DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 257 918 UD 024 278

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TITLE Educational Equity.
INSTITUTION North Dakota Univ., Grand Forks. Center for Teaching and Learning.
PUB DATE May 85
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)
JOURNAL CIT Insights into Open Education; v17 n8 May 1985

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; Disadvantaged Youth; Dropouts; Educational Discrimination; Educational Finance; Educational History; Educational Objectives; *Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; *Equal Education; Magnet Schools; Minority Group Children; Pregnant Students; Racial Discrimination

ABSTRACT

In the midst of a period of major educational reform, questions about standards, quality, and excellence have dominated at the expense of questions about access and equity. To begin with, certain myths must be challenged. The belief that schools were once uniformly better than today is a distortion of history. So is the belief that attempts at greater equity in the 1960's and early 1970's eroded the quality of education. In spite of some gains, however, there is still a long way to go. The percentage of students completing high school has declined annually since 1972, and race and social class remain powerful factors in educational success. Unfortunately the measures advocated by the 1980's "return to quality" reforms have been tried before without success, while programs such as Headstart and Title I, which reseach has shown to have many benefits, are not being applied widely or equitably enough . Parents, students, and political leaders giving testimony at hearings on schools offered these thoughts about equity and access: some groups of children seem to matter more than others; the "creaming" of white middle class children by the gifted magnet schools depresses regular schools; little is done to retain or bring back pregnant or parenting teens; women face educational and economic discrimination; and school finance varies inequitably among school districts and among states. Clearly the United States has far to go to achieve a democratic, fully equitable, and accessible educational system. (RDN)

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Volume 17, Number 8
May 1985

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by Vito Perrone

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(This Insights is excerpted from a talk given at a Michigan State Department of Education symposium. Portions were also presented at a meeting of the St. Paul School-Community Collaborative.)

This morning I will use my time to examine a large share of the cloth of contemporary public education, in the middle of what is being called a major reform period--my way of easing into equity concerns. There are, without doubt, many positive threads in the current discourse of reform--there is a need, for example, to be more concerned about purposes, about literacy, about enlarging expectations, about more appropriate linkages between schools and community resources. Further, the reform agendas have pushed us all to talk again about educational issues of substance. This, too, has had many salutary effects. But there are, nonetheless, some discouraging themes in the discourse which may well take precedence if not vigorously challenged at every level by every person who cares deeply about children, schools and communities. I will focus on only a few of these themes this morning.

Implicit in the National Commission on Excellence Report, among others, and given considerable support in the popular media, for example, is the belief that schools were once uniformly better than they are today, that there was at some earlier time--certainly before 1960 --an idyllic age in which everyone learned to read and write effectively, studied physics and foreign language and the like. That is clearly a distorted history in need of constant challenge. It just wasn't the case that everyone learned to read and write effectively. And at its peak, physics was only studied by a small percentage of high school seniors. More importantly, however, in relation to the past, we should feel particularly obligated to ask--how many blacks, Indians, children of the poor, immigrant and cultural minorities, children with special needs were in the schools in 1900, 1920, 1940, 1960? There was, as you know, large-scale de facto as well as de jure exclusion well into the 1950's. However one wishes to rationalize exclusion, these earlier exclusion dominant years ought never to receive the accolade of "idyllic."

Related to this thread is the belief that we tried equity in the 1960's and early 1970's and it cost quality. In many ways this belief and its related public policy discourse represents a serious and unacceptable attack on the Civil Rights movement and the corresponding desire for a truly democratic society. Title I and Headstart worked. Desegregation was right. Nutrition and health programs were needed. Attention to curriculum relevance was logical. Women's equity was long overdue. But, the denigration of 60's reform is, it seems, a constant theme--most recently expressed in the Secretary of Education nominee William Bennett's report on the humanities and higher education. While not a report on elementary and secondary schools, its implications are closely connected. Bennett suggests, for example, that the 60's inclusion of ethnic, non-western and

women's literature and history is one of the important reasons for the decline of the humanities and a loss of "the best that has been said, thought, written, and otherwise expressed about the human experience." He is critical of "our eagerness to assert the virtues of pluralism." To suggest that efforts at inclusion were the reasons for some mythical loss of quality is an unacceptable formulation. Any separation of equity and quality, to state, as many of the dominant voices do, that they are competing goals, distinct formulations, is a massive abuse of our social language. The 1960's effort to include all children, young people and their families in the schools has not yet been completed. In spite of some significant gains, we have, unfortunately, a very long way to go to achieve the promise of universalism. For every school with a universalist commitment there are hundreds of others in which such commitments have been forgotten or compromised.

