What role should government play in education?

The 1969 classic, *Kes*, is a definite favourite in our family household. Featuring the general humiliation of pupils by teachers, corporal punishment and grim classrooms and buildings, the film does, however, convey a somewhat brutal depiction of schools to say the least. Every time we watch it my Dad will always remark on how painfully accurate the school portrayal is in comparison to the one he went to as a boy, with the reactions to the infamous PE scene always being particularly amusing, in which my parents, aunties and uncles will all laugh and groan simultaneously whilst reminiscing over their own childhood experiences.

Loach's feature film was in part a comment on institute education and how it can stifle young talent. Yet, the schooling system has clearly changed massively since my Dad's day, and this has a lot to do with government involvement. Since primary and secondary education became mandatory for all children, the government has played a significant role in providing necessary resources. This includes ensuring that enough schools are built, money is provided through taxation to allow schools to be run, enough trained teachers are employed and records of attendance are kept. The government also has additional roles, such as setting a National Curriculum, inspecting schools and the administration and grading of exams, so that all children can expect to receive a reasonably consistent standard of education. Surely then, it can be said that government intervention has clearly had a positive impact if we view these aspects in light of the past. Indeed, when comparing contemporary schools to the one depicted in *Kes*, I certainly feel relieved that it contrasts so considerably with my own education experience.

However, these government roles have accumulated over time so that generally schools today have a lot less autonomy than they would have done in the past. *Kes* may convey an environment in which children's abilities are confined and restricted, but there is also an argument that this is still the case today. The curriculum is now quite rigidly defined in primary and secondary schools by the National Curriculum, for instance, which leaves little room for schools to express creativity and students to excel in areas other than traditional academic subjects. Talking from personal experience, my secondary and sixth form experience all seemed to aim toward the one goal of achieving suitable grades for university, yet this obviously is not the right path for everyone. If a young person wants to explore more vocational or artistic careers, schools should surely help guide them to do so.

What is needed, then, is a balance. Government involvement is of course vital, as it is needed to set the general policy framework to ensure certain standards are met and fairness and equality for pupils is achieved. However, there does need to be room for local autonomy and creativity. The education system has to deal with being high profile at a government level and politically, but also must be locally accountable and responsive.

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