

Letters

Problems with "Choice"

Ron Brandt's "Conversation with Seymour Fliegel" (December 1990/January 1991, p. 20) raised my indignation. It promotes the promise that a choice plan is an answer to our educational problems while we are not sure of the educational questions.

Brandt asked, "How do the schools in District Four actually differ from one another?" as if being different is enough to improve schools. One reply is that these schools vary very little from each other. With the exception of the student body size and the Central Park Schools, the schools even resemble the ones of decades ago. There has been little formal conversation initiated by the district office, let alone formal research. If there is any research, it has not been shared with the schools' faculties.

When an alternative school is put into the same building with an existing school, the antagonism and bitterness that usually arise, and which sometimes still exist, are glossed over. This was true in 1974 and is still true in 1991. There is resentment over real and imagined hurts. "They are taking my room away" or "They're getting more of the supplies" or "They're getting the better kids."

The claim that quality of an instructional program is improved by competition among alternative schools is an illusion. Why would one staff want to compete with another staff? What is their incentive? The administrations and faculties of schools, even within the same building, seldom have the time, energy, or inclination to cooperate or compete.

Finally, I agree with Fliegel when he repudiates educators who wonder if poor parents can make an intelligent decision about school choice. But earlier he states that parents should not run schools because "In a poor community, parents have enough to do just struggling to survive" (p. 23). Gee, wouldn't the parents and guardians in East Harlem who vote for the local school board, who attend and participate in N.Y.C. Board of Education meetings, who were on the panel to select the N.Y.C. Chancellor, who run PTAs,

and who are involved in selecting the schools their children attend be surprised to find that out? Being poor does not mean you lack the desire or the needed skills to be involved.

MARC L. SALZMAN
Assistant Director
District 4 Academy of
Environmental Science
New York, New York

Response from Fliegel

I have never claimed that choice is a panacea; I consider choice a catalyst and a mechanism for accountability. In our conversation, I emphasized the importance of a clearly defined vision, raised expectations, small schools, autonomy, and ownership extended to all member constituencies and a focus on teaching and learning. During our talk it was quite clear that I believe in real parent involvement, however, I don't expect parents to run schools. That is what professionals are paid to do. School boards set policies they should not administer the schools. I've yet to meet parents who feel they run their school; few, if any, want to. Giving parents choice is meaningful involvement.

In regard to differences in schools, there is a diversity of philosophical beliefs in District 4 alternative schools. I would like to see a greater degree of diversity in teaching and learning approaches as exemplified in a good number of our schools. Too many of our teachers still teach as they were taught; however, the quality of teaching and learning is excellent.

I am sorry that Mr. Salzman is indignant about my statements; perhaps his indignation will lead to some positive changes in how children learn.

SEYMOUR FLIEGEL
Center for Educational Innovation
Manhattan Institute for
Policy Research
New York, New York

Most Assuredly an Achievement Program

In their "Synthesis of Research on Compensatory and Remedial Education" (September 1990, p. 10), Lorin

Anderson and Leonard Pellicer questioned the value of "substantially funding" Chapter 1 programs. They make some important points, but their arguments about the relationship of Chapter 1 and achievement are flawed.

To begin with, the only source Anderson and Pellicer cite on this relationship is a 1987 article by Launor Carter, which did say that compensatory education had little or no effect on the more severely disadvantaged students *but also* concluded that compensatory education was generally effective in producing better than expected gains for the total Chapter 1 (then Title I) population.¹ Indeed, it was Carter's 1982 Congressional testimony on his *overall* findings that contributed powerfully to the opinion that Chapter 1 was working and that greater funding should be provided.² Second, Carter's survey of programs occurred between 1976 and 1979—now more than a decade old, it's hardly a reliable indicator of the effectiveness of compensatory education today.³

Unfortunately, since the Carter study, there has been little quality research on this question. However, perhaps the best data we have comes from *The Reading Report Card, 1971-88*.⁴ The reading performance of the nation as a whole inched higher during this 17-year period; but the achievement gains of our principal minorities, blacks and Hispanics, improved *substantially*. In fact, the achievement gap between black 17-year-olds and their white peers narrowed from 53 points in 1971 to 20 points in 1988. Commenting upon the "dramatic" growth of black children and the "very strong" improvement of Hispanic children, Archie Lapointe of Educational Testing Service said, "This may mean that early intervention and compensatory programs are having a positive and lasting effect in reading."

Increases in minority achievement sometimes reflect changes or are sometimes the result of socioeconomic status, but the most recent U.S. census data make it difficult to explain these gains in this way. The percentage of black families with children residing in poverty

actually increased (from 35 to 37 percent) between 1970-1987. Among Hispanics, the poverty rate for families with children climbed from 27 percent in 1980 to 32 percent in 1987.⁴

Chapter 1's 25-year-old mandate for encouraging parental involvement has fostered the critical linkage between home and school. This requirement and program components such as supplemental instruction and achievement test accountability have made Chapter 1 our most important compensatory education model. It is most assuredly an achievement program, not just a funding program, associated more powerfully than any other factor with narrowing the performance gap between the haves and the have-nots in our nation.

