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Oral Histories

Country School Legacy

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### **Mervyn Benford**

Country School Legacy: Humanities on the Frontier

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M.B.: Mervyn Benford

M.B.: My name is Mervyn Benford, I'm headmaster at Lewknoor Primary School in Oxfordshire in England. My school is a three-close village primary school with between 50 and 60 children. There are currently 3 teachers, I am one of the teachers as well as the principal of the school. And the other 2 teachers are classroom assistants. The school is organized somewhat differently from a normal primary school in that each teacher has 1/3 of the children divided vertically. In other words, each teacher has about 20 children covering the whole age range of 5 to 11 years old. The children start school in England at 5 and they transfer to their next school at the September after their 11<sup>th</sup> birthday. So we do have 6 primary class levels, age levels, in a primary school system in England, but these are 1 year behind the equivalent American 6<sup>th</sup> grades in the American elementary school. Thus an English child would transfer to the equivalent of Junior High at the end of grade 5, but would begin one year younger in grade 1. We have no kindergarten attached to our school, and this is not usual in England. Summer schools in the towns do have nursery classes which serve the same purpose. However, schools which do not have nursery classes attached are allowed to enroll children somewhat before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday provided they have the space in the school.

[2:21] At present, my official staffing entitlement would be just 2 teachers. The 3<sup>rd</sup> teacher should, by the formula, have been cut when the school roll fell below 64. However, at that time, rather than face that cut, which would have, perhaps, or would have seriously impaired the efficiency of my kindergarten – oh, sorry – my class 1-6 system, where each teacher works with the wider spread of age. Rather than lose the 3<sup>rd</sup> pair of hands, who – who were so vital to the team, I decided that we would try to pay. First we had to ask the county council if they would agree to such propositions since this is what – what would be completely novel in the history of English education. I did not expect them to agree, but they told me to get on with raising enough money for – to guarantee at least 2 years in advance, and I had about 10 weeks to do this, and the sum involved was about 10,000 pounds. So, I suspect, they just simply wanted to encourage me for a little while longer, but didn't expect me to raise the money. In the end, we did manage to raise the money, and they, in the end, gracefully decided to accept the proposition. There was such professional hullabaloo by the teacher unions that a subsequent, namely 3 other schools, tried to salvage their staff who were otherwise doomed to be cut. The county council refused them and – privately admitted that – they only let Lewknoor through because they hadn't realized – or hadn't thought that we would make the money. However, we are now stuck with having to raise this large amount, something like 10,000 dollars per year, in order to maintain a 3<sup>rd</sup> member of staff. I mentioned all this only because in English primary school with 50 to 60 children, there would not normally be 3 teachers.

[4:40] Now, I'm in America on the second stage of an 8 month unpaid period of leave. Because of the national coverage of my school's campaign to raise money – it came to the notice of a community charity in the North of England who were interested in what happens to villages when schools are closed. As a result of reduced enrollment in English schools at the moment, together with severe cutbacks year by year now for some 4 or 5 years, and the amount of moneys available for education, there has been a growing tendency for local authorities to decide to make savings by closing smaller schools and sending the children to another nearby small school, or a town school, if there is a town school nearby. There has been a lot of anxiety about this, especially in rural communities, because they see the school as an important, integral part of their local life.

[5:50] Equally, there are anxieties amongst parents who feel that the small school has a lot to offer in smaller classes, familiarity, closeness to home, the mixed age groups which bring young and old much closer together, even where there are conventional divisions in the teaching arrangement, such as 1 teacher taking the first 3 classes, and the one taking the 2<sup>nd</sup> – the older 3. So, that has been a bit of a fight back in many local communities have fought successfully to retain their schools, but many have lost. And the schools have gone. And these schools, unlike the Nebraskan schools, are nearly always central to a residential area, a small village. Yeah, not a kind of school placed in the middle of an empty space simply to serve a lot of scattered dwellings. So, that the school can truly be called a community focal point, if it functions in that way, it is quite possible that a school may simply operate as a school and have very little to do with its community. It may keep its parents at somewhat of a distance and may teach in a very unimaginative way, may offer a very limited curriculum simply because of the two teachers being very limited persons, professionally.

