

Notes on the

Education of the Poor in  
Historical and International Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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A great amount of literature has appeared in recent years, and no doubt will continue to be published in the years to come, on the problems of educating the poor. Generally, the references tend to avoid the term *poor*, but to use the circumlocutions of *economically deprived*, *financially disadvantaged*, *fiscally handicapped*, *monetarily underprivileged*, and the like. Much is written about the *culturally depressed*, *the urban underprivileged*, *the inner-city indigent*, or simply the *different*. What all these terms amount to is an expression of social, governmental, and humanitarian concern with respect to persons who have not shared in the benefits of the contemporary affluent society. The accent is on the role of educational institutions in remedying prevailing injustices and in propelling children and young persons into a situation which will reflect the highest ideals of human rights and equality. At least, this seems the sum total of the underlying ideology of the many writings on anti-poverty education.

What is missing to a large extent from the plentitude of printed matter on the poverty problem in education is an awareness of the historical dimension and of the experience of various nations, other than one's own, in meeting the issue. The educational struggle against poverty did not begin with the program for the Great Society by President Lyndon B. Johnson nor with the reforms by the Labour Party in Great Britain nor even with the Russian Revolution. It may be that the functionalists and the activists do not regard the historical development as relevant to the immediate, practical task of aiding the poor. However, it is hard to understand why the scholars in education, particularly those who are associated in teaching and research in the area called Educational Foundations have seldom called attention to the antecedents in time of the campaign to eradicate poverty via education.

One must hasten to add that the standard histories of education do contain data on past efforts to educate the poor, but these items of information are frequently buried in masses of detail. There does not appear any systematic analysis of the attempts at anti-poverty education in past eras in various parts of the world. The second edition (1966) of Brubacher's useful historical analysis of education problems omits the education of the poor as an identifiable problem. To find any historical information in his book concerning this question, it is necessary to look into the chapter on economic influences on education and the one on elementary education.<sup>2</sup>

Space is inadequate for a thoroughgoing presentation of the subject in its international and historical dimensions. What will be attempted is an overview which would point to several lines of development which are suggestive of further and deeper study leading to a more definitive analysis of the historical factors in the drive against poverty in the educational experience of mankind from ancient times onward.

To trace the history of education in relation to poverty in antiquity is not at all an easy assignment. One might begin with examples from such areas as poor relief and social legislation. The Bible contains numerous references to the obligations by the individual and the community toward the needy of all kinds, such as the propertyless Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow.<sup>3</sup> Concerning "thy brother" who becomes impoverished, the Bible warns

that "as a stranger and a settler shall he live with thee."<sup>4</sup> This equates three types of disadvantaged whose welfare became the responsibility of the community and had to be aided as brothers. It might be assumed that the responsibility was not merely to prevent starvation or any form of misery, but also to rehabilitate the individual and to enable him to recover economically. Such a process might involve adult vocational training. This is the interpretation of Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) in the legal compendium and commentary published about 1180. The physician-philosopher-rabbi specifies eight levels of charity, the highest of which is to give the poor a grant or loan, to invite him as a partner, or to find him work so that he would become self-supporting.<sup>5</sup> Like the Bible, the Talmud, upon which it is based is replete with admonitions regarding the necessity of aiding the poor to the fullest possible extent and to help avoid the status of poverty and dependence. Thus, according to Rabbi Judah, "He who does not teach his son a trade . . . is as though he taught him to be a robber."<sup>6</sup> Here is the recognition of the link between deprivation and delinquency.

Another Talmudic passage praises the High Priest, Joshua ben Gamala, who ordained about 64 A.D. the establishment of schools in every town and province for children of six or seven. This ordinance was promulgated after Joshua observed that orphan children, in contrast to those with fathers, were not receiving an education. In order that all children get as much attention as possible, Raba stated that a teacher preferably should have no more than twenty-five pupils and that if he should have forty children, the town should pay for an assistant.<sup>7</sup>

In another section of the Talmud is an interesting account of provision for the underprivileged. Rabbi Hiyya narrated how he helped feed orphans with the meat of deer caught with nets woven from flax he had sown. From the deerskin he prepared scrolls which he brought to a town which lacked a school for young children. He then wrote on the skins the five books of Moses (the Pentateuch) for five children, and taught the six sections of the Mishnah to six children. "I said to each one, 'Teach your section to your friend'."<sup>8</sup> This procedure earned him the approval of Rabbi Judah the Prince, the editor of the Mishnah (the basis for the Talmudic discussions and disputations). This slogan of Rabbi Hiyya is an ancient precedent for the twentieth-century formula "Each one, teach one!" by

which the Rev. Dr. Frank C. Laubach, the American missionary, succeeded in bringing literacy to underdeveloped countries.

