

It was six earnest scholars
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

And so these earnest scholars
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his opinion,
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

With apologies to John Godfrey Saxe

WHO'S AFRAID OF CHRISTOPHER JENCKS?

Only those with blindfolds still in place

BY KIM MARSHALL

Inequality, the book by Christopher Jencks and seven colleagues, has been around for more than a year, and it is time, now that the initial shock waves are ebbing, to step back and take a new look at it. The book's original impact was widely heralded as mind-boggling and foundation-shaking because it said, according to the press and others, that schools were not making Americans from all walks of life more equal and, in fact, were having little effect on success in later life. Friends sent me clippings about the book with notes in the margins such as, "What do you think of *that*?" as if, because I am a teacher, I would be traumatized by the news.

I was worried enough to read the book, and having plowed through it, I came to three conclusions: (1) No sane teacher should feel threatened by any of the book's conclusions. (2) Jencks and his colleagues did a great deal of important and interest-

ing work on the links between IQ, heredity, family background, schooling and income. (3) The book was not written for teachers but for social scientists and policy makers. It therefore does not stress (and neither did the newspaper and magazine accounts) a number of conclusions that are of great interest to teachers.

However, many teachers are less worried by the content of the book than they are by the way conservatives around the country have been using it to justify cuts in school budgets and slow-downs in integration. These fears have been heightened by the mass media's concentration on the book's themes of "Schools don't make a difference" and "More school spending won't affect inequality."

The points Jencks made that bear on these fears are:

- Schools don't make society more equitable; in fact, they "serve to legitimize inequality" in the distribu-

tion of wealth in that society.

- The effect schools have on kids is fairly uniform, meaning that kids don't leave school much more equal than they entered it. As Jencks puts it: "Variations in what children learn in school depend largely on variations in what they bring to school, not on variation in what schools offer them."
- Racial desegregation doesn't affect test scores very much and has little subsequent effect on inequality in the society or the economic chances of students who are already at a disadvantage when they enter school.

These points have been widely disseminated without some of the qualifications that Jencks attached. For example, they deal only with test scores and income and not with a host of other factors in schooling and people's lives.

Perhaps Jencks stated some of the book's conclusions too boldly, making them tempting to report out of con-



No matter what you hear,
SCHOOLS ARE FAILURES.

A point well taken:
It's All a
MATTER of
background
AND heredity

The PROBLEM IS
just too BIG for
TEACHERS to DO
Anything about.

TAIL-enders will always
be tail-enders.

Too Far apart-
there's No way
to BRIDGE the
Gap.

THE differences
ARE TOO GREAT,
It SIMPLY CAN'T
Work.



text and easy to misinterpret. This is one of the dangers of writing social science in such controversial areas. When I spoke to him, Jencks said if he had it to do over again, he would put several points differently. But he was diffident about the impact of the book on the ongoing public policy debate. He said that in the short run, sociological books have little effect on policy, that only when their conclusions have been absorbed into the conventional wisdom do they have such impact.

The point that many have missed is that Jencks wrote the book mostly to make a case for income redistribution by government action (he argues that no one should have an income of less than half the national mean). He makes this case by using a lot of test-score and income statistics to demonstrate that schools can do very little to redistribute income from rich to poor. When Jencks says that schools don't make a difference, he means that they neither change the patterns of inequality with which kids enter school nor reduce income inequalities among them after they leave school. Only government action can achieve that, says Jencks.

However, Jencks is *not* saying that schools don't make a big difference in people's lives in personal and intellectual and aesthetic and moral and other ways that don't show up on data concerned mainly with aggregates and averages and test scores. Nor is he saying that there aren't other, stronger arguments for spending money to make schools better and spending money to close the gaps between rich and poor schools.

Out of my own reading of the book, I have drawn eight conclusions that should be of reassurance and interest to all but those teachers who were laboring under the impression that schools can alter the economic structure of this society. Some of the points Jencks himself makes; others I have drawn as much from things he left unsaid as from those he spelled out. In the welter of publicity and reaction that followed the book's publication, almost all positive judgments deriving from the book were lost. They now seem particularly worthy of expression:

1. Teachers can and do make a difference in the lives of their students. It is important to remember, in this context, that Jencks' data deal only with the effects of schooling on test scores, which are at once the hardest measure of student achievement to improve and one of the least important factors in success in later life. Moreover, Jencks deals in

aggregates and averages, which are fine from a sociologist's point of view but misleading in relation to the individual teacher. So the accomplishments of a teacher who in one year prevented a student from committing suicide, turned another on to a career in writing, and prevented five others from dropping out of school would not show up at all in the data.

