

Abstract

Schools have come to be acknowledged as escape-valves for those wishing to overcome the social and economic circumstances of their birth. From the beginnings of public education in Canada and the United States, educational promoters saw schooling as a way of providing social justice and economic stability as well as means of instruction in literacy and computation. Recent educational policy in Canada and the United States assumes equality of access results in equal opportunity. Since sociological findings offer little support for the notion that schooling causes equality, the educational assumption of Canada and the United States is highly arguable. Unfortunately, the schools cannot ensure equality of outcome. Despite a public policy which has opened access to educational institutions, the distribution of social wealth has changed little.

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**The Equality Question:  
Uncertainties In Educational Thought  
And Democratic Idealism**

The question of what constitutes equality in schooling has been the source of the most lively and enduring debate in educational thought since the establishment of public education in the nineteenth century. Traditionally, public schools in North America have been viewed as society's principal agents of social reform and, as such, have been charged with the onerous task of not only fostering but demonstrating equality in their operations. Without doubt, the high esteem in which education has been held over time is attributable to both a public confidence in the intrinsic value of schooling on the development of personal character and to the widely-held regard for the economic value of education to the individual. In the latter respect, schools have been recognized historically for their selective function in assigning individuals to occupational positions based on their academic and vocational training and, in general, a higher level of educational attainment has been rewarded by increased earning potential and improved social status. For these reasons, schools have come to be acknowledged as escape-valves for those wishing to overcome the social and economic circumstances of their birth.

The association between equality and education has been the product of a long and deliberate historical alliance in both Canada and the United States, although it should be noted that the peculiar problem of race has accentuated the American experience. From the beginnings of the public education movement on either side of the border, schoolmen and other educational promoters envisioned a role for schools which far transcended simple educational responsibilities. In their efforts to secure the passage of legislation favourable to their cause, nineteenth-century educational spokesmen commonly portrayed schools as institutions of singular importance in the struggle to ameliorate social ills. At once, they predicted, public schools would serve as laboratories of political and social justice, agencies of social and economic mobility and the primary means of socializing the poor and foreign-born into the mainstream of national life. Not only would schools instruct the young in the basic skills of literacy and computation but, more importantly, they would provide

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rigorous moral training and promote a state of political, social and economic stability. In short, public sponsorship of "mass" systems of education would assist in the survival and promotion of the democratic order. In supporting the persuasive arguments of the educational reformers, communities voted for what they had come to expect — a greatly expanded set of functions for educational institutions. Consequently, it is perhaps no more than a slight overstatement to say that over the past century educational and social reform have become almost interchangeable concepts in the public mind and, as a result, the role of the school has been stretched to new and dangerous limits. Unfortunately, the fallacious nature of this social equation has been subjected to scrutiny only in recent years.

Above all, school reform has addressed the difficult question of how to ensure social and economic equality through education. At the heart of this issue is the persistent and perplexing dilemma of how to achieve a political and social ideal in a democratic society and, in a fundamental sense, this important enquiry has involved the often-bitter debate regarding state versus individual rights and the role of government in the lives of men. A number of long-standing and unresolved questions suggest some of the parameters of this problem: For example, what is the proper role of government? In what areas of human affairs should the state intervene? Is a simple political majority the will of the people? What is the public good? And, at what point does state intervention on behalf of one ideal — in this case, equality — contravene other trusts of government such as the protection of liberty and the preservation of individual choice.

Equality, then, is neither simply nor first an educational matter but one that relates to the complexities of the political, social and economic matrix. Questions involving equality, however, have been directed increasingly toward the educational realm in the twentieth century. As society's most accessible institutions, schools have become arenas for the discussion of vital concerns and, like the courts, have acted as crucibles where social direction is cast. The panoply of issues that radiate from the relationship of education to equality can be ultimately distilled into two pivotal questions: Should education serve as an agent of social change? And, if so, can the schools effectively promote greater educational and social equality?

