

Education for Developing Nations: Equality of Educational Opportunities

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Abstract

This article is the substance of an address to the Pre-Congress Conference of the IVth Congress of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES), Seoul, Korea. July 3-5, 1980. Ward outlines various ways to understand the term “equality of educational opportunities”—especially as it applies to majority world development.

“Equality of educational opportunities” has become a worldwide political theme. In nations that remember clearly their colonial past, the theme speaks of deliverance and fulfillment. Where recent history has been blighted by elitism and unwarranted privilege, “equality of educational opportunities” has become a motive of those who would correct imbalances and injustices.

Equality of educational opportunities is an ideal. Perhaps nowhere has it been nor will it be fully realized. But to strive for anything less seems beneath the dignity of humanity. The government that refuses to claim this ideal as its ultimate goal will be severely criticized. Every sector of society with real or imagined claims of neglect and discrimination will complain that the government is using educational policy to suppress them.

The ideal is costly. To strive toward equality of educational opportunity is expensive. In most cases it demands sacrifices in some other sector of governmental expenditure. It often involves broadening of the face of educational expenditures at the expense of higher education. Equality of educational opportunity demands an attack on the systems that maintain the privileged few at the expense of poor.

If the goal of equality of educational opportunity were simply a choice between broad basic education for everyone or lavish and extensive education for a select few, the decision could be made on the basis of political power. A nation with a broad representative democracy would likely choose the former, and a totalitarian or oligarchical nation would choose the latter. But it is not so simple. Education is more than a product of national development. Indeed, education is the *engine* of national development. Thus, the extent of educational opportunity will determine the breadth and quality of national development. In the nation that denies educational opportunity to its people, everyone suffers the consequences, rich and poor alike.

Education has social, economic, and political values. Americans call upon the philosophy of Thomas Jefferson to explain the nation’s historic commitment to education of rich and poor. Jefferson’s ideal of universal and free education “for the general enlightenment of the citizenry” though not immediately implemented, has been widely recognized as offering the most practical deterrent to tyranny (Brookover et al., in Gordon, 1974, 164).

In today’s world the striving of nations for political and economic strength sometimes ignores the social conditions of the people. On one hand, education is respected and sought after for its value in creating job competencies and technological output. But education also has inevitable social meaning. As people become more able, more self-reliant, and more confident, they also become more critical and more

communicative. Few nations have been able to move toward equality of educational opportunity without, at the same time, opening up traditional and restricted social systems. Educated people are inevitably more aspiring people.

Sociologists and historians have observed that education serves the society in contrasting ways: the educational system contributes to social flexibility while at the same time making the society more stable (Havighurst and Neugarten, 1957, 270). National policy decisions can make either of these two qualities, flexibility or stability, dominant. In the interests of political stability, protection of power structure and its ownership properties, the tendency is to emphasize stability. The appeal for equality of educational opportunity, on the other hand, tends toward opening up the social system and providing for “climbing and falling” according to people’s energy and abilities.

Not all education leads to national development. The hope that larger investment in education will result in economic and social development is too simple. Some forms of education maintain existing conditions and thus slow other efforts toward development.

Particularly in the post-colonial nations of West Africa, the first expansions of educational opportunity produced relatively little measurable gain in the quality of life. Until the curriculum of education can be converted from colonial models and elitist academic values to become a functional preparation for participation in new developments, the results are disappointing. One of the most serious mistakes is to expand the wrong type of education. Perhaps more people will be educated, but if what they learn is useless to themselves or to the nation, it is largely a waste.

The universities of many nations are vulnerable to criticism. Beginning as instruments of colonial culture, many still continue to represent cultural values far removed from the needs of the nation. As a means of assuring the upper classes a way to assure themselves and their children superior status and lifestyle, they function all too well.

Most third world universities are still carbon copies of universities in industrial countries; they remain remote from the development problems of their own nations (Botkin et al., 1979, 95). It is not enough to be educating many people into high skills and academic proficiency. Such people tend to develop disdain for their “backward” nation and depart for greener pastures, anyway.

