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Van der Ross, Richard Ernest

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education for equal opportunity: issues, attitudes and action among the coloured people

R E VAN DER ROSS

Educationists share with other academics a habit which many others often find upsetting, even annoying, that is the habit of defining the terms of the argument before we set about the argument itself. Pedantic as it may seem to some, it is, nonetheless, a good habit which we have inherited from the Greeks, designed to give greater clarity to our thinking and to guard against possible irrelevancies creeping in. I propose to adopt this line as an introduction to our subject.

Our topic is Education for Equal Opportunity. Once, as a student, I started to collect the definitions of Education which I found to be current and respected; I stopped when I had collected more than forty versions and found that, like Omar Khayyam, I evermore came out by the same door as in I went! But let us for the present assume that by **education** we meant that which is dispensed in schools, that which we teach children five — or is it six — hours a day, that with which Departments of Education busy themselves and which is systematised, institutionalised and itemised in a mass of procedures and impedimenta such as curricula, syllabi, textbooks, examinations, etc., and guarded over by Colleges, teachers, Inspectors of Education, Subject Inspectors, and a large number of officials of the bureaucratic hierarchy. It is a bold assumption, I know, but let it for the moment suffice for us, a body of practising teachers to whom trusting parents send their children "for their education".

If we, as professional educators, are to find it difficult to define **education**, we can expect to find it even more difficult to define equality of opportunity. We meet in the South African context, and it is within that context that I shall frame my remarks. I think that when we speak of equality of opportunity, we have in mind something which we desire, because the theme of my paper is that we wish to educate **for** this. In simple language, I suppose it could be defined as a condition in which each person has the same chance as anyone else of realising his full potential, of developing his talents and of achieving the satisfaction and happiness which comes to a rounded-out personality. Obviously, whilst our definition does not say this, it presupposes such requirements as doing the right kind of job, of earning a wage commensurate with one's abilities, of acquiring the basic modern needs of adequate housing, medical care, insurance, savings, recreation and, of course, education of one's children so that the process may continue.

But it is just when we come to examine this apparently acceptable definition of **equal opportunity** that we run into grave problems. Let us look at the terms more closely. **Equal:** Equal with whom? Does it mean equality within certain social class? Equal with those of one's own so-called race-group? Equal with all other South Africans? More basic still, if it means that the education of, say, a South African Indian child must be equal to that of a South-African White child, what does this mean? Does it mean that they must follow the same syllabi? Write the same examinations? Be taught in schools staffed by teachers who have followed the same courses of training? Or does it mean that in the final analysis the same amount of money must be spent **per capita** on the Indian child as on the White child?

Whilst we are busy piling up our list of unanswered questions, let us turn to consider the concept **Opportunity.** Again, how

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do we in South Africa view this term? When a teacher considers the matter of the opportunities facing his pupils, must he think of the opportunities in the child's social class, in his racial group, or in the country as a whole? Is it fair, permissible or honest, for instance, for a teacher to tell an Indian girl about employment as an air hostess? Or a Coloured child about the diplomatic service? Or should an urban African child in Cape Town be told about home ownership when he cannot achieve it? Or should a White child who wishes to farm be informed about farming opportunities in the African Homelands?

I am aware that the critic will ask: Why cite these examples? Why not concentrate on the many jobs open to people in their own areas? Why not get them to enter trades and professions available to them and where frustrations are not likely to develop? But my point is that this is precisely where we have to decide what we mean by equality of opportunity. Without for the moment taking sides, I wish to make it clear that it is quite likely that simply by steering the pupils into the so-called "available" and "non-frustrating" avenues, we are most probably stirring up just those very frustrations which some people believe are being avoided. And the reason for this is the very basic one that in educating for narrower goals, we negate and offend the principles of true education. The confrontation between students and staff at the University of the Western Cape, which led to the temporary closing of the University, is a striking example of how this works in practice.

