

## Contributors



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# Mass Education: A Personal View

ERNEST W. BREWER

## *Jacksonian Position*

Mass education as an American philosophical imperative can trace its initial inception to the ideological formulations of the Jacksonian Era. Here, the notion that a just government derived from the consent of all the people, not merely the elite, and the ideology of equality of opportunity became realistic and functional objectives, not only in the political and economic realms where a man could now have the chance to be president or to be a millionaire, but in education as well. The new Republic had divorced itself from the traditional aristocratic rule of European origin, but it had been dominated since its inception by a new elite of wealth, education, and position; consequently, it was toward the privilege of this elite and its dominance of all the social institutions, including government, that the Jacksonians directed themselves. More importantly, however, they directed themselves toward the elevation of the common man, who, when given free access to government and to education (an equality of opportunity in general), could elevate himself to new heights [1].

According to Degler [1], it was assumed that a free democratic system would abolish artificial distinctions and permit the free development of talent. To achieve this democratic ideal, an educated and enlightened citizenry was essential. It became an article of faith that education was the great leveler which provided every individual an option to raise himself by the "bootstraps." It was not, however, the society or the educational system which would elevate the individual—it could only give the rugged individual a fair chance to elevate himself—it was his responsibility.

## *Writer's Assessment and Critique of Contemporary Mass Education*

Initially, mass education meant compulsory elementary education where citizenship and the 3 R's were taught with the objectives of developing an active citizen who could at least manage the affairs of daily living and working. High school was for the gifted who wished to pursue traditional professions requiring college. This liberal education was elitist oriented, but it was provided as an equal opportunity for those who wanted it. We continue to provide a liberal education to

those aspiring to the traditional professions; however, the mass education system now requires compulsory liberal education to those who are mentally deficient, those who have particular "high" aspirations, and those who have no talent or interest in purely academic pursuits beyond the essentials. It matters not that our society needs garbage collectors, carpet layers, waitresses, factory workers, farmers, and many other skilled and unskilled workers; it appears that all must be provided with the same equal opportunity for the "good life."

The expression of so many educators and proponents of the mass education system are couched in such idealistic terms that one is obliged to describe them as hopelessly romantic. To say that the goal of education is the achievement of "self-actualization" or the attainment of the "good life" sounds appealing, but it is meaningless in terms of measureability and accountability. We are told that only through twelve years of mostly liberal education can the "good life" be achieved and without it, or by watering it down, the student's life will somehow be diminished. Such are the inconsistencies, absurdities, and needs of an ideology with a view of reality that verges on the idealistic rather than the realities of the world.

Yet the real world requires specific skills in which even our highly motivated and most intellectually capable students are deficient—in liberal arts, even though that is where the emphasis has been placed. For the past ten years, there has been something of an ideological shift from the philosophy of equal opportunity to that of egalitarianism with its romantic notion that every one has in his reach a diploma and an academic degree. To achieve this end, academic standards have been seriously compromised on both the high school and college levels. It is becoming increasingly common to find high school seniors whose competency levels do not exceed eighth grade standards and who are not only graduated but are accepted into colleges where their first courses are remedial. It is also increasingly common to find high school seniors with no saleable skills at all who must seek additional education beyond high school at their own expense before they can be hired. Mass education without aspiration toward excellence is mediocre education at best, and it is an education which has most certainly not provided an equal opportunity.

## *Writer's Philosophy of Mass Education*

Simply stated, this writer's philosophy of education requires that the schools recognize diversities in students' intelligence, motivation, interests, talents, and backgrounds, and that they address themselves to this diversity by providing a curriculum responsive not only to needs of the students but also to the needs of the society and economy, to include not only liberal arts training for the college bound, but

business training, broad areas of vocational-technical training and on-the-job training for those not interested in advanced schooling. I also believe that education worthy of the label is a rigorous, demanding exercise requiring that students learn and apply the work ethic, as they will later be required to do in the work force, and either strive for excellence or face the consequences or the reality of their situation. Failure, like success and minimal competency, is a fact of life and must be used as liberally as reward to demonstrate to students that they must either apply themselves more or, if they cannot, change the direction of their education and career objectives. We must not deprive students of the need to learn from mistakes and failures. This writer's philosophy of education gives no preferential treatment to one who seeks a liberal education over trade training or on-the-job training. It rewards those who strive and achieve according to their ability and interests in their chosen areas of pursuit. It tends to be specific rather than general, objective rather than goal oriented, functional rather than aesthetic. It is still mass education in that everyone is given an opportunity to acquire the education he can handle, but it is not the assembly line system which now exists.

#### *Role of Vocational-Technical Education*

Taking the mass education system as it presently exists, vocational-technical education can go far in meeting the realistic needs of society, the student, and the system. The role of vocational education is specifically important here in that it is so frequently lacking in both liberal and technical forms of education. If schools are to fulfill their function of preparing students for life, then it must prepare them to subsist—to choose an occupation in line with their personal interests and capabilities. This is not a duty of any given disciplinary segment of the school but of the school as a whole. It must also be an ongoing process—from grade one on, of educating and guiding students into the myriad of occupations available to them. Of course this must be accompanied with continuous assessment of interest and abilities and frequent counseling as well as contact with community occupations. The technical segment of vocational-technical training can bring the process to fruition by providing broad preparations in numerous occupations. Technical education must go beyond its traditional role of providing such limited offerings as auto mechanics and mechanical drawing courses; also, they have a tremendous role to play with the largest segment of the student population that merely bleeds into the work force without advanced training and without any specific preparation for work routines.

#### *The Reality Principle*

The mass education system could definitely benefit from continually reassessing its function and objectives in view of the realistic needs of the students and of society. If students do not benefit from the technique or content of instruction, then the technique or content should be altered or dropped, not maintained just because of tradition, ideology, or idealism. There must be a balance between idealism on the one hand and that which is practical on the other; each has its place in the educational system. However, the educational system must recognize that its mandate is to educate—not provide compulsory attendance—and that it cannot realistically expect each student to benefit equally without the provision of a multiplicity of programs. Education for its own sake is an elitist and idealistic notion, fit only for those who can afford it while the rest of us must aspire to more practical, attainable, and realistic objectives.

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#### REFERENCE

1. Degler, Carl N. *Out of Our Past*. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1962, pp. 144-160.