

SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

A Political Scientist's View

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PERHAPS THE MOST ARRESTING conclusion in the summary of the Coleman Report is the statement: "a pupil's achievement is strongly related to the educational backgrounds and aspirations of the other students in the school" (p. 22). The point is stated more forcefully later, in the body of the Report: "Attributes of other students account for far more variation in the achievement of minority group children than do any attributes of school facilities and slightly more than do attributes of staff" (p. 302). I always thought so. I like this finding because it coincides with my own views about social democracy and the schools. This was forcefully expressed in 1950 by Chief Justice Vinson, when the Supreme Court ruled racial isolation of a single Negro in the Texas Law School constitutionally unequal on grounds that fellowship and extracurricular association with other students were as essential to legal education as were equivalent teachers, books, and lessons. Now in the Coleman Report there is persuasiveness in documentation and analysis for this view which is more convincing than personal or judicial opinion. This is one of several points I have selected for comment from a series of recent social science reports on race as a factor in national school policy. In looking directly at only a few points one can merely pause to salute the energy, daring, intelligence, and skill of the social scientists who have prepared these stimulating, impressive, and important documents.

Although the Coleman Report contains no recommendations as to what policies or programs should be adopted by government to improve educational opportunity in light of the findings, there have already been many public actions which, by design or coincidence, accord with its

principal findings. The Report was prepared at the instigation of the United States Commissioner of Education to fulfill a provision of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Accordingly, the U.S. Office of Education was scheduled, and other public and private groups were encouraged, to seek "constructive courses of action based on the survey" (p. iv).

The best known implementation of the Coleman Report's principal findings is Federal Judge J. Skelly Wright's decision in *Hobson v. Hansen* aimed at correcting racial and economic discrimination found in the operation of the District of Columbia public school system. The Coleman Report is not mentioned in the 214 footnotes in the 135 page opinion, but Dr. Coleman's views and those of other sociologists and psychologists testifying in the trial and Judge Wright's principal findings of fact are all harmonious. The first finding is this: "Racially and socially homogeneous schools damage the minds and spirit of all children who attend them—the Negro, the white, the poor and the affluent—and block the attainment of the broader goals of democratic education, whether the segregation occurs by law or by fact" (269 F. Supp. 401, at 406). His second finding of fact is really identical to the Coleman Report finding and is phrased almost identically. This is how Judge Wright makes the point: "The scholastic achievement of the disadvantaged child, Negro and white, is strongly related to the racial and socio-economic composition of the student body of his school. A racially and socially integrated school environment increases the scholastic achievement of the disadvantaged child of whatever race."

Both *Hobson v. Hansen* and the Coleman Report exhibit deep sensitivity for the manner in which school characteristics are intertwined with race. The methodology of the Coleman Report aims at controlling race as a variable "which is known to have a high and stable relation to the dependent variable, independently of characteristics of the school attended by the student" (p. 311). Hence, in one set of analyses school factors other than race were examined for their bearing on variation in achievement. The main analysis used a number of variables representing school factors, teacher factors, and student qualities. It is only on the basis of many statistical demonstrations that the Coleman Report asserts that nearly any student-body characteristic accounts for variations in individual achievement more effectively than any school characteristic (p. 304). Two faults with the data are noted in the Report itself. Only one year, 1965, was available for the survey (p. 292). The other fault is that, nationally, school integration has been so slight and

experience so sharply limited "that students of both races in racially heterogeneous schools are not representative of all students of their race, but are often highly unrepresentative" (p. 307). One can believe that the studies also have internal faults but it is hard to think they would be sufficient to profoundly affect the validity of the findings. My reaction is to endorse further studies covering several years and, at the same time, on the basis of the findings hope for further efforts toward racial integration in the schools.

Reading the Coleman Report intending to criticize, comment, and expand upon it reminds me of a lecture T. S. Eliot once gave on the subject of versification in Shakespeare. Eliot said at the beginning that no lecture on Shakespeare could fail if plenty of quotations were made. And so it may be with the Coleman Report. Concentrating as I have on the one outstanding effect of school on achievement it is well to show from the Report itself how that implication or effect stems from a whole cluster of results taken together, as follows:

1. The great importance of family background for achievement;
2. The fact that the relation of family background to achievement does not diminish over the years of school;
3. The relatively small amount of school-to-school variation that is not accounted for by differences in family background, indicating the small independent effect of variations in school facilities, curriculum, and staff upon achievement;
4. The small amount of variance in achievement explicitly accounted for by variations in facilities and curriculum;
5. Given the fact that no school factors account for much variation in achievement, teachers' characteristics account for more than any other—taken together with the results from [the section on characteristics of staff], which show that teachers tend to be socially and racially similar to the students they teach;
6. The fact that the social composition of the student body is more highly related to achievement, independently of the student's own social background, than is any school factor;
7. The fact that attitudes such as a sense of control of the environment, or a belief in the responsiveness of the environment, are extremely highly related to achievement, but appear to be little influenced by variations in school characteristics.