But, however interesting it might be to continue this line of discussion, I do not propose to do so. Instead, I wish to leave the realm of the political implications of education for equal opportunity and return to the educational and social implications, ending with the efforts of the Coloured people in this sphere.

One of the strong beliefs of underprivileged communities the world over, has been and remains that their salvation lies in education. Poor people all over have slaved for their children so that they may go to school, acquire education, and so break out of the confines of poverty and lead a better life than that which the parents knew. So it was in the days of slavery and after with the Coloured people, so it was and is with the African people of our country and I have no doubt that it is so with the South African Indians. Indeed, the very history of Indian education, of the platoon schools, of the efforts of parents and the teachers and of this Association bear eloquent testimony to the belief that has been placed in education as the panacea of all the ills.

Poor people will say: Give a child education, for no-one can take it away from him. Poor fathers say: I had no education, so I stayed poor; but my son must go to school, so that he can live better. Leaders in poor communities — teachers, preachers and businessmen — say: Send your children to school, so that the community may be uplifted." "Send them to school", is the universal cry, and social reformers have called for more schools, better-trained and better-paid teachers, compulsory education, free books, greater bursaries at higher levels, and so on as a means of awakening the authorities to their responsibilities. Again we see the belief that if, on the one hand, the parents send their children to schools, and if, on the other hand, the authorities provide the schools, everyone will be educated and all will be well.

Now, this theory, indeed this message of hope, has held sway for a long time, and still does in the minds of most people. And there can be no doubt that there is some truth in it. It is true that people with better education do tend to get better jobs, with better pay, and are, therefore, able to buy more of the good things of life. But now a new thing has happened, or is happening before our eyes — if we have eyes which see. We have entered a new phase of development. We have passed from the phase of mere day-to-day existence when one's purpose was to get a piece of bread to eat, and the function of education was to supply a bigger piece with maybe some butter or jam.

We have entered the phase when we realise, in the words of Christ, that "Man shall not live by bread alone". And in this phase, we strive after new goals, and when we speak of opportunities, we use phrases, such as intellectual and spiritual or aesthetic satisfaction, or self-fulfilment, of the harmony of one's personality and of good inter-personal relations. And the process of expanding our educational objectives and our conception of what is meant by opportunities will continue at an increasing rate as we plummet further and faster into the world of inter-continental, even inter-planetary travel, and the mass media of Press, radio and television.

We have now come to take stock, afresh, of the purpose and role of education **vis-á-vis** the society in which we live. Whereas the educational goal of our forefathers was mainly (if not entirely) to get more money and live more easily, our present-day formulation demands a new perspective of society. We see society as a whole, and we notice that the poverty of the individual must be seen in relation to that whole. We notice that society has become stratified into a number of classes. Broadly speaking, we may define two main classes, the middle class of upper professionals, businessmen and "successful" people, and the lower class or working class, consisting of the tradesmen (at the upper level), the semi-skilled workers, down to the unskilled workers.

Now this in itself is no new discovery. Society has been stratified in classes for ever so long. What is new, however, is our discovery that in the present industrial-type society it becomes virtually impossible for those born into the lower classes to rise out of them. Those who are born poor, live poor and die poor. This does not mean that they will remain at the same subsistence level; poverty is a relative concept. "People feel poor and are poor if they have a lot less money than their neighbours. This is true regardless of their absolute income. It follows that we cannot eliminate poverty unless we prevent people from falling too far below the national average. The problem is economic inequality rather than low incomes."[1] This is said by two American investigators, Mary Jo Bane and Christopher Jencks, of Harvard University.

It will be seen that this type of statement, where education is seen from the sociological viewpoint, is of great relevance to our discussion of education for equal opportunity. For the teacher will ask, does not the education which we provide in schools destroy this poverty cycle, raise people out of poverty, out of the lower class into the middle class? Alas, the answer is No. Jencks and others have conducted a searching study entitled "Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America". One of the striking — and for teachers, humbling — findings has been how **little** difference the schools make in the process of upward social mobility of people.

