"Social benefit" or "personal benefit"?—These two contrasting goals represent quite different outcomes of education. Perhaps now is the time to reassess the functions of education and to forge a more realistic picture of the actual contribution of schooling to young people and to our national life.

If formal educational attainments condition entrance to some economic and social spheres, and if great opportunities for educational advance are open to some groups while the educational facilities for others remain meager, it is obvious that education becomes an instrument of social stratification and of regional and racial inequality—Newton Edwards, 1939.

EDUCATION, in its most general sense, has always been a fundamental element in the American experiment. During the course of our history, however, education came to be associated with certain symbols and institutional forms which now serve to define the nature and scope of our national commitment in this vital area. In the nineteenth century, American faith in education found expression in the institution of schooling. With this formalization, education moved from the private to the public domain and eventually became a matter of governmental policy and finance. As a public institution, the common school forged linkages with collegiate and occupational opportunity and, in this capacity, acquired central meaning in the lives of all American children and youth. In a very real sense American commitment to equality became a matter of educational opportunity.

As we enter the Bicentennial year it is clear that the question of educational opportunity is one of intense public concern. Indeed, we appear to be experiencing a revolution in the fundamental conception of the nature of educational opportunity and hence in the meaning of our national commitment to this ideal. Although the issues


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are complex, much of the discussion centers on the conflict between “equality of access” as the traditional emphasis of school policy and “equality of results” as the only acceptable criterion with which to judge the efficiency of schooling. Given the sheer bulk of rhetoric on this question it is especially easy to oversimplify the implications of this shift in focus from access to results.

The present article represents an attempt to delineate more fully the magnitude of this changing emphasis through an analysis, within a broadly historical framework, of American commitment to educational opportunity. This discussion is, needless to say, highly selective. The purpose, however, is to establish perspective and stimulate inquiry rather than promulgate solutions. To the degree that options can be more clearly understood, then, the likelihood of finding appropriate educational responses is increased.

Social Benefits of Schooling

The traditional American commitment to educational opportunity appears to be based on what can best be called a social-benefit theory of schooling. In essence, the social-benefit theory places primary emphasis on the contributions of schooling to the overall betterment of society and measures school success in terms of conventional statistical indices such as average literacy or income levels and improved living standards. Individual variation from the general pattern is not necessarily a cause for surprise or concern. As long as schooling seems to maintain social values, improve social institutions, and “work” for the majority of citizens, a degree of individual failure is tolerable.

The social-benefit theory is deeply rooted in American educational history. The fundamental principles of the theory are reflected in Jefferson’s arguments for universal schooling to provide society with a minimally-educated citizenry and to nurture talent for positions of public leadership. For Jefferson, disparity in educational achievement was both expected and explained by reference to his conception of the “natural aristocracy of virtue and talent” distributed throughout society without regard to wealth or origins. In this framework, inequality in the outcomes of schooling is simply a function of the natural inequality of talent among people. The commitment to educational opportunity is satisfied by furnishing equality of access to a common set of school experiences.

The social-benefit theory also derived substance from the rhetoric of social control which permeated nineteenth century justifications for universal schooling. Most common school crusaders saw urbanization, immigration, and industrialization as sources of decay, sin, and social disintegration. With evangelical spirit, they campaigned for schooling as an instrument to instill traditional American values and thereby counter these serious threats to national identity, public morality, and social solidarity.

In sum, then, the social-benefit theory
From top to bottom: A Spanish-American school in Ojo Sarco, New Mexico, 1943; an Indian school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1903; and a "ladies horticulture class" in Washington, D.C., 1900.
defines educational opportunity as “access” to a common and largely uniform curriculum and accommodates disparity in educational output as a natural consequence of the inequalities among people. The theory further tends to subordinate individual and minority group interests to dominant social values and the demands of national unity. This orientation has certainly guided the efforts of professional school people throughout the present century, and, with certain notable exceptions, considerable progress has been made in extending school access to all American children and youth.

Personal Benefits of Schooling

Beginning with the child-centered progressivism of the 20th century, the rhetoric of schooling began to incorporate a personal-benefit theory of the consequences of formal education. A personal-benefit approach stresses the central importance of individuality and diversity in terms of needs, skills, and preferences. In response to this diversity, the school is charged with creating a differentiated educational program designed to foster individual interests and maximize individual potential.