Taking all these results together, one implication stands out above all: That schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this

very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school. For equality of educational opportunity through the schools must imply a strong effect of schools that is independent of the child's immediate social environment, and that strong independent effect is not present in American schools (p. 325).

Converting typical suburban PTA members of the world to this formulation will doubtless be a task on a par with that of persuading consumers during the depression of the value of milk dumping and plowing under every third row of corn. Bringing supporters of private schools around to a point of action on such a belief seems almost out of the question. Yet it will be important to argue the correctness of the finding, to restudy it and reformulate it on the basis of national experience as it unfolds. This is not a short run matter, but some of the persistent problems which will hamper putting the finding into effect may be seen already in the decision in *Hobson v. Hansen*.

The program of integration ordered by Judge Wright for the District of Columbia shows in acute form features of American government which present dilemmas almost as abiding as the root conflict between race discrimination and the democratic ideal of equality. One is the limiting perimeter of the District of Columbia boundary line defining it as a metropolitan center surrounded by a ring of suburbs located in other states—Maryland and Virginia. Even a Federal Judge of Skelly Wright's experience and audacity does not claim jurisdiction across these lines or muse over the futility of an integration order within these lines. Futile in the sense that Washington has become so predominantly Negro in population that the national minority vastly outnumbers whites in the District. In 1966, the Negro school population there reached 90.2% with every indication of a further rise. To express the degree of segregation, Judge Wright called a school "predominantly" Negro (or white) if 85% or more of its students were of that race. A question this raises for Washington, and other communities across the country where one race predominates, is whether an injunction against racial discrimination can create schools with a sufficiently large cadre of well-motivated, aspiring students to augment the achievement of Negro pupils. It is difficult to believe that a benign white quota of below 10%, reverse tokenism really, can produce a Coleman Report effect. Recognizing this difficulty, Judge Wright ordered substitute action for the impossibility of sufficiently balanced integration. His remedies included this order:

Where because of the density of residential segregation or for other reasons children in certain areas, particularly the slums, are denied the benefits of an integrated education, the court will require that the plan include compensatory education sufficient at least to overcome the detriment of segregation and thus provide, as nearly as possible, equal educational opportunity to all school children (269 F.Supp. 401, at 515).

But if attributes of other students make a much larger difference in the achievement of minority group children than do facilities or staff (an inestimable, crucial difference in the distillation of the values of social democracy) no compensatory education can possibly provide equal educational opportunity.

But in Washington Judge Wright found both blatant and subtle, designed and unintended, racial discrimination in the public school system. For example, his analysis of "tracking," by which pupils were divided into four separate ability groups, penetrates deeply into educational testing, its theory and practice. "Tracking," or "streaming" as it is called in England, is not new—but the four-track plan was approved for introduction in Washington in 1956, only two years after the Supreme Court's major school segregation decisions. In a close examination, Judge Wright shows disadvantaged children to be relegated to lower tracks on the basis of intelligence tests which were largely standardized on white middle class children. As a result the "track system" in the District of Columbia schools, as planned and carried into effect by Superintendent Hansen, "tends to separate students from one another according to socio-economic and racial status, albeit in the name of ability grouping" (269 F. Supp. 401, 457). Accordingly, Judge Wright held that the "track system" results in an unconstitutional denial of equal educational opportunity to the poor and a majority of the Negroes attending school in the District.

In paralleling, and in a sense implementing, the findings of the Coleman Report, Judge Wright's assertion of judicial power in *Hobson v. Hansen* depends very heavily on premises and methodologies of current social science. Having found socioeconomic and racial correlations with tracking, as well as discrimination in the administration of teacher and student placement, he holds a whole array of practices unconstitutional. In his opinion, on the heels of this dazzling judicial activism, Judge Wright adds a "parting word" of lament in which he calls the subject of racial discrimination in the administration of the public schools alien to the court's expertise. He believes these problems should be resolved "in the political arena by other branches of government." But he con-

cludes that because the problems are so difficult—almost irresolvable—the judiciary must depart from a desired restraint and “bear a hand and accept its responsibility to assist in the solution where constitutional rights hang in the balance” (269 F. Supp. 401, 517). I disagree and think the court’s expertise is adequate and its activism appropriate. His opinion and order show that Judge Wright thinks so, too, despite his “parting word.”