Finally, it is pertinent to quote the well-known statement that one should take care not to neglect the children of the poor, for the learning (Torah), goes forth from them.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the disadvantaged pupils have educational capabilities which the community cannot afford to leave undeveloped. The Talmudic era, then, made provisions for the education of the poor children because they were entitled to it by reason of being children and because education would enable them to rise above poverty.

Urban problems reared their heads in ancient Greece. In Book IV of the *Republic*, Plato maintains that “. . . any city, however small, is in fact divided into two, one the city of the poor, the other of the rich; these are at war with one another . . .”<sup>10</sup> He goes on to say that “if you . . . give the wealth or power or persons of the one to the others, you will always have a great many friends and not many enemies.”<sup>11</sup> But the optimum solution to the problem in the ideal state, according to Plato, is to elevate “into the rank of guardians the offspring of the lower classes, when naturally superior.”<sup>12</sup> The intention was that, in the case of the citizens generally, each individual should be put to the use for which nature intended him, one to one work, and then every man would do his own business, and be one and not many; and so the whole city would be one and not many.

Another example from a later period in antiquity is from the writing of the Greek Church Father, Gregory Nazianzen, *Peri Philochoias* (Concerning the Love of the Poor), based upon the practical charitable work by St. Basil in Caesarea. Dedicated to the importance of the principle of Christian charity, it provided inspiration to the French social reformers in the early sixteenth century in their efforts to ameliorate the condition of the poor and thereby to raise the level of society.<sup>13</sup> One indication of this campaign was the appearance of translations of Gregory's Sermon Fourteen in German, French, English, and Italian. Of the ten recorded vernacular editions published between 1530 and 1615, seven were in French. And indeed it was the welfare organization of the municipality of Lyon, the Aumône-Générale, which utilized a French version of Gregory's sermon to raise funds to improve the status of the

poor in the community. The organization, which was founded in 1534 by a group of Protestant and Catholic businessmen and lawyers, was influenced by two local humanists, Jean de Vauzelles, Prior of Montrottier, and a Dominican friar, Santo Pagnini. The latter two were interested in the Aumône-Générale for a number of reasons: "a humanist sensitivity to noise, disorder, and ugliness in the city; a strong appreciation for what education could do to divert the young from begging; an Erasmian conviction of the value of lay piety and that 'Charity is certainly much more agreeable to God than fasts, prayers, abstinence or austerity of life'."<sup>14</sup> It is interesting that the people of Lyon were able to draw upon a sermon some 1,200 years old, and couched in the traditional terminology of loving and aiding the poor, in the campaign to eliminate death by starvation, the need for begging, and the presence of potential young hoodlums on the streets. It was unfortunate that, for all the assiduous activity, this goal remained unfulfilled.<sup>15</sup>

An examination of many secondary writings on the history of education in ancient and medieval times has yielded very little that will illuminate the development of anti-poverty education. This is understandable in societies where there was a great gulf between the rich and the poor, the noble and the lowly, the learned and the ignorant. One does not expect, as a rule, to find examples of education of serfs in a medieval West European manor. Nor can one anticipate the education of poor peasants in Eastern Europe when the upper and priestly classes revealed many who were illiterate and untutored. There were exceptions in the Middle Ages, however. The English charity schools of the fourteenth and later centuries, maintained by foundations which arranged for the singing of masses and for other religious services for the souls of the departed, admitted children of poor parents to the classes taught by the priests in their spare time without charge.<sup>16</sup>

It is perhaps fitting at this point to take note of a non-European culture, that of China. Unlike India, China never had a rigid caste system, although there were indications of differentiation among social classes, such as the nobility or Superior Men (scholars, officials) and the common, uneducated people. In spite of the fact that ancient China gave first priority to the education of the princes and the upper class, attention was also given to the educational needs of the underprivileged. The obligation upon the higher echelons of

the population to educate the lower is stressed in the "Book of History" (Shu Ching) and in the sayings of Mencius (c. 372 — c. 289). The "Book of Rituals" (Li Chi) states that, "if the Superior Man wishes to transform the people and perfect their social life, he must begin with education."<sup>17</sup> The phraseology, "transform the people" and "perfect their social life," according to Galt, "are among the phrases of the Classics most quoted in memorials and edicts on education throughout all the later dynasties. They represent a fundamental doctrine in the Chinese theory of education."<sup>18</sup>