As a rule, affirmative responses to the first enquiry are based on an optimistic view of man that is consonant with a liberal philosophy. This perspective holds that the human condition can be improved through the rational and collective actions of men and that the purpose of government is to assist in this social progress. From this point-of-view, education is considered as the foundation of national and individual betterment, a matter of such importance that government interference in the lives of citizens is warranted. Since education is viewed as a human right, it cannot be left to the discretion of the family or the individual to ensure. On the basis of this rationale, education has been made public, compulsory and free. Overall, the guiding tenet of liberalism maintains that it is the duty of government to reconcile the public and private ends of human behaviour.

On the other hand, a negative outlook toward the intrusion of the state in human affairs is generally more closely aligned and consistent with a conservative philosophy.<sup>1</sup> According to this conviction, only under exceptional circumstances should government interpose. It is not the role of the state to concern itself with the promotion of change through social institutions; government exists solely to preserve the status quo of the natural competitive state. With respect to education, conservatives normally believe that schooling, like a gentleman's taste in neckties, should remain a private matter. Moreover, variables such as family wealth, number of children, and individual interest should determine educational

opportunity and choice. On the scale of democratic priorities, conservatives tend to value liberty above equality as a political and social ideal.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, then, with respect to the question of whether education *should* serve as an agent of social change, this much is obvious. Over the past century, the conservative viewpoint of non-intervention has been subordinated to a liberal creed which espouses a more active posture for government, if for no other reason than the fact that liberal administrations in Canada and the United States have enjoyed office more frequently. More importantly, however, the social and economic dislocation that has accompanied industrialization, urbanization, and economic depression has underlined some of the weaknesses and the inequities of the free-market system. In short, while state and individual rights may still provide the substance of specific debate, in general there is agreement and support for state involvement. And, this involvement has been no more apparent than in education.<sup>3</sup>

The second question of whether the school *can* act as an effective means of social reform shifts the issue of education and social equality from a primarily value-laden and theoretical discussion to more practical considerations. Despite a century of unqualified acceptance for the idea of education as a levelling device in the cause of social and economic equality, the utility of the school in this respect has been seriously challenged of late.

The recent questioning of the school's appropriateness as a vehicle of social transformation has been precipitated in the main by three related factors: disenchantment with over a decade of intensive educational reform beginning in the 1960's and continuing into the 1970's; a wide assortment of dissatisfactions with the overall condition of public education; and, a growing body of scholarly literature which strongly suggests that the potential of the school as an agent of social change and equality has been greatly exaggerated. Taken as a whole, these factors outline a climate of opinion that can be described best as an open-season on education and educators.

From our present vantage point, it is readily apparent that the massive infusion of public funds into the educational programs of the middle and late-1960's did not achieve intended social ends. Although substantial investment did increase access, and, in some cases, the quality of services, it does not appear to have altered radically the incidence of social and economic opportunity nor does it appear to have significantly reduced crime, unemployment, or poverty — social problems which it clearly was meant to attack. Conversely, what it did do was demonstrate that education was not a panacea for social ailments. Without question, responsibility for the social failure of education must be shared in large part by educators who succumbed to the temptation of overestimating what appeared to be the bright future of educational reform. Their tendency to overpromise, which led to unfulfilled expectations on the part of the public, must be seen for what it was — a naive belief in a professional history which held that teachers and the schools could reshape man's social environment. Like the society they served, educators became unfortunate victims of their own mythology.<sup>4</sup>

Upset by the miscarriage of these reform efforts, the public has been quick to voice concern with other aspects of schooling. Principally, their criticisms have been aimed at such matters as lack of discipline in the schools, inflationary grades and falling academic standards, spiralling educational costs, and anxieties over community representation in educational government at the school and district levels. More pointedly, parents have complained about the adverse effects of teacher indifference and unionization. Demands for teacher accountability and for the efficient delivery of educational services are not merely

symptoms of an educational backlash that has occurred but serve notice that a growing undercurrent of public sentiment seeks to wrestle some aspects of school governance from the control of professional groups.<sup>5</sup>

Caught in the vice of retrenchment and waning public confidence, educators in the late 1970's have been compelled to wind down public schooling's social aspirations and concentrate more specifically on the time-honored business of the schools — the teaching of the young. Quite simply, this change in the emphasis of educational policy marks a distinct shift in public taste from an ideologically-centered to a practically- (or industrially-) centered focus.

