

EQUALITY

“One of the paradoxes of our society,” Goldwin J. Emerson begins, “is that the more we treat people equally, the more we increase their inequality,” a fact that leads him to conclude that “if we want people to end up with equal status, equal positions, and equal achievements, we must treat them in an unequal manner.”¹ This apparent “paradox is nowhere more evident than in our publicly supported educational systems.”² Emerson points out that “as a matter of convenience, students are normally grouped together in classes and grades,” an arrangement that ignores “their individual differences.”³ Emerson’s example is “the teacher who has 30 Grade 6 students ” and who is “expected to teach all of his students a certain amount of common subject material,”⁴ informed by curriculum guidelines, administrative and parental expectations, as well as by her or his professional preparation at university. “The idea of equal objectives for all students,” he points out, “is embodied in the simplistic but commonly held notion of a set curriculum for each grade level,” an arrangement based on the unfounded assumption “that there are certain basic skills, facts, and attitudes that are required for useful and happy living in our society,” requiring packaging these into “sizable portions of curriculum appropriate to the different ages and grade levels of the students.”⁵ Teachers’ success is assessed “according to how closely their students come to achieving these curriculum objectives,” a fact, Emerson points out, that implies that “it will not be important that some students are able to go much further than the required objectives.”⁶ Those students who do not achieve the curriculum objectives either fail or are judged slow. There are “obvious advantages” to this “principle,” Emerson allows, among them “a common understanding about what the objectives are,” allowing teachers, parents, and students ... clear standards by which to measure the apparent success or failure of the school and its students,” leaving “the general feeling that tax dollars are devoted to important educational necessities.”⁷

Despite these “advantages,” this “principle of equal objectives for all leaves much to be desired,” assuming, as it does, that we can know and agree upon what the basics in education are.”⁸ We don’t, a fact Emerson substantiates by referencing “notable educational philosophers, from Aristotle to John Dewey, who claim that the goals of education must of necessity remain open-ended if education is to be an ongoing search for truth.”⁹ Moreover, Emerson continues, the scheme simply isn’t tenable: “Publicly supported schools cannot accommodate large numbers of students, hold to a fixed curriculum, accommodate individual differences, treat everyone equally, encourage brighter students to excel, and satisfy parents and administrators, all at the same time.”¹⁰ Moreover, Emerson continues, “rigid adherence to a fixed curriculum and to a lockstep graded system also prohibits individual progress,” suggesting that any “strong emphasis on basic curriculum should be modified by taking into account the

abilities and interests of individual students.”¹¹ Indeed, “consideration ought to be given to the varying levels of ability within the class, rather than ignoring the fact that these variations exist.”¹² Emerson concludes: “Do schools exist primarily for the development of the individual so that each can proceed at his own rate and in pursuit of his own interests, or do they exist primarily for the purpose of educating students in the common goals of society?”¹³ While theoretically the two are intertwined (at least for me), for Emerson – and the technologically-driven economic “society” in which North Americans live now – they seem set apart.

COMMENTARY

Emerson endorses schools committed to the development of individuals, an appealing agenda (to me) provided individuals are appreciated as inextricably embedded in society. His point about treating everyone the same (leading to inequality of outcomes) is acknowledged in affirmative action policies, where the descendants of victimized populations are given a special consideration, in the United States a controversial policy still under litigation as I write.¹⁴ Even affirmative action is race-based - not individually focused - and what Emerson seems to embrace is affirmative action for all.

REFERENCES

- Emerson, Goldwin J. 1979. The Egalitarian Paradox in Public Education. *Canadian Journal of Education* 4 (3), 53-59.
- Hartocollis, Amanda. 2021, February 4. U.S. Drops Yale Discrimination Suit, Signaling Shift From Trump Race Policy. *The New York Times*, CLXX, No. 58,959, A20.

ENDNOTES

¹ Emerson 1979, 53.

² Emerson 1979, 53.

³ Emerson 1979, 54. His point about “convenience” is one my Ph.D. mentor and friend Paul Klohr made from time to time, disputing that the grades were at all correlated with intellectual development or the acquisition of knowledge.

⁴ Emerson 1979, 54.

⁵ Emerson 1979, 55.

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- ⁶ Emerson 1979, 55.
⁷ Emerson 1979, 55-56.
⁸ Emerson 1979, 56.
⁹ Emerson 1979, 56.
¹⁰ Emerson 1979, 56.
¹¹ Emerson 1979, 57.
¹² Emerson 1979, 57.
¹³ Emerson 1979, 58.
¹⁴ Hartocollis 2021.