We shall return to the findings of Jencks and his associates, but first let us look at two other studies. In the 1960s, the United States Government in its zeal to demonstrate its sincerity in eliminating poverty, sponsored the massive Equality of Educational Opportunity Survey. The Survey had four main questions[2] to answer, and I give them with my comment:

> "To what extent are the racial and ethnic groups segregated from one another in the public schools?"
>
> (This shows the American acceptance of the belief, dating back at least to the 1953 Supreme Court Judgement on Desegregration in Schools, that racial segregation **per se** already constitutes inequality.)
>
> "Do the schools offer equal educational opportunities in other respects?"
>
> (Reference here is to other matters such as training of teachers, salaries, equipment, content of education, methods, accommodation, etc.)
>
> "How much can students be said to learn, judged by their performance on standardised achievement tests?"
>
> (In other words, how does the school achievement of a pupil in one set of circumstances differ from the school

achievement of a pupil in another set of circumstances.)

"What kinds of relationships may be supposed to exist between a student's achievement and the kind of school he attends."

(Or, how much difference does the school really make?)

The Survey was headed by James S Coleman. George W Mayeske and others, analysing the findings independently,[3] found that it is not so much the schools which are responsible for the achievement of pupils in and after school, as the total society, i.e. the school as well as the society. "One the whole," says Mayeske, "the influence of the school cannot be separated from that of the student's social background — and vice versa." He makes a point which is relevant for those who are concerned with pupils drawn mainly from the lower socio-economic classes when he says: "Schools exert a greater influence, in terms of both attitude and achievement, on students who have relatively high socio-economic status, are either White or Oriental-American, and come from homes where parents are still living together."

Now Mayeske speaks here of the pupils' attitudes. This is a vital concept, the concept of a pupils' attitude to his studies and his attitude and motivation in regard to his future. Those of us who work in poor communities are constantly struck by what is called "lack of motivation" of the poor. It is not really lack of motivation, but is the substitution by them of other motives, largely as the result of a sort of social conditioning. A middle class child grows up desiring to own his own home, to go to University or College, or at least to matriculate, or to travel overseas one day. The working-class child grows up hoping to get only enough schooling to get a factory job, to get a Council house and to go for a week-end camp at the seaside at Christmas time. What is more, the working-class person does not only **have** different attitudes to study and aspirations for work opportunities, but he is conditioned by his living conditions to **believe** that the goals set by the middle class for themselves, are not for him. And it is this general attitude (called by varied names such as apathy, laziness, lack of ambition or workshyness) which is so important, for it lies at the root, again, of what he will in fact achieve.

For us, too, who work with poorer communities, Mayeske's summary of Coleman's findings has an additional value. For we deal with pupils whose school expectation rarely extends beyond the Primary School, and it is precisely here, in the earlier school years, that the school has the least effect on motivational attitudes which would influence job choices "Up to the 12th grade (Std 10)", says Mayeske, "the distinguishable influence of social background is greater than that of the school."

Jerome Bruner, of Harvard University, sums up the matter of the attitudes, motivation and goals of the poor admirably when he says:[4] "Persistent poverty over generations creates a culture of survival. The outsider and the outside are suspect. One stays inside and gets what one can. Beating the system takes the place of using the system."

One could go on to cite many authors on this point, but I shall let just one more excerpt suffice. This is from a monumental study undertaken in Britain in 1958.

> Every child born in England, Scotland and Wales during the week 3rd March to 9th March was noted and made a subject in the study. The children were obviously from all social-economic classes. Information about them was gained as at the time of birth, and again seven years later, when 92 per cent were located and again assessed. Let me quote an article on the findings:
>
> "The most persistent and striking finding is the extent of the disadvantage suffered by working-class children, and in particular, by those from semi-skilled families. That such disadvantage exists is well known. The study **From Birth to Seven** shows that by the age of seven, at the end of their infant schooling, the gap in ability and attainment between children

from professional and other middle-class families and those from semi- or unskilled families is depressingly wide. Furthermore, the differences pervade most aspects of children's development, and extend to over-crowding in the home, lack of basic household amenities, low level of parental interest and under-use of health and welfare services.

