

THE SELECTIVE CHARACTER OF  
AMERICAN SECONDARY  
EDUCATION

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## CONCLUSION

Little need be said in conclusion. The story that has been told in the foregoing pages is not a new one. Misfortune, as well as fortune, passes from generation to generation. The children of unfortunate parents are unfortunate, assuming here that the current secondary education is worth to the individual some fraction of its cost. The ancient adage, "To them that hath shall be given," is true today as in olden times. When not preserved through the operation of biological forces, the inequalities among individuals and classes are still perpetuated to a considerable degree in the social inheritance. While the establishment of the free public high school marked an extraordinary educational advance, it did not by any means equalize educational opportunity; for the cost of tuition is not the entire cost of education, or even the larger part of it. Education means leisure, and leisure is an expensive luxury. In most cases today this leisure must be guaranteed the individual by the family. Thus secondary education remains largely a matter for family initiative and concern, and reflects the inequalities of family means and ambition.

## CHAPTER XVII

## THE HIGH SCHOOL AND DEMOCRACY

More than twenty years ago John Dewey, in the opening paragraph of his *School and Society*, gave this expression to his conception of the ideal relation that society should sustain toward its children: "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy." With this ideal, properly interpreted, all believers in democracy are in sympathetic and complete accord.

At the present time, in the light of the facts revealed in this study, it is clear that we are very far from the realization of this ideal in our own country, at least in so far as secondary education is concerned. We are probably as near to it, if not somewhat nearer, than are the people of any other nation; and yet the facts do not set especially well with our professions of equality of opportunity, assuming of course that secondary education does increase an individual's chances for what we call success in modern life, as well as contribute to the general enrichment of life. In a very large measure participation in the privileges of a secondary education is contingent on social and economic status. In this connection, as in others, it would be difficult, in the thought of Bernard Shaw, to place too much emphasis on the need of a child's using wisdom in the choice of its parents; and yet, in view of the differential birth-rate, the number of chances of choosing the more highly educated and well-to-do parents is distinctly limited, and is gradually becoming more so.

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But it may be maintained that this ideal of equality of educational opportunity does not mean sameness of opportunity, nor does it mean necessarily equality in years of educational experience. Some natures, as certain soils, will respond to more intensive cultivation than others. Surely no one would defend the proposition that all persons should continue their education through the three years of the university graduate school in the interests of equality of educational opportunity. The endowment of the individual must be recognized in each case. The

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most that can be demanded in recognition of the ideal is that the potentialities of the individual be realized. It is obvious that the selective principle, resulting in elimination, must appear at some point in our educational system. But at what point should the principle appear, and under what conditions should it operate?

This really raises the question of the wisdom and justice of universal secondary education. In theory we are apparently rather definitely committed to the idea, although in practice we are yet very far from its realization, as this investigation shows. If the course on which we have embarked is unwise, it should be changed while there is time and in the light of a thorough analysis of the matter. Should Dewey's ideal apply to the period of secondary education? What is the place of secondary education in a democracy? Let us pass to the various considerations which these questions bring to mind.

## THE FINANCIAL OBJECTION

It has been pointed out with truth that our people have embarked upon this ambitious program of secondary education without fully realizing the financial burden that such a program entails. The increase in high-school enrolment has not been unattended by increasing costs. In fact today we hear from various quarters the complaints of the taxpayer as he is asked to meet increasingly heavy demands on his pocket-book for educational purposes. Undoubtedly a further extension of secondary education will mean greater educational costs. The education of all children of high-school age would probably involve four times the present expenditure, with no improvement in the quality of instruction. This statement of course disregards those economies that would be realized in the small high schools through a more intensive use of the present teaching staff and material equipment. This would result in an increase in the cost of secondary education to a figure somewhere between one-half and three-quarters of a billion of dollars. And in the minds of some people such expenditure is too stupendous to be entertained for a moment.

A further analysis is needed, however, to discover the real nature of this opposition to further educational expenditure. Is it that the economic system is unable to bear the added burden; that the methods of taxation are antiquated and not adapted to modern conditions; or merely that the people do not regard a further extension of secondary education as worth the cost? The first of these questions must certainly be answered in the negative. Any nation that can spend billions on

armaments can spend a half billion on secondary education, if it so desires. A people that spends annually three billions of dollars on luxurious services, over two billions on tobacco and snuff, one billion on candy, and three-quarters of a billion on perfumery and cosmetics, need fear neither bankruptcy nor revolution by even quadrupling the present expenditure for secondary education. The economic system can bear it.

An affirmative answer to the second question can be as easily defended as the negative answer to the first. The methods of taxation for the support of education are antiquated and do not insure an equitable distribution of the burden. A century ago the property tax was fair, because property was tangible and usually a satisfactory index of an individual's ability to pay. Today the situation is quite different, due to industrialization and the increased complexity of an economic life in which property assumes many intangible forms and is no longer a fair index of ability to pay. The increase of educational costs demands, on the part of educators, close attention to the problems of taxation.