[7:12] Nevertheless, the scope is there, and the potential is there, and my school is an example of what we have been able to achieve in these ways, in enriching the curriculum, in drawing out the maximum potential of each member of the teaching staff, in recruiting parent volunteers with their skills, and - in generally organizing the classroom activity in a stimulating way. Therefore, I was asked if I would like to do some – some campaigning, some studying, some developing arguments and strategies, collecting of evidence and the like on behalf of the righter cause of preserving rural education, preserving a presence for education in rural areas, and possibly, therefore, helping to preserve rural, community lifestyle.

[8:03] I have accepted this proposition and they have agreed to fund my survey. They've also very generously contributed an extra piece of traveling grant to enable me to come this far afield. The first 4 months of my study were from September to December 1980, and I've confined myself to looking at 17 other local county areas in England, together with short visits to Sweden, Denmark, Hungary, and [can't understand]. Then I went back to school for winter term – spring term, from January to March, since I felt I needed time to digest and look further ahead. And, to get back to my school for a while. And now I'm in the United States on the first leg of a tour which will take me to New Zealand, Australia, and Canada, there in the next two months. Then I go back to England and I have 2 further months later in the autumn and I shall write all my material up. [Long Pause]

[9:28] The problem in England, that seems to be one of the pressures which bring about closure. Closure has always occurred, over a long period of time, through perfectly natural reasons such as the roll declining to zero, or to some very low number, where the parents press for a more preferable alternative. The heat has been put on simply by the economic combination of cuts with falling enrollments and the inability of local authorities to continue to preserve the marginal differentials in favor of the small school, which always meant that they had slightly more generous levels of staffing, and slightly more generous levels of funding for more basic materials, books, pencils, papers, and so on. This has always been tolerated, and simply because of the wide spread of age – ages involved, and few professional people would argue with this differential provision. However, it's reached a stage in England where, because of the economic – the requirement to keep on making more and more savings in expenditure in education, leads local authorities to say, "well, can we just simply afford it anymore?"

[10:56] In order to, to take some of the emphasis off the fact that it is economics, that isn't the route of the problem. Local authorities and governments have begun talking in terms of educational arguments, about the viability of schools with small numbers and low numbers of staff. Now, this has never come up

before, and for 100 years in English education, including quite recent times, no one has started to talk about the educational and acceptability of small schools. It has only arisen in combination with this economic pressure and is really a mask. There are arguments – educational arguments – against small numbers. There are, equally, arguments against large numbers. There are equally arguments against large numbers of teachers who have special skills but which never seem to sort of effect the children in the larger schools, the children are more by the way of – spectators than participators. In a school like mine, almost half the school are involved in practical music making, learning an instrument of one kind or another, and yet sometimes it is justified – a large school is justified by its parent body or its teachers, simply on the grounds that it has half a dozen children learning the violin, and there, you can't do that in a small school, can you?

[12:22] The pointed issue is not really things like this, even the costs of a small – of a large school are sometimes higher than a small school in certain areas where this large school has things like playing fields, which have to be cut, and the small school doesn't even have one. So, that - the argument is far from cut-and-dry. And therefore I have been trying to develop evidence of good practice in small schools to show that the educational arguments are invalid. The fact that any individual school may not be performing to those levels is not a matter for closing it, because if so, there are plenty of reasons one could find for closing large schools, where the teaching is dull as dishwater, where the children are having boring, unstimulating curriculum, where there are discipline problems, and where there is not an enriched curriculum, even though potentially there could be. We cannot go around closing schools on the – the present levels of failure, which is simply because of economic reasons. We must look to why the failure is happening, we must look to helping develop educational strategies for such places, be they large or small.

[13:40] I feel that the parti- the particular curriculum argument against a small school tends to revolve around the amount of special subject skills that can be offered. [long pause] Sometimes the teacher will feel that they cannot tackle music, arts, or science. And if there are only 2 teachers on the staff, then they have very few other people around, and no one, probably, who they can call upon with some help in presenting these subjects. I would like to think that all teachers, given the right training, given the right staff development programs, could develop confidence in such fields, as far as elementary grade teaching went. We could, something which I've had to do, and I've managed to do it, I now do things I would never have dre- imagined I could do. I do things which I was in no way trained to do at training college. Even the multi-age grouping system, which I have evolved, has forced me to – teach children to read, which is something that no one ever taught me to do before, and I just had to face up to – to handling children of grade 1, and rarely ever see a man, because men do not normally teach grade 1 children. So I knew that professional people with commitment can develop wider teaching skills than they even imagined, it's a question of leadership.