In this regard, the percentage of young people of high school age completing high school has declined annually since 1972. It is now 72 percent and still falling. This represents a major shift after one hundred unbroken years of keeping more students through high school graduation. In some of our minority communities the completion rate is well below 40 percent. I shed a number of tears this week reading drop-out reports from Chicago and Los Angeles. Somehow such reports just don't get much constructive public policy attention. In light of this drop-out data, how ought one to react when hearing about a state enlarging greatly graduation requirements when that state's schools are already losing a very large number of its students before graduation? North Dakota and our neighboring state of Minnesota, as you might know, lead the nation in the numbers of its students who complete high school. But who are those who don't complete high school in North Dakota and Minnesota and in other states with similarly high graduation rates? And who are those who stay in school but struggle with learning, who lack the skills and knowledge to go on successfully to a full range of post secondary educational settings? I have done enough to know that race and social class are powerful factors in the educational success of students in these schools--as they are elsewhere. But in these more stable looking, more favorable settings, it isn't often part of the ongoing discourse.

And what seems to characterize much of what is being proposed as the 1980's "return to quality" reform? We are seeing more testing mechanisms, more state curriculum requirements that seek greater standardization, increased centralization regarding text and materials selection, time-on-task mandates that foster increased minutes of worksheets, pedagogical admonitions that equate discrete skills with whole meaning and rule making that confuses the constructs of discipline and responsibility. Such tried-before directions have not in the past brought much improvement to the schools and there is no reason to believe that the future will be different. Such regulatory directions will surely discourage the best and brightest from considering teaching at a time when teacher demand is enlarging and demoralize large numbers of those thoughtful teachers whom we most need to continue in the schools. Over the long run, they will most likely discourage students and parents as well.

And how should we respond to the following issues which relate to fairness, access and economic well

being, issues which are receiving too little attention in the discourse of educational reform? For example, only 18 percent of those who qualify for Headstart services are being served in spite of the carefully researched and reported benefits. Bilingual programs, guaranteed by legal and legislative actions, serve fewer than 25 percent who qualify. Special education support still doesn't reach a large percentage of those who need such services. And within special education there is the paradox of blacks and other cultural minorities being overplaced through misclassification --straining an underfinanced system unnecessarily. Black students, for example, are about four times as likely as white students to be in a class for the mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed. Title I services which have proven successful in many realms of school achievement reach just over 50 percent of those eligible. And very few secondary students receive any assistance from Title I. And further, in regard to Title I, the requirements for parent advisory councils, a vehicle for encouraging parents to take an important role in the substance of their children's education, have been relaxed significantly, seen within this current national administration as burdensome and unnecessary. Even our states are beginning to drop parent advisory requirements in their compensatory programs. Vigorous enforcement of the Civil Rights Act and of Title IX has virtually come to an end. With the loss of Women's Equity Coordinators, for example, the curricular efforts of the early to mid 70's have virtually collapsed. Enormous inequities of resources and curriculum exist between school districts and in schools within school districts. If you take some time visiting diverse schools--an activity you would all find enlightening--look at the chemistry labs, the libraries, the aesthetic character of them. You will find enormous differences. Overall services for children--nutrition, child care, housing--are more inadequate than they have been since the years of the great depression. Females are still heavily concentrated in vocational programs aimed at the lowest paying jobs in our economy, contributing to the increasing feminization of poverty. Tracking mechanisms that have long worked against the interests of those most vulnerable in the schools have expanded and new sources of exclusion are being encouraged in the name of quality. These are critical issues--tests of our commitments to equity, pluralism and social democracy.

In regard to this democratic commitment, I want to share with you a little of the report I have had the pleasure and the pain of putting together in association with the National Coalition of Advocates for Students--essentially a coalition of eighteen major civil rights and child advocacy organizations. Issued in a Washington, D.C. school by Marion Wright Edelman (of the Children's Defense Fund) and Harold Howe (former Commissioner of Education) a little over a month ago, the report is sub-titled Our Children at Risk, a self-conscious play on The Nation at Risk. It is based to a large degree on the testimony of persons such as yourselves, students, parents and political leaders.

