Is There Equity in Educational Reform?

Early evidence indicates that, contrary to what many educators fear, current efforts to raise standards are having a positive effect on at-risk students.

A number of thoughtful scholars believe that the reform movement of the 1980s has ignored the needs of minority and disadvantaged students. They fear it will, therefore, exacerbate differences between advantaged and disadvantaged students; legitimize school structures and practices that harm low-functioning students, such as tracking; and compel at-risk students to drop out of school at accelerating rates.

I contend, on the contrary, that the reforms may indeed have a positive influence in promoting educational equity. First, the integrated approach to serving low-SES students that is embedded in current reform initiatives augurs well for increased equity. Trying to improve equity by superimposing discrete programs onto schools has not been a particularly successful strategy in the past. Current reform initiatives—which are designed for all students, align needed special services with core curriculum and instructional activities, and aim to create schools that function as "organic wholes"—offer more promise than did our previous efforts to promote equity.

Second, the basic themes of the current movement also bode well for improved equity. One such theme, "the emergence of concerns for educational productivity" [outcome focus] (Boyd and Hartman in press), has for the first time prevented the inequitable achievement gains of at-risk students from being explained away. This concern for productivity offers as much promise as anything to date to ensure continued efforts to increase equity. Another theme, "tightening organizational linkages," (e.g., defining goals, raising standards, and so forth) emphasizes what we have known for some time: loosely coupled educational systems put at-risk children at a disadvantage. As linkages are tightened, it becomes increasingly difficult to hide or to...
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minority students at a faster rate than for white students (BEPC 1988, Guthrie and Kirst 1988). For example, the most recent (1986) National Assessment of Educational Progress mathematics data reveal that not only have black and Hispanic students made steady gains in achievement at all grade levels, but that their progress has been greater and more consistent than the gains of white students (Education Week 1988b, p. 29).

The belief that reform in the 1980s has neglected equity issues in its drive for excellence represents a profound misunderstanding of the effects of major elements of the reform. Two facts are emerging about these effects. First, the requirements of minority and special-needs students have not been overlooked in efforts to reform schooling (Guthrie and Kirst 1988, p. 140). What's more important and hopeful, the positive effects of reform have actually been flowing disproportionately to disadvantaged students.

References


Education Week. (June 8, 1988a), p. 12.

Education Week. (June 15, 1988b), p. 29.


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