¹L. F. Carter, (1984), "The Sustaining Effects Study of Compensatory and Elementary Education," *Educational Researcher* 13, 7: 4-13.

²United States House Committee on Education and Labor, Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education, (March 23-25, 1982), *Oversight Hearing on Title I*, 97th Congress, 2nd Session, pp. 142-145.

³L. F. Carter, (1983), "A Study of Compensatory and Elementary Education: The Sustaining Effects Study, Final Report," prepared by the Systems Development Corporation for the U.S. Department of Education, VI-V38.

⁴A. F. Saluter, (August 1989), "Changes in American Family Life," Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, p. 23.

VIRGINIA R. L. PLUNKETT

Chapter 1 State Coordinator
Colorado Department of Education
Denver, Colorado

BENJAMIN D. STICKNEY

Associate Professor of Education
University of Colorado
at Colorado Springs
Colorado Springs, Colorado

Response to Sawyer

The sidebar "What We Know About Learning Styles from Research in Special Education" was not a critical examination nor a comprehensive review. Space did not allow that kind of analysis nor does space allow it here.

It is true that much of the research examined modality matching (i.e., the practice of matching auditory and visual learners to a particular instruction approach) was conducted more than

ten years ago. As I pointed out, numerous reviews of that large body of literature have failed to support the practice of modality matching. How long should researchers expend time and resources on research questions that seem to have been answered?

I am familiar with all of the studies cited by Mr. Sawyer except Ingham, 1989. They have three major drawbacks:

1. Several of those studies did not provide instructional intervention. Students in those studies were tested, not instructed, in various instructional environments. Therefore, one can draw some conclusions about how the environment affects test-taking skills, but one cannot draw conclusions about how it affects learning in the classroom.

2. All but the Martini (1986) study examined environmental factors such as lighting, intake, design, etc. They did not examine perceptual preference (Dunn's term for modality matching). The most popular application of learning styles does not involve environmental variables, but the notion of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile learners. Therefore, the studies Mr. Sawyer cited do not contradict the studies I cited regarding modality matching.

3. The studies that he cited are all unpublished doctoral dissertations completed at St. Johns' University. *Independent, published* research must be forthcoming to give credence to this vein of research.

Mr. Sawyer is correct in his observation that I miscited Shahl (1988). However, most psychometricians recommend reliabilities of over .90 for making critical educational decisions about individual students (e.g., placement in a special program). The reliability of all instruments used to assess learning styles are below this criteria. I suppose one could argue that learning style is not a *critical* educational decision, and standards applied for placement decisions are unnecessarily stringent. Personally, I feel that curricular decisions are more *critical* than placement decisions because it is the means of instruction, not the *place* of instruction, that determines student outcomes.

Finally, to the extent that the idea of learning style has merit, it is the way in which good teachers informally observe and modify the instructional environment every day to meet individual needs. Why must we use tests to quan-

tify differences and label children? If a student is not succeeding, some change must occur to enable the student to learn. That change might have something to do with the individual differences referred to as "learning style" or it might have to do with the rate of instruction, appropriateness of objectives, missing preskills, example selection, or quality of the curriculum. This sensitivity and flexibility is the best meaning of the term "eclectic" instruction.

VICKI E. SNIDER

Associate Professor

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
Eau Claire, WI

A Review of Whose Research?

I read with interest Robert Slavin's recent review of the cooperative learning research (February 1991, p. 71). A thorough and comprehensive synthesis of the evidence gathered on this important subject would be a valuable contribution to researchers and practitioners. It seems a more appropriate title for this review would have been "Slavin's Review of Slavin."

I was amazed to find, for example, that only three of the over 60 published research studies on cooperative learning by David and Roger Johnson and their associates were cited by Slavin. At the same time, Slavin cites himself 46 times in the review, which is, on average, once per paragraph. A quick count reveals, in fact, that nearly 60 percent of all citations in the review were Slavin citing Slavin.

Considering the vast research literature on cooperative learning, the narrow focus taken in this review makes the validity of its findings highly suspect. It does make clear, however, Slavin's view of his contribution to that literature.

THOMAS R. GUSKEY

University of Kentucky
Lexington, Kentucky

Praise for "Choice"

The article by Karen Seashore Louis and Boudewijn A. M. van Velzen (December 1990/January 1991, p. 66) was fantastic—the best article on choice that I have ever read.

STANLEY POGROW

Associate Professor
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona

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