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Introduction: What Difference Did the Coleman Report Make?

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Introduction: What Difference Did the Coleman Report Make?

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Abstract

The Coleman Report

For this *History of Education Quarterly* Policy Forum, we look at the historical significance of the 1966 Coleman Report from several different perspectives. The four main essays published here originated as presentations for a session on “Legacies of the Coleman Report in US Thought and Culture” at the History of Education Society annual meeting in Providence, Rhode Island, in November 2016. Presenters

for that session— Zoë Burkholder, Victoria Cain, Leah Gordon, and Ethan Hutt—went on to participate in an HES-sponsored session entitled “Currents in Egalitarian Thought in the 1960s and 1970s: The Coleman Report in American Politics, Media, and Social Science” at the Organization of American Historians meeting in New Orleans in April 2017. Thinking that their reflections on the reception and influence of the Coleman Report in different contexts would be of broad interest to HEQ readers, we asked members of the panel to comment on each other's papers and revise them for this Forum. We then invited Harvey Kantor of the University of Utah and Robert Lowe of Marquette University to write an introduction summarizing the origins and findings of the Coleman Report, along with their own assessment of what the presenters’ essays teach us about its long-term significance. What follows are Kantor and Lowe's Introduction, “What Difference Did the Coleman Report Make?,” together with substantive essays by Zoë Burkholder of Montclair State University, Victoria Cain of Northeastern University, Leah Gordon of Amherst College, and Ethan Hutt of the University of Maryland.

The fiftieth anniversary of the release of Equality of Educational Opportunity (EEO), better known as the Coleman Report after its lead author James S. Coleman, has been marked by the publication of numerous popular and scholarly retrospectives, including reflections on the report's significance and legacy by a number of the nation's leading educational authorities.¹ In contrast to these retrospectives, the essays in this issue of the *History of Education Quarterly* do not seek to analyze the report's methodology or to reassess its conclusions regarding the relative weight of school resources and family background on educational achievement. Instead, together they help explain why the report was, as Christopher Jencks put it in 1969, “the best-known and most controversial piece of educational research” of its time and what consequences it had on the evolution of educational policy.² This essay briefly discusses the origins and some of the key findings of the Coleman Report and, in concert with the essays in this forum, considers what difference the report made.

Situated at the center of the era's struggles over poverty and racial equality, EEO was the result of a mandate by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to the United States Commissioner of Education to conduct a survey on the lack of equality of educational opportunity by race, color, religion, and national origin in the nation's public elementary and secondary schools. Exactly why Congress ordered such a survey is unclear. Coleman himself suggested it was likely that members of Congress wanted to document the gross differences in the quality of the schools that black and white students attended and thereby legitimate the fight for school desegregation and equal educational opportunity.³ But if members of Congress simply intended to document the extent of inequality in the provision of educational resources across ethnic and racial groups, they got something much more. Not only did the survey collect information on the availability of school resources, what it called school “inputs,” but in an effort to determine the effectiveness of schools in improving outcomes for students from different ethnic and racial groups, it also sought to identify to what degree those inputs were related to school achievement.⁴

Not everyone who later read the report agreed with this shift in focus from inputs to outputs. In their reanalysis of the report, Eric Hanushek and John Kain maintained that prior to focusing on outputs it would have been better to more carefully measure the inputs to schools African Americans attended and the schools whites attended to show, in fact, the kind and degree of discrimination African American children experienced in school.⁵ But Coleman argued that focusing on inputs alone would

have limited the survey's ultimate value, since it would have left unexamined the bigger question of which inputs were the important ones. He likened such a strategy to the activities of southern school officials who hoped that by increasing spending on teachers, textbooks, and buildings for black schools they might thwart pressures for desegregation without ever asking whether these inputs made a difference to the achievement of black students.⁶

