



Education for Developing Nations: *Equality of Educational Opportunities*¹

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Equality of education 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 deal 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. Often it involves broadening of the base 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 the poor.

If the goal of equality 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 broad representative democracy would likely choose the former, and a totalitarian or oligarchical nation would choose the latter. But 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 a 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 both the rich and the 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 political tyranny.²

In today’s world, the striving of newer nations for political and economic strength sometimes ignores the social conditions of the people. On the one hand, education is respected and sought after for its value in creating job competencies and technological output. But education also has an 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

¹ Ted Ward. Education for Developing Nations: Equality of Educational Opportunities. Paper presented to Pre-congress Conference, July 3-5, 1980, 4th World Congress, World Council of Comparative Education Societies, Seoul, Korea. See Fall 2013 issue of *Common Ground Journal*” (www.commongroundjournal.org) for a revised version of this paper.

² Brookover, et al., in C. Wayne Gordon (ed.) *Uses of the Sociology of Education*. Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 164

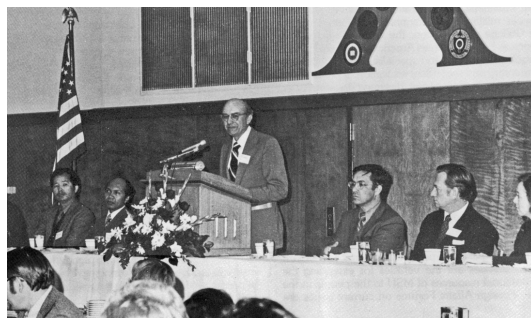
move toward equality of educational opportunity without, at the same time, opening up traditional and restrictive social systems. Educated people are inevitably more aspiring people.

Sociologists and historians have observed that education serves a society in two contrasting ways: the educational system contributes to social flexibility while at the same time making the society more stable.³ National policy decisions can make either of these two qualities (flexibility or stability) dominant. In the interests of political stability, protection of the power structure and its ownership of 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 a superior status and lifestyle, they function all too well.



Most Third World universities are still carbon copies of universities in industrial countries—remote from the development problems of their own nations.⁴ It is not enough to educate many people into high skills and academic proficiency. Such people tend to develop disdain for their “backward” nation and leave for greener pastures, anyway.

Higher education has two major ends: power and service. Many of the great institutions of learning are more proficient at developing people who will use their education as power in order to influence and to control others. But development of a nation benefits more from 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 equality 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

³ Robert Havighurst and Bernice L. Neugarten. *Society and Education* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1957), p. 270

⁴ James W. Botkin, Mahdi Elmandjra, Mircea Malitza. *No Limits to Learning*. A Report to the Club of Rome (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1979), p. 95; see also Cole S. Brembeck. *Equal Educational Opportunity: Denial From Within*. Paper for the International Education Society Conference, Sun Valley, Idaho, 1975

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 the people, there will be no equality of educational opportunity.”⁵

Politicized Minorities, the Neglected and the Poor

In every nation, development is uneven. Some people benefit from development more than others. Urban lifestyle, health and welfare conditions often improve before the rural. Regions or tribal factions which 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 for 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 where 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 expensive. So far, there are no large-scale breakthroughs of educational re-design for the rural poor. (The increased emphasis on nonformal education is important, but the schools and school curriculum show few signs of better meeting rural needs.)

The cities still get the best teachers, the newest resources, and the largest share of financial resources. In a few nations, the problems of regional discrimination are being studied but *equal access does not make equal opportunity*. Even in regions with 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, as well as the hidden costs such as unavailability of the child to engage 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.⁶

To assume that industrialized 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.

“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.⁷ The faults in justice systems and the malfunctions of education are being urgently addressed in the American society. (Although Americans aren’t part of the majority world, we are nevertheless

⁵ Ibid., p. 93

⁶ Ibid., p. 85

⁷ Boyers, Waters and Harris in James J. Jelinek, James (ed.) *Improving the Human Condition*. Yearbook of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (Washington: ASCD, 1978), p. 163

continuing to confront our own development problems.) Social realities have led to inequality of educational opportunity for certain Mexican-Americans, Native American Indians, and African Americans.⁸ No less than in a developing nation these are important problems. Development and the 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. The MOBREAL [the Brazilian Movement of Liberation] literacy and basic education program of Brazil, for example, has stimulated an almost overwhelming demand for more education. And since MOBREAL was designed to “recapture” school drop-outs and adults who had never gone to school, the assumption was made by many that successful studies in MOBREAL programs would be rewarded by admission into further formal education. But Brazil does not have the necessary educational facilities and teachers to fulfill these hopes.

