

Published: June 21, 2006

Race Report's Influence Felt 40 Years Later

Legacy of Coleman study was new view of equity

By Debra Viadero

Just before the Fourth of July weekend in 1966, the U.S. Office of Education quietly released a report that would shake the beliefs upon which many educators and social reformers had staked their work.

Titled "Equality of Educational Opportunity," the mammoth, 737-page study reached the unsettling conclusion that school might not be society's great equalizer after all.

On the eve of the 40th anniversary of that study, now better known as the Coleman Report, researchers continue to grapple with many of the same questions about how family background contributes to disparities in children's school performance.

The report found that black children started out school trailing behind their white counterparts and essentially never caught up—even when their schools were as well equipped as those with predominantly white enrollments.

What mattered more in determining children's academic success, concluded the authors, was their family backgrounds.

"This was the 1960s," the policy expert Marc S. Tucker recalled. "The idea that who one's parents were and what happened in the home is a far greater determinant of one's future than what schools could do was a pretty grim commentary and one that was very hard for people to accept."

Mr. Tucker, today the president of the Washington-based National Center on Education and the Economy, was among a group of scholars convened by Harvard University later the same year to make sense of the findings.

Four decades later, scholars say that much has changed in American education and much has not. While social science has found more sophisticated ways to chart disparities in children's schooling and achievement, it has failed to make them go away.

"The Coleman Report basically opened up that question, and nobody's been able to answer it satisfactorily since," said David J. Armor, a researcher who worked on the original study and subsequent reanalysis. "No one has found a way, on a large-scale basis, to overcome the influence of family," added Mr. Armor, currently a professor of public policy at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va.

The project was historic for more than its provocative conclusions, though, says David K. Cohen, a professor of education and public policy at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

"I think it really marked the beginning of a new era for both research on education and a more general understanding of schooling and how schools work," he said.

Breaking New Ground

The study was ordered by Congress as part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In Section 402 of the legislation, federal lawmakers directed the U.S. commissioner of education to “conduct a survey ... within two years of the enactment of this title, concerning the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin.”

To carry out that task, Alex M. Mood, then assistant commissioner for educational statistics, chose two researchers: James S. Coleman, the Johns Hopkins University sociologist whose name has become indelibly associated with the study, and Ernest Q. Campbell, a sociology researcher from Vanderbilt University.

The report they produced was, and some say, remains, among the most extensive and best-known studies of American education. At a cost of \$1.5 million in 1966 dollars, the project drew on data for 570,000 students, 60,000 teachers, and 4,000 elementary and secondary schools across the country. When completed, it weighed as much as the Manhattan telephone directory and was only slightly more readable.

What was revolutionary about the report, though, was its use of testing data to measure educational disparities, which was an innovation that went beyond the project’s congressional mandate. Rather than provide a checklist of physical resources, Mr. Coleman and Mr. Mood wanted the study to find out what children actually learned.

“Up until that time, very little attention was paid to student outcomes,” said Eric A. Hanushek, a Stanford University economist who participated in the post-report analyses at Harvard. “It was all about inputs—whether the schools had books, libraries, or computer labs. The importance of the Coleman Report was that it changed the perspective to concentrating on student performance, and that has endured.”

Mr. Coleman, an unassuming football-player-turned-academician, and his research team worked under intense pressure to complete the massive project within the two-year time frame. James McPartland, one of the young researchers whom Mr. Coleman recruited to work on the study, recalled that the sociologist even rented an apartment near Capitol Hill to cut down on commuting time from Johns Hopkins in Baltimore.

“The frenzy was all about, ‘What do we have here?’ ” said Mr. McPartland, who is now a co-director of the Center for Social Organization of Schools, based at Johns Hopkins. “And Jim was the one making sense of it all.”

Mr. Coleman, who later moved to the University of Chicago, died in 1995.

Greeted With Silence

When the report was done, it met with deafening silence. The lack of response was due in part to its release right before the July 4 weekend.

In addition, the advisory committee that had been appointed for the project refused to sign off on it, citing methodological concerns, recalled Edmund W. Gordon, a member of that committee.

