EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL: BEYOND COMPENSATORY EDUCATION

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The spate of books on schools and schooling in the past year or so carries at least one clear message. Andrew Hacker (1984) sums it up like this in an omnibus review called "The Schools Flunk Out" for the *New York Review of Books:* "While the reports stress that education must be improved if we are to catch up with our competitors, they also profess a broader goal: excellence for everyone. *Educating Americans* specifically states that 'academic or educational excellence . . . does not mean the provision of high quality education to only a small group of highly talented youth' " (p. 35). Hacker goes on to say that such is, of course, the American way of discourse. Panels called to address a general audience could hardly do other than to conclude that, whatever the problems and whatever the needs, all must benefit equally from renewed and emboldened efforts. Where the schools are concerned the quest must be not merely for life, liberty and happiness, but also for *excellence for everyone.*

Indeed, who among us would eschew such a goal?

Yet to his credit, Hacker sounds a discord: "The panelists omit saying that what they are proposing is both unprecedented and radical. Equal opportunities for everyone may be our accepted rhetoric. However, as a practical matter, we have never sought to close the gaps between different classes of schools . . . the fact (is) that high quality schooling, as defined by educators themselves, at best reaches about a third of young Americans" (p. 35).

Again, who among us could deny that efforts to provide equal educational opportunities for all have been, at best, halfhearted or, worse, thwarted by self-interest groups with turf and/or privileges to protect. Or, perhaps the very worst of all insofar as the sensibility and credibility of professional educators is concerned, the efforts may have been subverted by misdirection. Without claiming any personal lack of bias or ideological purity, I would like to argue that compensatory education is a case in point of the latter and then look beyond the platitudes to the future.

Compensatory Education

I think that a paper published in 1979 provides a particularly lucid analysis of the compensatory education movement and the issues that surround it. Professor Edmund Gordon (1979) prepared the paper to draw implications for compensatory teaching from a collection of state-of-the-art reviews of theory and practice related to the initial learning of reading; but he also made important points about compensatory education that are as well taken today as they were in 1979.

One of Professor Gordon's basic points is that the main approaches to compensatory education have grown out of a "deficits" concept. "Circumvention of insufficient environment, reparations for neglect, special education to compensate for malfunction—all these approaches involve the underlying assumption of a deficiency" (p. 302). In other words, the inclination has been to compare poor and minority children to so-called "mainstream" children in order to find ways in which the former differ from the latter, to consider any differences to be deficits, and then to devise programs designed to compensate for the deprivation that underlies the deficits.

Without denying that certain differences do in fact exist—at least when groups of disadvantaged and advantaged children are compared—Professor Gordon argues that the traditional deficit approaches are inadequate. The inadequacy is not so much a matter of content as of scope and implementation. The problem is that efforts to achieve equality of educational opportunity too often ignore the fact that there are differences in children's capacity to benefit from schooling. The real need is to provide a system of educational programs that are designed to provide all youngsters with an adequate education, regardless of the level at which they enter school.

The critical question, then, is how to make schooling effective, regardless of social circumstances—how to achieve equality of educational opportunity. The search for an answer must go beyond a deficit conception of compensatory education to a conception of quality education that provides ". . . quality of achievement at the survival level and opportunity to exceed that level" (p. 304). And the answer would apply " . . . not only to poor or minority group children but to all youngsters in the school" (p. 304). What Professor Gordon finally offers is less an answer to his own question than direction for continuing to seek an answer: " . . . even the elimination of . . . adversive social, economic, and political conditions is not likely to eliminate learning dysfunctions as long as schooling is not adaptive to the wide variations in the learning behavior of our pupils" (p. 319).

Focus on Individuals

An audience of classroom teachers might be a bit skeptical about Gordon's challenge. Isn't he, after all, sounding still another call to individualized instruction?

Of course he is! But in this case it isn't just another slogan. Compensatory education has always been beset by too much inclination to generalize and dichotomize and too little inclincation to individualize. By assuming that all poor and minority children share common deficits, educators have justified sending them off to special programs. Thus, they spare themselves the trouble of trying to understand individual differences and the expense of trying to do something with (not *about*) those differences. Repetitious and tiresome as still another call to heed individual differences may seem, it has the certain sound of common sense.

Gordon's message is more than just another professor's exhortation. It is, at the same time an invitation (a) to re-think the purpose and plan of compensatory education, and (b) to devise better ways to enhance the teaching and learning of individual students.

Goodlad (1984) extends some similar invitations in his book, *A Place Called School.* He says, for example, that grouping students in the traditional ways is just a convenient way for schools to show concern while they do nothing about individual differences:

> Grouping children by ability or achievement reflects what many people believe to be desirable or necessary, appears to provide for present individual differences, and helps teachers accom-

> modate to a difficult pedagogical problem. Also it is a procedure experienced by teachers when they were students that is passed along from teacher to teacher with little or no questioning. This form of classroom organization can be justified, many teachers believe, as a way to satisfy the popular plea to individualize instruction and learning. In practice, however, teachers tend to believe . . . that the grouping practice itself has largely taken care of pupil variability. Consequently, providing further for individual differences through instructional modifications is not necessary. Ironically, then, a device practiced in the name of individual differences actually may contribute to thwarting attention to students' individual learning problems" (p. 165).

Goodlad goes on to observe that "tracking" at the junior and senior high school levels compounds the problem. He laments the fact that the very practices devised to provide for individuality result instead in giving up on many individuals. And finally he suggests some ways to cope more effectively with individual differences. While they are not directed expressly to compensatory education, the suggestions are entirely relevant to the topic.

