

Poverty, Government, and the Schools

*We have a moral obligation
to encourage
a critical appraisal
of all social endeavor.*

IT IS conservatively estimated that 9.3 million of this nation's 47 million families live in poverty. Their annual pre-tax income is less than \$3,000.¹ The 30 million persons in these families include many who are over 65, but 11 million are children. One sixth of our youth live in poverty. In our big cities it is not unusual to find a school district with 60 percent of its high school age group out of work and out of school. One of our moral shames is that many teachers and administrators are relieved to know that certain youth are no longer on school premises.

There is a simple, direct and inexpensive method to ameliorate poverty. Transfer payments of \$11 billion would lift the income of the poor to a minimum level of \$3,000. The necessary amount could be raised by taxation, and the proceeds distributed to our needy friends

and neighbors. The tax burden would not be insupportable, amounting to less than 2 percent of our gross national product.²

When I discuss this idea with teachers in education courses, two objections are raised. This modest dole would destroy initiative, and the recipients would not spend their windfall wisely. With the first argument I point to Philip Stern's study of the tax laws, and his documented claim that some of our wealthier businessmen receive an annual dole in excess of any that has ever been proposed for the poor.³ No one is likely to suggest that aid to the rich undermines their initiative. In fact, the opposite is usually claimed, that a repeal of such aid would make businessmen less ready to take risks with their money.

The second argument, that poor people will not spend wisely increments in income, is not extended to those affluent families who purchase a second car, or a third television set, rather than a first book. Teachers who would not want government to supervise their expenditures accept the necessity for limiting the mar-

¹ Paul Wells. "The Problem of Poverty." *Illinois Business Review*, Vol. 21, No. 11. December 1964. p. 6.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³ Philip Stern. *The Great Treasury Raid*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1964.

ket choices of people less fortunate than they. A double standard, one for the rich, another for the poor, is one major reason why we have been unable to abolish poverty. Unless teachers acquire new attitudes from changed insight, they will not in their classrooms perform in ways that foster in their students an understanding of poverty, its incidence, causation and effects.

Causes of Poverty

A dole, modest or not, could continue indefinitely unless steps were taken to remove basic causes of poverty such as race prejudice, lack of education, and unemployment. Almost half our non-white population lives in poverty. Twenty-two percent of our poor are non-white. One third of all low income families are headed by an unemployed person. Many of these family heads are women with small children. Over 60 percent of the family heads have had no more than a grade school education.⁴

Measures to reduce prejudice, unemployment, and lack of education as causes of poverty are supplements, not alternatives, to a dole now. In fact, the redistribution of income that would result from a dole could have a favorable effect upon our rate of economic growth sufficient to reduce significantly the incidence of unemployment. The actual effect upon unemployment would depend in part on how much of our unemployment is cyclical rather than structural in its nature.

Structural unemployment is generally of two kinds, one resulting from the immobility of some members of the labor force, the other from a lack in some per-

sons of a marketable skill. There is no doubt that structural unemployment is on the increase, and much of the government's anti-poverty program assumes that structural unemployment is a major component in all unemployment. One study estimates that one third of present unemployment is structural, a fact of considerable significance to vocational educators.⁵ Yet cyclical unemployment caused by a total deficiency in effective demand is still a major social problem, a fact of considerable significance for those who look with some favor upon a more equitable distribution of national income.

The extent to which poverty results from prejudice and lack of education is a condemnation of our free and public school system. An enterprising and effective school system would be able to hold pupils in school with an attractive and valuable curriculum which would educate them free of prejudice. The spate of federal legislation in the last three years is testimony enough that many have lost faith in a school system financed and controlled at a local and state level. Our future will include more and more federal aid, and such aid will not be without its controls. Even if federal control is minimized and non-deliberate, federal influence is likely to be far reaching.

Much of the federal influence now consists of legislation that would remove lack of training as a cause of unemployment and poverty. The concern is lack of training, not lack of education. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the Area Redevelopment Act of 1961, the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962, the Urban Mass Transporta-

⁵ *Staff Report on Employment, Growth and Price Levels*. Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States, 80th Congress, 1st Session. Washington, D. C.: U.S. Government Printing Office. p. 173.

⁴ Wells, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

tion Act of 1964, the Housing Act of 1964, the Vocational Education Act of 1963, and the Mental Retardation Act of 1963 have provisions which bear directly or indirectly upon problems in education which, in turn, bear upon the incidence of poverty and unemployment.