“We weren’t sure that Jim had drawn his conclusions from a sample that was sufficiently representative,” said Mr. Gordon, who is now an emeritus professor of psychology at both Yale University and Teachers College, Columbia University. “And we were not comfortable with the finding

that the effects of schools were so small. Only after a year or a year and a half of study in the Harvard seminar did we become comfortable with it.”

Gradually, though, news of the findings spread. Christopher S. Jencks, a journalist-turned-policy expert, writing in *The New Republic* in October 1966, called attention to the report as the “most important piece of education research in years.” And he noted that its “diagnosis of what makes students learn is at odds with almost everything legislators, school board members, and school administrators have believed in recent decades.”

The findings, in fact, came less than a year after President Lyndon B. Johnson had signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, with its Title I—a Great Society program aimed at providing compensatory educational services to disadvantaged students.

The news also reached Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a sociologist, former Johnson administration official and future U.S. senator, at Harvard University.

Mr. Moynihan had just written a controversial report, “The Negro Family: The Case for Action,” which argued for federal attention to problems of disorganization in black families. With other Harvard academic stars, such as Thomas F. Pettigrew, a social psychologist, Mr. Moynihan obtained funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York to launch a yearlong seminar to dissect the Coleman Report’s findings.

“Because the results were so earthshaking, everybody wanted to reanalyze the data and make sure nothing was amiss,” said Mr. Armor.

Gordon M. Ambach, who later became New York’s state education commissioner and headed the Washington-based Council of Chief State School Officers, served as the executive secretary to the newly formed cross-disciplinary group, called the Harvard Faculty Seminar on the Coleman Report. Originally, he said, the plan was to involve 10 to 15 scholars from a variety of disciplines.

In the end, 75 scholars became regular attendees, traveling to Harvard at their own expense once every two weeks for the dinner-to-late-night sessions. Their ranks included some of the most prominent academics in the social sciences—people such as Frederick Mosteller, a widely admired statistician; the reading expert Jeanne Chall; and Theodore R.Sizer, then the dean of Harvard’s graduate school of education. Seven professors came from the law school. The sessions also drew a crop of young graduate students and junior professors who would later go on to make their own names in the field of education.

“Many people cut their teeth at that seminar,” said Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, an education historian at Harvard. “I don’t think there’s been a Coleman seminar since, or anything equivalent to it.”

Findings Wide-Ranging

The Coleman Report’s conclusion on schools’ relative ineffectiveness at overcoming the academic disparities that children bring with them was just one of many findings in the study.

It found, for instance, that the next-most important determinant of academic achievement after family characteristics was a student’s sense of control over his or her own destiny.

The report also found that, more than a decade after the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation case, most American students still attended

schools populated mainly with students from the same racial group. More surprisingly, though, the study found that school segregation was just as pervasive in the North as it was in the South.

And the achievement disparities the report documented were troublingly large. In 6th grade, the authors found, the average African-American 6th grader lagged 1.9 years behind his or her white counterpart. By 12th grade, the statistics suggested, the average gap had widened to nearly four years.

As expected, the report also showed that black children typically attended schools that were more poorly equipped than those attended by whites. They had less access to physics, chemistry, and language laboratories, for instance, and fewer books per pupil. But the differences were much smaller than expected, and particularly so for white and black schools in the same geographic regions.

“Congress really expected to see the South shortchanging black schools, and we didn’t have much evidence of that at the time,” Mr. McPartland said.

In retrospect, though, some scholars suggest that the disparities may have failed to emerge because of limitations in the survey.

“One person’s science lab may be another person’s closet,” said Marshall S. Smith, who was the research director for the Harvard seminar as a young faculty member there. “Some of that was also partly due to the fact that the South had been gearing up since *Brown* to provide better resources to black schools in the hope that they could convince courts not to desegregate,” said Mr. Smith, who later became Stanford University’s education dean and served as the deputy secretary and undersecretary of the U.S. Department of Education under President Clinton.

In any event, the study found that few school-related “inputs” seemed to matter much in terms of improving student achievement. Only teachers’ verbal ability seemed to be linked to higher student test scores.

Schools where teachers scored high on a 10-item verbal test embedded in the survey tended also to have students who scored high on academic tests. And having those so-called “good” teachers seemed to be more important for black students than for white students—a finding that subsequent studies have echoed.

The Coleman team also found that *whom* students went to school with was almost as important as family background in predicting academic success.