As Coleman and several observers since have noted, the broader significance of this shift is that it constituted a reformulation of what was meant by equal education, or at least how it should be measured. Briefly, prior to Coleman, as the congressional mandate for the report implied, mainstream thinking was that equal opportunity meant the availability of equal resources to different groups, the "inputs" referred to in the report. But by broadening the survey to include the determinants of achievement, Coleman essentially redefined equal opportunity to mean equal outcomes for students from different ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds. Many since then have pointed out that this way of thinking in effect precluded the possibility that even if achievement remained tied to background, schools may have kept these probabilities from getting worse. But after Coleman, when policymakers, educators, social scientists, and others talked about equal educational opportunity, they increasingly had in mind the schools' effectiveness in freeing achievement from the students' socioeconomic background. When we talk about (the lack of) equality of educational opportunity today, this is typically what we mean.⁷

Much of the report confirmed what many already knew about the extent of racial segregation in the nation's schools (black and white students generally attended separate schools in both the North and the South) and the performance levels of students of different racial and economic backgrounds on achievement tests (black as well as Puerto Rican, Latino, and American Indian students performed substantially worse than white students). What was unexpected was what it said about the causes of racial and ethnic disparities in achievement. A common assumption at the time was that black students achieved less than white students because they went to segregated schools that had less adequate facilities and inferior curriculums. But the report contradicted those assumptions. Not only were the disparities in resources between black and white schools smaller than anticipated (at least within regions), but, even more important, differences between schools did not account for most of the observed differences in achievement. According to the report, what mattered more than these conventional measures of school quality were the socioeconomic backgrounds and educational aspirations of the children students went to school with, students' sense of control over their own destinies, and, by far most important, the socioeconomic background of the individual child.⁸

Though the press at the time almost universally referred to these results as "shocking," Coleman was in fact hardly the first scholar to conclude that family background trumped schooling as the primary determinant of educational success.⁹ But the sponsorship of the federal government, coupled with the scale of the survey and its dense statistical analysis, lent an air of authority to the report's findings that earlier studies lacked and all but guaranteed that it would become much more than just another study of racial and ethnic differences in educational achievement. Released by the US Office of Education (USOE) in July 1966, the final report included data from more than 3,000 schools, 60,000 teachers, and nearly 600,000 students in grades 1, 3, 6, 9, and 12, which it analyzed in 737 pages crammed with dozens of tables, charts, and figures, an endeavor that even in today's era of "big data" still seems, as one observer recently put it, "mind-boggling."¹⁰

Although the stamp of government sponsorship, its statistical sophistication, and sheer size meant that the report carried more weight than previous studies, it turned out that there was little agreement about what it all meant. Popularly characterized as saying “schools don't make a difference, families do,” the report was sufficiently ambiguous that given its failure to explain its findings and provide recommendations journalists, scholars, and educational activists across a wide spectrum of opinion could all find something in it to support their competing educational and political agendas. As a result, it was soon cited, as Jencks put it, on “almost every side of every major educational controversy” by various constituencies who probably hadn't read it very carefully, if at all, but read into it whatever served their interests, even if they contradicted the report's main findings.¹¹

As Zoe Burkholder's essay in this forum illustrates, nowhere was this more evident than in the debate within black communities in the North about what the report had to say about the relative merits of desegregation and community control.¹² To the degree that anything was likely to make a difference, the report's finding that impoverished children did better in schools with more economically advantaged children seemed to imply that racial integration provided the best chance to expand opportunities for black children. Though this conflated Coleman's finding about socioeconomic integration with racial integration, black and white liberals cited this in support of their argument that desegregation would improve opportunities for black students simply because there were not enough middle-class black students to ensure socioeconomic integration in all black schools.¹³ As Burkholder points out, however, the report appeared precisely at the moment when many African Americans in big cities in the Northeast and Midwest had begun to sour on the promise of integration and were advocating the internal development of black neighborhoods and institutions. For this reason many of them rejected the report because they believed it implied that black children had to go to school with white children in order to learn. But the report also found that African American students who felt they controlled their own destinies did better than their peers, which some advocates of separate black schools, most notably Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) chair Floyd McKissick, seized on to support their argument for community control of black schools.¹⁴