A relation between the economic status of the common people and their education was pointed up by Mencius in his statement that "there is a way for humanity, and if the people, with plenty to eat and plenty to wear, merely live in creature comfort without education they are much like the birds and beasts."<sup>19</sup> In other words, to uplift the masses, it was not only important to feed and clothe them, but also to educate them so that they would contribute toward a stable society. The "Kuo Yü" (Discourses of the States), possibly written by Kuan Chung in the seventh century B.C., warns that if local public officials do not report the presence of "some talented ones with capacity for scholarship" among the common people and indicate that they are candidates for education, "this delinquency is a punishable offence."<sup>20</sup> Here we have a case of the obligation upon the authorities to identify the gifted children of the low economic level and to inform the imperial government so that suitable arrangements could be made to develop their talents. This requirement is repeated time and again in all later periods of Chinese history. This policy was well summed up by the statement of Confucius (c. 551—c. 479 B.C.): "In education there are no distinctions of class."<sup>21</sup> As Galt put it, ". . . educational theory and practice had a place for the talented student who, by study and exertion, might rise from lowly origins to high rank among scholars. To this extent China's educational theory has always been democratic and it is a point of excellence."<sup>22</sup> It is also pertinent to observe that, in the long history of selection by the examination system for the imperial Chinese civil service, poor youngsters with ability did not lack patrons to finance their studies and their upward climb.

Coming back to Europe, we find interest in educating the poor among some Renaissance scholars. It is strange the Humanism did not give birth to humanitarianism. Too many of the humanistic

scholars were concerned with the writings of ancient times and too few with the needs of the lower rungs of the economic ladder. One Renaissance educator with a social conscience was Vittorino da Feltré (1376-1446), who is generally identified not only as the leading schoolmaster of his era but also as one of the most successful pedagogues in the history of education. A renowned scholar in mathematics and Latin, Vittorino kept school at his home in Padua, where he charged high tuition rates for sons of the wealthy, but nothing for the poor who were sent to him on the personal recommendation of friends. His objective was "to equalise the treatment of the whole household, repressing indulgence on the one hand, and lifting the burden of poverty on the other, and thus to all alike *libris, domo, victu, vestituque optime consulebat*."<sup>23</sup> He apparently continued this custom at his school in Venice, where again parents offered "large fees to secure the admission of their sons" to his home.<sup>24</sup>

It was at Casa Giocosa, at the school set up on the estate of Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, that Vittorino achieved his lasting fame and influence, in his own time and in the history of education since. Once more, "Vittorino moreover, mindful of his own early struggles, and true to the scholar's instinct of the equality of genius, continued to receive free of all charges promising boys commended to him by trusted friends. These he treated absolutely on the same footing with the rest of the boys, and in some cases he undertook the entire cost of their maintenance, clothing, and books for ten years or more."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Vittorino ". . . provided an income for the parents [of the poor pupils] secured upon the State's treasury."<sup>26</sup> It is indeed remarkable that historical works in the field of education have infrequently picked up these points, not merely in praise of Vittorino, but also in recognition of practices that appear to be far in advance of contemporary thinking about the education of the poor.<sup>27</sup> Also noteworthy is the fact that Vittorino's Casa Giocosa equalized the education of rich and poor, male and female, and Italian and non-Italian.

The history of education during the Renaissance and later periods yields more examples of the thinking relative to poverty provisions made for the education of the impoverished and the orphaned. One thinks, in the first instance, of the treatise by Juan Lufs Vives, "De subventionem pauperum" (1526). This great educator, in dedicating his work to his adopted city, Bruges, exhorted the

municipal fathers " . . . to take care that each should help each, so that no one should be overwhelmed or oppressed by any loss falling on him unjustly, that the stronger should assist the weaker, so that the harmony of the association and union of citizens may increase in love, day by day, and may abide for ever."<sup>88</sup> Later in this treatise, Vives goes on to show that it is not enough to ameliorate the condition of the poor by the giving of alms or other measures, but society must rather attack the problem of poverty at its roots and, with all resources at its command, must remove its underlying causes.

