

FEDERAL PARTICIPATION AND ITS RESULTS

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THE massive commitment of the federal government in support of a broad range of programs designed to improve the quality of education in this country must rank as one of the most significant developments of our time. Although federal support of public education beginning in 1787 has had a long history, nothing remotely compares with the scope of federal support embodied in the National Defense Education Acts, programs for improving the education of the mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, culturally disadvantaged, and juvenile delinquent, the building, equipping, and staffing of libraries, and the tremendous resources which are being made available to states and local schools under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

Hopefully, we stand on the threshold of a new era as we gaze upon a promised land of greater educational opportunity for all of our children and youth. Whether the hopes and expectations of this new era are fulfilled will depend upon the initiative and wisdom of educators, the understanding and support of the public, the leadership of school administrators, boards of education, and professional organizations, and the continuing support of the federal government itself. Few of us need be reminded that adequate financial resources will not by themselves result in the improvement of education. As President Johnson stated at the NEA convention in New York in July 1965, "Nothing is more dangerous than the easy assumption that simply by putting more money into schools we will emerge with an educated, trained, and enlightened Nation."

We educators are on the spot. From now on it will be more difficult to blame the limited gains of an educational half-loaf on the lack of funds. Do we have the vision, commitment, knowledge and professional skills to bring into fruition a fuller realization of the latent capacities for learning of all of our citizens?

Audacious, indeed, would be the person who could claim to provide definitive answers to the question: What are the results of current federal participation in education? The scope and complexity of older programs as well as newer ones are so vast that it is difficult to obtain a representative picture of their total impact

on American education in general. We will comment briefly on some of the evidence that is available from studies of (a) Project Head Start, (b) mental health programs, and (c) Cooperative Research projects.

Project Head Start

Few programs have captured the interest and support of all segments of American life as has Project Head Start. Verbal reports of summer Head Start experiences by directors, teachers, parents and others suggest that the program has been eminently successful. Children who were at first quiet, shy and withdrawn quickly opened up, smiled, laughed and became freer in interactions with adults and other children. Generous staffing of Head Start classes with one teacher to fifteen children plus aides and volunteers permitted a low adult-pupil ratio, and this is given credit for much of the initial success of the program.

Teachers who taught Head Start children in first grade during 1965-66 vary considerably in their evaluations of the program. Many felt that children who had attended Head Start programs did adjust more quickly and easily to first grade. Head Start children are reported to have made better progress in learning to read in first grade than did comparable previous first graders while others made little progress in first grade in spite of Head Start experience.

A research reported by Eisenberg (3) showed that children enrolled in Head Start in Baltimore in 1965 made substantial progress on attributes related to subsequent school success. Raw scores on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test of a control group whose families had not elected to register their children in Head Start did not differ significantly from those of Head Start children prior to their summer's experience. Significant gains were registered by Head Start children at the end of the summer program, and these children scored further significant gains upon entering first grade. Although the greatest gains were scored by children with the lowest initial scores, there was a consistent trend toward higher scores for all quartiles.

Project Head Start appears to have contributed to the initial adjustment and achievement in first grade of a large proportion of the children enrolled in this program. An eight-week summer experience, however, cannot be expected to overcome the limited cultural and language experiences of several years. Few schools report continued involvement of parents or volunteers as classroom aides where children require an unusual amount of individual attention. In a few schools the enthusiasm and interest in Head Start has resulted in the school and community taking a fresh look at curriculum design and teaching. Others, however, have responded more cautiously in seeking proof that the innovations are worth the cost of additional facilities and personnel that are required (4).

Mental Health and Cooperative Research

A second way in which the federal government has fostered the learning and adjustment of children and youth has been through support of programs which seek to improve their mental health. Only a few of the several hundred mental

health projects can be mentioned here. Especially promising is the use of the nursery school as a treatment resource for emotionally disturbed preschoolers (1).

Lois Barelay Murphy of the Menninger Foundation is using longitudinal data on a group of 128 normal children to develop teachable techniques for enhancing children's "coping" mechanisms for handling stress and preventing emotional disorders. Numerous projects are helping troubled adolescents, unwed pregnant adolescent girls, and school dropouts. At one university a program begun early in the college career, preferably in the freshman year, seeks to identify students with problems which would interfere with academic progress (2).

A third type of effort of the federal government to improve education has been the support over more than ten years of several thousand Cooperative Research projects by the U.S. Office of Education. This program has encouraged the development of new knowledge about major educational problems, new applications for existing knowledge, and has stimulated increased educational research at all levels. One notable example of the effects of Cooperative Research is the impetus given to the study of teacher role and behavior in the researches of Hughes, Flanders, B. O. Smith, Travers, Bellaek and others.

Criteria for Assessment

It appears likely that federal programs in support of education will grow in the years ahead. In view of the potential impact of this assistance on the nation's children and youth, the need for careful assessment is clearly indicated. The following are some of the criteria which may be useful in assessing the impact of these programs on education.

1. What happens to the people whom the program is intended to serve is of first importance.

How infrequently we hear discussed the tangible results of a given program on children's ability to read, their cognitive development, or their mental health. Eavesdropping on the lunchroom conversation of school administrators or university faculty club members might give one the distinct impression that success is measured not in what happens to students, but in the size and number of the grants that are received.

2. There is need for identifying and agreeing on priorities in this vast effort for improving education.

It may be that further research and development, the building up of depleted reservoirs of trained personnel and modernization of school organization and facilities are needed before major educational innovations can be implemented. The scramble for bank credit is matched only by the scramble for trained personnel to staff the projects and programs created by federal funds.

3. There is a need for re-thinking and clarifying educational purposes and rationale of proposed and existing programs.

Essential in this clarification are the contributions of philosophy, the identifi-

cation of values and guiding principles, and the knowledge of the growth, development, learning and adjustment of children and youth. One would hope that the purposes and rationales of individual projects might be sufficiently attuned so that their relationship to the national effort would be clearly evident.

4. New programs call for bold new assessment procedures and research designs.

Can we, for example, develop and standardize reliable and objective observational procedures as an alternative to relying so heavily on paper and pencil instruments? Achievement outcomes are important, but focus on the individual suggests that changes in physical health and coordination and in personal and social development should also be assessed.

5. Finally, there is a need for more adequate means of reporting and disseminating the findings of researches and programs related to education.

The current lag of educational practice is due in part to the fact that research information has not reached those who might be expected to use it. So voluminous is the outpouring of results of research studies that some type of computerized system of information storage and retrieval available to all who might use it is urgently needed.

The promise of the federal government for improving American education is great, yet so new and vast are many of the programs that only a limited picture of their impact is presently available. Perhaps the most important outcome, however, is the greater vision these efforts are giving educators and lay leaders of the vast potential of education for developing our human resources beyond anything we can now imagine.

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