

# Significant Books

Column Editor: J. Cecil Parker

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## **Slums and Suburbs: A Commentary on Schools in Metropolitan Areas.**

**James Bryant Conant.** *New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1946. 150 p. \$3.95. (Paperback—\$1.95.)*

Two refreshing results follow from the investigation of a problem by someone who is not ordinarily or primarily engaged in its study. First, many aspects and conditions are pointed up which have become so familiar to practitioners in the field that they fail to remark them. Second, many stimulating questions are asked and inventive solutions offered for problems to which the professionals may have been bringing substantially repetitive solutions rather than innovations. When the investigator is someone with imagination, an open mind and a frank response both to his own surprise and to the taken-for-granted aspects of the situation, the result is a profitable one.

Such is the case with the most recent publication by James B. Conant and his associates in their continuing studies of American education. In this brief volume, Dr. Conant gives primary attention to "slum schools"—now more often euphemistically referred to as "culturally deprived or disadvantaged"—and to suburban schools. Dr. Conant is quick to state that conditions in these dramatically contrasting areas of large urban centers require school programs which differ in many ways from his earlier recommenda-

tions regarding the comprehensive high school.

One is impressed by the fact that Dr. Conant is shocked by what he found. The extreme conditions of life in the slum areas and the special difficulties of the "Negro slums" produced by a combination of poor employment possibilities, unstable families, and transiency, have led him to remind us that "schools must differ in order to serve specific communities." This recommendation, which underpins all the discussions in the book, is in sharp contrast to the more usual "egalitarian" approach of many school personnel, to say nothing of citizens, school boards, and legislature. Because, as Dr. Conant points out, "Prestige gets mixed up with academic programs," many school systems have until lately refused to face the implications of diversifying schooling for children who grow up in different families and different social groups, and who face differing vocational choices and opportunities for advanced study.

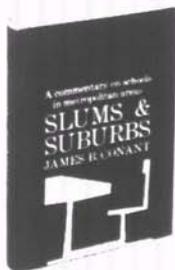
Dr. Conant reminds us of many of the most serious problems faced by teachers, but sometimes forgotten even by professional educators. In slum schools: many, many children of low reading ability, low aspiration to do well in school, lack of family support, lack of opportunity for employment for early school leavers, especially Negro youth (and here the

contrast between an early leaver who can move directly into a job and one who joins a large number of others who have not and cannot find work points up a serious social problem). In suburban schools: unrealistic parental ambitions, lack of elective opportunities, occasional failures to take that pattern of courses necessary for adequate college success.

He points up many other problems which widely characterize education: inadequate staff-pupil ratios—with the suburban schools often having more than half again as many staff for their students; the enormous size and complexity of urban school systems; failure to decentralize administrative controls; inadequate individual programming, with tracking often an inadequate substitute; the wide variation of expectations and standards of performance in colleges and universities, coupled with a “conspiracy of silence” regarding the “hierarchy of quality which exists.”

What are some of the recommendations? Gear education opportunity to subsequent employment. Have guidance personnel supervise youth from the date of their school leaving until age 21. Reappraise vocational education. Require an achievement examination for admission to graduate schools, since it is only at this level that a national standard could and should be imposed on achievement, and doing so will affect college programs and hence indirectly high school programs. Give increased attention to the pattern of high school curricula, recognizing that there is no one college preparatory program, but that all who seek advanced level academic work (the top 15-20 percent nationally is the group suggested) should during high school have the necessary

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action”



## SLUMS AND SUBURBS: A Commentary on Schools in Metropolitan Areas

By DR. JAMES B. CONANT

*The New York Times'* Editorial page said on October 17, 1961: “A call for action ‘before it is too late’ has alarming implications when it comes from a man who, in his previous reports on the schools, cautioned so strongly against extreme measures. These warnings must not be treated lightly. Dr. Conant’s conscientious, selfless efforts deserve the nation’s gratitude. He has served in positions of greater glamour, both at home and abroad; but he may well be doing his greatest service with this straight-forward report on the state of the public schools.”

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work in mathematics, foreign languages, science and English, to permit them in college to go on rather than to be undertaking remedial work.

Dr. Conant repeatedly reminds us, whether in his descriptions of effective remedial programs now in use in slum schools or in his recommendations for increased attention to academic preparation of college bound youth from suburban schools, that one cannot divorce the school from community and family backgrounds. He is also reminding us, both critics and defenders of public education, that action, not argument, is called for.

The reader notes with some regret that there is little mention of action programs which have been carried on. In such a short book there must be omissions; nothing is said of the intergroup and human relations programs in the 1950's, 1940's and even earlier, which frequently addressed themselves

to the knotty issues surrounding the education of lower class children, and out of which developed both some tools and increased understanding of the problem.

It is also a source of concern that action may be instituted with too little attention to the educational rationale of various approaches and to the experience of previous programs. Such current projects as the Higher Horizons program of New York City, remedial reading programs in many cities such as the Banerker program in St. Louis, and the Ford Foundation's Grey Areas project are mentioned. However, the educational assumptions upon which such projects rest are not always made explicit.

It is well to be reminded, by someone of Dr. Conant's stature, of the scope and seriousness of the educational task in slums and of the increasing pressures on the suburban school. His descriptions

and his proposals warrant serious consideration. It must be remembered, however, that with professional educators rest the additional responsibilities of testing proposals, of examining the educational consequences of particular programs, of studying the adequacy of the proposals made in this book and of perhaps inventing alternate ones.

We need carefully planned investigations of such questions as the following: To what extent is the most effective approach that of changing attitude and motivation? This is the premise of the Higher Horizons program and of many concerned with locating able learners in slum schools. But what of the less able? Should programs be instituted, as most now are, *after* failure has occurred? The upper grade and junior high programs must focus on undoing and on remediation.

Could failure be avoided or mini-

mized by drastic changes in curriculum, and, if so, what kind and at what level? First grade? Kindergarten? Or even earlier—age 4 perhaps? Are there experiences that could be built into the lives of slum children which could enable them to succeed even within the present pattern of schools? Are there ways of effectively enlisting home support and understanding, and are the ways now being tried the best? What changes in textbook content, in range of course offerings in secondary school, and in instructional procedures would make sense for children growing up in the neighborhoods described in the sections on slums?

When one considers suburban schools, should not the community setting for such children receive scrutiny equal to that given the slum school? Beyond the effect of unrealistic parental expectation, what other psychological hazards and

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supports exist for the suburban child? What does he see as underlying the demand for high grades and entry into a good college and how does he feel about himself in this picture and in the larger picture of society? Are more academic subjects the best way to help him, or does this able learner need time to sit back and wonder, as Bruno Bettelheim suggested a couple of years ago—even to wonder why the teacher does what he does? The “more of the same” solution is always vulnerable to criticism until we have proof that it, rather than more of something else, even something non-academic, does indeed lead toward more competent, mature adulthood. Is advanced placement the best solution to saving a year for the child bent on a professional career, or is that year best saved by more rapid movement through an ungraded primary or by acceleration

in the junior high school where many children are found making haste too slowly?

To raise such questions is to suggest that Dr. Conant and his associates have initiated an inquiry which others, particularly those professionally involved with schools and with teacher preparation, should carry on. If they can do so with equal frankness, willingness to admit problems and unwillingness to flinch from emotionally charged issues, perhaps they can not only test and eventually implement the best suggestions of this book, but also come up with some additional imaginative solutions to the special problems of improving education in slum and suburb.

—Reviewed by ELIZABETH H. BRADY,  
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