

The Egalitarian Paradox in Public Education*

Goldwin J. Emerson

university of western ontario

L'un des paradoxes de notre société c'est que plus nous traitons les gens d'une manière égale et plus nous accentuons leur absence d'égalité. A l'opposite, si nous désirons que les individus parviennent à l'égalité en ce qui concerne leur position sociale, leur situation et leur réussite, il nous faudra les traiter de manière inégale. Nulle part ce paradoxe n'est plus évident que dans nos systèmes d'enseignement public. Le maître compétent découvrira assez vite qu'il existe bien des niveaux différents de capacité et de réussite dans sa classe. Si le maître consacre autant de temps et d'effort à chaque élève, il est probable que les élèves les plus doués dépasseront rapidement ceux qui sont plus lents et que les efforts du maître auront pour effet d'accroître les inégalités de capacité et de réussite qui existent déjà. D'autre part, si le maître trouve qu'il est important d'enseigner un certain nombre de matières inscrites au programme, il lui faudra travailler davantage avec les enfants plus lents afin d'arriver à son but. L'ensemble des idées pédagogiques du maître se reflétera sur la manière dont il abordera ce paradoxe d'égalité. Ce texte étudiera un nombre de possibilités qui s'offrent au maître.

One of the paradoxes of our society is that the more we treat people equally, the more we increase their inequality. Conversely, if we want people to end up with equal status, equal positions, and equal achievements, we must treat them in an unequal manner. This paradox is nowhere more evident than in our publicly supported educational systems. Consider, for example, the teacher who meets a class of 30 students for the first time in September. The competent teacher will soon discover that there are 30 different levels of ability and achievement within the class. If the teacher devotes an equal amount of time and effort to each student, the brighter students are likely to surge ahead of the slower ones, and the teacher's efforts will have had the effect of increasing the existing inequalities in ability and achievement. On the other hand, if the teacher decides that it is important to teach all of his students a certain prescribed amount of subject-matter as outlined in the curriculum, he will have to work much harder with the slower students in order to achieve this goal (Jencks, 1973, pp. 74-75). The teacher's overall philosophy of education will be reflected in the manner in which he copes with this egalitarian paradox. Attempts to resolve the paradox are numerous, but in general they can be classified as variations or combinations of two main approaches (Tyler, 1977)

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which I will call the “equal treatment for all” approach and the “equal objectives for all” approach.

EQUAL TREATMENT FOR ALL

The notion of equal treatment for all has such a ring of justice about it that, on the surface, it seems hard to imagine that it should ever be open to criticism. Yet, in the strictest sense of the word, equal treatment for all is an unworkable principle (Tyler, 1977, p. 9). Given the fact that children have different and unequal abilities to begin with, it is either impossible or unwise, or both, to offer equal treatment to all students. Consider the futility of a teacher giving equal help in learning the multiplication facts to two children — one who already knows the multiplication facts, and another who does not yet know his addition facts. In this case equal treatment is a denial of individual needs and individual differences.

Proponents of equal treatment for all may wish to argue that equal treatment does not mean identical treatment. They may claim that what is meant is that, in a general way, the teacher ought to devote an equal amount of time and effort to all students, so that he provides for “equality of training” (Coons, 1970, p. 3). In effect, the argument supports the view that equal treatment for all really means different treatment for all. It means helping students in whatever areas they need help, but it also implies that to be fair teachers should devote, in effect, equal time and effort to all students. This interpretation of “different but equal effort” to all students presents difficulties, for it requires that the teacher devote considerable time and attention to the individual needs of each of his students. The needs of 30 students are too numerous and diverse to be ministered to properly by one teacher who, of necessity, can devote only several minutes per hour (one-thirtieth of his teaching time) to each student. In order to offer equal time and effort in a variety of directions so that individual needs can be met, much smaller classes may be needed. While devoting equal time and effort to all may appear to be desirable, unfortunately it also is unworkable under normal classroom conditions.

As a matter of convenience, students are normally grouped together in classes and grades in such a way as to either minimize or overlook their individual differences. The teacher who has 30 Grade 6 students in his class is expected to teach all of his students a certain amount of common subject material. Curriculum guidelines, supervisory personnel, principals, and parents act together to direct the teacher’s efforts to this end. A teacher may take personal pride in the fact that he has taught one of his Grade 6 students how to solve algebraic equations at the Grade 11 level. Yet supervisory personnel will take a rather negative view of the fact that there is another Grade 6 student in the same class whose mathematical achievement is at the Grade 4 level. It would be unwise for the teacher to conclude that his success with the brighter student will offset his lack of success with

the slower one. When slower students vary from the norm, these variations tend to be perceived as "problems" requiring immediate attention, but the abnormalities of the brighter student are much more acceptable. Thus, rightly or wrongly, the teacher's success will generally be measured not by what he can achieve with the brighter students but by what he has been able to do for the slower ones. It is in this area that he will be either rewarded or condemned as a teacher, for his critics may claim that anyone can teach brighter students, or that brighter students can learn well on their own.

