

Prof. Bryan Caplan
bcaplan@gmu.edu
<http://www.bcaplan.com>
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Week 14: Nourishing Mother: Is Education Good for the Soul?

- I. The Humanist Critique
 - A. So far, I've focused on measuring benefits of education that we can readily price. But what if the problem is that people ignore or reject goods with *intrinsic* value?
 - 1. In economic jargon: What if education is a "merit good" – or helps produce merit goods?
 - B. Humanist thinkers have long promoted ideas and culture as merit goods – and their position is plausible. Subjectivist clichés abound, but who really believes them?
 - 1. The self-education of Malcolm X.
 - C. Humanists still overstate their case: "Education *can* be a merit good" is much weaker than "Actual education *is* a merit good."
 - D. Three plausible criteria for meritorious (intrinsically valuable) education:
 - 1. Worthy content
 - 2. Skill pedagogy
 - 3. Eager students
 - 4. Note: Education doesn't need any of these attributes to be *instrumentally* valuable.
 - E. Actual education does poorly on all three counts.
 - 1. Content: Curriculum is packed with boring, trivial topics.
 - 2. Skill: Most teachers are boring. (Just my opinion? No, almost everyone's opinion. Who watches YouTube videos of *average* teachers?)
 - 3. Students: Vast majority are philistines. (Check Google hits for high versus low culture).
 - F. Even if education is a merit good, cost-benefit ratios still matter.
 - G. Happily, the internet has brought the cost of high-quality self-education down to near-zero. Lessons:
 - 1. Since self-education is a tiny share of internet use, apathy – not cost – explains widespread ignorance of ideas and culture.
 - 2. Subsidies' function is not to make ideas and culture accessible to anyone who's interested, but to make them mandatory for everyone who isn't.
 - H. Intermediate position: "Enriching the soul" = "Fosters desirable adult attitudes and behavior."
 - 1. Identifying "desirability" is up to the reader.
 - 2. Identifying attitudinal and behavior effects is up to me.
 - I. Big complication: leadership versus peer effects.
 - 1. If school changes students via leadership, more education remolds society.

2. If school changes students via peers, more education *reshuffles* society. (Complication: Non-linear peer effects).
- II. High Culture and Political Correctness
- A. Schools explicitly and energetically push high culture in literature and music.
 - B. How effective is their pushing? Not very.
 1. People spend very little on books, and high culture is at best a small niche of the book market.
 2. Classical music is only 1.4% of the U.S. music market.
 - C. My point is not that only high culture is worthwhile. My point is that schools heavily push high culture, but adults voluntarily consume almost no high culture. So the pushing is, at best, almost totally ineffective.
 1. If education causes all consumption of high culture, it doesn't cause much.
 - D. Schools rarely explicitly promise left-wing indoctrination. But they do have means, motive, and opportunity for such indoctrination: captive audiences of students plus strongly left-leaning faculty.
 1. Best available (but not great) estimate of K-12 teachers' D/R ratio is 3:2.
 2. For professors, the D/R ratio is more like 4:1 – and higher at more prestigious schools.
 3. The ratio is most lop-sided in humanities (5:1) and social sciences (8:1).
 4. This is no “conspiracy theory.” Ideological neutrality requires constant – if not inhuman – self-discipline.
 - E. Won't even a subtle slant, year after year, turn students into leftists? Barely. Results from the GSS:
 1. Univariate regression: One year of education makes students .014 steps more liberal on a 1-7 scale. Adding controls amplifies the effect, but it remains weak.
 2. Univariate regression: One year of education makes students .071 steps more *Republican* on a 0-6 scale. Adding controls moderates the effect, but the sign is still the opposite of expected.
 - F. Specific issue effects are larger. Correcting for many other factors, the educated are:
 1. More supportive of civil liberties and tolerance.
 2. More opposed to racism and sexism.
 3. More supportive of capitalism, free markets, and globalization.
 - G. In other words, education makes people more socially liberal but more economically conservative. Is this really what teachers and professors want?
 1. Natural inference: Education works via peer effects, not leadership.
 - H. What about mere voter participation? Turnout rises with education, even correcting for many confounding factors.
 1. But several prominent researchers argue *relative* education is what matters, again suggesting peer effects.