But these problems in education can be interpreted as problems in training. We are to help the poor by teaching them a "basic education" consisting of vocational skills and the three R's. It is even suggested that we try to change the work attitudes of the poor. Although the teaching of any attitude or skill can be conceptual rather than merely motor, it would be heartening if at least some of this legislation gently suggested that our failures in general education, defined as social insight, match some of our failures in basic or vocational education. It is not even clear that the vocational skills favored by this legislation are generalized enough to survive anticipated technological change.

That most of this legislation aims to make people more employable, and that it is not offered as a full employment policy, becomes evident when one examines it in some detail. The Economic Opportunity Act, for instance, is a compendium of several programs, all of which are concerned with unemployability of school dropouts, school failures, and illiterate youth or adults. The Vocational Education Act of 1963 offers semiskilled, skilled, or technical level preparation in a recognized occupation. The revised National Defense Education Act of 1964 makes loans and fellowships available to students in accredited business schools and technical institutes. The same act extends its support of counseling services to elementary schools and junior colleges, and includes funds for summer institutes in education of the

culturally deprived. It remains to be seen whether anyone will sponsor and fund a summer institute that would explore in depth the problem of teaching the culturally deprived how to make the kinds of valid social criticism that increases their understanding of the social origins of their deprivation.

In his January 12 special message to Congress, President Johnson proposed the elimination of ignorance as the taproot of poverty. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was introduced in Congress, following this special message. This act would appropriate 1.25 billion dollars for education, with emphasis on assistance to children of low income families. About \$1 billion would be spent on the provision of special services for culturally disadvantaged children and youth. About \$100 million would assist the several states in purchase of books and other instructional materials for both public and private, nonprofit elementary and secondary schools. Another \$100 million would be used to establish supplementary educational centers within the community, and to develop exemplary models of elementary and secondary school programs. This would very probably create an entirely new educational institution, federal in its support, which could rival and even displace the traditional system in influence and impact.

This effort to improve the lower schools is coupled with proposals in the Higher Education Act of 1965, also introduced in Congress in January. This act aims to strengthen our smaller colleges, improve extension services and continuing education for adults, assist college students with loans, fellowships and scholarships, and build up library services. It would also sponsor basic research, and assist in the construction of college buildings.

This proposed legislation will no doubt pass, and it will make available to schools financial resources greater than ever before. Future appropriations are likely to surpass those proposed for this year, and schools will no longer be able to point to slim budgets as an excuse for not doing anything about certain educational problems. The new legislation gives as much attention to education as to training. At least such attention is a potential for educators who take advantage of their opportunities.

The new legislation proposes to make available the money with which to overcome certain educational failures, but the ideas are to come from our teachers, administrators, and other educational leaders. It would, then, be a mistake to assume that the only role of the school is to fall into line with governmental pressures, policies and demands. In addition to a creative role, it will be necessary for schools to be critical, and to develop this critical faculty in all the students.

When a government official says that the purpose of his program is to "offer a hand, not a hand-out," when another refers to an adult education design as Operation Second Chance (when many have never had a first chance), and when a fact sheet for the Job Corps placates our more obtuse conservatives with the assurance that "criminals, addicts and others with serious emotional psychological disorders will not be eligible for the Job Corps," a serious minded educator will find it easy and obligatory to be critical. It is, indeed, a moral obligation of our educational system to participate creatively in a sound and sincere effort to banish ignorance and poverty from the land. It is equally a moral obligation for that system to encourage and support in all its clientele a critical appraisal of all social endeavor, including current poli-

cies for reducing the incidence of poverty and unemployment. The latter is no doubt the greater obligation if education is to serve its educational purpose.

A major problem in the next decade is whether the schools will be able to educate, not merely train, the children and youth of the poor. An education would develop in our poor population a capacity to make valid social criticism. How else are the poor to understand why they are poor, and what can be done about poverty? How else are they to acquire those constructive attitudes toward work and citizenship they are now said to lack? The development of this capacity will depend upon whether the schools can achieve conceptual learning, or the ability to theorize, in all its students, not just those whom Conant would designate as gifted. The solution of this problem could be a focus of most of what we do in research, in teacher education, in guidance and counseling, in the selection and production of instructional resources, in summer institutes, in the whole range of endeavor for which federal aid will soon be available.

This kind of focus will reveal to every objective observer the extent to which freedom of inquiry in our public schools and colleges is to be as plentiful as sums of money from the federal treasury. If the Great Society is to use its educational money for no other purpose than to teach people motor skills in reading, mathematics, and vocations of little dignity, its anti-poverty program will breed failure and frustration, the seeds of a social revolution quite different from the one we are told is about to take place. What kind of social revolution occurs will ultimately depend upon the kind of response schools are able to make to the challenges of an affluent educational budget.

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