"Nearly half of the children from unskilled families were poor readers at seven years compared with only one in 12 from professional families. More than one in 20 of the children from unskilled families were judged by their teachers to need special schooling compared with fewer than one in 500 from professional families. Moreover, they were on average 1,3 inches shorter, less well adjusted in schools and had poorer general knowledge and oral ability. They were more likely to have a squint, speech defect, poor physical co-ordination or to wet their beds. They were less likely to have been immunised or vaccinated, or to have been taken to a dentist.

"It is clear that if equality of opportunity is to be more than a mere catchphrase, a massive redeployment of resources is needed."[5]

Now these studies place us as teachers right in the witness-box of the inquiry; indeed, they might even seem to place us in the dock of the accused. We can raise our hands in dismay and plead innocence, or ignorance, but dare we then allow the position to continue? What these studies tell us is that we, the teachers, are really not being anything like as effective as we think we are, if we think that we are giving our children equality of opportunity in life, by teaching them in school. It tells us that, whereas our schooling may give the children certain skills with which to do better jobs and earn more money, we are **not** really changing the social system; we are **not** providing for real upward social mobility of the poor; we are **not** providing the basis for the poor to be less poor, relative to the rest of society; we are **not,** therefore, really contributing significantly to equality of opportunity.

Let me clarify two points in regard to poverty again. The first is that we must not be misled by the exceptions; these are few and only prove the rule. Every one of us knows of the odd doctor or teacher or businessman who has "risen from poverty". But for every one such person whom we can name, there are many thousands to whom it does not apply. It is these thousands of people who gain some schooling but sink back without "making it", and and ensure the self-perpetuating character of poverty. The second point is that we must not be misled by outward signs. A man can have a liquor supply, a hi-fi set and even a motor car, and still be poor. A woman can own a fridge, dress in fashion and wear a wig, and still be poor. The test resides in the answers to such questions as: Do they own or could they own their own home? Is there reasonable provision for education of the children? For insurance? For health needs? For an occasional holiday? For a rainy day in the form of savings? The poor do not have these things and the basic security which they imply.

Having now briefly surveyed some of the findings of overseas studies in regard to equal opportunity and education, I wish to examine the situation in South Africa. I shall deal more especially with the Coloured population group and leave you to apply my observations to other groups in the light of your own special knowledge.

I have been asked to discuss how the problem of education and equality of opportunity is being dealt with among the Coloured people, and I shall attempt to give a brief answer at two levels, the first being the administrative, the second being the psycho-sociological.

At the administrative level, people are not really concerned about the kind of social functioning of education which I have been discussing, viz. the function concerned with eliminating poverty and changing the

social order where a large class of poor people exists. They are concerned with such matters as providing more schools, training teachers, equipping schools, providing books and ordering the mass of detail and organisation of matters such as inspections, testing, classification, examination and so on which forms the stock-in-trade of education.

I am not for a moment denying the value, indeed the vital importance, of these factors, and in the Coloured sector they gain due attention. Thus there is at present a drive to implement compulsory education. We have, as you may know, a large number of Coloured children who drop out of school, and to counteract this a form of compulsion has been introduced whereby as from 1974 all Coloured children aged seven years have had to go to school. In 1975 this has applied to children aged seven and eight, in 1976 to seven, eight and nine years and so on, until, hopefully, all children are kept in school to the age of at least 14 years.

This involves planning expenditure in other areas as well, and some R21m has recently been voted to accelerate the building programme over the next four years. The rate at which teachers are trained has also been stepped up by increasing the number of Training Schools and Colleges and their enrolment. All of this concerns the number of pupils and teachers. In respect of the quality of work done, there is the normal attention to inspection and guidance at various levels. Perhaps the efforts most relevant to equality of opportunity are in the area of secondary schooling, where differentiated education offers a number of streams and courses ranging from the academic, through commercial, technical and general. Specific schools and courses offer training in navigation and hotel services and administration.