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 new 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 with their numbers.⁹

Difficult Decisions

The choices that must be made require great wisdom. Education for development and especially the ideal of equal opportunity forces 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 mean children.

National development through education demands attention for both children and adults. But this development 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 equality cannot be achieved by emphasis on children alone. The false hope that through the children a 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 of 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

⁸ Ibid., p. 172

⁹ John W. Hanson. Education in Developing Nations. *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*. (Fourth Edition) (New York: Macmillan 1969), p. 350

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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 great 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 the 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 the previously by-passed masses of urban and rural citizens, literate and illiterate.¹²

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. Bhola's data indicate literacy progress in world-wide percentages, but not in totals: "In 1979, there were 742 million illiterate adults in the world; in 1980 . . . 814 million; and in 1990, there will be 884 million . . ."¹³

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 advocate 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 have been assumed not to need educational opportunity is regrettable. Just before the international spotlight was thrown on this problem, Hardee (1969) assessed the female university enrollments in various countries: Brazil 19%, India 15%, and Nigeria 7%.¹⁴

Education of the handicapped. The emotional quality of this area of inequality is overwhelming. The incidence of such conditions is greater in less developed nations (blindness, untreated fevers and resultant brain damage, uncorrected orthopedic conditions); thus, the human loss is staggering. Yet, the costs of providing educational assistance for handicapped persons are relatively greater than

¹⁰ In Peter Manniche (revised by Jakob Kjaer.) *Rural Development in Denmark and the Changing Countries of the World* (Copenhagen: Borgen Publishers, 1978), p. 59

¹¹ Botkin, et al. (1979) p. 91

¹² Harry L. Case and Richard O. Niehoff. *Educational Alternatives in National Development* (Program of Studies in Nonformal Education), East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, 1976, p. 50

¹³ H.S. Bhola. The Elusive Goal of World Literacy. *Development Communication Report*, No. 30 (April 1980), p. 1

¹⁴ Melvene Hardee. Education for Women. *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*. New York: Macmillan, 1969

for others, and the economic advantages are unclear. With funds that will not even stretch to cover minimal education for all “normal” persons, what can or should be done for the handicapped?

In Israel, a developing nation that has invested broadly in human potentialities of its people, programs of education have provided for a productive and happy life of the disadvantaged within the agricultural labor sector. Their programs are based on some of the best research in the world.

On humanitarian grounds, and because the economic contribution of the handicapped can be turned from a negative to a positive, the handicapped should be included in any honest attempt to provide “equal educational opportunity.” But without sufficient funds, the cold trade-off emerges: neglect one handicapped person or 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, accumulative across a person’s lifetime. Econometric procedures of our time are inadequate to answer 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.¹⁵

Such views have not been ignored. For example, Julius Nyerere has built the new education system for Tanzania on a platform of self-reliance, appealing to African tribal values as the basis of energy for development. He has proposed that development should affect “the countryside rather than allow urban concentration to command economic decisions and preempt professional services.”¹⁶

The quest for a more functional education has led to a wide 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.

Non-formal 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.¹⁷

As educational development proceeds, participation may become the key issue. The Report to the Club of Rome 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 . . . co-operation, dialogue, and empathy.¹⁸

¹⁵ Hanson (1969), p. 357

¹⁶ Denis Goulet. *A New Moral Order*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1974, p. 95

¹⁷ Case and Niehoff (1976) p. 51

¹⁸ Botkin (1979) p. 13

Responsible Commitment to Equality of Educational Opportunities

Pursuit of the ideal of equality of educational opportunities can stimulate social reconstruction. Even in the United States of 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 African Americans 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 issues of racial discrimination was faced squarely.¹⁹

The ideal requires 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 “sociopolitical will.”²⁰ Drawing on L.J. Lebret’s concept of development, Goulet concludes:

There is no development unless all people benefit from it, unless the common good is achieved. Privilege systems, excessive gaps between the city and the countryside, alienating divisions of labor are all ruled out.²¹

A 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 a society on the move towards greater social justice.

Awareness and participation of the population.

Plans . . . geared to economic and social development.²²

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 that feeling of powerlessness and not something basic in people. Before success in education can be experienced, children of diversity must begin to feel the 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.²³

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

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¹⁹ Don Shoemaker (ed.) *With all Deliberate Speed*. New York: Harper, 1957

²⁰ Botkin (1979), p. 129

²¹ Goulet (1974) p. 45

²² Bhola (1980) p. 1; see also Gary Brown. *Literacy Campaigns in the Context of Development*. Bonn: German Foundation for International Development, 1980

²³ Stanley Charnofsky. *Educating the Powerless*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1971, p. iv

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