What McKissick ignored was that the survey indicated that black students actually reported a greater sense of control in predominantly white schools. The most plausible explanation for this is that prior to court-ordered desegregation those black students in racially mixed schools likely came from better-off families and felt confident enough to select into them in the first place, despite the hostility they knew they were likely to face from white students. Either way, however, if the report's finding that black students did better when they felt in control of their destiny was correct, it was not implausible to conclude that this sense of control could be better fostered in separate, community-controlled black schools, even if the report's findings indicated that school integration was the most efficacious educational strategy to increase achievement. Indeed, one irony of the report that Burkholder's essay reveals is that its findings were sufficiently open to interpretation that they were used to intensify support for integration and community-controlled black schools at the same time.

If both proponents of integration and community control could plumb the report for evidence to support their respective agendas, however, the report cast a long shadow of doubt over compensatory education programs like the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. The signal legislative accomplishment of the Great Society in education, ESEA was premised on the belief that devoting more resources to the education of low-income children would expand educational opportunity by compensating them for what most policymakers and educators at the time assumed to

be the cultural disadvantages of growing up in a poor family. Yet if differences in achievement had little to do with conventional measures of school quality such as facilities and textbooks, as the report implied, it seemed unlikely that disparities in achievement by race, ethnicity, and economic background could be reduced simply by spending more on them, which is what programs like ESEA proposed. For this reason, historians who have written about the Coleman Report typically have concluded that the report's chief historical significance lay in the fact that it exposed the fragile assumptions underlying the educational components of the Great Society.¹⁵

What made the Coleman report so controversial, however, was not what it did or did not have to say about the relative merits of desegregation and community control, or what it implied about the (in)effectiveness of compensatory education. What made it so controversial was its finding that the schools apparently did very little to overcome the influence of socioeconomic background on achievement. At odds with what Julie Roy Jeffrey has called “the easy liberal confidence” of the early 1960s about what education could accomplish, this finding sparked a lively and sometimes acrimonious debate among liberals and those on the left about the limits of education as an instrument of egalitarian reform that ironically did little to dislodge belief in the capacity of schooling to equalize opportunity that the report had seemingly discredited.¹⁶

Leah Gordon's essay suggests that the persistence of this belief in the importance of education as a tool of social policy traces partly to black educators, intellectuals, and civil rights leaders, most notably people like Kenneth B. Clark and Charles H. Thompson, who disputed the report's implication that schools don't make a difference. To Clark and Thompson, this way of thinking was naïve, if not just plain wrong, though not because they thought schools alone could equalize educational opportunity. They believed, rather, that arguments like Coleman's that discounted the importance of schooling relative to the student's socioeconomic background would likely result in attributing failure to black students themselves, work to rationalize disinvestment in schools that black children attended, and obviate the perceived need to attack institutionalized racial discrimination inside as well as outside the schools. Consequently, while they agreed that equalizing educational opportunity could not be accomplished absent changes in employment, housing, and other social institutions as well, they rejected the report's implication that schools didn't matter and doubled down on the importance of reforming the schools so they would better serve black children.¹⁷

In her essay, Gordon fleshes out the sources of these differences between Coleman, Clark, Thompson, and others on the liberal left, most notably Christopher Jencks, who argued that tinkering with the schools, as he put it, would do little to increase opportunity unless the “whole social system” were changed.¹⁸ If this debate seemed to open up the possibility of a more capacious vision of education and social policy, however, not much resulted from it. Although Coleman provided a rationale for school desegregation,¹⁹ neither proposals for the reconstruction of public education along more racially egalitarian lines nor for changes in the distribution of power and income between the races had much, if any, impact on federal policy. More politically palatable were compensatory education programs like ESEA, which persisted even though the report implied they would likely not make much difference, and innovations like those proposed by supporters of visual media that Victoria Cain describes in her essay. Interpreting Coleman to mean that the educational difficulties of low-income children resulted from the educational disadvantages of growing up in a poor family, advocates of instructional media sought to reconstruct the social environment of poor children outside of school by designing television programs like Sesame Street, which provided instruction in letters and numbers

while teaching interracial comity without redistributing income or threatening the racial advantages of middle-class and upper-middle-class whites.²⁰

