Choice and Consequence in Education

Public and Private High Schools. The Impact of Communities. JAMES S. COLEMAN and THOMAS HOFFER. Basic Books, New York, 1987. xxviii, 254 pp., illus. $21.95.

This book must be understood in the context of the school debate of the past quarter-century with which James Coleman has been clearly associated. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 included congressional authorization for a national survey of equality of educational opportunity. The report by the same title (1966), which came to be known as "The Coleman Report," essentially concluded that "schools don't matter" and that family background factors determine educational achievement. The report offered no policy recommendations, though it was used in the courts to support arguments for racial balancing. Coleman complained that the courts used the report inappropriately. In 1981 Coleman and associates produced a highly controversial draft document entitled *Public and Private Schools* that concluded that "schools do matter," that students in Catholic high schools and possibly other private schools do better in scholastic achievement than do students in public high schools. In 1982 Coleman and colleagues elaborated the argument in *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared*, attributed the increased achievements of students in Catholic and private schools to stricter discipline and higher academic standards, took the position that parents should be able to choose educational environments for their children, and made policy recommendations for subsidizing private schools through tuition tax credits or educational vouchers.

Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities, like its predecessor, is based on the large-scale High School and Beyond study, but the difference is that these analyses use the 1982 follow-up data and time-1–time-2 difference scores. There is little here that is hash rehashed. The follow-up data feature new measures of achievements and outcomes when respondents are two years further along in school or beyond. The book has the announced goals of extending earlier work on public and private schools and studying the functioning of the school as a social unit in its social context.

Coleman and Hoffer assert that underlying the controversy over public versus private schools is the deeper issue of the goals of education and who determines them. The public-school orientation views the school as an instrument of society that frees the child from constraints imposed by birth (a common-culture orientation), whereas the private-school orientation views the school as an agent of the family with authority vested *in loco parentis* (a particular-culture orientation). There are two variations of the private-school orientation. Religiously organized schools see themselves not directly as agents of the family, but rather as agents of the functional (religious) community of which the family is a part. The school is an institution of the community, and being part of the community includes enrolling the child in the school. In contrast, independent private schools see schools as direct agents of the family in an individualistic sense. Parents search for the school that most closely approximates their values. Thus, the book is framed in terms of three distinguishable orientations: school as agent of the larger society, school as agent of the functional (religious) community, and school as agent of the individual family.

The authors reason that the three orientations issue in schools that are designed differently, that the different schools attract different families, and that the different schools have effects that are independent of family background. The authors report large differences between public, Catholic, and other private schools and demonstrate that, in most cases, the differences are not reducible to family backgrounds. For example, private schools enroll much larger proportions of their students in academic programs of study; private school students, particularly those in Catholic schools, take more academic courses and fewer vocational courses; and parental involvement is greater in private schools.

Coleman and Hoffer examine achievement growth that occurs in students between grades 10 and 12. They focus mainly on two central cognitive skills, verbal and mathematical. Except for science knowledge and civics, the analysts report strong evidence for greater growth in Catholic schools (about one grade equivalent over the two-year period). In addition, Catholic schools feature lower dropout rates. The evidence for other private schools is more equivocal throughout this study, as it was in *High School Achievement*, because the sample is small and is probably less representative. Closer analysis reveals that Catholic schools are also more effective than public or other private schools in raising the academic achievement of subpopulations that traditionally achieve at lower levels, including blacks and Hispanics, children from families with lower levels of parental support, and children from families of lower socioeconomic status.

The follow-up data also provide for examining outcomes beyond high school, namely, the effect of high schools on students' choice of post-secondary career path and on their success in that path. There are large differences in the percentages (20 to 35 percentage points) of public, Catholic, and other private high school graduates who attend a four-year college and sizable, though smaller, differences in the percentages who attend either a two- or a four-year college. Catholic schools are more effective in promoting further education than are public schools. Family background affects success in school and beyond, but the high school that students attend also makes a difference.

High schools affect success in college. There are slightly more survivors in college among Catholic-school graduates than among other private-school graduates, and slightly more among other private-school graduates than among public-school graduates. College reentry rates for dropouts are 40 to 50 percent for public-school graduates and 50 to 60 percent for private-school graduates. Grades in college are closely tied to high school performance, homework, and study habits, all of which favor private schools, especially Catholic schools. There are no substantial and consistent school differences in measures of success of those who directly enter the labor force.

In sum, private schools, especially Catholic schools, produce higher levels of student achievement and more successful school outcomes than do public schools, which affirms the earlier *High School Achievement* thesis. Coleman and Hoffer attribute the difference to the functional community that exists around a religious body to which the families adhere and of which the school is an outgrowth. Independent private schools, by contrast, are supported by a collection of parents who individually choose the school but do not constitute a supportive functional community outside it.

Religion per se is not intrinsic to the school-as-agent-of-community orientation. Other bases of community could serve as functional alternatives for the social organization of a school. What is intrinsic to the functional-community orientation is that

the school is an outgrowth of a community of families that is in direct interaction in everyday life and shares common values. Coleman and Hoffer label this sense and presence of community with the concept "social capital." Just as physical capital is created by working with materials to create tools that facilitate production and human capital is created by working with persons to produce skills and capabilities that make them more productive, so social capital is a quality of inter- and intra-generational relationships in functional families and communities that facilitates individual productivity. Social capital is a necessary condition for the effective operation of schools.

