

Inequality Misconstrued?

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STAMPED with the imprimatur of Harvard University and the Carnegie Corporation (which provided a half million dollars to support the study), the book, *Inequality*, by Christopher Jencks and his associates, has provoked enormous controversy among academicians with its finding that equalizing educational opportunity will have no appreciable effect on equalizing income in our society.¹ On the day following a news conference arranged for Mr. Jencks by his publisher last fall at New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, a front-page story in *The New York Times* was captioned, "Harvard Study Disputes Impact of Schooling on Future Income."² The Jencks report and its attendant publicity have provided educational conservatives with considerable support for their position that the improvement of educational opportunity is a fruitless sociopolitical policy.

No less an authority than Arthur L. Stinchcombe, chairman of the department of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, has declared that the Jencks assessment of the evidence "agrees almost exactly with my own" and that "the book represents the best we know about the causes

of individual success and about how far inequality in the causes accounts for inequality of success."³ Yet an examination of the study, along with data from recently released census reports, gives cause for questioning the tenability of the conclusions reached by the Jencks study. A significant weakness of the Jencks study is the failure to account for age differences in education and income. A recent census report reveals that persons between the ages of 20 and 29 have completed an average of almost 13 years (median) of schooling, whereas those between 55 and 64 years of age have only 11.3 median years of schooling.⁴

Thus, although the younger age groups in our society have attained the most years of schooling, one could not reasonably expect that this age group would have the highest average incomes. Yet, by ignoring the age variable, the Jencks study confounds the expected relationship between education and income and proceeds to the conclusion that

³ Arthur L. Stinchcombe. "The Social Determinants of Success." *Science* 178: 604; November 10, 1972.

⁴ Bureau of the Census. *Population Characteristics—Educational Attainment: March 1972*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, November 1972. p. 13.

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¹ Christopher Jencks et al. *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1972.

² *The New York Times*, September 8, 1972. p. 1.

Age of Family Head	Mean	Money Income	
		Percent Distribution	
		\$15,000- 24,999	\$25,000- 49,999
Head under 25 years	\$ 7,354	2.9	0.2
Head 25 to 44 years	11,434	18.5	3.3
Head 45 to 64 years	12,920	25.8	6.4

Source: Compiled from: Bureau of the Census. *Consumer Income—Income in 1970 of Families and Persons in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, October 4, 1971. p. 47.

Figure 1. Income of Family Heads by Age Groups, 1970

schooling accounts for little variation in income.

As shown in the census data in Figure 1, family heads under 25 years of age have a mean annual income of only \$7,354, as compared with \$12,920 for those in the 45 to 64 year age group. It is also seen that less than 3 percent of family heads under 25 years of age are earning between \$15,000 and \$25,000, whereas one out of every four family heads in the 45 to 64 year age group has an income in this range. The percentage differences by age are even more pronounced in higher income ranges.

Despite the age variable, recent census data actually show a clearly positive relationship between education and income. For example, employed males who are earning under \$6,000 do not, on the average, have a high school education, whereas those who are earning \$15,000 and over have completed 3.2 median years of college.⁵ Although Jencks concedes that college graduates earn at least twice as much income as those who do not attend high school, he claims that 40 percent of the income difference is attributable to factors other than schooling,⁶ such as "varieties of luck."⁷ He even concedes that for males from upper-middle class families, after controlling for aptitude (as measured by standardized tests), extra schooling produces a higher rate of income amounting to some 24 to 29 percent.⁸ Of course, one can question the validity of con-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁶ Jencks, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

trolling for aptitude by means of standardized tests, inasmuch as such tests are of tenuous validity in predicting academic achievement and in bearing on actual job competence. But even allowing for Jencks' severe manipulations in the treatment of the data, his own statistics actually reveal a not insignificant relationship between schooling and income.

Did Jencks misconstrue his own data? Certainly a study revealing a significantly positive relationship between education and income would not have been very newsworthy, since the general public has believed that such a relationship is obvious. As a newsmen turned social scientist, Jencks is not likely to be unmindful of the advantages of making one's publications newsworthy. Thus it is doubtful that Jencks' "luck" syndrome was a significant factor in his success in gaining widespread publicity for his study.

A Range of Life Choices

The Jencks study also makes no attempt to examine the noncognitive effects of schooling, such as effects on attitudes, aspirations, and values. And the study glosses over the fact that college graduates who have identical years of schooling can be expected to differ widely in income according to their occupation. Compare, for example, the incomes of college graduates who choose careers in business, law, or professional basketball against those in teaching, social work, journalism, or the ministry. Consequently, furthering the education of a given population cannot be construed as the path toward *equalizing* income, but rather providing the members of that population with life choices that otherwise might not be open to them, not to mention the other satisfactions which derive from having such choices.

Less than two years prior to the publication of the Jencks report, Jencks himself, as president of the Harvard Center for the Study of Public Policy, endorsed education vouchers on the grounds that they would provide the disadvantaged with quality education and thereby serve to close the competency gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged in our society:

First it is important to decide whether "improving the education of the disadvantaged" means improvement relative to the education offered advantaged children today. We believe that, at least in education, closing the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged is of paramount importance. This conviction is central to our proposals for regulating the educational marketplace. . . .

Man is indeed a social creature. His capacity to do most of the things he cares about depends on his relationship to his fellow men. If he is less competent than they, he will find himself frustrated at every turn. If he is more competent than they, he will be in a good position to get what he wants from life.⁹

The education voucher report went on to state that "America must reallocate educational resources so as to expose 'difficult' children to their full share of the bright, talented, sensitive teachers" and that "America must alter enrollment patterns so that disadvantaged children have more advantaged classmates . . . (since) a student's classmates are probably his most important single 'resource' even though they do not appear in most calculations of per-pupil expenditure."¹⁰

⁹ Center for the Study of Public Policy, *Education Vouchers*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: the Center, December 1970. pp. 8-9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Now Jencks tells us that schooling is not a significant factor in improving one's place in society. Of course, Jencks is entitled to change his views in the light of new evidence. But, oddly, when confronted with the findings of the latest census study, as reported in an interview in *The New York Times*, Jencks conceded that "The association between schooling and income is there. What remains a mystery is why."¹¹

Perhaps the real mystery is why Jencks concluded otherwise in his highly publicized report. Also a mystery is why so many educators have accepted his findings as valid. In these days when the romantic dogmatists are seeking to "deschool" society, misdirected and misconstrued studies must not be allowed to influence educational policy.

Although academicians and conservative politicians may take Jencks seriously, it is doubtful that the general public would be influenced by the Jencks study to the extent of lowering their expectations of schooling for their own children. The American people have great faith in education not merely because they believe it is associated with pecuniary gain, but because they are convinced that it provides the rising generation of a free society with greater choice and control over their own destiny. □

¹¹ *The New York Times*, December 8, 1972. p. 53.

Educational Leadership Announces Themes for 1973-74

Manuscripts relevant to the proposed themes for the 1973-74 issues of *Educational Leadership* are now being solicited. Topics, and deadlines for receipt of manuscripts for examination, are the following:

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Length of manuscripts should be approximately 1400 words (about five pages), typed double-spaced. General style should conform to that of the journal. Photographs and other illustrative materials are requested.

Manuscripts should be submitted in duplicate and must be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope for return of unused manuscripts. Decisions on materials will be made as promptly as possible.

Materials should be addressed to: Robert R. Leeper, Editor, *Educational Leadership*, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

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