The Journal of Law and Education

Volume 2 | Issue 1 Article 14

1-1973

Book Reviews

Book Reviews

Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America. By Christopher Jencks. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1972. Pp. 399, $12.50.

How much effect has educational reform had on equalizing incomes? Both educators and laymen are likely to take umbrage at Christopher Jencks' conclusion that equalizing educational opportunity will not significantly alter the degree of economic inequality among adults. Bristling with controversial findings, *Inequality* might portend a new philosophy on the purpose of education in modern society.

Jencks and seven colleagues at Harvard's Center for Educational Policy Research, with the support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, re-analyzed most of the data gathered by major studies of schooling, income, and family background over the last decade, along with recent census data. To weave together this disparate information and draw from it conclusions, the Harvard team employed a sophisticated statistical technique called path analysis. Indeed, the jargon-laden prose and myriad of detailed footnotes and appendices are enough to boggle most readers' minds.

Critics have already attacked Jencks' methods and conclusions. The team gathered almost no new data. More important, perhaps, is the charge that his way of analyzing data is faulty. To properly use path analysis in this instance, Jencks had to program a computer with a series of mathematical equations embodying the variables which he assumed influence economic success. Although the magnitude of such an undertaking is awesome, Jencks believes that both his assumptions and conclusions are correct. In any case, the burden of proof may now be shifted; unless disproved by future studies, Jencks' findings will probably stand.

Inequality presents three general conclusions. First, poverty is a condition of relative rather than absolute deprivation. Jencks contends that the cost of living is not the cost of buying some fixed set of goods and services, but the cost of participating in a social system. What neighbors spend to participate in the system largely defines "necessities" and "poverty." In short, the problem is economic inequality rather than low incomes.

Second, equalizing educational opportunity will not do much to equalize adult status, power, or income. For example, Jencks compared the economic prospects of brothers raised in the same home. He found that the difference between brothers' incomes was almost as great as between random pairs of men. In sum, Jencks concluded that economic inequality is not mostly inherited; rather, it is created anew in each generation.

Third, even if equalizing opportunities for economic success was a societal goal, making schools more equal would not help very much. Differences between

schools have very little long-term economic effect on students. Drafters of the reform legislation of the 1960s imagined that if schools could equalize people's cognitive skills this would equalize their bargaining power as adults. Neither racial desegregation, nor increased school spending, nor preschool programs, nor compensatory education has significantly reduced inequality in cognitive skills, which Jencks defines as "the ability to manipulate words and numbers, understand instructions and make logical inferences." In fact, Jencks writes: "The character of a school's output depends largely on a single input, namely the characteristics of its entering children. Everything else—the school budget, its policies, the characteristics of the teachers—is either secondary or completely irrelevant."

Moreover, Jencks argues that the primary reason some people end up richer than others is not that they have more adequate cognitive skills. Economic success seems tightly tied to noncognitive factors, such as personality and luck.

These findings imply that school reform is never likely to have any significant effect on the degree of inequality among adults. Rather than serving as socialization agencies, whose job is to change people, schools have primarily functioned as certification agencies, legitimizing inequality. Instead of focusing on the long-term effect of schooling, Jencks argues that the primary basis for evaluating a school should be whether students and teachers find it a satisfying place to be. He eschews the notion that schools should be like a "mediocre summer camp" while highly valuing ideas and the life of the mind. Jencks does not belittle the importance of education, but he squarely rejects the tradition that equal educational opportunity can eradicate economic inequality.

Despite Jencks' liberal stance, *Inequality* may buttress opponents of busing. The report plainly states that forced busing cannot be justified on the ground of its long-term benefits for students. The Harvard team found, for instance, that racial desegregation raises black elementary school students' test scores by only two or three points. Nevertheless, Jencks' presentation of a knotty problem should be applauded for its simplicity—if we want an integrated society, we ought to have integrated schools. In addition, Jencks advocates open schools. That is, school boards ought to provide transportation, expand the relevant schools, and ensure that students are welcome in the schools they want to attend.