The authors decry a decline in the embeddedness of youth in these enclaves as evidenced in the decreasing strength of social institutions, the declining presence of fathers and mothers in households, and the increasing psychic involvement of youth with the mass media. Given the erosion of social capital outside the school, the authors conclude with recommendations on what educational decisions families should make, what policies school principals should promote, what superintendents should do, and what state and federal policy should support. The common theme in the recommendations is that at every level the store of social capital must be enhanced.

Public and Private High Schools: The Impact of Communities is a provocative contribution based on the best data available to inform an ongoing public debate. The book is readable, though there is occasional vacillation between technical writing and popular prose. Critical readers will miss discussion of the technical characteristics of the data, and leisure readers may occasionally stumble over statistical formulas and related exotica. The book is rich in conjecture and hypotheses that will fuel further investigation and debate. Elsewhere Coleman has taken the position that the role of social policy research is not to resolve conflicts but to inform the issues and to raise the content level of the debate. This book accomplishes that purpose.

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The Testing Movement and Its Founders

Psychological Testing and American Society, 1890–1930. MICHAEL M. SOKAL, Ed. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1987. xvi, 205 pp. $28. Based on a symposium, New York, May 1984.

The multiple-choice test, observes Franz Samelson in this volume, "is as American as the assembly line." For modern Americans are habituated to taking tests—intelligence tests and others constructed according to psychologists' principles. How was this pattern effected, and what have been its ramifications? Conventional historical accounts point to events of the World War I era. Led by American Psychological Association president Robert Yerkes, psychologists persuaded the wartime army to commission them to devise multiple-choice intelligence tests, which were administered to over 1.7 million recruits. The general public accepted the psychologists' valuation of the tests and their data analysis: the tests measured innate talents, not learned skills important in a particular culture; the average citizen, represented by the average soldier, was rather dull, and in the aggregate blacks and immigrants were inferior to native-born Americans of Western European stock. Having demonstrated the utility of their services during the war, psychologists gained professional status after it, securing markets for their services in education, industry, and therapeutic agencies, and persuaded Congress to pass the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act, designed to exclude persons from ethnic groups supposedly proven inferior. Some historians add to this narrative the argument that when the schools adopted intelligence tests to sort students for differential processing—responding to the exigencies of the development of mass education—they became the agents of transmission of class privileges from one generation to another: schools grant the credentials necessary to membership in the middle class, and intelligence tests have served to label disadvantaged youths uneducable, fit only for adult careers performing joyless labor.

The authors of this collection join other recent revisionists in recognizing that we owe our exaggerated notions of the importance of psychologists' research for policymakers to the psychologists' own campaign for professional advancement. Indeed, the army found little merit in their work, and their findings constituted but one of the many reasons Americans found for immigration restriction in the 1920s. I suspect that we have been willing to credit psychologists' misrepresentations because our own experiences as educated persons have affected our historical perceptions: the College Entrance Examination Board's multiple-choice Scholastic Aptitude Test, administered to prospective college students since 1926, and its objective achievement tests, administered since 1942, loom large in the memories of members of the middle class, and, as Samelson notes, students and adults recently surveyed generally believe such tests to be fair and consider the personal consequences of test-taking to be positive. But scholars of social stratification disagree about the importance of education per se in the reproduction of class privilege. And as Samelson cautions, we have inadequate evidence to specify the direct and indirect results of testing—its impact on pedagogy and its effects on American social structure.

Questions of its impact aside, the testing movement was sustained because it addressed issues of concern to many Americans during the Progressive era. As Sokal observes, it had precursors throughout the 19th century, when Americans seeking guidance had been advised by practitioners of folk psychology—phrenologists and others who read character from physical traits. Folk beliefs were systematically translated into scientific terms during the period covered by this collection, when the development of tests to gauge individuals' merits by objective standards was emblematic of emergent national culture; indeed, this period's goals of centralization of authority and efficient use of all manner of resources were premised on the existence of universal standards by which individuals and policies might be judged. Furthermore, as Henry Minton indicates in his essay on the Stanford psychologist Lewis Terman, the IQ test had broad appeal because it could be advertised as a vehicle for the realization of the American ideal of equal opportunity for all. Since Terman dismissed environmental factors as irrelevant to explanation of the correlation between IQ and socioeconomic status, his interpretation of test results admitted the comfortable belief that American society approximated a meritocracy; his views appealed to such powerful scientific patrons as the Rockefeller Foundation, which supported his work to adapt the army tests for school use.

Nevertheless, psychological opinion cannot be reduced to a reflection of cultural biases general to—or dominant in—American society. This collection is distinguished by the attention the authors devote to specification of distinctive spheres of psychological work. The academic Yerkes, for example, pursued research in comparative psychology that was irreconcilable with the assumptions and methods of the conventional IQ test, although his fellows in the Committee on Psychological Examination of Recruits persuaded him to suspend his reservations