11 Problems of Credentialism

A characteristic contribution of educational credentialism is standardisation. Credentialism makes possible a standardised classification of the schools. It facilitates selection of students to advance up the educational ladder and eventually selection for employment. It gives the government and industry an idea of the qualities of their new recruits. Moreover, in the process of modernisation, it facilitates manpower forecasts and the calculation of the rates of return from human investment. It also provides a relatively stable means of assessing graduates in the context of rapid change. However, despite all these advantages, there are many questions to be asked.

A. HOW FAIR IS SELECTION BY CREDENTIALS?

The stress on credentialism has made selection the major objective of education. This is exemplified by the fact that in the three societies, there are some ‘squeeze points’ of selection. For example, in Hong Kong, the proportion of pupils who are able to obtain assisted senior secondary school places is decided before the pupils sit for the JSEA. Hence, the basis of selection does not depend upon the absolute marks a pupil obtains in the examination but his relative performance as compared to the other examination participants. Likewise in the HKCEE it is the relative standards that determine the grade of each subject a candidate has taken. As a result, when the schools and the universities consider offering a place to an applicant, it is the relative examination results rather than the absolute results that matter. In other words, it is how well one competes rather than how well one performs that determines one’s future. The more the applicants, the higher is the ‘cut-off’ point. This is exactly what happens in the admission process of the universities. Each year, the universities adjust the ‘cut-off’ points in their consideration of admission. So is the case in Singapore (Lim, 1974, p. 128; Seah, 1983, p. 39). In the case of Japan, taking into account the escalator system which admits students from those high schools which are related to the universities, the openings for other applicants are strictly limited.
If it is the relative standards rather than the absolute standards that determine selection, the basic principle of meritocracy is brought into question. When a student has performed well or is even above average in an examination but cannot be selected for further education or for certain jobs because of the limited places available, what will the *merit* he has gained mean to him? It can be said that what is meant by merit in practice refers to relative merit and there is actually no absolute merit *per se*, as merit becomes merit only by comparison. However, when a candidate who was not admitted in a particular year submits his application again in the next year and is eventually admitted, what sort of meritocracy is it? When obtaining certain grades in a certain examination in a certain year does not guarantee selection in that year, what will these grades mean to him? Is it luck, chance or fate rather than by merit *per se* that determines whether the candidate is chosen? When it is not *merit* that matters but competition or chance or fate, the meritocracy that these societies have boasted of is only a myth.

B. THE INFLATION IN CREDENTIALS

The more widely selection is based on educational credentials, the faster the rate of inflation in credentials. The reason is obvious. When schooling is significant for obtaining credentials, more people attend schools in order to obtain credentials. When credentials become a more important means of upward mobility, more people desire credentials and thus more people desire schooling. Furthermore, the more equal opportunity is adopted as an ideal in a society, the more will people press the government to expand educational provision, and school enrolments will expand. When more people can gain access to schooling and thus educational credentials, and when this growth is faster than that of job opportunities, inflation in credentials will take place. Hence the faster the educational system grows, the faster will educational credentials inflate (Dore, 1979, pp. 75–8).

There are some indications of credential inflation in Singapore. First, in a study of educational opportunity, it was found that most English–medium school leavers aspired to professional jobs but only a few people could actually obtain one. In 1966, 45 per cent of the English–medium secondary school leavers wished to obtain professional jobs, but only 26.88 per cent could succeed. On the other hand, only 9.7 per cent of the school leavers chose general office work but more than 49.5 ended up into this field (Yip, 1967, p. 48). Second,