Black students did better in schools that were predominantly middle-class than they did in lower-class schools, even though the improvements were not large enough to make up for achievement differences due to family background. Since students in majority-minority schools also tended to be poorer than average, that finding was later seen as a plus for the desegregation movement as it began to switch into high gear.

Schools’ Effect Muted

What most people took away from the report, however, was the notion that “schools don’t matter.”

Some politicians, in fact, later used that argument in opposing increased funding for education. But the scholars who were involved in the report and its subsequent reanalysis say that the “schools don’t matter” interpretation was greatly oversimplified.

“This is absurd,” Mr. Moynihan and Mr. Mosteller wrote later. “Children don’t think up algebra on their own.”

What the study found, specifically, was that differences in achievement varied as much within schools as they did from school to school.

What that means, Mr. McPartland says, is that schools tend to have a uniform effect on everyone: Students come to school with academic differences and learn, more or less, at the same rate.

“I had to think through the next two or three years on why I still thought schools could make a difference,” said Mr. Tucker. “What the study was showing, though, was what happened in average, ordinary schools. But it could never look at the effects of a particular intervention.”

The findings related to schools’ demographic composition were less in dispute, according to Mr. Cohen of the University of Michigan, who led a study for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that confirmed and amplified the Coleman Report’s conclusions.

Called “Racial Isolation in the Public Schools,” the 1967 report took the next step and concluded that, at least at the 9th grade level, black students learned more in majority-white classrooms.

Later characterized by the education historian Diane Ravitch as the “bible of integrationist forces,” the racial-isolation study provided fodder for the desegregation movement for years to come.

Mr. Coleman himself was labeled a traitor to that cause years later, after he published a different study that concluded the mandatory-busing movement was contributing to “white flight” from urban neighborhoods.

Data Flaws Cited

In the end, the scholars who participated in the Harvard seminar identified some methodological flaws in the Coleman study but, in the main, affirmed its conclusions.

With additional foundation support, Mr. Moynihan and Mr. Mosteller gathered the reanalysis in a book, *On Equality of Educational Opportunity*, which was published in 1972, putting the Coleman Report back in the public eye again.

“In retrospect, it’s fair to say there are some pretty serious weaknesses in the data,” said Karl L. Alexander, a Johns Hopkins sociologist who now teaches an upper-level undergraduate course on Mr. Coleman’s work.

Weaknesses that he and other experts cite include the use of per-pupil-spending data for districts rather than individual schools, an insufficient response rate to the surveys, improper sampling procedures, and flawed testing instruments.

“By today’s standards, that kind of analysis would not have passed muster, but it was in the vanguard then,” Mr. Alexander said. “I think we are getting better at asking the questions and understanding how to do analyses that are more compelling.”

He said the report also reframed many scholars’ thinking in the field.

“If the resource differences were not that pronounced,” he said, “people thought then perhaps we needed to start looking inside schools.”

Other researchers, most notably the late Ron Edmonds of Harvard University, built careers on challenging the belief that schools don't matter. Those experts studied schools where minority children were succeeding, and distilled lessons for other schools.

Gaps Persist

Mr. Jencks said the Harvard seminar experience led him to make permanent his switch from journalism to academia and to undertake quantitative research in public policy.

“Just the idea that you could take social-science evidence and bring it to bear on policy issues was really inspiring,” he said. “I had been in Washington, and the way people got things done there was to tell a story about your Aunt Matilda.”

With Mr. Smith and Mr. Cohen, Mr. Jencks went from the seminar to found the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard.

As for the black-white achievement gap that the Coleman Report documented, the organizers of the Harvard seminar, at least, appeared to be confident that the U.S. education community could overcome it.

“It may be hoped that before the century is out the great gaps will have disappeared,” Mr. Moynihan and Mr. Mosteller predicted in *On Equality of Educational Opportunity*.

“It may also happen that in the process a general theory of education will have evolved, been tested, replicated, and accepted,” they concluded.

On both counts, scholars agree, the nation is not there yet.

Vol. 25, Issue 41, Pages 1,21-24

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Read an abstract of the Coleman Report, "[Equality of Educational Opportunity](#)," from the [ERIC Clearinghouse](#).
Read biographical information on [James S. Coleman](#), including a list of his writings, from [Britannica.com](#).