The third question is also an important and even basic one. We may at least say with assurance that, if the majority of the people want a further extension of secondary education, they will get it regardless of the cost, that is, if they want it as much or more than they want tobacco, snuff, candy, perfumery, cosmetics, and other things, for which they are spending their money now. Whether or not they want it will depend on two things: first, the value of secondary education; and second, their realization of its value. Both of these are, in large measure, problems for the educator. On the one hand, he must organize and administer secondary education in such a way and with such clarity of purpose that its value will be unequivocal and patent to the ordinary citizen without the interposition of educational sophistry and cant. Educational purpose and educational accomplishment must be stated in terms of those things that most people regard as valuable and worth while. On the other hand, the educator must inform the citizen that secondary education is so organized and so administered. Only when people are made to *feel* that education is as valuable as tobacco and cosmetics will they be as willing to spend their money for the one as for the other. But certainly the matter of cost is not in itself a sufficient reason for opposing universal secondary education.

## PUBLIC SUPPORT OF SELECTIVE EDUCATION

There is another side to this question of finance that deserves attention. At the present time the public high school is attended quite

largely by the children of the more well-to-do classes. This affords us the spectacle of a privilege being extended at public expense to those very classes that already occupy the privileged positions in modern society. The poor are contributing to provide secondary education for the children of the rich, but are either too poor or too ignorant to avail themselves of the opportunities which they help to provide. But it will be answered that the high school is supported by taxation, and that the poor do not pay taxes. This is obviously an unsound position to assume, since all people who wear clothes, eat food, and live in houses do pay taxes either directly or indirectly. Of course, no assumption is made here that all taxes are shifted to the consuming public, for they are not. Some are shifted altogether, others only partially, and still others not at all. The consumer does pay taxes, but not the consumer only—this and no more is assumed, but it is sufficient to warrant the foregoing statement.

It is sometimes said in extenuation of this condition that society as a whole profits from the education of the few through the superior service that the few render; and there is much that may be said in support of this theoretical position. In fact this is about the only justification for public support of higher and professional education, which are necessarily selective. Yet in practice it must be admitted that many individuals use the gifts of society for self-aggrandizement and are quite unconscious of any social obligation. This is particularly true of education in its various forms which has been regarded too much as a natural right or gift from God and too little as a preparation for social service. Indeed in many quarters it is even looked upon primarily as a means of avoiding the hard and disagreeable work of the world and a sure road to those callings that combine high remuneration and respectability with the comforts of life. Elementary education, which is guaranteed to all, may perhaps be regarded as a natural right, but secondary education, limited as it is, can be justified at all only in terms of the unqualified recognition on the part of the high-school student of the social obligation involved. There is no such recognition in the public high school today, although the narrow source of its students makes this obviously and peculiarly necessary.

#### THE PERIL TO SOCIAL STABILITY

In some countries the universalizing of secondary education would be viewed with alarm on the grounds that it would produce social instability and result in the disintegration of the established order.

Indeed, such a disquieting view has been taken by some foreign educators of the effect of our limited (though extensive in comparison with other countries) secondary education on American society. The idea back of this view is apparently that it is dangerous for any society to produce a larger number of trained minds capable of self-direction and critical thought than may be required to fill the customary positions of leadership. Unquestionably there is something in this argument, if we look at it from the standpoint of those occupying the strategic and privileged positions in the existing order and who may consequently be expected to lose through any change that might be effected. On the other hand, if we are interested in the welfare of the great mass of the people, there is nothing to fear in the universalizing of secondary education; in the very considerable increase in the number of individuals capable of thoughtful leadership in every class of the population; in the presence of larger numbers of persons qualified to serve as informed and critical followers in the various social groups. In other words, any individual or any class depending on special privilege of any sort for its position in society has good reason for fearing the further extension of secondary education; all others may look upon such change with equanimity. It is of course assumed that this further extension would take into consideration all differences in individual aptitude and interest.

#### THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFICULTY

Perhaps the strongest objection to universal secondary education is the psychological objection, to which reference has been made in an earlier paragraph. The wide range of intelligence among children of a particular age is well known, and we may assume the same for other psychological traits. Nature has thus set limits to the educability of all her children. In some this limit is very low, as in others it is extraordinarily high; at the one extreme is the idiot who can profit but little from either experience or instruction, while at the other is the child of genius for whom the most difficult intellectual tasks are easy and whose hours of instruction are very productive. To the one, secondary education is out of the question, while to the other, it is scarcely the beginning of an education that will continue throughout life.

If, however, we think less in terms of the extremes, which account for but a small proportion of the total number of cases, and more in terms of the great mass of individuals in between, much of the force of this objection is destroyed. There are undoubtedly individuals at the lower end of the distribution for whom education during the adolescent

LITTLE PLACE IN INDUSTRY FOR ADOLESCENTS

One other consideration favoring a further extension of secondary education deserves mention. In the Cleveland vocational survey it was found that there is practically no place in modern industry for children under sixteen or seventeen years of age. Normally, below this age a child enters an occupation with but little profit to either himself or society. Since there is so much that needs to be done in preparing these young people for the many and varied responsibilities of citizenship, vocation, parenthood, and the other important activities of life, and since this can hardly be accomplished in the elementary school, it seems the part of wisdom to enrich their lives and equip them to become more useful members of society through the agency of the secondary school.