Those opposed to the principle of equal treatment for all may argue that the needs of the slower students are greater, for brighter students can survive in the work-a-day world on their own merits. Proponents of this view believe that teachers have an important duty to help slower students learn to cope with life beyond the school so that they will not be a burden to themselves and to society.¹ While this goal is itself open to attack, it does have the effect of diffusing the strength of the "equal treatment for all" position. It is an argument that has strong appeal in a society that supports welfare payments, unemployment insurance, old age security benefits, and public health insurance programs. Public concern rests with the students who appear to have the greatest personal needs and who also are seen as potential burdens to society. Paradoxically, the idea of equal treatment for all may in the end be a callous principle which ignores the educational requirements of those who have the greatest need.

EQUAL OBJECTIVES FOR ALL

The idea of equal objectives for all students is embodied in the simplistic but commonly held notion of a set curriculum for each grade level. Proponents of this view argue that there are certain basic skills, facts, and attitudes that are required for useful and happy living in our society.² It then becomes necessary to package these requirements into sizable portions of curriculum appropriate to the different ages and grade levels of the students. Teachers who believe strongly in this approach will measure their success according to how closely their students come to achieving these curriculum objectives. It will not be important that some students are able to go much further than the required objectives. Slower students will be considered to be "successfully educated" only in the degree to which they are able to approximate the basic requirements of the curriculum.

The principle of "equal objectives for all" enjoys certain obvious advantages. There is a common understanding about what the objectives are. Teachers, parents, and students have clear standards by which to measure the apparent success or failure of the school and its students. The publicly supported school which holds to this philosophy is seen to be meeting the basic educational needs of everyone. Although enrichment may be per-

mitted it is not encouraged, and there is the general feeling that tax dollars are devoted to important educational necessities.

In spite of certain obvious advantages, the principle of equal objectives for all leaves much to be desired. A frequent concomitant of the principle is the assumption that we can know and agree upon what the basics in education are. To make this assumption is to run counter to the opinions of many notable educational philosophers, from Aristotle to John Dewey, who claim that the goals of education must of necessity remain open-ended if education is to be an ongoing search for truth.

Setting equal objectives for all has the effect of holding students together in their pursuit of these objectives. Slower students are frustrated by their inability to compete with their brighter peers. The brighter students, in turn, are frustrated by boredom and lack of challenge. They are neither rewarded nor encouraged to excel to the point where they may develop their highest potentials. In the end, both society and the brighter students lose out, for the principle of equal objectives for all is a principle of mediocrity.

CAN THE PARADOX BE SOLVED

Ideally, all students, whether slow or bright, should be given maximum help by their teachers so that they will be encouraged to proceed as far and as fast as they can in their education. Again, ideally, brighter students will surge ahead of slower ones, and teachers will be capable of accommodating the variety of educational needs that are a natural part of each student's individual development. However, to the extent that the egalitarian paradox is genuine — that is, that it is a true dilemma — there are no entirely satisfactory solutions. Publicly supported schools cannot accommodate large numbers of students, hold to a fixed curriculum, accommodate individual differences, treat everyone equally, encourage brighter students to excel, and satisfy parents and administrators, all at the same time. "Solutions" are, at best, compromises designed to avoid exacerbating the egalitarian paradox. Nevertheless, a number of partial solutions deserve consideration. The following paragraphs are presented as suggestions only, for they require additional research to adequately establish their empirical foundation.

a) *Class Size*. Large classes work against the possibility of teachers coping with students' individual needs. Although studies regarding the ideal class size are inconclusive, many of these studies assume that students will share identical objectives as set out by the teacher and the curriculum (Wright, 1977). In cases where all students are striving toward an identical objective, it may not be important whether there are 15 students or 35 in the class. But if the objective is to encourage a class of students to develop at their own maximum speed and in a variety of directions, small classes are much more appropriate.³

b) *Curriculum*. Rigid adherence to a fixed curriculum and to a lockstep graded system also prohibits individual progress.⁴ The strong emphasis on basic curriculum should be modified by taking into account the abilities and interests of individual students. Consideration ought to be given to the varying levels of ability within the class, rather than ignoring the fact that these variations exist.