[15:08] Equally, when one can enrich the curriculum by the use of parent volunteers. We have a lot of parent volunteers who come in, mainly in the field of arts and crafts, take painting groups and pottery, needle-craft, all – all manner of other things, which together with the three teachers, who have a go at things they've never done before, fabric printing, screen-printing, tie-dye, making of curtains, or whatever. Things which, together with the parents, mean that the children have a tremendous practical experience of using their hands and their eyes, and developing a sense of aesthetics, a sense of design, and so-on. So, I know that it can be done, we even have other members from the communities, which is

old-age pension who comes up and takes a small gardening group and maintains the school garden, an old-age pension who came and taught some wine-making.

[16:02] One can do this, equally one can use field trips and the immediate environment of the school: the farms, the fields, the hedges. Things which a rural school has which an urban school doesn't have, things which a rural school can get out into because the numbers of children are small, where the larger school has greater problems with organizing such activity. All of these help towards providing an enriched curriculum, where there is a will to do so. Then, of course, there are support services – there are county advisors in England whose job it is to go around organizing training, organizing courses, visiting schools, and making suggestions, helping to – with extra funds to provide particular pieces of equipment, such as a microscope, which a small school may not be able to afford on its own budget. All of these things can be done, and in our school we have developed this way a good range of musical instruments, xylophones and glockenspiels, and such the like which would be expensive otherwise, and a couple of really nice drums to make a lovely sound. We've developed a pond, an animal area where we've named to keep rabbits and guinea pigs, we've had chickens hatching out, and all kinds of things like this, largely through the help and support of the county advisory staff, who have funds for this purpose.

[17:25] So, we know that it can be done. Equally in terms of finance, I have found in schools that parent help for repairing doors, and – all kinds of things – converting desks to make tables, or any sort of practical problems at all, even in a school in Westershire, which I went to, the – the Vicar who comes in every week and teaches some of the children religious education, but then will come in another time and turn his hands to handyman, maintenance-type jobs such as repairing latches and putting fuses in so the lady teachers don't have to stand anything about electricity. So, all of these things show that a small school can be viable, and if they are active in those ways, they are, in fact, a very dynamic, thriving, and progressive community, because they are all involved, and of course this is a good built-in safety factor if ever there is going to be an official challenge to the school's future. Because it means that there is automatically more commitment to defend that school. It means that the community really feels it is their school, it is not just for the children. And they are not going to object so much to the fact that their rates and taxes are going into a school which they may have no children in. In fact, they may not themselves have children, and feel that education is a service that they should have nothing to do with, but there is more chance that they will accept a responsibility and – and be willing to pay their share, if one can involve them in that way. [long pause]

[19:17] So, therefore, you will see that I am interested in publishing details and publicizing these possible strategies. The – potential support of the village, of its community and its parents, in self-help ways, has an economic impact as well because, obviously, the school doesn't need so much money spent on it in terms of maintenance and upkeep if parents are willing to help with problems like redecorating and repairs and so-on. This – this is one way in which we can look to make some kind of economic savings which will help deflate the argument for closure. One of the other arguments for closer is the lack of peer group for children. That a – a child who has to spend 6 years in a small social group of just something up to a dozen or 20 children, with only one, perhaps two children of his own actual age to accompany him through these 6 years. That this is bad for the children and they suffer the lack of stimulation from others of their own kind. Now I don't accept this argument, because especially in a well-run primary school, with lots of activity going on, lots of adults around, the child gets plenty of stimulation. It is my observation as a teacher that children do not seem to need or require other – so

many other children. They seem to have a very close level of active friends, two or three that even in the small school, that they really stick together with, close with them. And then this will change after a few months and suddenly the active group of friends is a different group, but there's never more than 2 or 3 in these close friendship groups.

