

● Research in Review

COLUMN EDITOR: JAMES RATHS

EQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

ILENE ALBERT

PAMELA SHELDON

EQUALITY of educational opportunity comes when all students are offered the opportunity to study, to engage in discussions and to exchange views with other students of similar age and qualifications. To separate students solely because of their race "... generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone."¹ Thus Chief Justice Earl Warren, delivering the opinion of the Court in the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, concluded that "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The Court ruled that segregated schools deprive the students of the equal protection under the law as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

Ten years after this Supreme Court decision, with the status of desegregation for the most part unchanged, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. A key provision of this Act (Section 402) directed the U.S. Office of Education to conduct a survey concerning the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individ-

uals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public educational institutions at all levels of the United States.² The findings of this survey serve to support the conclusion arrived at by the Warren Court in 1954.

The survey addressed itself to four major questions in its attempt to assess the problem of the availability of equal educational opportunities. The first was the extent to which racial and ethnic groups are segregated from one another in the public schools. The second question was whether the schools offer equal educational opportunities in terms of a number of criteria which are regarded by the U. S. Office of Education as good indicators of educational quality.

A few of the criteria studied were the number of laboratories, textbooks, libraries and the like, the curriculum offered, and academic practices such as the administration of achievement and aptitude tests and "tracking" by pre-

² The summary report made from the findings of this survey is entitled *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (OE-38000). It is available from the U. S. Government Printing Office for 30¢. A more comprehensive report consisting of eight sections is also available for \$4.25.

¹ Supreme Court Decision. *Brown vs. Board of Education*, May 17, 1954.

sumed ability. Other less tangible criteria studied were the characteristics of teachers and of the student bodies. A third major question considered in the study was how much the students learn, as measured by their performance on standard achievement tests. Finally, the survey attempted to discern possible relations between students' achievement, on the one hand, and the kinds of schools they attend on the other.

Findings

Six racial and ethnic groups were considered in the survey: Negroes, American Indians, Oriental Americans, Puerto Ricans living in the continental U. S., Mexican Americans, and whites other than Mexican Americans or Puerto Ricans, referred to in the survey as "majority" or "white." Regional differences among these groups were also analyzed.

A reliable sample of 900,000 students was drawn by selecting the primary sampling units, county systems, from predetermined areas reflecting a representative distribution of the characteristics to be studied—metropolitan/non-metropolitan, majority/minority, geographic location.

Tests and questionnaires were administered in the counties to measure the students' achievement in grades 1, 3, 6, 9, 12, 13, 16, their family environment and attitudes toward education, and the school facilities available to them. Where possible, the information received was checked for accuracy. Steps were taken to insure accurate responses from school officials by assurance that the information they provided would be confidential.

Analysis of the data collected reveals several major findings:

1. The great majority of American children attend schools that are largely segregated. In light of the Supreme Court ruling that separate schools for Negro and white children are inherently unequal, American education remains largely unequal in most regions of the country.

2. Nationally, Negro students have less access to the educational facilities that seem most related to academic achievement—e.g., science laboratories, books, and libraries—than do white students. While variations in such facilities and the curricula of the schools account for relatively little variation in pupil achievement insofar as this is measured by standard tests, the achievement of minority pupils was shown to depend more on these facilities than does the achievement of other pupils.

3. The average minority pupil—excluding Oriental Americans—scores distinctly lower on standard achievement tests than the average white pupil. Minorities that begin with an educational deficiency—as tested in the first grade—continue to exhibit this deficiency throughout the 12 grades. Therefore, whatever may be the non-school factors that put the minority pupil at a disadvantage when he enters the first grade, the schools apparently do not overcome the initial deficiency.

4. The educational background and aspirations of the student body bear the most influence on pupil achievement. There is higher achievement of all racial and ethnic groups in schools with greater proportions of white students because better educational background and as-

pirations for higher education are more prevalent, on the average, among white students. Moreover, given a student with a strong educational background, his achievement will be little affected by his placement in a school where the student body in general has backgrounds different from his.