c) *Teaching*. It should be recognized that there is a wide variety of effective teaching and learning styles. Brighter students are often, though not always, self-motivated. It may not be necessary to teach these students in a step-by-step developmental style that requires the teacher's constant participation.⁵ Thus the teacher's "equal" share of attention to these students may be in the role of resource person rather than the traditional teacher role.

d) *Competition*. An emphasis on competition for marks and academic awards also increases the apparent inequities in students' progress. The more academic marks are used as a criterion of success, the more the slower students in the class are made to feel that they are educational failures (Mechanic, 1962). Thus teachers should keep in mind the need to have different requirements and different standards for slower students so that they can have a reasonable expectation of success. There are, however, dangers inherent in this practice. The teacher should, of course, encourage the slower child to work at his own maximum level. Thus, reducing competition does not mean that slower children will simply be allowed to do as little as possible.

e) *Teacher Education*. In teacher education, strong emphasis is placed on the student's performance in practice teaching. It is almost an unquestioned assumption that the best predictor of future success lies in a student teacher's ability to obtain high practice-teaching marks (Sanders, 1974). A corollary of this view is that the emphasis in practice teaching is often placed on the student teacher's performance at the front of the class, rather than on the learning process as it occurs at various individual levels among the students he instructs. Supervisory personnel will comment on the student teacher's voice, dress, posture, the neatness of his plan book, the colorfulness of his prepared charts and diagrams, and the smoothness with which he shifts from the stimulating introduction of his lesson to the new information he wishes to present. Yet when we reflect upon those few teachers that we remember as outstanding in our own lives we tend to comment on a different set of criteria. We may simply remember that we learned a great deal from a particular teacher, or that the teacher understood our difficulties, or that he was willing and able to offer help where we needed help. In other words, we shift our emphasis away from teacher performance at the front of the classroom to the learning process itself. If we wish prospective teachers to deal even minimally with inequalities in

learning, teacher education must shift its emphasis away from teaching performance per se and toward students' individual learning. This shift of emphasis should enable the prospective teacher to realize that his *raison d'être* is to facilitate learning among children rather than to impress outside observers with his dynamic enthusiasm and colorful teaching aids. The prospective teacher may then be persuaded to devote more energy to considering the students in terms of their individual needs and differences. The recognition of individual abilities and limitations will discourage the grouping of children into one class so that they can be taught as a monolithic entity according to a preferred teaching style. Ideally, both curricula and teaching techniques will be modified to suit individual needs where classes are small enough to allow the teacher time to do so. Although classroom size lies outside the immediate jurisdiction of teacher education, most school boards are willing to spend tax dollars where they count educationally. Unfortunately, in the past small classes tended to be taught in the same manner as larger classes (Wright, 1977). It is up to teachers' college faculties to educate prospective teachers to be efficient when classes are small enough to allow for individual instruction.

SUMMARY

In the end, the egalitarian paradox in public education still remains. The teacher who treats his students equally will find that they progress at very different rates. As a result of equal treatment, students will advance to very unequal positions. On the other hand, if the objective is to bring students to a common educational level, it will be necessary to treat them in unequal ways. Thus a recognition of the egalitarian paradox forces us to consider what publicly supported schools ought to have as their overall philosophy. Do schools exist primarily for the development of the individual so that each can proceed at his own rate and in pursuit of this own interests, or do they exist primarily for the purpose of educating students in the common goals of society? Until we have answered this question we cannot hope to solve the egalitarian paradox.

NOTES

- ¹ See Jencks (1973, p. 15). Here Jencks distinguishes between "‘equal opportunity’ (i.e., treating everyone alike) and ‘compensatory opportunity’ (i.e., helping the neediest)."
- ² See Bereiter (1973, p. 55). Here Bereiter suggests that the school cannot overcome inequalities but it can raise the level of attainment in basic skills such as the three R's. This in turn will lessen the inequalities and make for a fairer system for the disadvantaged.
- ³ See, for example, Martin and Macdonell (1978, pp. 51, 70-71). See also the Gene V. Glass Report which links increased student achievement to small class size as reported in *Phi Delta Kappan*, 1979, 60, 411-412. Contrary to many previous studies, Glass presents evidence of a strong positive relationship between small classes and higher student achievement.

⁴ See, for example, Goodlad and Anderson (1963), chap. 1, "The Child and Procrustean Standards," pp. 1-29.

⁵ See, for example, Jencks (1973, p. 75) where he discusses the principle of "compensatory opportunity" wherein the teacher devotes his or her efforts to the student with the greatest needs. Jencks points out that compensatory opportunity may be compatible with, though not identical to, "equal opportunity."

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Goldwin J. Emerson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy of Education at the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario N6G 1G7.