In dramatic fashion, then, the experiences of the 1960's underscored some of the uncertainties surrounding reform and, at the same time, proved that the relationship between education and equality was more complex than previously imagined. Above all, the controversy that has ensued over the "failure of education" to bring about greater equality has highlighted some of the serious difficulties with traditional concepts of equality, and particularly those of a definitional nature.

For example, while the term "equality" may possess some educational currency in a vague and general manner, it fails to proffer any clear indication of what constitutes equality or to whom. The meaning of the word and the weight given to it vary markedly with the orientation of the constituencies who use it. In other words, the term is highly susceptible to a kind of environmental coloration. Moreover, it is ordinarily held to be synonymous with a variety of other terms such as "equality of opportunity," "equality of access," "democracy," and "social justice," which again diminishes its specificity. Of these terms, only "equality of access" denotes possible policy guidelines and, for this reason, it serves as the most useful definition for an entry into the discussion of the idea of equality in education.<sup>6</sup> However, it must be understood that the notion of access is not without some difficulties.

To wit, as an educational concept, equality of access has changed substantially over time. Initially, it meant little more than access to whatever rudimentary schooling existed. Today, it denotes admission to the highest levels of formal education for all, irrespective of age, sex, or economic status, providing that the individual can meet prevailing standards (in some instances, academic requirements may be waived or reduced). In general, recent educational policy in Canada and the United States has assumed that equality of access will automatically result in equality of opportunity. Implicit in this broad assumption are three related premises: one, that ensuring access will promote increased participation; two, that there is a significant correlation between the educational attainment of an individual and his or her eventual occupational, economic and social status; and, finally, that a meritocratic system is the ultimate goal of society.

Each of these premises has proved to be highly arguable. With respect to the first premise, current sociological research suggests strongly that opening up access to educational institutions does not necessarily lead to the inclusion of individuals at the bottom end of the socioeconomic scale. Such people may be socialized into the acceptance of lower social and educational aspirations and be unable to overcome the psychological barriers which block their advancement.<sup>7</sup> In the second instance, a considerable controversy exists pertaining to the social and economic gain that is purportedly attendant with educational accomplishment. The number of unemployed and underemployed graduates is often cited as evidence that the case for economic and social gain through education is greatly overstated. Lastly, the notion of a meritocratic society brought about by education brings into question the bias

of a public policy that appears to subsidize the scholastically-gifted at the expense of the scholastically-weak. Unless some financial compensation is awarded to those who decide not to attend educational institutions past the junior-secondary or secondary stages, the distribution of public monies is inequitable. Alternatively, other forms of taxation which would supercede the progressive formula now in operation could attempt to assess taxes more in line with educational benefits received, particularly in cases where financial reward for educational skills is excessive or training has been unusually costly.

Of course, the issue of access as it touches upon the equitable allocation of public resources raises a number of other interesting, if not confounding questions. There is the "Catch-22" dilemma of whether or not equality can be assured best through the equal or unequal distribution of resources. If resources are distributed equally throughout society, the inequalities that already exist will not be offset. Conversely, if resources are unequally diffused, it is again apparent that some individuals will be discriminated against. And, while public policy may support the latter action, or what the Plowden report termed "positive discrimination," in order for complete equality to be reached, public provision would have to equal the greatest level of private resources held by any one individual. Obviously, that is not possible. Furthermore, the persistent and appreciable intervention by government on behalf of the "have-nots" brings into question what incentives exist for the "haves" to continue subsidizing others. Stated somewhat more succinctly, the crucial task of government is to determine accurately the "trade-off" point where state intervention satisfies the interests of both groups. In any event, all of this demonstrates that the equality of access notion is not as straightforward as might be first imagined.