Jencks spends much of the book trying to pinpoint the factors that lead to good jobs and incomes for adults. He finds that good grades and rich schools aren't important, although they do help, and ends up without a satisfactory explanation for adult inequality. Jencks' guess is that part of the gap is accounted for by sheer luck, but another part is certainly attributable to the immeasurable influence individual teachers have on student attitudes, values and aspirations.

Jencks told me that there has been virtually no research on the effects individual teachers have on a broad range of cognitive and noncognitive student skills over a period of years, which is astonishing. Presumably, sociologists will eventually get around to this kind of study. Meanwhile, teachers should rely on their gut feelings that conscientious, sensitive, humane teaching is having an effect on real people every day.

2. Teachers of the disadvantaged have extra impact. Jencks cites a study in New York City which showed that half the advantage that affluent kids enjoy over their poorer peers is acquired during the summer months while the schools are closed. The implication is that kids from more affluent families have access to more sources of educational stimulation outside school than the less affluent, thus making the poor more dependent on the schools for their learning. This is an insight that should help teachers of the disadvantaged cope with the ups and downs of their jobs.

3. Teachers should concentrate their reform efforts inside their own schools. They will have far more effect there than they will trying to bring about changes in an entire school system. Jencks says that "as the long-term effects of schooling seem much less significant . . . the internal life of schools seems correspondingly more important." And this is the area in which teachers have maximum impact. Perhaps Jencks' book will help teachers realize that their efforts should not be primarily devoted to trying to improve test scores and the economic future of their students but to creating with other teachers a stimulating and

humane environment.

4. Schools should reduce their emphasis on test scores and competition between students. Jencks thinks the invidious effects that such competition has on those who do badly on tests—the feeling of failure and uselessness—can't be justified by any possible positive effects resulting from the competition. His attack on test scores and competitiveness is two-pronged. First, Jencks is concerned with the internal life of schools and their immediate effects on the lives of students. Any system that inflicts psychological damage on a substantial number of students, as a competitive school must, is indefensible.

Second, and to repeat, Jencks' data show that test scores are much less important in later life than many had believed. Jencks writes, "Standardized tests measure skills that are useful in getting through school, not skills that pay off once school is over." Jencks also found that schools do very little to change the test scores of students. For the most part, those who score well when they start school are those who score well later on, and those who start off poorly generally wind up that way. Hence, school competition based on test scores is to a large extent a rigged race in which the winners are known right from the beginning. As long as schools use test scores to select the winners—the "good" students—things will continue to be very rough for those who don't score well.

How differently would teachers do things if they no longer had to deal with competition and test scores? Jencks thinks that most schools need rigor and tests and perhaps grades to retain a sense of purpose, to give both teachers and students a feeling that they are doing something organized and worthwhile. Thus some teachers might go on doing things in the same way if test scores and competition were to vanish, but at least they would be doing them for the right reasons.

But a shift away from competitiveness might have a more important effect. A real liberation from test scores might void one of the few excuses schools have to remain grimly serious and oppressive, to set students trampling each other for grades.

5. Schools should spend much more time developing noncognitive skills. This conclusion is a corollary of Jencks' point that "most jobs require a wide variety of skills. Standardized tests measure only a very limited number of those skills." One of Jencks' most striking and comprehensible statistics is that there is

almost as much income inequality among adults who had the same test scores as students as there is in a random sample of people with widely differing test scores.

This is part of Jencks' argument that schools should focus more on the quality of the lives of students in the here and now—the pleasure they get from reading books, their ability to think critically, their tolerance of other viewpoints, their values, their ability to concentrate and carry projects through to completion, their patience, their appreciation of art and music, their relationships with other people. (It should be noted, however, that while test scores don't have much direct bearing on how people perform in their jobs, there is no doubt that kids who do well on tests are usually encouraged to stay in school long enough to get credentials. That gives them a foot in the job-market door, while those who score badly become discouraged, drop out and are then at a disadvantage in job competition, even though they might be able to do certain work better than the big scorers.)