#### A BROADER PROGRAM NECESSARY

The methods to be employed in bringing the opportunities of secondary education to practically all adolescents, regardless of class distinction, can hardly be discussed here. Undoubtedly our compulsory education laws will have to be extended beyond the period of elementary education, and several states are already leading the way. We shall have to abandon our conventional ideas of secondary education as necessarily involving a four-year school, or a six-year school as under the reorganization, in which students attend four to six hours in the middle of the day for five days of the week during some nine or ten months of the autumn, winter, and spring seasons. Pedagogical traditions and administrative conveniences will have to adapt themselves to the conditions of life. Whether or not the community will have to go beyond the provision of free tuition and free textbooks to at least a partial support of the student during his period of attendance at school is a nice question. In certain cities where poverty and ignorance are to be found in their most extreme forms the community will probably have to bear responsibilities that the home or the individual will carry in others. But these are matters to be determined in the light of experience.

#### CONCLUSION

In our march toward the educational ideal referred to at the beginning of this chapter and which is clearly compatible with the professed ideals of our democracy, we must recognize two principles. *In the first place*, up to a certain point in our educational system we must have practically complete attendance of all the children of the community

years would be unprofitable, because intellectual maturity is already practically attained, and on a very low level. Just how high the intelligence level should be in order to profit from twelve years of instruction, which takes the child through the elementary and secondary schools, is a question as yet unanswered. For certain types of subject-matter the level obviously would be higher than for others. It seems reasonable to assume that, through the proper adaptation of subject-matter and methods of instruction, secondary education might be so administered as to be profitable for all except those who are clearly feeble-minded. This would of course involve a thoroughgoing departure from the curricula and methods of the conventional type, which are the legitimate offspring of the selective principle.

That there is some scientific justification for the psychological objection to universal secondary education is admitted, but such justification does not extend to present practice. Much might be said for a secondary education that is based frankly and definitely on the principle of psychological selection, but ours is not of that type. It is true, as this study shows, that on the average, high-school students exhibit a higher intelligence level than do those children of high-school age not in high school. But what is the explanation? That the high school has purposefully selected these individuals because of their superior ability? Not at all, or at least not altogether, by any means. It seems just as probable that the selection is sociological first and psychological second; that children enter and remain in high school because they come from the homes of the influential and more fortunate classes, and not because of their greater ability. It is the usual thing for these two to go together, but a society is conceivable in which by some chance the individuals in the upper social and economic strata incline toward intellectual mediocrity. In such a society, assuming the large parental influence in determining educational opportunity which characterizes our own system, the children in high school might represent on the average a lower type of ability than those on the outside. Admitting that this is an extreme statement of the case, it nevertheless contains a certain element of truth. The high-school population includes many individuals of mediocre and inferior ability, and the population of high-school age not in high school includes many of superior talent, although the proportion on the upper levels is larger inside the high school. At the present time we have neither universal secondary education, on the one hand, nor selection according to any defensible principle, on the other.

with adequate provision for individual differences in ability, aptitude, and interest. Where this point should be is, in the main, an unanswered question, although there is some evidence that we shall place it well up into the secondary period and possibly at its close. The writer is inclined to favor the latter practice, because of the tremendous educational demands of an infinitely complex world that is rapidly becoming a single society. *In the second place*, beyond this point of complete attendance, in so far as public education is concerned, further education must rest on some objective basis rather than on the chances of circumstance and the whims of fortune. In theory today the public supports higher education for the purpose of securing trained persons to perform those important services that require special types of ability, knowledge, skill, and discipline. But no serious effort is made to discover the number of trained persons of each type required and the amount of training necessary in each case; nor is there a diligent search made through the lower school population for those special and superior types of ability that will most satisfactorily do those things that society wants done. Beyond the compulsory-school period a boy attends high school or college, not necessarily because of any special promise, but possibly because he is the only child of fond and well-to-do parents or because he likes football. To be sure, we make certain minimal demands of a formal sort, but the larger purposes of this selective education are obscured, and they will remain so until they are clearly defined and their implications find definite expression in practice and tradition. Why should we provide at public expense these advanced educational opportunities for X because his father is a banker and practically deny them to Y because his father cleans the streets of the city? We must distinguish between that education which is for all, and that which is for the few. At present our secondary education is of the first type in theory, and of the second in practice. We must bring the theory and practice together: either open the doors of the high school to all children, and take care that all enter without favor, or frankly close its doors to all but a select group, adopt objective methods or selection, and teach to this selected group the meaning of social obligation. There is no other course that leads to democracy, that puts the high school at the service of every class without distinction, and at the same time renders the largest service to the entire community.

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