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Davis, J. Elwyn

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Johannesburg College of Education
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Differentiated Secondary Education: An Emerging Picture

by J. E. DAVIS

THERE is, contrary to a widely held belief, nothing new in the principle of differentiated education. What is relatively new is the trend among most nations in recent decades to organise and systematise this differentiation. In such systematising there are obviously the possibilities of great improvement by such means as the most efficient distribution of financial resources, educational equipment, the most appropriate selection of pupils and allocation of staff and buildings, and the planning of the most suitable and acceptable courses.

But there are also dangers. There is the danger of the sacrifice of educational desiderata for the sake of administrative tidiness; of making reorganisation along educational grounds a pretext for doing so on political or ideological grounds; of using the same pretext for financial streamlining at the expense of educational improvement, and so forth. Differentiation as such is inevitable; its systematisation in accordance with educational aims is desirable; but to use political or bureaucratic authority to force it into artificial channels as indicated above is to invite a blunting of its efficiency, to create a sense of frustration in those who are trying sincerely to carry it out and perhaps even to debase it by exploiting it.

As to the actual mode of implementing the policy of differentiation, there is a wide range of practice and experimentation among the more advanced countries today. It is generally accepted that differentiation should commence only at the secondary school stage, which is usually entered upon when the pupil is about twelve years of age, with greater flexibility on this point in some countries than in others. On the Continent the range of differentiation in secondary schools tends to include an extremely exclusive course for the academic élite, some form of continued primary course for the very slow pupils, and between these two extremes a less exacting academic or general course and a wide range of vocational courses which have developed in keeping with local tradition. In England one finds usually either the tripartite system of fairly small separate schools — grammar (academic, pre-university), technical and secondary modern (the last being aimed at a general education up to the minimum leaving age, and catering for some eighty per cent of the high school population) — or a combination of these as three streams in a comprehensive school. In Scotland there is a similar range, with its senior high schools, junior high schools and omnibus schools. In the U.S.A., contrary to ardently propagated opinion, more than 70% of the high schools have an enrolment of less than 200 each and are comprehensive only in the sense that they absorb all the pupils of their respective geographic areas, irrespective of ability or aim. In the larger cities in that country, there are large comprehensive schools offering an extremely wide range of courses (including some that could hardly be described either as academic or vocational); there are also certain separate schools with specific biases, and there are some extremely large vocational schools which should, perhaps, be regarded rather as technical colleges, in which case some of those most often quoted for their size are smaller than some of their South African counterparts.

Concerning observable trends in recent times, it may be said that on the Continent efforts are steadily being made to bring into being a more systematic correlation between the many varieties of school that have emerged somewhat haphazardly over the decades in response to local needs. In both Britain and America, where there was not long ago a trend towards ever larger schools on the grounds of their greater efficiency and versatility, even at the expense of human contacts, there is now something of a reaction against excessive size, and an attempt to provide versatility and efficiency by other means. In the U.S.A., which had been early to react against accepting attainment as the sole basis for pro-

motion, there is now a similar reaction against the other extreme of accepting chronological age as the sole basis. All three of these prominent trends pertain specifically to one facet or another of the overall matter of differentiation. One further fundamental trend must be recorded, namely the increasing acceptance of the belief that vocational education is not the function of the secondary school, which should concentrate on the urgently necessary foundation of general education upon which more specialised institutions can later build; this does not preclude the introduction of activities of a pre-vocational nature to maintain the interests of pupils up to the end of their period of compulsory school attendance.

From all the above there emerges the desideratum of a school that is not so large as to become impersonal, nor yet so small as to be inefficient in fulfilling its role; since that role is to provide mainly a general education, with only a measure of streaming to cater for a reasonable range of abilities, and a reasonable range of courses aimed at providing some pre-vocational stimulus within the accepted orbit of general education, there is in any case no need for an over-large school. Practical experience in England has shown that a reasonable range of differentiation can be provided in a school with an enrolment of from 600 upwards. while in areas of high population density it has been shown that additional variety in courses, coupled with economy in staffing and equipment, can be provided by offering a choice of courses in a range of schools within such areas.

Obligatory segregation into separate schools on the basis of tests at an early age has caused acute resentment where it has been tried, and the means of testing has been proved faulty at forecasting the ultimate potential of pupils. The comprehensive type of school obviates the need for such segregation, offering as one of its main advantages the possibility of inter-stream transfer at any stage within its courses should the justification for such transfer emerge. The practicability of this procedure has been amply demonstrated. The raising of any artificial barriers between the streams, making such transfer unduly difficult, must be regarded as educationally unjustified and a hindrance in the optimum implementation of the principle of the comprehensive school.

Inherent in this principle, with its freedom of inter-stream transfer, is the feature that all streams must have a common core of subject material within their respective syllabuses. Pupils in the faster streams will cover more than the basic material of the common core, and teachers will adapt their methods to suit the pupils of the several streams even when handling the common material, but by the retention of the common core, the difficulties of transfer are minimised and it becomes a proven and practicable possibility.

Provided that this common core principle is retained, another major difficulty in the implementation of differentiated education can be avoided, namely that of equated certification. It is possible for an employer or an institution of higher learning to assess the relative merits of two applicants for appointment or admission if there is some common basis to their high school certification, and that common basis has been proved to be quite possible for pupils in the various streams even if the maximum possible marks for the "C" stream pupils are considerably below those for the "A" stream. There is the risk of grave injustices if examinations of totally different standards are set and pupils of lesser ability and attainment are given certificates recording more subject-passes at a given standard or grade than those awarded to pupils of higher attainment who have achieved fewer passes at that grade only because their stream-examinations were more difficult. It has been practically established that there are perfectly normal ways of obviating such anomalies.

To sum up: it is steadily emerging that differentiated secondary education is an eminently normal proposition, and one that can be and has been carried out without recourse to any spectacular changes in normal educational practice whether as to size of schools, rigid testing or streaming procedures or eccentric exclusivenesses of syllabus. The conscious recognition of its potentialities has been a good thing, as also the increasingly systematic approach to its application.

As soon, however, as strictures begin to be applied merely to make it more visibly "differentiated", or for any motive other than educational improvement, it must become suspect, and to that extent — and perhaps further — it will be criticised and even condemned. This regrettable and unnecessary development has unfortunately been observed to occur in more than one country in the presently emerging picture of this fundamentally sound educational principle.