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Democracy, Equality, and Education

By A. Lawrence Lowell

I

The cousin who asked my grandfather to find for her a small house at a low rent, adding that she must have a good many rooms and would like them large, had no idea that her desires were unreasonable, much less humorous. A merciful providence fashioned man capable of holding at the same time contradictory opinions without being conscious of their inconsistency, and thereby of working toward a golden mean between two partially fallacious theories.

James Fitzjames Stephen pointed out that the democratic triad — Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity — contained such an inconsistency, because liberty strictly carried out would result in inequality reproducing itself in a geometrical ratio. He was of opinion, moreover, that the public cared more for equality than for liberty and would in the future sacrifice liberty to prevent inequality. Signs are not wanting that his surmise was not so far wrong as people at the time supposed, for on the whole, legislation in Europe and America has tended to curb liberty in the interest of equality, and in an exaggerated form in Russia to suppress it altogether. In our happily illogical way we do not go to extremes, and, while we proclaim political principles in platforms and on the stump, good sense keeps us from carrying them to their logical conclusions. We drive our automobiles on roads and not by compass across country.

Napoleon, who regarded himself as both fulfilling and destroying the French Revolution, considered its cardinal principle that of opening all careers to talent; which means liberty and inequality — but a substitution for inequality of status derived by birth into a class, of inequality of career arising from birth with talent; that is, a change from differentiation by classes to one by individuals. It was essentially a bourgeois or middle-class attitude, as was that of the French Revolution. As such it has not satisfied the aspiration for equality, has not by itself brought the millenium, and has not been final. The fact would seem to be that neither of the principles of liberty and equality, if carried to an extreme, is either in accord with human nature or practicable, and, as in many other cases, the modern world is striving by the method of trial and error, and therefore by oscillation, to discover the path that will lead to the greatest measure of happiness and progress for mankind. Fraternity, the third term in the triad, is treated by Stephen as a mere aspiration hardly worth scientific discussion. Yet it is perhaps the most important of the three, for disappointing as its practical application in human relationships has been, it must ever be the guiding star. Nor has it been wholly without effect. The bounds of sympathy have greatly widened, are still expanding, and, far as they are from what they should be, they point the way to a better world.
II

Democracy believes that in universal education it has found the key to its problems, which will unlock the door to its aspirations. Never has so much thought been given to the subject; never has anything approaching the proportion of aggregate income been devoted to its service; and one may therefore well ask whither it is tending. Popularly it is believed to be an instrument of equality, and as between classes, between the rich and the poor, those born of professional and of laboring parents, between those who have culture by heritage and those who have not, this is doubtless true, but as between individuals the case may be different.

Universal compulsory schooling places the tools of education in the hands of every child, that he may profit thereby to the extent of his capacity and ambition. Its aim is the largest opportunity for all to develop their abilities to the highest point, both for their own happiness and for the welfare of the community. Pasteur said that democracy meant enabling everyone to put forth his utmost effort—a reiteration on a higher plane of Napoleon's remark about opening a career to talent. But so far as education means cultivating a person's natural abilities it involves an increase in their potency, and therefore enlarging the inborn differences of talent more than would otherwise have occurred. At a time when the sons of manual workers had no instruction beyond learning their trade, the difference between them was not so marked as it has become since some of them may by education rise to be professional men, leaders in industry, or statesmen; while their less talented playfellows remain in the occupation of their parents. One can conceive of a system where none are educated above the capacity of the least intelligent, and the whole community reduced to a dead level, with the result of condemning it to stagnation and misery; but that is far from our democratic ideal, and would be abhorrent to all our aspirations.

Granted our conception of education as the greatest opportunity for all, its discriminating and selective function is inherent. It must give the bright and industrious child a chance to develop more than the dull or lazy one. In fact it does not do this so much as it should to carry out its own purpose, for the capable child is still more than he should be held back to the average pace of the class. If the object is to give each one the fullest opportunity to develop his natural capacity, provision ought to be made for the capable to advance more rapidly than is now done; and this is important not only for them but also for the community because its progress in the arts of civilization depends upon finding and developing the men who are capable of leading forward in the march of progress. Even as things stand in our public schools there is an inevitable differentiation among the pupils, the superior ones getting their faculties more developed than those who have less to cultivate.

In any fixed curriculum the divergence between the pupils of greater and less ability shows itself very clearly, and hence the weaker are discouraged. They feel how much less benefit they are getting than others; how great an effort they must make to keep abreast of the class; and they tend to give up
the struggle and leave school. The selective process in such a case proceeds automatically by the elimination of those who by natural endowments or by lack of impulse are least adapted for the work. The result has been most marked in the case of the older curricula of an academic nature, because these were long the only fixed programs; but it would be true of any uniform course of instruction, although the particular pupils affected would not always be the same in different fields. An elimination of that kind is naturally felt to be undemocratic, as violating the principle of equality, the pupils who cannot keep up not having the same chance to develop their possibilities as those who remain in school. This is one reason, although by no means the only one, for a variety of curricula in public schools. There is also a demand that instruction should be provided for children of different tastes, and for courses leading to a diversity of occupations. Yet beneath all these reasons there is a deep-seated feeling that justice, or the principle of equality, requires that all children should get the benefit of education to a certain age, be that fourteen, sixteen, or eighteen.