Gordon's essay implies that part of the reason for this meliorative turn is that the debate over the viability of education as an instrument of equal opportunity fragmented the left along racial lines, thereby reducing political pressure on the state for a more comprehensive conception of school reform that included a direct attack on poverty and racial inequality. By the end of the 1970s, however, in the face of a resurgent conservative movement, even many liberals had begun to lose faith in the idea of pursuing equal opportunity by attacking the sources of racial inequality in schooling and advocating policies like full employment and a guaranteed income. In a society that had become disillusioned with the War on Poverty and had turned against the struggle for racial equality, what eventually emerged instead was a focus on school reform that not only reinforced the Great Society's tendency to educationalize problems of poverty and economic inequality but that also divorced questions of educational equity from questions about the effects of racial discrimination and income inequality on school outcomes in favor of an emphasis on the use of hard, quantifiable data to evaluate which attributes of school organization were most effective in raising achievement and reducing what we now call the "achievement gap."²¹

Ethan Hutt points out in his essay that this reliance on quantifiable data was first evident in Project Talent in the late 1950s. But the Coleman Report marked a "watershed" in the development of this kind of evidence-based policymaking.²² Indeed, although the uncertainty the report created about the school as a vehicle for equalizing opportunity and social change has never entirely disappeared, the report's chief legacy does not lie with its findings about the relative efficacy of school reform to increase achievement.²³ More important was the momentum it gave to the development of a technology of research and evaluation that viewed the education system, to paraphrase Hutt, as a discrete system of organizational variables that could be manipulated and optimized through evidence-based policy interventions.²⁴

The development of this type of research and evaluation technology has increased our knowledge about how schools affect achievement. But there is little evidence that it has engendered policies that address the sources of inequality of educational opportunity or that lead to better or more equal schooling. To the contrary, by equating school reform with acting on evidence-based manipulations of measurable organizational variables, the type of research Coleman inspired has worked instead to narrow debate about the possibilities of educational reform that the Coleman report initially provoked and to reinforce the idea that the problem of educational inequality can be resolved simply by making more and supposedly better educational policy without addressing the social and economic context that creates educational inequality in the first place.

¹ For examples of retrospectives, see *Education Next* 16 no. 2 (Spring 2016); *Russell Sage Journal of the Social Sciences* 2, no. 5 (Sept. 2016); *Theory and Research in Education* 14, no. 3 (Nov. 2016); and *Sociology of Education* 89, no. 3 (July 2016).

² Christopher Jencks, "A Reappraisal of the Most Controversial Educational Document of Our Time," *New York Times Magazine* (Aug. 10, 1969), 12.

³ Hodgson, Godfrey, "Do Schools Make a Difference?" in *The "Inequality" Controversy: Schooling and Distributive Justice*, ed. M., Donald Levine and Mary Jo Bane (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 25–