Historically, the personal-benefit conception of schooling was part of a systematic campaign by professional educators to increase the attractiveness of the school. This campaign contributed to the extension of the school’s custody over American youth and helped link common schooling to educational and occupational opportunity. In the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, the Supreme Court acknowledged this fundamental connection between schooling and personal opportunity by asserting: “In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education.”

As it evolved in this century, the personal-benefit viewpoint, in contrast to the social-benefit theory, is most compatible with a definition of educational opportunity in terms of achievement rather than access. The position also emphasizes a pluralistic framework for specifying possible educational outcomes. With a strong environmentalist flavor, this “personalized” orientation also supports the construction of differentiated curricula adapted to individual needs and learning styles and designed to achieve equality of educational results.

Prior to the 1960’s, the personal-benefit theory found expression largely in the rhetoric of schooling but had minimal impact on the formulation of actual school policy or program. During the present decade, however, the personal-benefit theory has moved to the center of educational discourse and is advocated strongly as the only adequate basis for defining America’s commitment to educational opportunity.

From a historical perspective at least two factors have played a part in precipitating this transformation in perceptions of the consequences of schooling. The first grows out of what Daniel Bell has called “the revolution of rising entitlements” which combines an increased sensitivity to social inequities and an expectation that government will rectify the situation. The second involves a revision of traditional assumptions about the efficacy of schooling. Throughout this century school people have adopted the common professional practice of measuring efficacy by the amount of activity generated. It was assumed that “process” criteria (buildings, materials, enrollments, and programs) automatically translated into “product” outcomes (greater learning, occupational opportunity, and social mobility) for all students. Results of recent historical and sociological studies suggest that the school’s ability to reduce disparity and distribute its benefits widely has

been vastly overestimated. The fact that inequities in school effects tend to correspond closely to social class and ethnic divisions in society has served to intensify the commitment to equality of educational results.

The Uses of Schooling

Regardless of the “causes” of the shift from access to results, the current controversy over educational consequences has brought into focus some fundamental questions about the purposes and mechanisms of schooling. What follows is an attempt to comment briefly on these questions in order to stimulate awareness of the magnitude of the transformation implied by the personal-benefit definition of our national commitment to educational opportunity.

The first, and perhaps most important, question is whether an institution formed within a social-benefit framework can be reconstructed to serve personal-benefit purposes. Advocates of equal results appear convinced that this reconstruction is indeed possible, that the school can reduce disparity in achievement and equalize output. There is even some suggestion in the argument for equal results that this change in school effects is simply a matter of eliminating middle class bias in the control of schools and implementing already available procedures for maximizing school results. There would seem, however, to be factors which seriously impede this transformation.

In striving to achieve universal access to schools, educators constructed a mass-processing educational system. As recent naturalistic studies suggest, such a system accommodates large numbers of students but is for the most part unresponsive to individual needs and preferences. Indeed success in the present school system would seem to depend to a considerable degree on the individual student’s own ability to extract meaning and substance from a complex and often ambiguous educational environment.

Even if it is assumed that a mass-processing institution can be changed to serve “personalized” ends, there remains a question of the capacity and the willingness to achieve this transformation. Little evidence exists to suggest that educators have ever possessed a technology powerful enough to overcome inequities fostered by broader social arrangements and conditions. With regard to instructional procedures, it is impossible to conclude that any given mode is consistently superior to any other. Proposals such as Bloom’s mastery learning, which appear to offer promise in equalizing school effects, necessitate a fundamental reordering of basic school processes, such as scheduling and the validation of student achievement. In spite of a persistent rhetoric of innovation, past experience in the area of school change offers little cause for optimism concerning our ability to radically alter the mechanisms of schooling. The current economic situation further suggests that, in the final analysis, society cannot absorb the costs necessary to achieve a fully equalized program of educational opportunity.

The final question is one of whether, given the magnitude of the task, the school should be committed to the equalization of educational results. American faith in education has traditionally sustained an exaggerated rhetoric in which schooling is depicted, rather modestly, as the social panacea. Perhaps the current disaffection with school effects presents an appropriate occasion to reassess the functions of education and to forge a new and hopefully more realistic vision of the contribution of schooling to our national life.

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Ibid.