At our first hearing in Boston, Massachusetts, a witness urged us to ask ourselves one question--"Which children matter and to whom?" We tried to apply this criterion throughout our inquiry and came to the conclusion that large numbers of children do not matter enough to too many of those who set the education and economic policies of this nation

and its states and localities. Minority children do not matter as much as non-minority children; poor children are considered less important than non-poor children. Non-English speaking children are not as important as English speaking children; and girls matter less than boys. Now most of us would like to wash our hands of this and for the most part do in press of our educational lives, but how can we really come to any different conclusions?

Let me share some of the testimony that emerged.

This was a young man in New York City.

I hated the school. It was overcrowded; teachers didn't care; students walked out and acted up and no one did anything to help the situation. I never knew who my counselor was, and he wasn't available for me. In the year that I attended, I saw him once about working papers. One 10-minute interview period. That was all. After awhile, I began spending my time sleeping in class or walking the halls. Finally, I decided to hang out on the streets. I did this for two years. During this entire time, I received about three cards in the mail asking where I was. Luckily, I always got the mail before anyone in my family did. That was it. End of school.

There are a large number of young people in Boston who are on the school rolls but have never been seen, and have never been contacted. The argument is, they are 16 years of age and as I was often told "we have no legal responsibility to make sure they are in school." But what of the moral responsibility?

In Massachusetts, a teacher reported to us that when she tried to get enough textbooks for all of her students, she was told to have students share the books because half her class would leave anyway. Still another teacher, whose principal responsibility was to teach writing, told us of her school's policy to hand out half-sheets of paper to students, no matter what the assignment. She did not understand how she could expect her students to complete serious writing assignments if the initial message to them was they would not have more than a half-page worth to say. But she was told often not to have expectations greater than this. A parent who described herself as "an average middle-class citizen" of Seattle told us of her reaction to the gifted option program established in that city--a program, by the way, that drained off a fairly large number of students from each of the neighborhood schools. I can see her saying it. It was a powerful statement given with great passion and corroborated by several other white middle class women.

Every time I read, or hear, how much somebody loves the Seattle School District, how they love the special program their child is enrolled in, how they applaud the job of educating the school district is doing, I don't have to read any further. I know the next sentence will read, "My child is enrolled in the 'gifted' program...." No one with a child in a non-gifted classroom in Seattle, with one or two exceptions, would ever think of writing such a letter of praise.

She concluded: "If the regular classroom is not good enough for the gifted, perhaps it is not good enough for those left in it either."

Others in Seattle talked about the depressing effects the "creaming" of kids (and parents)--mostly white and middle class--has had on the regular schools. The parent I

quoted earlier asked, "What are my children--all in the gifted magnet that is almost exclusively white and middle class--learning about the values of democracy?"

A number of witnesses noted how little is done in most schools to retain or bring back pregnant or parenting teens either in terms of providing support services or making the school climate more welcoming. As one presenter testified, "Even if she is granted medical maternity leave, she will probably fall behind in her studies...because home tutoring is not readily accessible and schools for pregnant girls do not have a full curriculum."

Lack of day care also appears to be a principal reason teen parents have difficulty returning to school. With child care sporadic or uncertain, many of those who do return cannot meet the attendance requirements and end up suspended from school. The director of a continuing education program for girls in Michigan noted that "teens returning to school after delivery fear being judged immoral, delinquent or promiscuous by school personnel." Already frightened at the prospect of "being different" and of not fitting into a classroom situation, these young women often "lose heart and stay at home." As a social worker in Chicago put it, "when there are problems with re-registering and when administrative officials at the school are not supportive, it is hard to feel wanted."

In effect, many of our schools have all but written off this population of young women. Having allocated few resources, schools offer little help once a student becomes a young parent.

What else did we learn--relearn --get pushed to comprehend again?