What is more apparent, however, is that the failure of recent educational efforts to advance the cause of social equality cannot be attributed to either an absence of government commitment to the promotion of educational access or to a lack of funding. Rather, it now appears that the immediate causes of failure were the application of inappropriate change strategies combined with some basic sociological and historical misunderstandings concerning the limits of educational reform. Certainly, these difficulties are worthy of discussion.

A review of recent reform methodology reveals that three major propositions generally underpinned social reform planning.<sup>8</sup> First, it was believed that massive government intervention was required to eradicate the social and psychological conditions that created the poverty cycle. It was argued that, without raising the social and economic aspirations of the young and the poor, the culture of poverty would persist. Additionally, it was held that the main reason for this enculturation into poverty was that individuals lacked the cognitive skills necessary for escape through occupational advancement. And, finally, the most effective method of improving the life chances of the poor was seen to be through the delivery of a comprehensive set of educational programs. Without wishing to become enmeshed in the emerging body of literature which discusses the failure of this approach, it is sufficient to say that reformers were haunted by a number of elemental misconceptions in their attempts to operationalize these propositions.<sup>9</sup>

Briefly, then, while educational technology has become increasingly sophisticated, the idea that underpinned a century of reform remained essentially unchanged; namely, that the disparity between the socially and economically disadvantaged and the rest of society could be incrementally overcome through education. The extent to which government, the public and educators were wedded to this atavistic notion is vividly illustrated in their reaction or,

more precisely, their lack of immediate reaction to the publication of James Coleman's ground-breaking sociological study on equality of opportunity in 1966.

In an investigation of national scope, Coleman and his colleagues discovered that, contrary to conventional thought, the school appeared to be only of secondary influence in the development of children. In fact, Coleman's research indicated that the most significant educational influences on children occurred outside the school. Interspersed in the text of this lengthy report were a number of other pivotal findings, notably that: family background was the most important determinant of children's educational levels; most of the inequality in educational attainment occurs within and not between schools (in other words, variations in school facilities and curricula account for relatively little variation in pupil achievement); pupil achievement is closely related to the educational backgrounds and aspirations of other students; and that the schools provide little opportunity to overcome initial learning difficulties for disadvantaged students. In brief, Coleman's conclusions were that the schools did little to reduce the inequities of birth and that greater educational spending did not necessarily produce greater educational results. Unfortunately, instead of heeding these early warnings on the social limits of education, the momentum of reform was accelerated by educators and government alike.

When similar conclusions were reached six years later by Christopher Jencks and his associates in an examination of the effects of family and schooling on inequality, policies for social reform through education were already under siege. Quarrelling with Coleman's contention regarding the significance of family socioeconomic status as a predictor of children's educational and economic success,<sup>11</sup> Jencks argued that equality of opportunity, even when defined by equal cognitive skills, equal educational level and equal family background, did not lead to equal results as described by income.<sup>12</sup> Jencks maintained that inequality of income varied as much within social classes as it did between them and that the "cycle of advantaged position" did not seem to exist as previously believed.<sup>13</sup> Stated differently, Jencks posited that each generation, regardless of social station, was forced to fend for itself. It was Jencks' further contention that unmeasured variables or "missing links" such as "luck," "personality," or other "non-cognitive skills" may most clearly explain variance in incomes. In other words, taken as a whole, the sociological findings of Coleman and Jencks offer little support for the notion of schooling as an agent in the cause of equality.

An equally damning indictment of the idea that the school serves as an instrument of equality can be found in the work of educational historians during the last decade, particularly in the research that questions the mythology and motives of educational reform.<sup>14</sup> In their examinations of past efforts at educational reform, a number of historians have concluded that, contrary to common belief, the chief progenitors of such reform have been of a conservative rather than a liberal persuasion and that their motives have been more in line with preserving the *status quo* than with effecting a widespread social change which might lead to equality. According to the commonplace and popular legend, a coalition of liberals and members of the intelligentsia and working class promoted educational reform for largely humanitarian reasons. Recent interpretations, on the other hand, suggest that an alliance of middle and upper-middle classes, together with a number of corporate leaders, conspired, wittingly or unwittingly, to sponsor major educational changes. Educators, with their own special interests to maintain, complied with the wishes of this economically and socially dominant class. Stated differently, current historical literature questions whether there was ever any real intent for the schools to function as levelling agents or to redistribute