Inequality's conclusions may also have important implications for the school financing imbroglio created by *Serrano* v. *Priest* and its progeny. Jencks found that a school's annual expenditure is moderately related to the test scores of its alumni. But this is because affluent schools enroll students whose test scores are above average to begin with. Consequently, equalizing school expenditures will do little to reduce cognitive inequality. Nonetheless, Jencks contends that the public treasure ought to be equitably divided, even if the distribution of such money has no long-term effect. Well-financed schools are more enjoyable places for students and teachers to live and play. After all, students spend approximately one-fifth of their lives in school. Jencks, in fact, would attempt to equalize lifetime expenditures per pupil by directly taxing those who benefit from higher education.

The fundamental question remains: how great is our country's commitment to economic equality? Jencks writes: "Egalitarians' first aim should be to convince people that the distribution of income is a legitimate political issue." Further.

Jencks would tackle economic inequality directly, not by trying to manipulate marginal institutions like the schools. He suggests that the government might force employers to make the wages of their best- and worst-paid workers more equal, or provide the poor with more free public services. Jencks recognizes that this is probably not a politically palatable course at present. However, this does not mean, he emphasizes, that government control of income distribution is the wrong strategy.

Jencks firmly believes in the importance of education, and even though educators are likely to respond acrimoniously to his findings, *Inequality* could prove to be a much needed liberating force in educational policy. Instead of fearfully awaiting test score results, educators could concentrate on the internal life of schools. Making schools a more humane place to live would have a salutary effect on the entire social fabric.

Jencks' conclusions must be scrutinized and their validity tested. Concomitantly, additional data must be gathered and analyzed. Jencks made no attempt to explore the relationship between economic inequality and inequality in other realms, such as health, happiness, or political influence. This should be done. In the meantime, this report is mandatory reading. *Inèquality* could be the cornerstone in a new edifice of educational and social policy.

CHRISTOPHER SMITH*

* An attorney with Arent, Fox, Kintner, Plotkin, and Kahn, Washington, D.C.

3 BOOKS OF INTEREST

Law and the School Superintendent, 2nd. Edition, 1971 (M. CHESTER NOLTE, ED. IN CHIEF) *$8.50*

Sponsored by The National Organization on Legal Problems of Education.

Includes: The Legal Status of the Public School Superintendent

The Superintendent and School Integration

The Superintendent and Church-State Relations

The Superintendent and Collective Negotiations and Communications Law

Authors: M. C. Nolte, R. B. Vlaanderen, M. A. McGhehey, E. E. Reutter, Jr., J. P. Radloff, Anne Flowers, D. E. Boles, J. P. Linn, M. M. Volz, L. W. Knowles

Student's Legal Rights and Responsibilities, 1971 (LAMORTE, GENTRY, YOUNG) *$8.00*

Provides guidelines for those involved in educational administration in the formulation of policy and its enforcement.

". . . the question of the proper governance of student conduct has become a matter of growing concern to both local school boards and administrators. Issuing rules and regulations which, in their judgment, would promote efficient administration of the school, has become more difficult than in past years. Failure to take this into consideration may result in local officials being charged with exercising arbitrary authority, and when authority is perceived in this light, it now risks being challenged in the courts."

—from the Foreword

Teachers' Legal Rights, Restraints and Liabilities, 1971 (EDWARD C. BOLMEIER) *$6.50*

A topical discussion of matters of deep concern to members of the teaching profession—contents includes:

RIGHT OF TENURE

TERMINATION OF TENURE BY DISMISSAL

RIGHT OF LEAVE OF ABSENCE

RIGHT OF ASSOCIATION

RIGHT TO TEACH CERTAIN CONTROVERSIAL MATTERS

RIGHTS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

RIGHT TO STRIKE

LIABILITY FOR PUPIL INJURIES

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

TABLE OF CASES

INDEX

W. H. Anderson Company 646 Main Street Cincinnati, Ohio 45201