There is also, of course, the field of higher or more specialised education, where we could mention nursing and the University, the University of the Western Cape, offering courses in the Arts, Sciences, Education, Commerce, Social Work and Dentistry. In addition, adult education classes offer evening courses for those who may have missed their opportunities for normal schooling.

Whilst it will be agreed that this type of educational activity is both commendable, in the sense that it provides much-needed facilities and controls, and normal in that it is the kind of activity with which most education departments busy themselves, it is my submission that this has little to do with education for equal opportunity. This is because it does not necessarily contribute to a condition where poverty — as described above — will be eliminated. And it will not necessarily lead to the upward mobility of people now poor, so that they will, in significant numbers, rise out of poverty. It might and probably will lead to an increase in the money incomes of the present lower class or working class, but it will do little or nothing to their position in society relative to the middle class. The poor will remain the poor; the better-off will remain the better-off. And this entails, too, very importantly, that the poor will continue to have very little if any part in decision-making, which the power-structure leaves in the hands of the middle or upper middle class.

I now come to the question of what is being done to change this rather gloomy picture, or to break the poverty cycle. On the educational side, I have regretfully to say that the only place where educators seem to be consciously applying their minds and efforts to this problem is at the Early Learning Centre, in Athlone. This Centre, which I have the privilege of heading, is not only the only one of its kind in the Coloured community, but in the entire country, irrespective of race or colour. Perhaps, therefore, I should sketch its background briefly.

The Early Learning Centre has been established by the Bernard van Leer Foundation in Holland, which draws its funds from the Van Leer Packaging Company. The Company operates in some 33 countries in the world, and in most of these it ploughs back some of its profits by establishing projects designed to assist the communi-

ties — especially the working class — to cope with the demands of modern life. More than one hundred projects are at present sponsored by the Foundation. The Early Learning Centre occupies a new building specially designed, erected and equipped by the Foundation, which has also guaranteed its staff salaries and running expenses for three years. I might add that the Foundation has erected another project at Entokozweni, in Soweto, Johannesburg.

The purpose of the Early Learning Centre is to investigate the conditions under which working-class Coloured children grow up in Cape Town's townships, the one selected for study being Kew Town, Athlone, where it is situated. It tries to determine the specific areas of cultural deprivation and their effect mainly on cognitive development in the pre-school years. It then develops appropriate educational methods, i.e. work programmes (or "curricula") and teaching skills designed to develop the children's cognitive ability to the maximum, so that when they eventually go to primary school they will be able to compete on more equal terms with middle-class children than has hitherto been the case.

Some people use the term Compensatory Education, and this is all right, as long as we do not misunderstand it and expect that it can, in fact, make up for all of the shortcomings of the child's environmenit. We try our best, by intervening in the child's life in the early years, before primary school, to provide an environment as stimulating, challenging, thought-provoking and — very important — as enjoyable as possible. To do this, we depart somewhat from the rather loose, traditional nursery school pattern, which relies almost entirely on the "play-way" and concentrates on the social and emotional aspects of the child's life.

At the Early Learning Centre, we have due regard for this approach and for these aspects of development, but we also concentrate on the cognitive side. Here our concern is not so much with **what** the children learn, as with **how** they learn. The method is more important than the content. Thus, you might teach the children something about their environment yet, looking at this matter again, the critic might ask what is the point of it, surely the child will in any case learn that this is a school, that a church, the other buildings cottages, flats, a day hospital, and so on. They will, in time, learn anyway something of what goes on in these places, and what play-parks, shops, bus stops or town halls are for, so why not wait?

This is the whole point. What happens while you wait? What happens during the years from birth to six? We believe these years to be vital for mental development. Indeed, we believe that unless these years are exploited to the full, the children lose the capacity for benefiting from later experiences — including later schooling — to the full. So we use some of this time, among other things, to introduce the children to the environment, as above. Not because we want them to know these things, but because we must have something on which to exercise their minds. So we visit the nearby school or play-park. We talk about it, discuss, it ask questions about it, consider the answers which are given, add bits of information to those of others.