wealth and power. From this viewpoint, the primary purpose of the schools over time has been seemingly to instruct the young in the values of diligence, obedience and discipline — the personality characteristics prized most highly in an industrial state. The creation of the public secondary school, a much-touted example of nineteenth century reform, therefore, has been interpreted by revisionist historians as a device by which the middle-class could maintain both their monopoly of the “white-collar” ranks and their control of the selection mechanism through which others might rise.

Interestingly, it has been further noted by the revisionist school that educational reform has been somewhat episodic and that each of the three great periods of school reforms in North America — the middle-nineteenth century (1840-1870), the Progressive era (1890-1910), and the 1960’s and after — corresponds to a time of immense technological change. The fact that the turning points in school reform clearly coincide with the turning points in the larger social order suggests that the motives for reform may be less altruistic than previously thought. Undoubtedly, if one entertains this kind of inference — that the genesis of school reform may be explained by the collusion of education and industry — the grounds for the failure of recent educational reform may merit reconsideration.

In reviewing the long and complex relationship between education and equality, a number of points are worthy of restatement. First of all, it is obvious that there are some fundamental difficulties in attempting to treat a philosophical concept such as equality with sociological data. The question of equality must be seen for what it is — a core element of democratic ideology — and an issue that must be debated outside the forum of the schools. It is sad but nonetheless true that, unless a society adopts an Orwellian course and severs the ties between parents and children, inequality will continue to exist. The schools simply cannot ensure equality of outcome. Unfortunately, our present mind-set has focused on the failure of the schools as agents of equality and has prevented us from asking an equally important question, “Would the social and economic inequalities be greater without public education?” Certainly, this line of enquiry deserves greater attention.

Looking backward, the preponderance of our problems with social reform appears rooted in our inability to question our initial assumption that the schools can act as vehicles of such reform. Similarly, we have failed in the past to separate concepts of educational and social reform to the extent where either could be considered in a meaningful way. The confusion which has accompanied the equation of educational with social reform has largely undermined the effectiveness of efforts both to revitalize the school and to plan social strategies for the remaking of society. If the schools have failed, it is chiefly because attempts at educational reform have been ill-conceived and premised for the most part on ambiguous goals. Significantly, also, it should be mentioned that, ordinarily, discussions on the failure of schooling have centered almost exclusively on educational “products” and not “processes.” The latter, many educators have argued, are perhaps of greater importance to the young and undoubtedly worthy of investigation.

Finally, the so-called “failure of the schools” has not only demonstrated the limits of our educational capabilities, but, more gravely, has suggested the limits of democratic idealism. One cannot discount the notion that sweeping reforms to promote equality have not come to pass because a genuine commitment on the part of the body politic has been withheld. The political, social and economic history of Canada and the United States can be typified by an innate conservatism and the absence of a revolutionary tradition in political, social or economic affairs. As a result, there are few, if any, alternatives entertained in

social thought which involve a radical redistribution of wealth or the power that it engenders.

In short, despite a public policy which has opened access to educational institutions in the last quarter of a century, the distribution of social wealth has changed little. Admittedly, there is support for the idea of equality, but what about the act? Ultimately, this is the vexing question that must be addressed by any society that wishes to be truly equal and democratic.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> For sound historical treatments of both traditions, see Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America: The Thankless Persuasion* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962) and Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955).

<sup>2</sup> While this brief overview of the major ideological divisions on the role of the state ignores the wide range of opinion on this issue that characterizes the middle-ground of the philosophical spectrum, at least it does identify the poles of discussion. The well-known academic debate of recent years on the allocation of public resources for education between economists John Vaizey and Milton Friedman perhaps best states the differing outlooks and values of liberal and conservative thought. As a matter of fact, economists have frequently "fleshed out" the classical points-of-view in their analyses of who benefits from and who pays for the provision of public educational services. However, it must be always kept in mind that educational finance is a socio-political question as much as it is a question of economics.

