

Editorial

Insurmountable Opportunities

Pogo, a cartoon opossum in an anthropomorphic American comic created by the late Walt Kelly, is alleged to have said something along the lines of, "We are beset by insurmountable opportunities."¹ Although the context and specific reference of this quote are unknown and possibly apocryphal, the statement seems to embody the atmosphere of the debate concerning private versus public education.

On both sides of the issue individuals claim that their position either preserves or creates opportunities for choice. Often the debate is clouded with much emotion and a lack of objectivity, as many participants are either involved with one or another approaches to the way education is provided or they have children in school. Perhaps if we step back from the present and consider examples from the past, where we have no direct emotional involvement, the matter of what actually constitutes an opportunity in education will become clear.

The idea of opportunity or choice in education is not new. For example, one of the reasons why we know of the 1st-century CE Roman orator and teacher Quintilian is because he wrote about his particular way of teaching so as to attract students. His method of instruction, he maintained, would provide young Romans with an opportunity for competent and rapid edification: an opportunity, he contended, that competitive methods of education would not provide (Quintilian, 1921, 1922). Of course, Quintilian did not devise his curriculum and methods purely for altruistic ends. He wished to make a living through teaching. In consequence, only Romans with sufficient means could afford to have their children taught by Quintilian. In this instance the opportunity existed only if a family could afford Quintilian's fee.

That money is often the basis for educational opportunity is a point that tends to be blurred today because of the ubiquitous nature of public education and the accompanying erroneous idea that it is free, and in consequence largely without value. By permitting private and alternative schools not funded by the public purse, therefore, parents should have a choice of educational opportunities for their children. Providing parents with some money in the form of vouchers would help ensure that these opportunities are available. As with most so-called "modern" ideas, this simply repeats a much older idea.

By the 18th century in Europe, before the advent of what we now know as public education, many private educational opportunities were available to parents. Moreover, several great and innovative educators became widely known for their novel ideas, methods, and schools. These included the Swiss Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827), Sweden's Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), and England's Thomas Arnold (1795-1842) and Samuel Wilderspin (1791-1866). Although each made significant changes to education and to how it was viewed, most people did not have the means to send their children to such schools, even though some of these educators offered reduced rates and time

payment plans for families with limited funds. At best, most families could afford to send only one or two children to such schools, and these were usually males (McCann & Young, 1982; Wilderspin, 1825). The problem became more acute when higher education was considered. Although there appeared to be many opportunities for choice in education, these really did not exist for people who lacked sufficient funds. Was familial wealth always the basis for educational opportunity? Surprisingly, perhaps, the answer is "No."

Some of my ancestors lived in what is now the United Kingdom. Although it has been nearly 100 years since that part of my family has resided there, I possess extensive written records concerning the lives of those who lived in the 19th century. It is possible, therefore, to examine the extent and type of educational opportunities that were available to them at that time. My family did not live in the grinding poverty portrayed vividly by Dickens, nor did they possess the affluence of the characters described by Jane Austen. Instead, my family ran a small shop, roughly akin to the later general store. This enterprise provided sufficient income for survival, but not enough to afford education for their five children (three girls and two boys) beyond the church schools, which provided basic reading, writing, and arithmetic.

My great-great-grandfather, who was a veteran of the Napoleonic wars, desired something better for his children than subsisting as shop owners. In a letter written in 1838, he stated that he believed education would enable his children to develop skills that in turn would enable them to obtain higher-paying employment. This was likely to lead to a better lot in life. Without money the only opportunities for education were, ironically, publicly funded organizations, the British military, and the clergy. Of course, these "opportunities" existed solely for male children. Through writing to his former commander, my great-great-grandfather managed to get his two sons accepted into the military when each turned 14. My great-great-grandfather (1824-1884) entered the navy, and his brother (1830-1855) entered the army.

Although success and advancement were largely dependent on personal ability, the military provided many opportunities for education, including tuition and time to attend polytechnical schools. My great-great-grandfather apparently had ability, and he took advantage of these opportunities. As a result, he did exceptionally well, rising from being a stoker (one who shoveled coal into a ship's boiler), to Chief Engineer, and retired as a Commodore with the credentials of Civil Engineer. Following retirement he used the education he had gained at the expense of the navy to devise and patent a four-bladed propeller in 1875, which supposedly reduced cavitation significantly over earlier propeller designs. The patent royalties and his subsequent position as Superintendent of the Surrey Docks in London made him a wealthy man.

This seemingly idyllic story of how a great opportunity for education was taken and led to social advancement belies a high, nonmonetary cost, however. A career in the military was accompanied by considerable personal risk. My great-great-grandfather's brother, for example, was killed in the Crimean War, and my great-great-grandfather narrowly escaped death in the same conflict when his ship was rammed and sunk. Although entering the clergy would not have entailed such risk, another nonmonetary price would have had to be paid,

the sacrifice of personal freedom and choice of lifestyle. Even so, neither of these opportunities was available to my great-great-grandfather's sisters.

Although my great-great-grandfather left considerable wealth, his descendants squandered it quickly so that my grandfather and his brothers were denied the opportunity for much education beyond the basics. Without the opportunity to acquire additional knowledge and to develop specialized skills, and with dwindling monetary resources, their prospects for securing well-paying positions were minimal. By the turn of the 20th century my family believed that they had no alternative but to emigrate to Canada as homesteaders. Although they survived, their existence was harsh and unpleasant for many years, made worse by the fact that none of them had any knowledge of agriculture or appropriate farming practices. It is no surprise, therefore, that my grandfather became a strong supporter of mandatory public education and donated land for the first schoolhouse in the district (*Forgotten echoes*, 1982).

What this account reveals is that one must make sure that an opportunity really is an opportunity, and that the sometimes hidden cost of each apparent opportunity is recognized and appreciated. Although providing vouchers might appear to address the problem of funds for different educational programs, can we be sure that vouchers will be sufficient to enable all students to avail themselves of each program? Similarly, will competition with publicly funded schools result in the degradation of those institutions so that the opportunities they offer are diminished? Will this lead in turn to a gradual diminution of quality in education? Are alternative schools really opportunities for improvement, or do they possess structures and curricula that are potentially limiting and restrictive?

On the other hand, could it be that by resisting all change to how public education is configured we are limiting opportunity? As stated at the outset, opportunities for choice in education are a complex issue. As educators and researchers we must ensure that as many aspects of the issue as possible are revealed, examined, and discussed. Moreover, we must ensure that we do not abrogate our responsibility to the politicians, for they view "opportunity" in ways that most educators do not.

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Note

1. A search on the Internet using the Google search engine reveals several incarnations of this quote, where "beset with" appears variously as "faced with," "confronted with," and "surrounded by." According to a Pogo site (<http://www.nauticom.net/www/chuckm/pogoqa.htm>) that consulted Pete Kelly, the cartoonist's son, no version of the quote can be found in any strip or Pogo comic book.

References

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