Higher education has two enabling hands, power and service. Many of the great institutions of learning are more proficient at developing people who will use their education as *power*, to influence and to control others. The development of a nation is benefitted more by people who use their education to *serve*. The orientation of the colleges and universities usually makes the difference.

In the primary and secondary schools the curriculum may or may not support national development. The impractical, imported, urban characteristics of many school curricula deny the quality of educational opportunities to poor and rural people. Their basic needs are not well served by such schools and thus they lack interest for themselves or for their children. The exception, of course, is the aspiring villager who wants a city-style and foreign education for his children so they can “escape.” This well-established educational tradition works against rural development and is one of the causes of urban over-population.

The dichotomy between school and life has been identified as a major limit on learning effectiveness. So long as schooling is in a language foreign to the mother-tongue of children, so long as the values and the rigidities of formal learning are alien to the lifestyle of home, community

and marketplace, and so long as the content of school studies lacks bridges into the life of people, there will be no equality of educational opportunity. (Botkin et al., 1979, 93)

Politicized Minorities, the Neglected and the Poor

In every nation development is uneven. Some people benefit from development more than other people do. Urban lifestyle, health and welfare conditions often improve before the rural components. Regions or tribal factions that constitute the political power base are sure to receive preferential treatment. And, of course, the middle class, however small it may be, usually benefits more than the lower class.

Overt-discrimination is the most obvious problem. Educational opportunities are still being denied to millions of people because of ethnic, tribal, political and religious reasons. Any government that promises to improve educational opportunity is obligated to open its eyes to the overt discrimination arising out of its own political structure.

The rural poor have been recognized as a neglected sector of society. In recent years many international assistance agencies have encouraged national planning ministries to attack this neglect. Unlike the rich countries wherein the rural poor are a minority, in most developing nations they are a major sector of the society. Thus to deal with rural poverty is very expensive. So far there are very few evidences of large-scale breakthroughs toward educational planning that benefits the rural poor. The increased emphasis on nonformal education could be important since the schools and school curriculum show few signs of dealing with better rural needs.

The cities still get the best teachers, the newest resources, and the largest share of financial resources. In only a few nations is the problem of regional discrimination being studied.

Equal access does not make equal opportunity. Even regions where there is an open access to educational experience, many other factors can work against equal opportunity. The distance to a school, the costs of going to school, tuition fees, uniforms, books, etc., as well as the hidden costs, such as the need for children to participate in the family enterprise, farm or other labor, keep education out of reach for many. The living conditions of the family are also closely related to realistic educational opportunity:

Learning that promotes the goals of survival and dignity cannot be developed and encouraged in a vacuum. For example, it makes little sense to launch a major program to stimulate learning among people living below the subsistence level without at the same time adopting policies conducive to...improvement in their levels of food, health and habitat. (Botkin et al., 1979, 85)

The assumption that industrialized modern societies are no longer confronted by problems of equality of educational opportunity is incorrect. Access to education, the contribution of education to social welfare, and the socio-economic values of learning are persistent issues in any society. They are never solved, though they may be ignored.

“Confusing perceptions of justice, of the nature of our society, and of the functions and needs of individuals are widespread,” according to Boyer, Waters, and Harris, as they introduce a chapter on the current problem of justice, society, and the individual in American education (in Jelinek, 1978, 163). The faults in justice systems and the malfunctions of education are being urgently addressed in the American society. Although the United States is not part of the third world, we are nevertheless continuing to confront our own development problems. Social realities have led to inequality of educational opportunity for certain Mexican-American, Native American Indians, and African-America people (Jelinek, 1978, 172). No less than in a developing nation these are important problems for the United States. Development and

strength of any nation are dependent on the integrity of the solutions to just such problems. Every nation must learn the importance of creative self-criticism.

Education can lead to frustration. Education, almost any sort of education, is associated with hope. Perhaps it is deep in the human consciousness to sense that development of one's understanding is a fulfillment. This sense is the fountain of hope and the hope is the stimulus of great plans. Education thus creates the demand for more education.

