Book Reviews

Predestined Educational Inequalities Today

Slums and Suburbs. A commentary on schools in metropolitan areas. James Bryant Conant. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1961. viii + 147 pp. Cloth, $3.95; paper, $1.95.

James Conant writes about the complex way in which ecological and social class factors interact and mutually reinforce each other to produce gross inequalities of educational opportunity in the United States. This, of course, is a phenomenon common to all the industrial countries of the world, in which local communities vary widely in social composition. Everywhere it is the case that the larger the proportion of manual or agricultural laborers in the local population is, the poorer is the local cultural and educational endowment and the lower is the modal level of social and educational aspiration. Everywhere these differences result in disparities, according to locality, in educational achievement between children of similar measured intelligence or aptitude, within as well as between the social classes. From top to bottom in the social and intellectual hierarchy, the children attending schools in the prosperous suburbs emerge relatively better equipped academically than the children from schools in small villages or large industrial cities.

Conant, however, is concerned with demonstrating the exacerbating influence, in the case of the United States, of two particular factors: the system of financing public education and the ecological segregation (*de facto*, not *de jure*) of ethnic minorities—in particular, the concentration of migrant Negroes in the slums of the big northern cities. He bitterly regrets the historic failure of Congress to establish a federal policy for education. He paints a deeply disturbing picture of a frustrated and delinquent generation of largely unemployed Negro adolescents, a picture of financial handicap, impoverished material equipment, high pupil-teacher ratios, and high teacher turnover in precisely the areas of greatest educational need—namely, the slums in which congregate the large transient families of unemployed, unskilled, unschooled, and often criminal or mentally sick breadwinners on the move from the South.

From his depressing catalog of social and individual miseries in these areas, Conant derives a number of interesting and controversial propositions. The problems of Negro education are no different from those of all underprivileged social groups; thus, we should not allow racial considerations to cloud the formulation of policy. Enforced mixing of *de facto* segregated school populations is less important than adult education among parents and literacy drives among slow learners in the schools. The problems of Negro unemployment, however, are characteristic and justify special measures: the prohibition of discrimination by employers and labor unions; the financing of public works to provide employment, especially for young people aged 16 to 23, of whom more than 50 percent are unemployed; and the vocationalizing of the high school after the 10th grade.

The purely pedagogical problems of slum schools that deal with large bodies of culturally deprived slow learners during 12 years of compulsory education lead Conant to formulate an educational heresy: that the curriculum and organization of schools should reflect the socioeconomic status and needs of the communities they serve and, in particular, that they should prepare pupils directly and explicitly for the local labor market.

When Conant derives the same proposition from his study of the wealthy college-oriented suburbs at the other end of the spectrum of inequality, its heretical character will no doubt strike his predominantly middle-class readers with more force. Here in the suburbs is a dual problem: on the one hand, how to raise standards of preparation for entry to higher education and, in particular, how to broaden the range and stiffen the content of advanced courses in the high school; on the other hand, how to diminish the indiscriminate emphasis on college-going among suburban parents by arousing a sense of the value of vocational courses in the high school and thus lessening their frenzied desire for the longest possible education for their children regardless of its content and quality.

A substantial investigation related to the first problem yielded "academic inventories" for six large, selective, academically oriented high schools. These data are presented to substantiate Conant's contention that it is both desirable and possible for the American equivalents of European sixth-formers to have and to profit from a comparable academic load. The second problem is perhaps more intractable in a society in which upward social mobility through education is not the privilege of a selected and sponsored minority but is open to all who will make the attempt, regardless of whether they can succeed. Conant confines himself to the suggestion in this connection that counseling in suburban high schools should be "realistic" in relation to college-going and that the schools should look betimes to the possibility of vocationalizing the advanced courses undertaken by children of average and below-average ability. That is, he reiterates the educational heresy in a context in which it is likely to prove even less acceptable to liberal educators.

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Astronomy—Geophysics

The Rotation of the Earth. A geophysical discussion. W. H. Munk and G. J. F. MacDonald. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1960. xix + 323 pp. Illus. $13.50.

Study of the variations of the earth's speed of rotation proceeds along two lines: determining the variations from astronomical observation and attempting to provide geophysical explanations for them. As the subtitle indicates, this book is chiefly concerned with the second problem, a large one. "The diversity of