- 6; and Grant, Gerald, "Shaping Social Policy: The Politics of the Coleman Report," *Teachers College Record* 75, no. 1 (Sept. 1973), 17–54.
- ⁴ "Summary Report," in Coleman, James S. et al., *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1966).
- ⁵ Hanushek, Erik A. and Kain, John F., "On the Value of *Equality of Educational Opportunity* as a Guide to Public Policy," in *On Equality of Educational Opportunity*, ed. Mosteller, Frederick and Moynihan, Daniel P. (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 116–45.
- ⁶ James S. Coleman, "The Evaluation of Equality of Educational Opportunity," in Mosteller and Moynihan, *Educational Opportunity*, 149–50, 153.
- ⁷ On numerous occasions, Coleman himself stated that he thought this change in the definition of equal opportunity was the report's most important contribution. See Coleman, James S., "Equal Schools or Equal Students," *The Public Interest* 4 (Summer 1966), 70–75; and Coleman, James S., "The Concept of Equality of Opportunity," *Harvard Educational Review* 38, no. 1 (Winter 1968), 7–22.
- ⁸ For good summaries of the report's findings, see Jencks, "Reappraisal"; and Frederick Mosteller, "A Pathbreaking Report," in Daniel P. Moynihan and Frederick Mosteller, *On Equality of Educational Opportunity*, 3–68.
- ⁹ For a summary of some of these studies, see Jeffrey, Julie Roy, *Education for Children of the Poor: A Study of the Origins and Implementation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978), 3–26.
- ¹⁰ Hoxby, Caroline M., "The Immensity of the Coleman Data Project," *Education Next* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2016), 65.
- ¹¹ Jencks, "Reappraisal," 12; and Hodgson, "Do Schools Make a Difference?"
- ¹² Burkholder, Zoë, "The Perils of Integration: Conflicting Northern Black Responses to the Coleman Report in the Black Power Era, 1966–1974," *History of Education Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (Nov. 2017), XX.
- ¹³ On this point, see especially United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Racial Isolation in the Schools*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1967; and Pettigrew, Thomas, "Race and Equal Educational Opportunity," *Harvard Educational Review* 38, no. 1 (Winter 1968), 66–76.
- ¹⁴ See Floyd McKissick, "Is Integration Necessary?" *The New Republic*, Dec. 3, 1966, 33–36; and Burkholder, "The Perils of Integration."
- ¹⁵ Jeffrey, *Education for Children of the Poor*; Matusow, Allen J., *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper & Row 1984), 221–26; and Davies, Gareth, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 144.
- ¹⁶ Jeffrey, *Education for Children of the Poor*, 180.
- ¹⁷ Gordon, Leah N., "If Opportunity Is Not Enough: Coleman and His Critics in the Era of Equality of Results," *History of Education Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (Nov. 2017), XX.
- ¹⁸ Jencks, "Reappraisal," 44.
- ¹⁹ Grant, "Shaping Social Policy," 51–53; and Coleman, James S., "Coleman on the Coleman Report" *Educational Researcher* 1, no. 3 (March 1972), 13–14.
- ²⁰ Cain, Victoria, "From Sesame Street to Prime Time School Television: Educational Media in the Wake of the Coleman Report," *History of Education Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (Nov. 2017), XX.

- ²¹ Kantor, Harvey and Lowe, Robert, "Educationalizing the Welfare State and Privatizing Education: The Evolution of Social Policy Since the New Deal," in *Closing the Opportunity Gap: What America Must Do to Give Every Child an Even Chance*, ed. Carter, Prudence L. and Welner, Kevin G. (New York: Oxford University Press 2013), 25–39.
- ²² Harold and Silver, Pamela, *An Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policy-Making, 1960–1980* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1991), 119.
- ²³ One finding that remains discursively potent, though limited in affecting policy in the post-desegregation era, is that poor children benefit academically from going to school with middle-class children. See, for example, Kahlenberg, Richard, "Learning from James Coleman," *The Public Interest* 144 (Summer 2001), 54–72; Emily Bazelon, "The Next Kind of Integration," *New York Times Magazine*, July 20, 2008, 38–43; and Ciolli, Anthony, "Economic Integration of Schools: Evaluating the Wake County Experiment," *University of Massachusetts Law Review* 6, no. 1 (Jan. 2011), 57–77.
- ²⁴ Hutt, Ethan, "'Seeing Like a State' in the Postwar Era: The Coleman Report, Longitudinal Datasets, and the Measurement of Human Capital" *History of Education Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (Nov. 2017), XX. On the development of social science as a tool for policy evaluation more generally, see O'Connor, Alice, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth Century U.S. History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 211–96.