Those who plan education must anticipate the pressures that will be created by even a relatively small success. Even worse are the false hopes about economic advantages. Education cannot create jobs. The economic condition of the country, especially its industry and function in the international marketplace, are more closely related to employment. Education can alter the employability of a person, but the primary question remains: for what job?

A major limitation on use of expanded education to promote economic development is the *absorptive capacity* of the modern sector of economies in emergent nations....The first stages of industrialization create few jobs....The schools do not create unemployment, but they contribute to the complex situation which leads youth to leave the rural scene in search of jobs in the cities which cannot cope their numbers. (Hanson, 1969, 350)

Difficult Decisions

The choices that must be made require great wisdom. Education for development, and especially the ideal of equal opportunity force planners to confront some difficult issues.

Adults or children? Historically education has been for children. In virtually every society today the major educational concern is for the socialization of children. Surely adults can continue to learn throughout life, and many do. But education usually means schools and schools means children.

National development through education demands concern for both children and adults. But this demands even more resources, so the emphasis on children usually wins out. It is more sentimental than logical to put the major educational investment into children in a developing nation. Educational quality cannot be achieved by emphasis on children alone. The false hope that through the children society can be transformed still persists.

The problem was clearly identified many years ago in the 1957 report of The Pakistan Commission on National Education:

...once pupils leave the village school they become assimilated by the community rather than function as progressive forces for its enlightenment. Many forget in a short time even the skills of reading and writing. The reason is not only that the atmosphere of the village discourages reading, but also that little reading material is available to sustain a positive interest. In spite of their schooling, children tend to retain the old prejudices, attitudes and way of life. *The education of the adult is clearly important even to ensure the continued literacy of the children.* (in Manniche, 1978, 59)

Literacy for all? Even the most optimistic assessment indicates that one-fifth of the adults in the world are unable to communicate through the written word. These people are mostly concentrated in the most economically deprived regions of the world's most economically distressed countries (Botkin et al., 1979, 91). Any discussion of educational opportunity must take into account this most difficult of all

educational problems. In many cases, people are illiterate because the political decision has been made to keep them illiterate; there is fear that increasing their communication skills will risk converting them into a political liability. For many illiterate people poverty is so deep and basic human needs so overwhelming that they see no value in “wasting” scarce energy on the seemingly meaningless rituals of symbols on paper.

Creative uses of mass media, especially radio, can be employed to bring such people into learning for development. Illiteracy is not equivalent to ignorance. But sooner or later, in one way or another, illiterate persons must be helped out of bondage to secondary sources and dependent modes of learning if equality of educational opportunity is to have any meaning.

The realization of national goals, economically, socially, and politically, is now perceived as requiring the participation of previously bypassed masses of urban and rural citizens, literate and illiterate. (Case and Niehoff, 1976, 50)

The educational needs of the developing world require massive literacy education efforts, but even more important, they require programs of educational opportunity that enable illiterate persons to develop important skills and understanding *before* they become literate. Otherwise, educational opportunity will continue to shrink.

Women, too? That women are proportionally under-enrolled in formal education in most of the world is a well-known fact. Within the past several years this fact has been linked to the parallel observation that most development schemes are based on thinking of, about, and for men.

The same international assistance agencies that have lately been advocating programs for the poorest of the poor and the rural poor are now concerned with women in development.” Educators may welcome this emphasis, especially in the spirit of equal educational opportunity. Surely the fact that such a large percentage of human beings has been assumed not to need educational opportunity is regrettable.

Education of the handicapped. The emotional quality of this area of inequality is overwhelming. The incidence of handicapping conditions is greater in less developed nations (blindness, untreated fevers and resultant brain damage, uncorrected orthopedic conditions, etc.); thus the human loss is staggering. Yet the costs of providing educational assistance for handicapped persons is relatively greater than for others, and the economic advantages are unclear. The funds will not even stretch to cover minimal education for all “normal” persons. What can or should be done for the handicapped? It is not an easy question

On humanitarian grounds, and because the economic contribution of the handicapped can be turned from the negative to a positive, the handicapped should be included in any honest attempt to provide equal educational opportunity. But when there is not enough money, the cold trade-off emerges: neglect one handicapped person for the education of four “normal” persons.

