

Public schools confounded by equality

Goldwin Emerson, gandjemerson@rogers.com

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One of the paradoxes in public education is that the more we treat children equally, the more we increase their inequality. Conversely, the more we aim at having children end up with equal achievements, the more teachers and others must treat them in an unequal manner to make this happen. In a class of 30 plus students, there will be many different talents and abilities that result in individual children learning at different rates. This fact raises ethical questions about the overall aims of public education. In this context, I am of course, including both the Roman Catholic School system and the Public School Boards since both systems are affected by a similar paradox about what is the fairest and most just manner to teach children.

Proponents of equal treatment for all may argue that equal treatment does not necessarily mean identical treatment for all. To them, equal treatment may mean the teacher devotes the same amount of attention and effort to helping each child in whatever areas the student needs help. In effect, this argument supports the view that different children need different kinds of help. But if a teacher has 30 students to deal with, each hour there are not many individual minutes to provide help to the various needs of each student. In order to provide individual help in a variety of directions, smaller classes may be needed. So while smaller classes may be desirable in an ideal world, unfortunately, it may be unworkable under normal classroom budgets and working conditions. Those who support different treatment for all recognize that both the brighter children and the slower ones will proceed as far and as fast as each student can and each will end up at different levels of achievement according to their abilities.

On the other hand, proponents of equal objectives for all, argue differently. The idea of equal objectives for all is embodied in the commonly held notion of a set curriculum for each grade level. Proponents of this view argue that there are certain basic skills, facts, knowledge and attitudes appropriate to the different

ages and grade levels of the students. It is also held that most of these objectives are measurable and testable. The Education Quality and Accountability Office (E.Q.A.O) is an arms-length organization of the Ontario government that has been set up for this purpose. As a Former Monitor for (E.Q.A.O.) I am personally familiar with this concept of equal objectives for all. Teachers who believe strongly in this philosophy will measure their success according to how closely their students come to achieving these curricula objectives. It will not be of great importance that some students are able to go much further than the required objectives. Slower students will be considered to be successfully educated only to the degree to which they are able to approximate the basic requirements of the curriculum appropriate to their age and grade level.

In general, parents of the children who cope in their school work at an average rate may be moderately satisfied that their children are working at a satisfactory level. Parents of the brightest children may be happy their off-spring are better than average. Yet, they may wish that teachers would challenge their children to do even better since many are probably quite capable of doing so. On the other hand, parents of slower children will be somewhat stressed and disappointed that their off-spring are below the average level even when students put forth a reasonable effort to succeed.

Are there solutions to the egalitarian paradox? Since the schools to which I refer are supported by public funds, in the long run it will be up to tax payers and politicians to decide what the objectives of public education will be and at what cost to tax payers. The ethical question of what kind of education we owe to our children arises in the minds of teachers, parents and school administrators. In the meantime, there are some partial solutions to improving education. Smaller class sizes, more thought to enriched curricula for brighter students and less emphasis on individual schools competing for the highest ratings for E.Q.A.O. tests may help. Perhaps readers of this column may have other solutions to offer for improving Ontario publicly supported education.