[21:12] There are other children around for other activities such as games and the playground and so-on and – and there will be a wider group of more casual acquaintance – today's friend but not tomorrow's and like that. But there's plenty of other children, it doesn't have to be of their own age. And I have worked in large schools and have seen that children do not naturally incline to large groups of their own age. By contrast, there is strength in the social groupings of – the small school because children are exposed automatically to children of different ages, and this is – has considerable advantages. This is something which helps develop an understanding of the differences between them, the lack of maturity, the – the respect for greater skills that the older children show. All of these various, unconscious social attributes are developed in the small school, where the children are not divided from each other so strictly by age and maturity as in a larger school.

[22:25] So that I – I feel it, though, when children reach teenage years and when adults are less significant in their lives, when they may in fact be, temporarily, going through that phase of pulling away from adults, in fact, then it is perhaps necessary for them to have a much larger circle of friends and contacts of their own age. Certainly the most able children will feed far more from the adults in the situation while they are of elementary school grades. The very gifted child will come up to me and ask me questions and use my brains, and if I – If I know anything about the subject that he's interested in. This is why I think it's important for there to be lots of adults around in these early years of schooling, where the parents and the other teachers and the neighbors and the friends, these are all important people and can all offer a child much in the way of stimulation. This is what his mind wants at this stage in his development, this is the best way to fit the developing mind of a young child, which is by nature random and spontaneous, today interested in Frostborn[?], tomorrow interested in space rockets, next day collecting stamps, and whatever. Capable of being fired here, there, and everywhere, by each and every event that happens, therefore we must meet this type of mind with plenty of stimulation so that there is a good chance that his mind will be switched on by, at least, something that happens during each day.

[24:04] I think that the small school can do this if it organizes itself, well, better than the large school, despite the fact that the large schools may have more money spent on them with more alleged facilities. Now, in Europe I have found that priorities and attitudes are very similar to those who would defend small schools in England. There isn't so much of a threat – [background noises, muffled 'good morning'] – In fact there is a great affection for the – the small school and by definition in these other European countries, they have always spent more on education anyway, at any level, than in England. And as a result their small schools are extremely well-staffed and extremely well-provided. They are also interested in developing strategies to improve the nature of rural education. Strategies that bring schools together, that share staff resources, and – and so on. There is a need, of course, for small schools to capitalize on talents of the individual people involved in them so that if there is a music specialist or a science specialist in one small school, they should be enabled and by the provision of extra man-power, to go to another school part of a week and meet some other children, some other teachers, and offer their specialism to those teachers and to those children in the other schools.

[25:37] And, when they go to another school, they may therefore release a member of that school staff to go and visit another school in a group and so set up a chain reaction of interchange, which can only be beneficial. Equally, there can be greater corroboration between schools, they can combine for particular learning projects, not just for sports and music enculturation, but actually for curriculum or – bring the benefits of the larger group and – the greater availability of the adult teachers. So these are more aspects of the strategy that I'm trying to develop and promote in the cores of small schools and rural education. One must remember that in many urban situations, schools are actually getting smaller and, for example, in Oxford City, which is quite a large town, some 160,000 people, there are many schools now which, 5 years ago, or when they were built, were built for, say, 240 children, and have now just about 100.

[26:48] And these schools are getting to the stage where they are no bigger than some of the larger village schools. So the same arguments probably apply. In the United States, I find that through things like education service units you have attempted to develop the concept of sharing resources between schools, and it is on a much more structured and formalized basis and it does seem to me to – particular needs rather than general needs, it does seem to reflect a feeling of timidity[?] by American teachers in subjects like music, arts and crafts, and science, for example. And – and, maybe there shouldn't be such a need for specifics like that. If we develop the professional confidence of each of our individual teachers, but the concept of providing extra man-power on a week basis to help bring schools together, for example, is a good one. However, the school board system which has – the – the greater say, the local autonomy and what happens in the school is – can only hinder this kind of development, unless the personnel involved in the school boards have a similar sense of professional vision and a willingness to – to share and cooperate with other communities.