What is education worth? The effective economic value of a given amount of expenditure in education is hard to assess. Many outcomes of education are remote, abstract, and, more often than not, cumulative across a person’s lifetime. The econometric procedures of our time are inadequate to address this vital question: what is education worth?

The economic question must be addressed, at least with logic and common sense. Educational planners can, for example, invest in education that has greater likelihood of relating to development needs. Hanson warns:

...many educational models and generalizations based on experience or research within advanced nations are not directly applicable to problems arising in the social, economic, and educational settings which characterize emerging countries. (1969, 357)

The quest for more functional education has led to a worldwide recognition of nonformal education. While not necessarily equivalent to formal education and thus not a “less costly” substitute for schooling, nonformal education does offer great hope for broad access to functional education. The nonformal education frame-of-mind accepts health, agriculture, nutrition, family welfare, job skills, and virtually all such vital areas of life as appropriate situations through which to develop learning experiences for adults and children alike.

...Nonformal education methods...are in a number of respects better adapted to the present educational needs of the developing countries than are the formal schools. They are designed to achieve more immediate results, especially in preparation for...socially useful jobs...In building upon...stronger motivation due to its more obvious relevance to real-life problems and needs...(Case and Niehoff, 1976, 51)

Ten years from now we may no longer be talking about nonformal education, but *education* surely will still be important and our perspectives about education will be larger. *Participation* may become the key issue. The Report to the Club of Rome¹ identifies participation as a major feature of both national problem-solving and of the form of education that enables it. In the report Botkin warns that

...if participation is to be effective, it will be essential that those who hold power do not block innovative learning. Participation is more than the formal sharing of decisions; it is...cooperation, dialogue, and empathy. (Botkin 1979, 13)

Responsible Commitment to Equality of Educational Opportunities

Pursuit of the ideal of equality of educational opportunities can stimulate social reconstruction. In the United States as recently as 1954, several states were still claiming that separate educational resources for the white and black races provided equal opportunity. This position, called “separate but equal,” had replaced the earlier practice of exclusion of black people from educational opportunity, a legacy from days of legal slavery. But the Supreme Court of the United States decided that the only valid equality would come from free access to the same resources.

Thus today the only allowable discrimination in educational matters is on the basis of abilities and previous record of the person. Despite our historic claims to freedom, the nation was 178 years beyond its own colonial revolution before the issue of racial discrimination was faced squarely (Shoemaker, 1957).

The ideal acquires deep social commitment. Botkin sees the same problem at the heart of the developing nation’s need for more open, participatory education: “What is especially important and currently lacking is socio-political will” (Botkin, 1979, 129).

¹ See <http://www.clubofrome.org/?p=324> for a description of the founding purposes and activities of the Club of Rome. Last accessed June 2013.

Drawing on L. J. Lebret's concept of development, Goulet comments that "There is no development unless all people benefit, unless the common good is achieved. Privilege systems, excessive gaps between the city and countryside, alienating divisions of labor are all ruled out" (Goulet 1974, 45).

The lesson can be learned from the world's experiences in literacy education. It applies just as well to the issue of equal educational opportunity. Experience thus far has shown that there are several factors vital to the success of literacy programs:

- National political resolve.
- Dynamic social and economic structures, more likely to succeed in the society on the move towards greater social justice.
- Awareness and participation of the population.
- Plans...geared to economic and social development. (Bhola 1980, 1)

Education is at the very life-center of human personhood and national development. To consider matters of educational practice is to deal with the basic conditions of human life and social-political systems.

It is the nature of the system itself that perpetuates the feeling of powerlessness and not something basic in people. Before successful education can be experienced, children of diversity must begin to feel power that comes from self-confidence, self-worth, a sense of security and place, the uplifting quality of group identification, and the salutary effects of becoming aware of the value of one's own ideas and feelings (Charnofsky, 1971, iv).

The quality of educational opportunity depends, ultimately, upon making these conditions available to all human beings.

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