Review Article

**Education under Siege: Why there is a Better Alternative**

MORTIMORE, Peter
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The writer, Peter Mortimore, is currently a professor at the University of Southern Denmark. He has been active in the field of education, including as one of Her Majesty’s Inspectors, as the director of the Institute of Education, University of London, and as an education columnist for the *Guardian*. These experiences have given him a keen understanding of the reality of the education system and the attitude of the government toward education in England.


This book has five notable characteristics. First, all chapters of the book are written in plain English with little specialized terminology. For instance, the author does not even use the term ‘independent schools’, but rather prefers the more general term ‘private schools’ as an alternative. Second, the author explains his political claims in detail with reference to the historically important Education Acts, including the Education Acts of 1944 and 1988. These two features leave the impression that this book can benefit any reader. Third, Mortimore provides ample support for his argument by using a significant number of quotations from both modern and historical figures, educators, and scholars.

Furthermore, these fourteen chapters can be roughly divided into three parts by substance; the first part from ‘What is education?’ to ‘Quality control’, the second part from ’Strengths’ to ‘Weaknesses’, and the third part from ‘How good is the system?’ to ‘What next?’ The first part mainly contains explanations of basic terms about educational matters. The second presents the strengths, weaknesses, and ambiguities of the education system in England as identified by the author. ‘Weaknesses’ contains Mortimore’s criticism of government policies on education. He is dissatisfied with the over-dominance of politicians and the lack of scope for educational

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innovation. In addition, it is notable that he is against the effective three-track system composed of private, selective, and comprehensive schools. He also disagrees with the current market model of schooling, which he argues has ‘reduced the universal right to good schooling to a commodity acquired by those with economic or cultural capital, sharp elbows or all three’ (174). This description of weaknesses is intimately related to the last part, which is focused on current issues in the education system in England and how they can be addressed.

The final feature of the fourteen chapters is the one Mortimore would like to emphasize the most. It is clear that he believes that ‘equality’ is of the utmost importance for ideal education. He makes this argument eloquently and iteratively, especially in the last four chapters of the book. Equality in education may be said to be the book’s primary focus. As such, the word ‘siege’ in the title ‘Education Under Siege’ could be interpreted alternatively as ‘inequality’.

It is entirely fair to say that the main goal of this book is to improve the fairness of education by improving the current education system in England. In the twelfth chapter, ‘A better system?’, Mortimore describes ‘inequality’ as ‘one of the most pressing problems in England’ (207). Also, as he summarizes in the conclusion to the thirteenth chapter, ‘Steps towards a better system’: ‘I believe that England must embrace changes to its education system. But such changes must be based on fairness and supported by evidence.’(234). Moreover, his belief can be seen in the context of reforming the education system, when he writes in the same chapter ‘It will take years to deal with the confusions of our current system, but a good start could be made by ignoring labels such as ‘academy’ and ‘free school’ and treating all schools fairly’. (238) He inveighs against unfairness in education, especially when it is caused by income gaps.

His attitude towards private schools can be seen in his quotation from the 2011 British Social Attitudes Survey, which concluded that ‘private education does, indeed, perpetuate a form of separate development in Britain, or “social apartheid”’ (162). This quotation functions to reinforce his opinion that private schools are divisive and hinder the provision of an environment offering education to children from varied backgrounds. Therefore, he suggests encouraging private schools to become state schools or academies. He offers the alternate suggestion that, as it would be a tragic waste for private schools to be closed, they should be converted into sixth-form colleges. Similarly, he insists that no schools should have to close but proposes that selective schools—including successful grammar schools—could be converted into non-selective ones.

Mortimore’s final appeal to the readers is that they speak out in their communities, at home, at work, and in political meetings, and that they use social networks to enhance pressure effectively. (240) While he recognizes that those seeking change must confront opposing forces, he believes that opposition can be overcome by the mass desire for a fair education system that serves the interests of all members of society, based on the theory that a country’s education system does not belong to ministers or political parties but to its citizens.

One noteworthy aspect of this book is that the author employs the method of comparative education. He compares the case of England with that of Norway, where he currently lives and works. More broadly, he makes comparisons between the case of England and those of Nordic countries such as Finland, Sweden, and Denmark in addition to Norway. In this way, he encourages English readers to become aware of what is possible through the experience of the Nordic countries.

Lastly, it can be said that this book encourages us to reconsider the nature of genuine fairness and equality in education, as well as how we can bridge social, economic, and ability
gaps among children in order to achieve a completely fair education system (if such a thing is possible). There is no doubt that the current education system contains numerous problems and that they include, as the author puts it, the ‘market model of schooling’, ‘private schooling’, ‘selection’, and ‘ability grouping’. In particular, the author is strongly against the existence of private schools, which he argues embody unfairness and division. Indeed, it is clear that the majority of families in England find it difficult to pay the tuition of private schools (even day schools) for their children. However, it should be kept in mind here that independent schools including English Public Schools have led the national schools and made substantial contributions to the country throughout history.