There is a **process** of confrontation, puzzlement, questioning, suggesting, discussing, reflecting, hypothesising, and insight-gaining. And it is in this **process** that the stimulus and the educative value consists. Children become more aware of what is about them, more observant about details, more cognisant about cause and effect, more speculative, more verbal and more able to conceptualise about things and to think

about them in their absence. And surely this is a large part of what all education is about! When they compare, classify, sort out, group or grade objects, surely this is what thinking is all about? Insofar as our work at the Early Learning Centre is different from work at other nursery schools, it is because it has this type of objective and, therefore, has to use special methods of structuring the material for more systematic — yet informal — presentation.

Our work necessarily entails a great deal more, but I must conclude, and so I wish to say something about community involvement which is so vital if we are to aim at social change via early intervention in the children's lives, we must have the understanding and co-operation of the parents and the whole community. This is not easy to obtain, as by definition you are dealing with people who are ill-motivated. J McVicker Hunt notes this point, and its circular effect, when he says: "Seldom do the children of poverty have an opportunity to develop motivation directed toward future goals and toward social status. The parents of the slums have themselves seldom had an opportunity to learn such motivation."[6] But recognising that the best point of entry into the people's lives is probably via their children, we have programmes whereby mothers come to work in our Centre for several hours a week (our Teacher-Aide Programme), our Social Workers visit homes to give guidance on child-rearing where parents look after their own children (our Home Visiting Programme). We also have a programme of Adult Education where films are shown, talks given and discussion promoted on a variety of topics such as family planning, sport, health and nutrition and matters affecting the lives of the people.

I could go into further detail about the activities of the Centre, but I feel that sufficient has been said for the moment. To conclude this paper, it is necessary just to look again at the theme of Education for Equal Opportunity. I can hear the sceptic asking: But will the work in your Centre really provide equal opportunities? Quite candidly I must answer: No, not in itself. More is needed. You cannot cure the ills of a society merely by improving the cognitive ability of the pre-school children. Much more must be done to alter the society itself at other levels, and the provision of better wages for the working classes could possibly be one of the major means of really promoting equal opportunity. Schools will have to do a great deal more in the poorer areas, and the British concept of positive discrimination, i.e. of spending **more** on education where the need is greatest, needs more attention here.

The studies of Jencks and others show that we cannot rely on schools — at any level — only. Public policy, that is, the laws which affect the lives of men and women, must also change so that the logjam of the class structure which confines peoples to the classes in which they are born, is broken up. The powerlessness of the lower classes must be relieved, and they must get real hope Jencks says, "If we want to eliminate economic inequality, we must make this an explicit objective of public policy rather than deluding ourselves into thinking that we can do it by giving everyone equal opportunity to succeed or fail. If we want an occupational structure which is less hierarchical and in which the social distance between the top and the bottom is reduced, we will have to make deliberate efforts to reorganise work and redistribute power within organisations."[7]

Jencks writes, of course, in the American context, and even he is not very hopeful. In the South African setting, I feel even less optimistic. I do not believe that we have even addressed our minds to the

possibilities of reducing the social distance between those at the top and those at the bottom. I do not believe that we have tried to see what our society might be like with colour barriers removed. I think that South African educators have been concerned mainly with the academic game of passing examinations and of preparing pupils for society as we know it, preparing them to fit into and perpetuate the type of society that exists, with each group in its slot. If this is so, all talk of education for equal opportunity is indeed but a delusion. But to the extent that we, as teachers, are involved in it, I can only suggest that we do the best we can **and** undertake to do that bit extra as teachers, parents and as citizens to bring about a new perspective, and to instil in our pupils a new and more dynamic motivation which will, indeed, assist in the attainment of a society in which the phrase Equality of Opportunity will have real meaning.

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