[28:20] Equally, it is the school board system and the tax-based system which is very distinctive, and very different to our English system of funding schools. It certainly is the result of – of your taxation system. It can be said that there is not really so much of an economic threat to the small schools in quite the same way. Seems – it seems small schools are more desirable, certainly in Nebraska, and economically are more acceptable than if they were to be closed and children sent somewhere else. And – so the situation here isn't quite the same. The – the threat, if that's the right word, to small schools in terms of the project that I am developing would seem to be far more concerned with the – the limitation of curriculum and – and development, and the sort of things that I would like to see. Unless school boards are prepared to cooperate across their own local boundaries – school board autonomy would also seem to inhibit the developments within a school which – which one would like to see. Such as mixing the age groups and the staff of an individual school cooperating in certain curriculum activities. The sort of things that I've described might happen in my own school, but unless there are people of professional vision on the schoolboard, then it may be that certain things arrested or stopped. There is no clearly responsible leadership as in an English school where there is a paid principal. And, therefore, the initiative that is needed to develop in the – the internal [not sure] of a school, may seem to be lacking.

[30:24] So it seems to me that the ingredients of the debate are similar. Certainly, some of the arguments put to me by teachers in American schools – American rural schools in Nebraska, are very much the same as those I've heard. They all say that students will do better in small schools than larger ones, certainly in basic skills, they say there are less discipline problems, that there is a much nicer atmosphere, that there is a greater understanding and tolerance between the young and the old, they

say that the parents feel closer to the school. That through the local school board they have a more direct say anyway in what happens and what goes on. Seems to me that in developing the situation in the American system, there is a threat – an economic threat if communities are too impoverished or too selfish to be willing to give the small school what it needs in order to provide a good education. This is a threat, and it requires a certain amount of vision or the state will eventually decide for the communities. [some background noises]

[31:51] As someone in an ESU [Educational Service Unit] told me, the example in Wyoming which seemed threatening to small communities and their local autonomy at first, seems to be working out quite differently. There, the schools were allowed to stay as, I think they were called attendance centers

M.B.: This is the second side of the tape prepared by Mervyn Benford from Lewknoor School in England concerning rural education. [long pause] In the Wyoming case, which I mentioned, it would seem that each individual school still exists in its own local community, and each of those school districts is represented on the school board which runs the larger district. This is somewhat similar to what one finds in large towns and cities like Lincoln, where there are many schools, but only the one school district.

[33:00] Certainly there's an equalization of the tax base, and of course there is a much greater potential for the kind of developments between schools and communities to take place. It would be sad if purely local suspicions and jealousies should prevent the development of good models of practice. I think that if communities were prepared to develop in this way, it would be a – a compromise position compared to the more drastic steps proposed under the LB319, for example. Where – masses of schools would simply – masses of school districts would be – seemed to be swept away, and there might well be a secondary hidden threat in time to the schools in the school districts, which probably could not be allowed to continue – without some major change in their provisioning. [long pause]

[34:13] Another possibility of development is the clustering system based on a large central school, sometimes in a town, whereby there is one principal who has a number of small schools as part of his group. He administers them from the center and can deploy the resources for his group in such a way that the small schools are enabled to function adequately and successfully. This tends to be the pattern in Sweden where there is plurality and – for head teachers and a particular example I saw, the head teacher – the principal, if you like, of the school was in fact able to find parents who wished their children, though they lived in the town area, wished their children to have education to village school, and he was able to arrange transport out from the center to the villages in order to boost population of the village schools to justify the level of staffing and other resources which he was able to deploy.

[35:25] So that there is this kind of arrangement which, again, is based upon keeping the schools close to where the children are, as much as possible. Certainly in the villages, keeping them as close as possible. And avoiding the compulsory busing of children from villages to towns, or to other large villages. In England, busing is becoming a vexed question, and I understand it may be so in New Zealand because of the high cost of energy. The fact that through taxation and price increases, it is becoming extremely costly even to bus children 3 or 4 miles twice a day so that the economic arguments for closing schools are being undermined quite seriously by this question of the cost of fuel and transport and in some areas, even the availability of transport because contracts have to be very competitive and operators can barely make a profit in running a school contract service. [long pause]

[36:31] There is a finality about a school closure, under which a transport that is involved is a new and increasing burden upon the tax payer, and is a forever commitment, it can never go away once you've closed the school. I did come across an example in England, too, of a community where the school had been closed - permanently, because that's what happens in England, and the building sold, and then the village developed against all expectations and grew and has in which been occupied by elderly people or people with – whose children had grown up and left school, suddenly became filled with younger families again, and there were at least as many children needing schooling in that village as there had been in the days when the school functioned. However, because it had been sold, it had gone forever, now two busloads of children have to go to another school 4 miles away each and every day of their school life.