6. Teachers should not be fatalistic about genetic factors in school achievement. Jencks challenges Arthur Jensen's celebrated conclusion that IQ is 80 percent inherited and is linked to race. Jencks puts the figure at only 45 percent inherited, and makes the further point that the science of measuring genetic and environmental factors is not nearly exact enough to justify precise figures such as Jensen's or, presumably, his own.

More to the point, Jencks brands the whole argument about IQ a red herring. A high IQ, he says, is primarily useful in scoring well on school tests (which are in turn designed to measure IQ) and has little correlation with economic success. High IQs don't necessarily lead to high incomes because they are only one of many links in a chain that can be broken or joined at any point.

The message for teachers is clear. They should resist developing negative attitudes towards kids with below-average IQs, because these attitudes tend to be self-fulfilling and contribute to a downward spiral of failure and discouragement. They should also get away from notions about the racial basis of intelligence, and they should diversify their student evaluations to include noncognitive skills.

The emphasis on IQ and the way schools select their winners at the starting line don't have negative effects only on the losers; there is a delayed effect on the winners as well. Being praised and reinforced for

doing well on tests builds a narrow self-esteem in many smart kids, a feeling of superiority and elitism. Many of them suffer rude shock when they encounter other, even brighter kids at college level, or leave school and discover that their high IQs and test scores are not very highly regarded.

7. Teachers should do all they can to keep kids in school who would otherwise drop out. One of Jencks' most interesting findings is that school attainment (the number of years spent in school) has a greater impact on the kind of job and the kind of income people will get than any other single factor. In other words, simply getting a kid through school and into possession of some decent credentials will have more effect on his later life than raising IQ or tinkering with cultural and psychological factors.

Educational credentials are important because those students who are considered "unfit" are all too frequently eased out of school. Employers more or less assume that anyone who made it through the nonsense of school must possess considerable stamina. As Jencks writes, "Schools serve primarily as selection and certification agencies, whose job it is to measure and label people, and only secondarily as socialization agencies, whose job is to change people." Keeping a potential dropout in school, teachers should remember, may give him that all-important foot in the job-market door.

8. Schools should do away with "ability" tracking. Separating kids into "fast" and "slow" classes is the way schools demoralize and dehumanize kids who don't do well in narrow cognitive skills, the way they breed an unwarranted elitism among those who have high IQs. The education that these two groups get is inherently unequal. The argument for integration of different ability levels within schools is as valid as the argument for integration of the races. In fact, tracking is as much a denial of equal opportunity as is racial segregation.

Tracking directly affects attainment, since kids who are put in noncollege tracks have much less chance of finishing school and getting the credentials they need to get a decent job. But the effects of tracking have an insidious earlier effect. Jencks says that by the time kids reach the ninth grade, the expectations of what they are going to achieve pretty well match what they actually achieve. In other words, they have scaled their opinions of themselves and what they can do down to the school's opinion of them.

The abolition of tracking would also help create classrooms containing mixtures of abilities, talents and interests. Jencks confirms the conclusion of earlier studies—that putting kids from different social classes and ability levels together in the same classroom helps the disadvantaged kids significantly without hurting the advantaged. The data suggest that working and rubbing shoulders with brighter and more sophisticated peers is one of the best learning resources for disadvantaged kids. It may also be good for the brighter kids, who would escape the shallow and unhealthy elitism that flourishes in the hothouse "smart" classes.

Jencks also found that there is more cognitive inequality within a given school than there is between even rich and poor schools. "Every elementary school," writes Jencks, "is nearly a microcosm of the larger society as far as cognitive inequality is concerned." Thus if schools were to do away with tracking and mix students at random, they would achieve almost a full representation of different ability levels in each classroom. Such schools would be much more truly integrated than those suburban schools that admit 50 middle-class blacks bused in from the inner city.

Getting rid of tracking is a goal that is, as Jencks puts it, technologically feasible now; the individual schools in which decisions about tracking can be made are the arenas in which teachers have the most clout. Truly integrating a metropolitan region, on the other hand, is an immensely complex process in which teachers can have only as much say as other affected citizens.

The abolition of tracking might also serve as a catalyst for the development of more open and individualized teaching methods because it is difficult to teach a class with kids of all different levels of ability in a traditional stand-up style. At the elementary school level, this points to open classrooms or learning-station styles of teaching. In junior high school it points to more flexible team-teaching arrangements, and in high school, to a school-without-walls concept.

In sum, the most important thing that teachers should get from Jencks is that changes that do make a difference to the lives of children are within their reach right now. ■

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