Questions

This survey elicits mixed reactions. First, it must be said that any research done in this area is beneficial, for the question of equal opportunity is one which has aroused considerable debate based on assertions which are valueless without substantiation. In addition, the report reveals the shocking fact that practically no progress has been made toward school integration and equal opportunity in the 12 years since the Supreme Court made its decision.

Nevertheless, there is also a certain reservation in acclaiming the study due to major weaknesses in three areas—measurement, selection, and qualification. To criticize the survey's methods in these areas is not to state that they are necessarily unreliable, but merely that sufficient evidence is not provided to give confidence in their reliability.

In terms of measurement, it is questionable whether the survey has found accurate measures for certain intangibles. For example, does a family's having an encyclopedia in the home really indicate that it is a family supportive of education and therefore able to increase the desire for achievement on the part of the student?

Because Negroes in predominately white schools did better than Negroes in predominately Negro schools, it was intimated that the school population

- A sound assessment of skills, knowledge, and understanding of modern mathematics . . .

Stanford Achievement Tests

MODERN MATHEMATICS CONCEPTS TESTS

Intermediate II level: Grades 5-6/Advanced level: Grades 7-9

The *Modern Mathematics Concepts Tests*, a part of the *Stanford Achievement Test* series, provides a valid means of measuring the reliability and usefulness of modern mathematics programs and their objectives.

The tests were constructed after a thorough analysis of the textbooks and syllabi of programs now in use throughout the country. The test items were chosen to evaluate concepts essential to the understanding and application of modern mathematics.

Instructors, administrators, and guidance counselors will find the *Modern Mathematics Concepts Tests* beneficial for the purposes of curriculum improvement, pupil guidance and placement, and evaluation of individual and group progress. When used with the Intermediate II or Advanced Battery of *Stanford Achievement Test*, the tests provide a basis of comparison with performance in other curriculum areas. When used singly, they reflect an individual pupil's progress over a period of years.

For further information about the *Modern Mathematics Concepts Tests*, write to:



HARCOURT, BRACE & WORLD, INC. Test Department

757 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017 • Chicago • San Francisco • Atlanta • Dallas

explains the observed differences. Yet is the comparison completely fair? What kind of Negro student attends a school of a predominately white student body? Perhaps he represents a different population than the Negro in an all-Negro school due to differences in achievement motivation of his parents not assessed only by the encyclopedia variable mentioned above.

Moreover, certain assertions of the study are made in statements which seem to require greater qualification. For example, one finding noted in the summary states that the achievement of a pupil from a background supportive of education will not be affected by his being placed in a school where most students do not have such background. This rather strong statement has important implications for the attack on the problem of inequality in light of the debate which has been raised by such attempted solutions as bussing and re-districting. However, statistical support of this finding in the comprehensive report is vague, as is any discussion of the actual conditions under which it is held to be true.

A final criticism is directed not at the methods of the study but at what might have been the philosophy behind it. The dimensions of this research are of tremendous magnitude. In addition to the vast numbers of students and schools involved as indicators of the effort, it has been reported that the cost of this study has approached 1.5 million dollars. While some of the findings of this particular study are gratifying for those

of us who feel strongly about the evils of segregation, there is a somber note that needs to be added. Rather than solely being an objective study of the problem, the U. S. Office of Education's research seems to be a vehicle for the support of political policy, namely desegregation.

A vast study such as this could be sponsored only by the government and while a number of valuable facts were uncovered, the conclusions drawn from these facts were not in all cases warranted by the data. How many low order relations were discovered and not reported? How many ways were the data manipulated until "desirable" findings were obtained? How much of the statistical data reported in the body is ignored in the discussion? We feel that because the means for discovering the facts were available only to the government, then the government incurred a particular obligation to handle the facts in a more responsible manner. It seems to have failed in this case.

All of the above is not meant to suggest that the findings of the study are in error, but because this is such an important area of study, it is hoped that further examination will lend more objective support to the ideas developed. It is also hoped that further progress will be made toward establishing equal educational opportunity.

—ILENE ALBERT and PAMELA SHELDON, *Graduate Assistants, Bureau of Educational Research and Field Services, College of Education, University of Maryland, College Park.*

Copyright © 1966 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.