[37:37] This really is not a healthy situation. What is interesting is to see a school here in Nebraska, or Lexington, or near Lexington, where school had reached zero for a while and had closed, ceased operating, but had been kept there and – they were to reopen again when children appeared again. And – one or two places in England are now beginning to think that this might be one of the things that they may have to do. There is another concept which is not – which is a little bit foreign to the Americans, see. In England, every – every kind of development requires some kind of planning consent, and there are large, level plannings, as well as local level plannings, and it does seem to me that one can plan for development – controlled development which will not spoil a village, it will not make it become too large, but which will ensure a rotation of housing staff if there – if there is some housing for rent and – and some housing at the bottom end of the private market. And – and under which there can be sufficient dwellings to ensure a viable population.

[38:55] If I were prescribing a strategy for rural schools in America, based on my observations in Nebraska, I would say that yes, there is a future. Yes, the arguments about the potential of rural schools are valid. Yes, Nebraska with its above average performance in American achievement terms does seem to make a case for – better performance in rural schools because presumably the results which place Nebraska above the average must be very much from rural children in one form or another, since there are so many of them. And – and indeed the evidence with Nebraska performers would confirm what Professor Edmonds has found in Canada, that rural children do tend to do better than Urban children as far as basic skills – attainments are concerned. So that all these things are valid and we should look to building a future for rural schools, but if it is to be secure, it must be based on the enhancement of professional responsibility. You must begin to do – you must begin to do what we do in England, allowing a little bit more initiative and self-determination for the teachers involved. There should be a clear – professional initiative available in the payment of responsibility allows for whoever is in charge of the unit. Or, a school must have a principal even within a larger school, as a center of a group, that kind of situation.

[40:39] There must be some kind of responsibility that will encourage someone to take initiatives. There must be a willingness to explore cooperative use of resources for the sharing of teachers and children and equipment. And finally there must be the development of greater professional competence or a feeling of competence through staff development programs which encourage teachers to feel that they can work with wider age ranges, they can – understand the problems of progression in learning, they can see where the whole process is leading to, and that they are willing to have a go at things like teaching infants to read – organizing a mixed-age project, study project – being prepared to hand some of the initiative over to the children so that they can be involved in their learning. So they can learn the

skills of management. That the able children can learn to do what they should be learning to do, which is to lead, to make decisions, to analyze, to evolve strategies for solving problems. This can all be done in the more open, not free and easy, but the more open, more flexible situations, such as I have developed at Lewknoor School.

[42:07] If you came to Lewknoor School, you would not see a free and easy situation, you would not see an explicitly learning is fun concept, but learning is interesting, learning is challenging – this is a better description of the concept. You would see, from time to time, during the week because of this very structured time table, you would see children in quite narrow age ranges in small groups learning with blackboard, with equipment in quite a traditional sense. But equally you would see situations which are much more open and fluid when children are making decisions for themselves, where they are organizing themselves in their work, under the overall guidance and supervision of the professional teachers involved. And of course you could see a lot of parental skill at work. This is because you have a genuine managerial situation where the head teacher, the principal, the person that is in charge, feels he is in charge and can make decisions – some of the decisions. It does not reduce accountability cause you know that people are watching you, you know that people can make life difficult for you if you do something which they don't particularly think – there will always be somebody who disagrees.

[43:19] But it seems that the school board system, if one individual disagrees, happens to become a member of the school board, then he or she can absolutely sabotage a school. And you just – then get procrastination, you get insecurity, you get people who sit on the fence, and that is never a healthy position in developing business-like education. But you must keep abreast with the changes in the rest of society, which must prepare children for a quite different future than children are being prepared for before, does require change. Without change, the thing will stagnate – will get acronistic[?] and we will build up trouble for ourselves. So we do need greater professionalism in schools. This can only come if the school boards, one form or another, whether by diffusing their authority to larger areas, or whether by insisting that at least one member of the school board is someone professionally associated with education can be a professional link with the people in the school, then – then I think it would be difficult for these strategies to be developed. [long pause]

[44:31] Anything that I've said on this tape may be used for the purposes of education, or the use in teacher education, or in any way which will stimulate discussion and debate about provision of education.