The action of the Federal District Court in *Hobson v. Hansen* has been criticized by Alexander Bickel (*New Republic*, Vol. 157, July 8, 1967, pp. 11–12). He particularly questions the aptness of positive judicial power to remedy de facto segregation in the schools. However, Bickel errs and oversimplifies when he labels *Brown v. Board of Education* as a “stop” order and *Hobson v. Hansen* as a “go” order. The inappropriateness of this distinction is neatly shown in the decision of the Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit in its re-examination of school desegregation standards (during the winter of 1966–67) in light of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the HEW compliance guidelines under Title VI. Judge Wisdom’s opinion stressed that the *Brown* case called for positive implication and shows that it was a “go” order. He said:

The United States Constitution, as construed in *Brown*, requires public school systems to integrate students, faculties, facilities, and activities. If *Brown I* left any doubt as to the affirmative duty of states to furnish a fully integrated education to Negroes as a class, *Brown II* resolved that doubt. A state with a dual attendance system, one for whites and one for Negroes, must “effectuate a transition to a racially nondiscriminatory system.” The two *Brown* decisions established equalization of educational opportunities as a high priority goal for all of the states and compelled seventeen states, which by law had segregated public schools, to take affirmative action to reorganize their schools into a unitary, non-racial system (*United States v. Jefferson County Board of Education*, 372 F.2d 836).

(The Supreme Court cases were: *Brown I*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954) and *Brown II*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955).) Judge Wisdom elaborated on the history of this subject at considerable length in a footnote.

But even if a “go” order is constitutionally appropriate, Bickel wants to know how Judge Wright is “going to see that effective methods of compensatory education are invented, how is he going to produce the trained personnel to apply them, and how, even if he could guarantee success, is he going to see to the financing of these efforts?” Judge Wright’s opinion gives an answer to part of this question, for he required the Superintendent of Schools to include appropriate provisions,

in the District's new \$300,000,000 school building program, for a plan to alleviate pupil segregation (269 F. Supp. 401, 515). True enough, court decisions on school segregation have so often been useless hortatory pronouncements, as Bickel says, that the question of their use is in order. But today there are several conditions for the shaping and execution of national school policy which were lacking in the 1950s. One is seen in the Coleman Report and related social science studies; for not only have scholarly investigations become more massive, they have also gained in acuteness and boldness. Another is that relevant economic, sociological and psychological findings are more readily utilized by government as compared to that cautious footnote eleven in *Brown I*. And, of course, courts do not go it alone now. This is shown especially well in Judge Wisdom's discussion of the confluence of the desegregation policies of all three branches of the national government in his opinion in *United States v. Jefferson County Board of Education* (372 F.2d 836). Moreover, there is every indication that coming public and private action will bring the power of the purse to bear ever more forcefully against racial disadvantage across the board of poverty, housing, employment, and school programs.

In the longer-range approach required to achieve anything truly approximating equal educational opportunity and allied goals, many institutions and practices will be taxed by new tasks and no doubt many will be distinctly altered. For the courts this has already brought a somersault in function—from protector of the status quo to initiator of social change. In technique the federal courts have come to deal easily with class actions where they formerly dealt substantially with individual claims. For the institutions of education the center of gravity in policy control has moved from the locality to the federal government. The schools have been forced to add ever more functions: too many and the wrong ones, in many eyes. The very concept of the neighborhood school has come under severe attack and, as we have seen, ability grouping by tracks or streams has been outlawed by at least one federal court. So too, the practices of scholarship in the social sciences now bob up to serve new and more urgent uses and they will also change. A particular danger, which I see accompanying the swift application of scholarship to social problems like school segregation, is the neglect of history. Not history in the conventional sense of only studying and using the past, but the awareness of the future use of a current study. I have found this thought to have been excellently illustrated in W. H. Sewell's review of

the Coleman Report with these examples of decisions which reduce the future usefulness of the research data: "Neither school systems nor students were identified so that neither schools, classrooms, principals, teachers, nor students can be selected for further intensive analysis." And, "the decision not to tag children means that no true longitudinal study building upon these data will ever be possible. This is unfortunate because it is precisely this kind of information which is so badly needed for determining the future effects of current educational inequalities" (*American Sociological Review*, Vol. 32, June, 1967, p. 478). Studies which measure time by generations must be planned by social scientists if government policy is to be guided deeply by scholarly thought.

