

## Do Desegregation + Competency Testing = Equity + Quality ?

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*Testing students for minimum competency is unfair if they have not had equitable opportunities to learn.*

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Equity and quality are important values. Schools in the United States are expected to reflect them both, although sometimes one receives more attention than the other. For example, Afro-American and Hispanic groups have a persistent history of underachievement in schools. One response to the problem—desegregation—is concerned primarily with equity, while another—minimum competency testing—is a demand for quality.

These responses also represent two ways to measure equal educational opportunity—input and output. Measures of student input include equality of facilities, materials, teachers, and programs. Racial desegregation of public schools was undertaken to assure that students would have equal access to educational inputs.

Measures of student output, on the other hand, are concerned with the results of schooling: what students learn and what they are thereby “qualified” to do with their lives. Minimum competency testing is clearly an example of this approach.

In initial efforts to assure equality, courts held that state action allowing “racial isolation”—indeed, the mere existence of segregated public schools—denied minority children equal protection of the law as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. Advocates of integration predicted that it would bring favorable outcomes, including increased academic and social competence for minority children.

In the more than two decades in which desegregation has been the law of the land, extensive data have been collected about its sociopsychological and educational effects. But the results are, at best, equivocal (for a review, see St. John, 1975). Research has not produced firm evidence to support some of the optimistic expectations. However, neither has research been able to account for how other factors, such as white flight, may be contributing to the disappointing results. Moreover, global assessments overlook what goes on in classrooms, where educational outcomes are actually produced.

It is widely alleged that resegregation often

occurs in integrated schools and classrooms. My own observations confirm that within schools and school districts that are "desegregated" according to enrollment statistics, there are classrooms with segregation patterns reminiscent of pre-integration. Even within fully "integrated" classrooms, reading or other skill groups stratified by achievement levels may result in considerable racial segregation, with many minority students often clustered in the lower level groups.

It is hard to know how to respond to this problem of equity, because teachers must attend to individual differences. Equal opportunity does not imply sameness. Nevertheless, information about teacher behavior, teacher attitudes, and teacher expectations suggests that the quality of instruction and feedback differs for advantaged, disadvantaged, black, and white pupils (Leacock, 1969; Washington, 1978; Brophy and Good, 1974; Maehr and Rubovits, 1973). It seems that desegregation has not been fully achieved and that minority children are not receiving equitable access to the human and curricular resources that integrated education should provide.

### Conflict Over Competencies

In recent years, the search for equity has been refocused to a search for quality education. Members of the general public, disturbed by reports of dropping test scores and illiterate graduates, support legislation requiring that students pass competency tests in order to get a diploma. Supporters of testing are concerned not so much with the quality of input as with quality of output.

Improving achievement is a worthy goal, and consistent with the search for equity. However, critical questions have been raised about the impact of competency testing on minority children (McClung, 1977). It is well known that test scores of minority students as a group are below those of white students as a group. Testing students who are currently in high school—students for whom questions of equity have not yet been resolved—may be viewed as insidious, *post facto* discrimination, reminiscent of "blaming the victim" (Ryan, 1971).

### Comprehensive Effort Needed

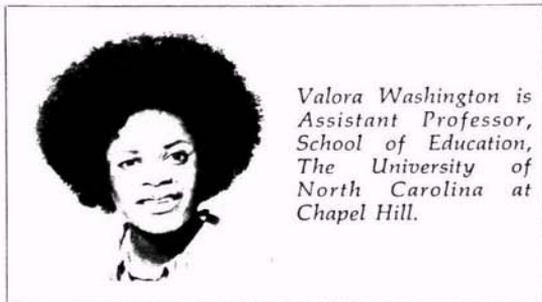
While concerns for student input and student output are interrelated, emphasis on student

output rightly asserts that pupil outcomes are the real test of the educational system. Equalization of input factors is essential to eliminate discriminatory, unicultural practices, but it is not sufficient. Schools may be lawfully and statistically desegregated, yet may limit opportunities of students by treating them inequitably or by failing to provide necessary supportive services.

Measures of output are even more inadequate if used only to penalize students whose achievement is unsatisfactory. Neither desegregation nor testing programs are sufficient to guarantee equal opportunity. A comprehensive effort, including pre- and in-service teacher training, multicultural curriculum, and parent involvement will be required if both equity and quality are to be achieved in public education.

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