The student of the subject of the historical and international status of anti-poverty education will want to examine other instances throughout the various periods of history. We can call attention to the Elizabethan Poor Laws and their impact in England and the New World; the work of August Hermann Francke and his Franckesche Stiftungen for the orphaned and poor children in Germany during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the achievements of Robert Raikes and the Sunday School movement in the late eighteenth century; the Charity Schools, the Pauper Schools, and the Ragged Schools; the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; Jean Frédéric Oberlin and his early childhood schools for the disadvantaged; the work and writings of Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth and Joseph Kay in the nineteenth century; the humanitarian movements in America in the nineteenth century; the impact of Jane Addams and Jacob A. Riis on the social welfare and education of the poor and the immigrants in the metropolitan centers of Chicago and New York around the turn of the century; the selfless devotion of Count Leo N. Tolstoi to the educational needs of the poor peasant children and the establishment of his school at Yasnaya Polyana; the settlement house work in the slums of Moscow at the beginning of the century under the leadership of Stanislav T. Shatskii; the remarkable achievement of Anton S. Makarenko with the re-education of the homeless and the delinquent children and young people (*bezprizornyy*) in the 1920's in Soviet Russia; and more and more.

The discerning reader will recognize that this paper is merely a sketch, an outline of a vast area hitherto not sufficiently studied in any systematic manner from the source materials. Much remains to be done — by the present writer, as well as by others. Let it be hoped that, once the past experience of many nations has been ex-



plored in greater breadth and depth, we will gain more ideas and more wisdom, not only in terms of knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but also in terms of suggestions to put into practice for the sake of humanity.

## REFERENCES

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3. Deuteronomy, 14:29.
4. Leviticus, 25, 35.
5. Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Zeraim, Hilchot Matnot Aniyim*, Chapter X, 7-14. Vol. V of edition published by El Ha-Mekorot, Jerusalem, 5716 (1956), pp. 273-274.
6. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Kiddushin*, 29a. Translation by the present writer.
7. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Baba Batra*, 21a.
8. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Ketuvot*, 103b. Writer's translation.
9. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Nedarim*, 81a.
10. Scott Buchanan, ed., *The Portable Plato*, New York: Viking, 1948, pp. 417-418.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 418.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 418-419.
13. Natalie Z. Davis, "Gregory Nazianzen in the Service of Humanist Social Reform," *Renaissance Quarterly*, XX, Winter, 1967, pp. 455-464.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 456. The quotation is from Vauzelles and the Erasmian reference is to the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 459.
16. Arthur F. Leach, "Charity Schools," in Paul Monroe, ed., *A Cyclopaedia of Education*, Vol. I, New York: Macmillan, 1911, p. 568. See also Arthur F. Leach, *English Schools at the Reformation* London: Constable, 1896 for a more detailed treatment of charity schools.
17. Quoted in Howard S. Galt. *A History of Chinese Educational Institutions: Vol. I, "To the End of the Five Dynasties (A.D. 960),"* London: Probsthain, 1951, p. 120.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 121.
20. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 123.
21. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 124.

22. *Ibid.*
23. William H. Woodward, *Vittorino da Feltre and Other Humanist Educators*, Cambridge: University Press, 1897, p. 19.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
26. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 31, from Bartholomaeus Platina, "Commentariolus Platinæ de vita Victorini Fedtrensensis," in Tommaso Agostino Vairani, *Cremonensium Monumenta Romae extantia* (Rome, 1778).
27. There may be some excuse that Woodward's work on Vittorino, long out of print, has been unavailable, but most larger, municipal and higher institutional libraries no doubt have had copies for some time. In 1963, there appeared a reprint in the valuable series, "Classics in Education," under the general editorship of Lawrence A. Cremin and published by Teachers College Press, New York, N.Y. The reprint edition is a facsimile, but it omits the frontispiece illustration of the likeness of Vittorino. However, it adds a much needed index, which, oddly it would seem for the 1960's, lacks the entry "poor," "poverty," or any reasonable synonym for lack of economic privilege. Also of interest is the fact that the author of the foreword to the reprint edition, Professor Edgar F. Rice, Jr., Department of History, Cornell University, makes no reference to Vittorino's pluralistic philosophy or to his educational activities in behalf of the poor.
28. Quoted in Foster Watson, ed., *Vives On Education*, Cambridge: University Press, 1913, pp. lxv-lxvi.