For the conservative perspective see Milton Friedman, "The Role of Government in Education," in Robert A. Solo (ed.), *Economics and the Public Interest* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1955) and for the liberal counter-arguments and rebuttal see John Vaizey, *The Economics of Education* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> Of late, educational economists have added a new and significant dimension to the question of state intervention. Moving beyond the idea of intervention on behalf of the individual, economists of the human capital school have offered convincing evidence that investment in human resources generates returns to government at least on a par with those of capital investment. Without doubt, the human potential movement has been a significant force in the development of government policies toward education (most notably in higher education) in both Canada and the United States in the 1960's and 1970's. In a direct manner, this has led to the further extension of the role of government.

Among the leading figures of the human capital movement were Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz of the University of Chicago. Their major ideas may be found in Gary S. Becker, "Underinvestment in Education?" *American Economic Review*, Vol. 50 (May, 1960), pp. 346-54 and Theodore W. Schultz, *The Economic Value of Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Largely, this mythology had its genesis in the work of Ellwood Cubberley. Cubberley's ideas on educational development in the United States dominated the field of American educational history for the first five decades of the twentieth century. An informative discussion of Cubberley's impact on the historiography of education is found in Lawrence Cremin, *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley* (New York: Teacher's College, Columbia University, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Concerns with the state of public education are summarized in lively fashion in National Committee for Citizens in Education Commission on Educational Governance, *Public Testimony on Public Schools* (Berkeley: McCutchan Publishing, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> It has been argued that the concept of "equality" unqualified by an "of" is without meaning in educational discussion.

<sup>7</sup> Marion Porter, John Porter and Bernard R. Blishen, *Does Money Matter — Prospects for Higher Education* (Toronto: Institute for Behavioural Research, York University, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Jencks, "Inequality in Retrospect," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 43 (February, 1973), p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> For a sampling of some of the lessons learned from the reform efforts of the 1960's, see: Martin Carnoy and Henry Levin, *The Limits of Educational Reform* (New York: David McKay, 1976); Victor Baldrige, *Managing Change in Educational Organizations: Sociological Perspective and Case Studies* (Berkeley: McCutchan, 1975); and Ernest House, "The Micro-Politics of Innovation: Nine Propositions," *Phi Delta Kappan*, (January, 1976), pp. 337-340. Reform efforts failed for a number of organizational reasons, among them: reforms failed to appreciate the difficulties involved in the mangement of large-scale reform; it was not understood that reform measures could not be successfully imposed from above; there was little "fidelity of fit" or "mutual adaptation" between the goals of the reformers and those being reformed; and, scant attention was directed toward the need to make decisions close to the level of those affected by the outcomes.

<sup>10</sup> James S. Coleman *et al.*, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1966).

<sup>11</sup> However, Jencks' research did help to corroborate Coleman's data which suggested that school resources have little effect on the number of years of schooling completed by students and that, for the most part, schools were unable to manipulate the cognitive skills of students as measured by standardized tests of reading; verbal ability or arithmetic.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Jencks *et al.*, *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> According to James W. Guthrie *et al.*, *Schools and Inequality — A Study of Social Status, School Services, Student Performance, and Post-School Opportunity in Michigan* (n.p.: the Urban Coalition, 1969), p. 9: "Having had the benefits of good schooling and parlayed them into a good life, the individual from a wealthy family is then capable of providing his own offspring with a headstart in the same race. The cycle of advantaged position thus tends to perpetuate itself."

<sup>14</sup> The following monographs are of particular note in this respect: Michael Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968); Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); Alison Prentice, *The School Promoters — Education and Social Class in Mid-Nineteenth Century Upper Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977); and Joel Spring's two volumes, *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State* (Boston: Beacon, 1972) and *The Sorting Machine: National Educational Policy Since 1945* (New York: David McKay Company, 1976).