III

For one reason or another everyone will now agree that a variety of curricula is wise, certainly above the elementary grade. The history of the policy in Boston is particularly interesting because the education there began with the first public schools in this country and has been constantly expanded with the needs of successive generations. The Boston Latin School was established in 1634—a part of the movement that caused the founding by the legislature of Harvard College two years later. Its primary function from that day to this has been to prepare boys for higher education, and excellently has it done so for well-nigh three centuries. Naturally its program was, and has remained, of a generally fixed character, dealing in the early days mainly with Latin, Greek, and mathematics, which were deemed the essentials for all serious progress. At a later time other subjects were introduced, but the aim has continued to be essentially preparation for college. The Latin School long remained the only public secondary school, until a demand arose for instruction of that grade for boys who were not going to college, and in 1821 the English High School was established. With the relaxation of requirements for entrance to the colleges, many pupils from this school also have passed into higher education; but unlike the Latin School, that has not been its primary object, which has been to give a solid mental training useful for any career. Then came the more specialized schools preparing for definite occupations, the High School of Commerce, the School of Mechanics Arts, the Trade School, etc. Meanwhile the city had been absorbing suburban towns which had high schools of their own of a somewhat mixed character. Partly for this reason, partly in accord with the general trend of public education in the country, came the last phase, that of a large variety of curricula in every secondary and intermediate school not maintained for a special purpose. There is an academic course, not particularly directed at higher education, but at general culture and training of the mind, and on the other end of the scale courses in the manual and mechanic
arts, and for girls in household arts, with sundry intermediate curricula. It must not be supposed that the system is by any means wholly rigid, for the academic course includes some manual training, and that of mechanic arts diluted academic subjects; but in general this is a fair statement of its general features, and the same practice prevails over all the more progressive parts of the country. The interest of the school authorities in the mechanical or industrial courses, and the amount spent upon them, are both very great. In fact, the cost in Boston of these courses per pupil is larger than in the academic ones. Elaborate machines are installed of the latest type used in industrial plants—too elaborate in the opinion of the committee that recently surveyed the schools at the request of the School Committee.

Now the result of this variety of curricula in the public schools is a differentiation of the pupils at a comparatively early age. In the main, although by no means without exceptions, the brighter children take the academic course, the duller, the less ambitious or studious, pupils the mechanical one. Thus a distinction is created, different paths are entered, and a transfer from one to the other, while not impossible, is difficult and at the best entails a serious loss of time. No doubt there is an attempt to maintain that all forms of education are equally valuable and should be so recognized by the colleges; but that proposition is not very logically held. It was claimed, for example, that graduates of the Mechanic Arts High School are as well fitted as those from an academic course to enter the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—although statistics of the Institute a score of years ago showed that they were not. But the people who make the claim do not admit that graduates of the Latin and English High Schools are as well prepared as those from the Mechanic Arts to enter an industrial shop. If all this were true it would mean that the diverse curricula provide no intrinsic educational advantages, each fitting as well as any other for the next step in every career; the sole use of the variety of courses being the appeal to the differing tastes of the pupils who elect the subject that seems to them the most attractive, or the least difficult, among paths all leading to the same goal. But no one maintains such a theory seriously. There is a real difference in the educational effect of the curricula, the pupil who elects one of them entering upon a road that leads in a definite direction. Having taken it, he is practically bound to proceed in that direction, and thus his future is in almost all cases determined by the election once made.

There is a manifest danger in allowing a choice of curricula to be made too early. Children develop at different ages, and one who appears not very bright, or who takes little interest in academic studies, at twelve or fourteen may show different qualities at a later period. But at some time a choice must be made, and in most cases when once made it is conclusive, and the child’s destiny largely fixed. Not wholly, for education by reflection on actual life in the world is often as potent as that given in the classroom—a fact we are too prone to forget.

All this is said, not to disparage the variety of curricula of our public schools, but to insist that they are divergent, and that they should be re-
garded as such and that the choice should be recognized as momentous, and postponed as late as possible. Although everyone knows that the different courses are not equivalent, and do not lead to the same end, there is too much tendency to treat them as if they did, to tempt, unwittingly, the pupil uninterested in academic subjects into others that he thinks require less strenuous mental effort, and is led to believe equally good. He or his parents or teachers should appreciate the decision he is making and make it deliberately.

IV

The selective function of education is salutary and inherent. Salutary because to give an instruction which is not assimilated, like eating food that is not digested, is not nutritive but positively injurious. Salutary also for the better students who are otherwise kept back by the attempt to teach with them those who cannot keep up. Salutary for the community, because more than any other form of government democracy needs the recruiting and perfecting of its best brains wherever found. The selective process is inherent because no form of schooling has yet been, or ever will be, devised that does not involve it. The diverse curricula in the American public schools do not exclude it, but on the contrary provide for it, and make it systematic. Under the old rigid academic program the less capable and less ambitious eliminated themselves by falling out, mainly at the end of the elementary period. Now they are virtually steered into courses that lead to much the same result. We may well say "much the same result," for although the boy launched on a mechanical career gets from these courses a great deal that is valuable therein, he is as definitely committed to that career as under the old system where he dropped wholly out of school. In some ways he is more so because the very increase in the number of boys in secondary schools has made rising from the ranks more difficult than in the past for those who have not the training in tone of thought and breadth of view given in the general or so-called academic courses. The competition is keener and the advantages of an education both broad and solid a greater factor in success in the larger fields.

To say this is not to criticize the plan of a variety of curricula in our public schools. They are desirable and necessary in any system of universal and compulsory education carried beyond the elementary stage; but it is worth while to consider frankly their results and their significance. They are not, and can not be, administered so as to promote equality among men; for while they provide opportunity for all to develop their natural abilities in the way they prefer, and thus foster individual liberty, they tend in so doing to increase, rather than reduce, diversity and inequality.