III. The Modern Lifestyle

- A. Schools may not explicitly try to promote “modern” over “traditional” lifestyles, but stereotypes suggest they still have this effect. But do they? Results are surprisingly mixed.
- B. Religion: education does not seem to make people less religious overall. Instead, at least in the U.S. education makes people...
 - 1. ...less religious theologically (i.e., in doctrine).
 - 2. ...more religious sociologically (i.e., in church membership and attendance).
 - 3. Statistical corrections make education’s theological effect look smaller and its sociological effect look bigger.
 - 4. How are these patterns possible? Simple: Most students are apathetic about both education and religion.
- C. Marriage and divorce:
 - 1. Being married is more common for college grads, and being divorced less common. In recent decades, GSS estimates controlling for many other factors say each year of education raises marriage probability by .7 percentage-points and lowers divorce probability by .3 percentage-points.
 - 2. These results vary by country, over time, by gender, and by specific degree level.
 - 3. Overall: Contemporary education pushes marital status in a traditional, not “modern” direction.
- D. Fertility: There is a strong negative association between education and fertility, at both individual and national levels.
 - 1. Globally, low-education women outbreed high-education women by about one-third.
 - 2. Intra-national disparities of one full child are common.
 - 3. Controlling for many other factors, the education-fertility connection stays strong: an extra year of education prevents .1 births.
 - 4. Women’s education has a much stronger effect than men’s.
 - 5. Leadership or peers? Globally, the evidence is mixed. But in the U.S., leadership seems to explain the whole story. Social class measures fully explain education’s effects on marriage and divorce, but none of its effect on fertility.
 - 6. Many take the goodness of this anti-natalist effect for granted. But there are thought-provoking arguments on the other side. (See my *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids*).

IV. Broadening Horizons, the Merit of Play, and the Cynical Idealist

- A. Schools often promise to “broaden students’ horizons.” But they do a poor job.
 - 1. Schools treat an ossified list of subjects – music, art, poetry, drama, foreign language, history, government, dance, sports as “breadth.”
 - 2. Instead of offering a diverse sample, schools keep pushing the same list for thirteen years.
- B. Alternative:

1. Many more options in much smaller doses (“tasting menus”).
 2. Extra focus on realistic options that could plausibly turn into a fulfilling career. (“Do what you love, and you’ll never work a day in your life” doesn’t operate in a vacuum).
- C. For younger kids, the main alternative to school is not work, but play. Though neglected, play is another plausible merit good.
1. What is childhood without play?
 2. Warehousing is useful, but kids don’t have to do schoolwork just because they’re at school.
 3. The upside of Leisure College, USA.
- D. You don’t have to be either a narrow-minded economist or a touchy-feeling humanist. You can also be a cynical idealist who:
1. Admits that merit goods are possible.
 2. Doubts the existing education system is good at delivering merit goods.
- E. Compulsory enlightenment is Orwellian – and its main fruit is lip service to humanist ideals.
- F. The good news: While the internet is not a major commercial threat to existing education, it does provide limitless free enlightenment.
- V. Conclusion: What Is the Case Against Education?
- A. Education is greatly overrated, especially from a social point of view. Most important stumbling blocks:
1. Ability bias
 2. Completion probability
 3. Signaling!
- B. While I’ve assembled a lot of academic research, it’s best to start by unromantically reflecting on your actual educational experience.
1. “What do I need to graduate?” versus “How can I maximize my learning?”
 2. “Will this be on the test?” versus “Will this be on the job?”
- C. If research and common sense are both on my side, what’s against me? Social Desirability Bias.
- D. The solution: we need less education. If I’m right, the main effect will be credential deflation, not “deskilling.”
- E. Will governments follow my advice? Highly unlikely. “One day, I’ll be vindicated” is classic Social Desirability Bias.
- F. Civilized societies revolve around education now, but there is a more civilized way. Trying to spread success with education spreads education but not success.