Beyond the Platitudes

Unfortunately, some of Goodlad's words sound like platitudes that teachers must by now expect when the topic is the teaching and learning of individuals. Statements like the following may be more likely to cause a chill of apprehension than a burning desire to move ahead:

> School principals can do much to set the expectation that it is teachers' responsibility to have each child succeed (p. 165).
>
> The good teacher is not the one who fails a third of the class but the one who brings an overwhelming percentage of children to mastery of the material (p. 166).

The ball, it would seem, always winds up in the same court when nobody else is ready or able to take a shot: the teachers'.

But platitudinous or not, there is no escaping the fact that it is indeed teachers who must be responsible for the teaching and learning of individual students. Not school boards, or superintendents, or curriculum directors, or school psychologists, or principals, or learning specialists. And, in school at least, not even parents. The others can help; but the teachers must see to the teaching and learning.

Fortunately, Goodlad offers lots of good advice on how others can help and how teachers can help themselves move toward schooling that is much more sensitive to human diversity and to individuals' attributes and aspirations. I do not mean to say that Goodlad's suggestions do not need more discussion and development. They do. Nor do I intend to sum up the ideas that fill a book. Look and judge for yourself. But I do want to underscore just two of Goodlad's ideas. I think that with serious thought and informed amplification they can be a basis for moving toward the elusive goal of individualized teaching and learning in the nation's schools.

First: "There will continue to be, . . . even under highly favorable teaching conditions for all, substantial differences in intellectual orientation, knowledge and work habits among high school graduates. In part this will be because school is not the only place one learns" (p. 166). This, too, may sound a bit platitudinous. But the fact is that too much of what has been said about individualizing instruction—or about providing equality of educational opportunity—ignores what must be obvious to anyone who has ever observed more than two or three people! (Or, I expect, anyone who has ever been in a school, either as student or as a teacher.) If individuals are in fact different from each other and if those differences are recognized as significant determiners of academic achievement, then it seems foolish to deny—or, as is more often the case, not to acknowledge—that truly successful teaching is more likely to increase than to diminish differences in the outcomes of schooling. Yet one of the *promises*—or maybe the word should be *expectations*—that is sometimes stated and almost always implied by advocates of individualized (or "equalized" or even "effective"—take your choice of terms) schooling is that everybody will turn out about the same if only appropriate learning conditions can be established. This false hope is nurtured by certain advocates of mastery learning, by optimistic politicians and by other platitude sayers who seem to have lost contact with reality. How sweet it is to know that sincere advocates of improved schooling for all, like Goodlad and Gordon, are taking a more realistic stance.

The recognition of reality is important, I think, because it demonstrates a level of sincerity and common sense that has too often been absent from discussions. If those of us in the education establishment will approach the improvement of schools and schooling with a little more sincerity and common sense we will have a better chance of making progress. At the very least, a realistic set of expectations is more likely to get the enthusiastic support of classroom teachers than more pie-in-the-sky platitudes.

Second, Goodlad calls for the completion of a "common school" experience. Now of course arriving at a consensual definition for "common school" presents no mean task; but my purpose here is simply to acknowledge that I see the call as a step in the right direction. (Granted, the notion isn't exactly a new one; nevertheless, at this point in time I think the step is forward, not backward.) I like the idea because it seems to be another demonstration of sincerity and common sense; and it provides a nice balance to admitting that we really shouldn't expect a common product from the schools and schooling. To oversimplify, the balance comes from, on the one hand, acknowledging that every high school graduate won't be ready to matriculate at Harvard and, on the other hand, subscribing to the notion that every high school graduate ought to be ready to participate in a literate society.

Again, it's the reality that appeals to me. By now it is abundantly clear that the schools cannot be everything to everybody. Yet it seems perfectly reasonable to expect that they be *something* to everybody. Reaching complete agreement on that "something" could be difficult; but the concept of the common school has been with us for a long time, so reaching a working consensus seems a reasonable goal.

To the Future

I choose to interpret certain signs of reality about the direction and expectations of schooling with optimism. But it would

be foolhardy to ignore certain notes of caution. For example, speculating about the school curriculum in the year 2000, Apple writes,

> There are many competing conceptions of what everyone should be taught, of what knowledge will be the most valuable to students and to the society. Defining the basics will prove to be one of the most difficult issues that the schools will face, because the schools will serve as arenas in which various groups will do battle for their differing conceptions of what the society should value" (p. 322).

One source of tensions, he says, will be an intensified struggle between business and organized labor to serve their respective goals; another will be continued fiscal problems that limit the resources available to schools.

In addition to the political and economic struggle, Apple foresees another possible trend that would have a serious impact on teachers: "the form or organization of the curriculum will become increasingly technical and management oriented" (p. 323). In Apple's view, the trend since Sputnik has been toward bigger, more elegant curriculum projects, particularly in science and math, that are "teacher-proof." That is, they specify *everything:* not only what the teacher should know, say and do but also how the students should respond. As a result, teachers are being "deskilled"—as they lose control of their own expertise and time, they lose the options that make teaching a professional activity and, ultimately, their teaching skills are lost through atrophy.

One needs not be overly pessimistic to see such a scenario followed by one with an even more standardized curriculum, more standardized tests and more deskilled teachers completely alienated from teaching.

Now I do not mean to suggest that Apple's "worst possible" scenario is the one that will prevail. But there is enough reality to it—particularly for those of us who have learned from and taught from basal readers—to sound a clear note of caution. Wouldn't it be a shame if the common sense appeal of a common school curriculum became the vehicle to destroy individual teaching and learning?

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