

Educational Equity: The Problem of Definition

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## Introduction

When the National Institute of Education was created by the Congress in 1972, its mission was set out in the initial paragraph of the authorizing legislation:

The Congress hereby declares it to be the policy of the United States to provide to every person an equal opportunity to receive an education of high quality regardless of his race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or social class .... To achieve quality will require far more dependable knowledge about the processes of learning and education than now exists or can be expected from present research and experimentation in this field. (PL 92-318, Sec. 405)

As envisioned by the legislation, NIE was to be concerned with both a general and a special task: to improve the quality or practice of education, and specifically to find ways to increase educational equity. Since practice has been understood to include everything from the setting of educational policy and structuring of educational finance to more effective classroom methods, it includes virtually anything that might hold some promise of improving American education. The meaning of practice improvement has thus not been much of an issue, however difficult it may be to actually accomplish.

The mission of providing for greater educational equity is, however, both more specific and more complex. More specific, because it identifies a particular historical problem ("Although the American educational system has pursued this objective .... inequalities of opportunity .... remain pronounced," as the authorizing legislation puts it). Yet more complex: six different group characteristics that have been the basis for discrimination are specifically mentioned (race, color, religion, sex, national origin and social class). Although individuals in all these groups have been the object of some kind of differential treatment based on assumed or imputed group

characteristics, each pattern of discrimination has its own historical evolution and present status. Moreover, the educational problems to be addressed range from problems of equal educational opportunity (denial of access or equal resources simply because of membership in one of these groups) to problems of equity: the provision of educational experiences for the poor, minorities, and women that are appropriate to their individual needs and thus really, "an education of high quality."

Thus the subtle and perhaps largely unconscious process by which women are dissuaded from pursuing advanced studies in mathematics is quite different from a governor standing "in the schoolhouse door" to prevent Black Americans from enrolling there. The methods by which Jewish student enrollment at certain exclusive colleges and universities was held within specified quotas is not quite the same as the problems Catholics have had getting professorial positions and tenure at these same institutions. The reasons for the lack of success of students from families at the low end of the socioeconomic ladder (a phenomenon observed in many other countries, including the Soviet Union) are not identical to the reasons for poor performance among Blacks (a problem rooted partially in social class, but also in the specific history of Blacks in America). The problem of providing equity now is complicated by the need to make up for the present effects of past inequitable treatment.

The provision of equity for all of the groups mentioned by the authorizing legislation (and for others not mentioned, such as the handicapped) is, then, a complex and many-sided problem. Each group is facing

barriers which differ in degree, in mode of operation and in severity, and which evolved in different ways. Further, at any given time, there are varying levels of current public awareness and professional concern (although religious discrimination is specifically mentioned by the authorizing legislation, for example, little research on this area is being done by NIE or anyone else).

Further, a thorough study of the barriers to educational equity requires a sound knowledge of both the groups being denied equity and the institutions which are not adequately serving them. To emphasize only the former would be to run the danger of "blaming the victim." On the other hand, to examine only institutions would make it impossible to provide the detailed information on the specific needs and characteristics of the client group which the institution must have in order to work more effectively for the members of that group

Thus, although the search for equity is at first glance a considerably narrower mission than that of improving practice, it is also quite complex and, in its own way, just as many-sided.

The two missions are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Any general improvement in American educational practice will benefit disadvantaged groups as well as everyone else. Fundamental research in such areas as human learning and the conditions under which understanding and retention are maximized may, in fact, be as much the key to improving inner city schools as research which is more obviously focused on "equity" issues.

### Attempts at Definition

Given the unusual complexity of "equity" in a pluralistic society as large and diverse as the United States, it is instructive to review the history of NIE's past attempts to reach consensus on a definition which would cover all situations, and criteria which would be applicable in all cases.

The Director of NIE, in February of 1974, created an Equal Educational Opportunity Committee "to ensure that the concept of equal educational opportunity permeates the entirety of the Institute's programs and activities." This committee almost immediately began to work toward an acceptable overall definition of equality of educational opportunity, so that criteria by which the Institute's plans and programs would be evaluated could be derived from this definition. The committee clearly gave this activity a great deal of time and effort. One briefing paper prepared for the committee reviews no less than 17 different approaches to defining equality of educational opportunity. These approaches stress different types of inequality, different levels of inequality, and different bases of inequality. Some are concerned with differing student backgrounds, others with equal access (or lack thereof) to the services and opportunities presented by the school, and still others with the differences in educational outcomes found in different groups. (It might be noted that there are also those who argue that it is a mistake to concentrate on group phenomena at all, and who produce definitions of equity centered around the individual.)

There is no doubt that the committee took this effort very seriously. One of the first memos sent to the committee by its chair states that,

"The first and possibly the most important responsibility of the Equal Educational Opportunity Committee is to establish criteria by which to assess NIE's progress toward the goal of equal educational opportunity ...." Other memos list some areas on which the committee had come to a consensus. Still other memos indicate that the committee soon found itself probing into the essential problems and assumptions underlying a search for equality (why is equality important? just what relation does school experience have to happiness and success in later life? how can past inequalities be remedied without preferential treatment, which is by definition unequal?).

Nine months after the committee began this task, an entire week was set aside for reviewing materials on this topic; three days of meetings, both morning and afternoon, followed. Yet, despite all this effort over a year's time, the committee was unable to come to a totally acceptable definition. (The committee largely ceased its activities after the untimely death of the staff member who chaired the group).