Forgive the kaleidoscopic nature of what follows:

- *The average child from a family whose income is in the top quarter of the income range gets four years more schooling than the average child whose family income is in the bottom quarter. (This gap has remained rather static for several decades.)*

- *In 1977 50 percent of all black high school graduates went to college. In 1981 the rate had fallen to 40 percent and in October 1982, it fell to 36 percent. The percentage for whites has continued at between 51-54 percent.*

Thirty years after Brown:

- *62.9 percent of black students attend predominantly minority schools.*

- *Only 8.5 percent of all teachers are minorities (and this number is declining).*

- *At the high school level, blacks are suspended three times as often as whites; while minority students are about 25 percent of the school population, they constitute about 40 percent of all suspended and expelled students.*

- *The national drop-out rate for blacks in high schools is nearly twice that of whites.*

Women face considerable educational and economic discrimination. By the time they reach young adulthood, females are often at a disadvantage relative to males in basic skills, in academic options and aspirations, in vocational and career opportunities and in anticipated economic security.

- *Vocational education programs remain overwhelmingly segregated by sex, with females clustered in those programs that prepare them for the lowest paying jobs. Females comprise 92 percent*

of those studying to be secretaries, or cosmetologists, but only five percent of those in electrical technology.

- *Women are less likely than men to complete four years of college.*

- *At all educational levels, women have higher unemployment rates than men.*

- *Women college graduates on the average earn less than men with an eighth grade education. The average woman worker earns about 59 percent of what a man does, even when both work full-time; minority women earn less than any other group or worker. (Women in the workplace, by the way, were doing as well or better in 1883.)*

- *Pregnancy is the major known cause of dropping out among school-age females. Three-fifths of women at or below the poverty level in 1982 were high school drop-outs.*

School finance has long been a major issue. The Serrano Case in California in the early 70's brought the fiscal inequity issue to the level of critical public discourse. Yet, enormous inequities persist.

- *Funding varies widely among states. In 1982, New York spent $2,769 per pupil while Mississippi spent $1,685.*

- *Funding varies widely within states as well. In Massachusetts, for example, annual per pupil spending reaches a high of $5,013 in Roe and a low of $1,637 in Athol. In Texas, the top 100 districts spend on average four times more per child than the bottom 100 school districts. Some school districts spend two or three times as much as do neighboring districts. This sort of inequity is repeated in many other states.*

The need for difficult questions to be raised is high. This is not to say that all that appears negative is conscious or overtly pernicious. Nor does it say that many of the issues that I have outlined are not being seriously addressed in many settings by thoughtful and courageous persons.

In settings where 85-90 percent of young people complete high school, too little time is spent asking about the 10-15 percent who don't. I can assure you though that they look a great deal like the 40-50 percent who don't complete high school in New York City and Boston and Los Angeles and Chicago. We speak with pride in North Dakota, as I know people do in many other places, about our advanced placement programs and our superior math and science and arts programs without asking often enough about the students who are and aren't represented. We should be more troubled than we are when we see only one woman for every eight men in the calculus class or one black or Hispanic for every 10 whites or, as was shown in an MSU research, that ninth grade general math is dominated by minority students and white females.

We have far to go to assure a democratic, fully equitable and accessible system of education. But we won't get there unless we continue to raise our voices and keep our commitments vital--asking hard questions, challenging simple answers, creating and risking the implementation of new structures.

Now I know that much of my message has had a negative quality. That was purposeful. I presented it because it represents a dimension of American education that has been put aside by too many--forgotten in the glow of talk about standards, quality and excellence. I meet increasingly individuals who argue that the quality we need may well have to come at the expense of a commitment

to a fully equitable and democratic system of education. I refuse to accept that. It seems that many of us in education have become spectators, voicing too few concerns about the loss of minority teachers to the ax of some technical formulation of competence; or watching kindergartners in record numbers being held back and more students failing to complete high school than has been the case for two decades; or accepting funds for more specialized schools for the privileged while inadequate funding is the general rule; or spending even more money on testing mechanisms when we can't support the funds necessary to support bilingual education at minimal levels; or developing larger statewide mandates which diminish even further the potential of individual schools and their teachers and parents and students from becoming sufficiently empowered to develop responsible programs; or choosing not to protest very loudly the loss of arts funds or library resources or jobs programs. We need to be more than spectators--we need to encourage louder voices from many more of our school administrators, teachers, students and their parents. For all of those reasons and more that I could supply, I chose to root my talk in the need to address issues of equity and access.