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ABSTRACT

Public schools in the big cities and urban areas will become proportionally more minority and poor in the 1980's and 1990's. The traditional measures used to collect data on minority population have proved to be inaccurate. The following items are needed and will be of value to people working in urban public schools: (1) data which distinguish between students who read with understanding and those who merely recognize or sound out words, and data which also assess students' level of understanding; (2) data on ages when students begin to show real growth in terms of higher order thinking; (3) correlation between grades, achievement tests and social class; (4) studies of cohort groups nationally by social class in relation to attendance and achievement; (5) alienation from school for students beginning at grade 5 or 6 and through high school; (6) type and nature of communication that occurs between the school and the community; (7) information concerning achievement data by social class cohort relating to improvement from year to year; (8) holistic data regarding students' writing improvement on a yearly basis; and (9) other data of importance not collected systematically such as teacher absence and student suspension, large district comparative statistical data, and state comparative data. (JAZ)

DATA NEEDS FOR BIG CITY SCHOOLS

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As we proceed into the 1980's and into the 1990's, our public schools in the big cities or urban areas will become even greater proportionally minority and poor. The needs, aspirations and ability of this poor and minority population in our big cities will require the development of new sources for data collection because the traditional measures used to collect data on this population have proved to be most inaccurate. Inaccurate data on this population has far reaching consequences for the future of America when they lead to policy decisions which address problems that no longer exist, problems that are not adequately defined and, in too many cases, problems that never existed. As well intended as these policy decisions might be, our country, with resources now scarce, cannot direct and use these resources by chance and in far too many instances use them to aggravate problems.

What is the data which will prove to be of the most value to persons working in the trenches at the public school level? Well, in my personal experience and knowledge gleaned from researchers, the following items are suggested with the idea that such data might lead to some reform. The fact that such data are collected could lead people to pay attention to them.

1. The NCES should help collect or report data which distinguish between students who read with understanding and those who mostly recognize or sound out words, and which also assess students' level of understanding.

Several tests are now available which can provide the data indicated above. Among these are the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) developed by the College Board in order to overcome some of the obvious deficiencies of the Scholastic Aptitude Test and other similar tests. Another is the Word Test now being validated by Dr. Ron Carver of the University of Missouri-Kansas City. The DRP and/or the Word Test and similar tests are urgently needed to help ensure that instruction is not driven unproductively toward mastery of narrow word attack skills which do not add up to reading with understanding. This is particularly important for disadvantaged students, whose elementary and middle-grades reading scores probably improved in the 1970's, but who did not make adequate gains in reading with comprehension. Comparable tests are needed to provide improved assessment of problem-solving in math as well as other higher-order skills.

A related test which also should be used to track the educational system's progress in developing the most important skills--i.e. higher-order thinking skills--is the Lawson Formal Operations Test. This test can help not just in assessing gains in students' performance on higher-order skills, but indirectly can help determine whether science, social studies, and other subject areas are being taught to develop thinking skills rather than unproductive rote memorization.

As part of the analysis of students' performance regarding comprehension and thinking skills, the NCES should conduct an analysis in selected big cities of discrepancies in performance between scores on the tests indicated above, performance on standardized tests such as the ITBS, the Stanford Test, or the Metropolitan, and performance on state and local criterion-referenced tests. Although the conclusions of this analysis are

predictable, i.e., many standardized tests and mastery tests currently in use frequently yield relatively high scores (particularly in the primary grades) when comprehension and other higher-order skills are low, and vice versa, documentation, verification, and publicity are urgently needed to avoid another decade of disaster in working to improve performance in big cities.

2. Higher order thinking skills beginning at 4th grade and going at least through Bachelors (particularly analyzing, synthesizing and evaluation) should become a common measure in our assessment programs.

Explanation: It is important to know at what age students begin to show real growth in this type of intellectual development. Additionally, the purpose of education ought to be in the final analysis to develop this type of intellectual development. There are tests available to do this, including the DRP.

3. Correlation between grades, achievement tests, and social class.

Explanation: It is clear that previous examination of how closely the grading system and testing program reflect social class has been inadequate. It is important to identify and examine these patterns. Also, it is important to identify if and when, or where, this relationship begins to change. These data are already available in schools; they need to be collected properly.

4. Studies of cohort groups nationally by social class in regard to attendance and achievement.

Explanation: Studies that show a relationship between attendance and achievement in schools could establish either a direct relationship or lack of a relationship, or determine that in some cases it matters and others it does not, i.e., are underclass children hurt by absence and upper middle class children not? Again, these data are available now but not correlated or collected in this manner. They could be.

5. Alienation from school for students beginning at grade 5 or 6 and through high school.

Explanation: Beginning as early as possible, data regarding alienation from school on the part of individual children or social class cohort ought to be collected. Such data when correlated with other data might reveal important information concerning context, climate, and learning. Instruments measuring this are available. There was a good deal of work on this in the 70's, both in the United States and Canada. Toronto University was particularly known for this.

6. The type and nature of communication that occurs between the school and the community.

Explanation: Data collected concerning the frequency, content, and type of communication between schools and homes of different social class and configuration (single parent, stepparents, foster houses, etc.), might begin to identify differences related to expectations. These data are

difficult to collect and would require more time than some might want to spend in the collection process.

7. Information concerning achievement data by social class cohort relating to improvement from year to year.

Explanation: It might be helpful to have a better understanding of how much improvement takes place from year to year by social class. Does it change as higher grade levels are involved? How many students overcome social class disadvantage at differing grades? Is the improvement the same and social classes simply start at different levels? These data are available if appropriate collection procedures are used.

8. Holistic data regarding students writing improvement on a yearly basis.

Explanation: Qualitative data is difficult to collect nationally. However, performance data beginning in kindergarten concerning language development is crucial. Written essays could be collected in September and another set in May. (A national sample would be needed.) Teams to do holistic grading of the two essays would be able to identify improvement. These performance data would be highly reliable data for prediction of school success. They could be collected in the 100 largest school districts in the country.

9. Other data of importance not currently collected systematically are:

A. Statistical data regarding Teacher Absence and Student Suspensions with related reasons.

B. State and large district comparative statistical data which would be of value and interest include: Technology/Computer utilization and application; Extent and success of the high school reform movement; Success of the Effective Schools movement; Extent and success of teacher competency testing; Equity and high risk children (Desegregation, Teenage Pregnancy, School Dropouts, Bilingual students, achieving excellence with equity).

In regards to the equity and high risk children issue, the large school districts are concerned primarily with learning about what programs are being developed and implemented to help solve the problem.

C. The Digest of Education Statistics provides most all comparative data by states. There is one section where selected statistics for the 120 largest school districts are provided. The expansion of this particular section to include more teacher and student data would be useful.

Again, the issue is not how much and how frequently to collect data. It is whether we want to collect diagnostic data which will assist us in formulating policies which will do more than measure, that is give appropriate direction to initiate necessary changes required to improve performance on the part of educational institutions and students. The populations in our big cities do not require more and better assessment on the wrong issues; let us all direct our efforts toward collecting data in a manner to give guidance in an effort to improve performance.