Can the School Promote Social and Economic Mobility?

MANY persons accept the idea that education has been highly esteemed for several years and is making a significant contribution to the social and the economic achievements of our nation and the world. Also, many believe that projected changes in educational procedures require comprehensive evaluation to be sure that we continue to know where we are going.

Education carries a greater responsibility today than ever before in promoting social and economic mobility. When our nation was in its infancy, there were many factors which contributed to the movement of an individual from the status level occupied as a member of his family to a higher social and economic level. As an example, one could homestead land and change his economic status; but now there is no more land to homestead. At that time, one could develop routine skills, but now those skills have turned into complex specialties.

Although the opportunities have changed over the years, the conditions necessary for mobility can still be identified as existing in two general areas—the structure of our system and the personality of the individual.

The structure of our social and our economic systems provides the means, not the ends, for individual mobility. A series of prestige levels, generally recognized by society, are provided, as well as access to the training for individual achievement in these levels. Thus, the system, as it exists, needs to be constantly changing.

There appears to be an increasing amount of evidence to indicate that the school does not directly affect social and economic change as much as we once thought it did. Schools are an extension of the community—a society within the community which can only manifest its own nature because it consists of students who are made

* Wiliam R. Anthony, Assistant Principal, Jefferson City Senior High School, Jefferson City, Missouri

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The Future of Education—where are we headed?

- Will students learn from textbooks or be taught more outside of the classroom?
- Can schools change to accommodate new societal needs?
- Are students becoming more and more disenchanted with an educational system that has been called “obsolete”?

These and other questions were explored at the ASCD futures seminar, “Alternative Futures in Education: A Consortium of Intelligences." The highlights of the seminar are now available to you on a set of 2 one-hour audio tape cassettes for only $12.00.

Harold G. Shane, Indiana University, chaired the seminar that featured Alvin Toffler, noted author of the controversial Future Shock; Lester Brown, agricultural economist and author of World Without Borders; and 20 other eminent futurists and educators.

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in the image of the society educating them, both in and out of school.

Do Schools Make a Difference?

Two historic reports in the past decade would seem to de-emphasize the role of the school in promoting social and economic mobility. The Coleman Report concludes that “Schools bring little influence to bear on a child’s achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; this means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront life at the end of school.” Also, a Harvard University research team, headed by Christopher Jencks, reports that the quality of a school has little relation to what a student learns or what he earns later as an adult. Luck and personality, according to the report, are the factors which really count in how much money one makes.

Although there is evidence that schools do not make the direct impact on social and economic changes that we once thought they did, schools do perform a significant role. The determining factor in mobility is the individual, and the school has its greatest impact on the individual.

We can study research reports and statistical data and conclude there are many variables influencing the outcome of social and economic mobility, but none is greater than the individual himself. We can study people whom we consider to be great contributors, indeed great leaders, in this rapidly changing world; men and women who seem to have achieved their human potential. As a result of such study, we could seemingly identify four broad areas in which the school has performed a major function in the lives of these people: (a) development of the full personality, (b) achievement of cognitive competence, (c) expansion of the thinking process, and (d) acceptance of rules of conduct and discipline.

As the school touches the lives of its students, it deals with much more than a mass of inert facts or ideas—it deals with
an attitude, a life style, an appetite, a continuing function of the full personality. Frequently we find that education provides students with the keys to unlock social and economic doors by helping them realize that the differences are in the area of human and personal characteristics.

Although the development of the full personality is an important function of the school, we cannot minimize the need for cognitive competence. Regardless of how gifted one is in a grasp of the humanities, one will suffer some functional illiteracy if one cannot converse in, at least, the basic areas of instruction.

Helping Students To Know and To Think

A requirement for mobility is useful knowledge, and knowledge is not taught. The teacher gives information and directs the student to information, but the student thinks through and assimilates this material and, hopefully, acquires knowledge.

A century ago the major emphasis of our schools was to teach pupils how to read, to use mathematics, and to write. Since then, education has come of age; that is to say, schooling has become more diversified. Yet changes have been occurring rapidly in recent years. While grasping for the title “innovative,” some schools are placing little emphasis on cognitive competence. Perhaps it would be well for us to remember that our students will have to live in today’s world until it becomes tomorrow’s world.

Although some educational experiences seem irrelevant, it must be realized that every experience in life, both in and out of school, becomes an integral part of an individual. Those skills and experiences which may seem unimportant may, in combination with other experiences at another time, become the basis for real understanding and appreciation of things important in the years ahead.

Schools also perform a significant function by helping the individual develop skills in thinking—another requirement for mobility.

Education liberates the thinking process. It is far easier to get people to acquire new information than it is to get them to think and alter their conclusions. Most of us have an incredible talent for processing new facts in such a way that our prior conclusions remain intact. The thinking process will release forces that produce changes in conclusions; and these changes cannot be predicted, prescribed, or predetermined. The conclusions will be whatever the individual, thinking for himself, decides they will be. Dewey said, “Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril, and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place.”

The fourth area in which schools have performed a major function has been in determining rules of conduct and discipline. There is little, if any, evidence to indicate that permissiveness contributes to success. Discipline and rules of conduct are simply shortcuts to manhood or womanhood. Life is not long enough for an individual to learn everything about getting along in society without direction and guidance.

What is the role of the school in promoting social and economic mobility? I believe the school performs an important role. It does not really matter whether this role is categorized as a direct or indirect function. It does not really matter that it cannot be accurately measured or tabulated. It does not really matter that there are so many factors affecting the outcome that we have difficulty identifying the variables, even by broad group descriptions. What does matter is that we can identify people who have made contributions to mankind because of the influence the school and the educational process had on them.

Schools have not totally predetermined, and we can assume will not predetermine, the future of an individual or society. Yet schools have influenced individuals in the past, and we can assume will continue to influence individuals in the future. It is through the effect and the influence upon individuals then that schools exert the greatest impact on the social and economic systems. □