Political science findings often seem uncommonly slow in gaining official usage, as is shown in Judge Wright's shopworn reference to "the power structure." There is no analysis and no verification, only a single reference to this scapegoat of our contemporary ills. After summarizing the many ways in which Negroes and the poor are disadvantaged in the District of Columbia schools, Judge Wright ends with this statement: "In sum, all of the evidence in this case tends to show that the Washington school system is a monument to the cynicism of the power structure which governs the voteless capital of the greatest country on earth" (269 F. Supp. 401, 407). True, there is racial discrimination in the school system and there is no voting. The nine-member Board of Education has, since 1882, had at least three and, until 1967, never more than four Negro members. How was this Board appointed? They were appointed, under provisions of the D. C. Code, by the United States District Court for the District of Columbia on which Judge Wright was sitting in *Hobson v. Hansen*! If there is a power structure controlling school policy in the District the federal bench was locked into it. Yet, through an irony typical of the American democracy, the school system is being changed by injunction. Note that Judge Wright properly spells out the nature and forms of discrimination at great length but is satisfied with little more than the label "the power structure" as an explanation of the political sources of school inequality. If the courts are to move down the path from reapportionment to inquiries into group representation on school boards and the linkages between the public and its government they will need to be versed in political science as well as in sociology. At this juncture in legal education each discipline may be "alien to its expertise." However, a starting point for judges would be the criticisms of the "power structure" by R. M. Dahl (*Who Governs?*,

1962), N. W. Polsby (*Community Power and Political Theory*, 1963) and others, and the continuing debate recently renewed by A. M. Rose (*The Power Structure*, 1967). The best single, short analysis includes a statement which could be addressed directly to the judiciary: "I take it for granted that in every human organization some individuals have more influence over key decisions than do others. Political equality may well be among the most Utopian of all human goals. But it is fallacious to assume that the absence of political equality proves the existence of a ruling elite" (R. M. Dahl, "A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 52, June, 1958, pp. 463, 465).

As a more conscious national school policy emerges through judicial review of de facto as well as de jure segregation and through the application of federal administrative compliance standards, increasing attention will be paid to the political traits of communities across the country. This is shown by the fact that the U. S. Office of Education is supporting social science research into community politics. It will be interesting to see the extent to which findings in such supported research coincide with findings reached independently. Which will serve as a direct basis for policy?

The study of community politics is considerably advanced by the NORC study, *Politics of School Desegregation*, by R. L. Crain and *Desegregation and Education* directed by R. W. Mack. Each contains a number of field-conducted case studies of how recent moves toward school desegregation have been affected by civil rights activism, the recruitment of school board members and other factors. A refreshing amount of attention is paid to informal politics, the possibility of different political styles as characteristic of different communities, as well as to what the people (including children) think. The NORC study uses the term "civic elite" with insufficient specificity, but shows as untrue the myth "that school boards are representatives of a segregationist power structure" (p. 3). The Mack studies lead him to the very definite conclusion that in each of ten communities,

it is obvious that change has been implemented as a result of citizens' organizing and protesting. From Riverside to Savannah to Kalamazoo, desegregation has proceeded haltingly, grudgingly, and in response to organized demands. The changes which have occurred have come about as the result of overt acts such as picketing and filing of complaints, by members of the Negro community and their white allies (Mack, Ch. 10, p. 16).

These studies document much that has been suspected about the local political process.

In 1967, optimism is a scarce commodity for readers of these reports and I can only end on a sober note. I wonder at the uneven distribution of pain which American government policies inflict on the young: military service on men in their twenties; and the often confusing, sometimes brutal, and almost always difficult, process of desegregation on school children aged five to eighteen. Mack's discussion of this fact is particularly moving, stressing how segregation in the schools is reinforced by segregation in churches, barber shops, banks, industries, city halls, and neighborhoods. "In America, we have deemed desegregation too difficult a social process to be dealt with by realtors, bankers, clergymen, and community leaders. We have assigned the task to children" (Mack, Ch. 10, p. 16). To correct this state of affairs we need a national school policy which is better connected with desegregation in the world outside of formal education. Social science cannot move as swiftly as public policy. But as policy comes to depend more on social science studies, efforts must be made to maintain a continuing census of those studies. Already the newer variables of Black Power politics and union militancy need to be introduced into studies of community politics. Work in each of the social sciences, attention to race relations across the board, and studies in more communities, will be needed if government policy is to be well-informed.