NIE set up an Equity Group in November of 1974 with a particular concern for research on equity problems. This group also wrestled with the problem of defining just what equity means. Even after more than a year of operation, consensus had not been reached. The fifth draft of a paper entitled, "National Institute of Education Equity Group: Programmatic Conceptualization and Mission Statement," dated February 9, 1976, notes that the paper had been developed by means of a process including "individual consultations, staff conferences, staff and consultant conferences, individual and group reactions to drafts of the paper." The paper has a thoughtful discussion of the problem of how to make educational

and social development, and social/political/economic participation independent of the backgrounds of group members. The paper argues for a deemphasis on the "deficit model" and an emphasis on differences. It notes that cognitive style, interest, motivation, aspiration, temperament and learning rate are crucial to school success, yet vary as much within language, ethnic and class groups as between them. It seeks to go beyond a narrow conception of equality or impartiality to an approach based on a nurturance of diversity.

These efforts, like those of the Equality of Educational Opportunity Committee, were serious and extensive. Yet we find, over a year later, that an external review of the Educational Equity Group complains "that the absence of clear conceptualizations about the matter of equity is a source of confusion." The reviewers note that "Equity is frequently used as a generic term within the Institute and as such leaves many opportunities for excessive ambiguity," and they recommend that "Equity criteria be developed in more specific detail ...." They also recommend accelerating the development of a programmatic definition of equity.

Thus, by the time the Reorganization Task Force was put together to plan the reorganization of 1977-78, NIE had had considerable (if frustrating) experience with the difficulties of trying to create a simple or universal definition of educational equity. As a result, there is a growing willingness to frame definitions according to the particular inequity being studied, and the purpose for which the findings will be used. As one paper prepared for the task force notes, for example, a definition acceptable to the courts is not the same thing as a definition

for educators. "An educational program suitable to the needs and aspirations of each individual," is a perfectly acceptable goal for an educator, but not a definition which a court can enforce. "Equity research" is not just the collection of data on educational phenomena broken down by race or sex. Rather, it involves the search for an understanding of the mechanisms by which inequities are brought about, and thereby for the means by which these inequities can be ended.

### Lessons of Experience

On the basis of NIE's experience thus far, it seems reasonably clear that, on the one hand, educational inequity is indeed (as the Congress admits) an unfortunate but pervasive fact of American life. On the other hand, however, its exact nature, mechanisms and remedies vary enormously depending on the context and the group in question, so that a definition with any meaningful specificity must be framed with the particular inequity and context in mind.

Thus specified, an inequity will often be found, on close examination, to present a variety of issues and problems that were not immediately evident. The fact that these issues have often not been thought through can indeed have negative consequences for research. As the draft of one paper prepared for the Reorganization Task Force notes, "the absence of clearly articulated paradigms and definitions contributes substantially to the haphazard and often incoherent research and development of programs to produce equality of educational opportunity."

There seem, then, to be two extremes which need to be avoided when considering this issue. One is to demand that an all-encompassing

definition of educational equity be worked out, with criteria for judging research proposals logically derived from this definition, before one may proceed to review specific research efforts with a view to making certain that they are consistent with NIE's equity mission. The opposite extreme would be to recognize the complexity of equity problems generally, and their many varieties and contexts in our society, and simply give up the effort to think through the issues involved in each case.

#### The Middle Way

The outcomes of NIE's recent reorganization seem to point the way toward a more useful course than either of these two extremes. On the one hand, the reorganization process recognized that equity concerns cannot be the limited responsibility of an equity officer or a small committee. Rather, equity concerns are at the heart of NIE's mission, and it is the Director, Deputy Directors, and Associate Directors who must be primarily responsible for seeing to it that NIE's research is, in fact, oriented toward the fulfillment of that objective. On the other hand, the complexity of this task, and the need for specialized knowledge of it, is recognized by providing for an Equity staff, housed in the Director's Office of Planning and Program Development.

One of the most important functions of this staff would seem to be the ongoing provision, through papers, seminars and discussion groups, of a continuing and thorough discussion of educational equity in all its forms. Rather than aiming at an overall definition, these efforts would concentrate on the origins, mechanisms and effects which characterize particular educational inequities. Such efforts can help program staff, who have the

primary responsibility for the proper focus of NIE's research, to carry out the equity mission. Simultaneously, acting as a part of the Planning and Program Development Office, the Equity staff can make expertise and assistance available to the Director and Associate Directors as they develop NIE's research plans and proposals. NIE's efforts will thus be more likely to contribute to a progressive accumulation of insight and information which can point the way to the lessening of inequity for all those individuals and groups in our society who have sometimes found our educational institutions more of a barrier than a help.

NIE is now planning and doing research that will examine significant areas of inequity in our educational institutions and systems. Data are being gathered that will aid efforts going on throughout the country to bring about school finance reform. Studies of desegregated and desegregating schools are under way in order to point the way toward high quality, stable, integrated education. More effective ways are being sought to select and train highly competent urban teachers and principals to run the kinds of schools which will provide opportunities not previously available to poor and minority students concentrated in urban areas. The process of advancement available to women and minorities within the teaching profession and into educational management is being studied. The fundamental process of teaching and learning is being researched, with a particular emphasis on the acquisition of literacy and its relationship to employment--a critical need of many poor and minority students. Possible bias in standardized tests is being investigated. Instructional approaches which might possibly better meet the needs of minority and bilingual students are being researched. Efforts are being made to increase the

participation of women in mathematics programs. Schools which are unusually effective with low-income students are being studied in an attempt to find the reasons for their success. The results of educational research are being brought to minority teachers and administrators who have not previously had access to them. Efforts to increase the number of women and minority group members in the educational research and development field are being implemented. The implications of minimum competency graduation requirements are being examined. The problems of unemployment and underemployment among youth, minorities and women are being addressed as researchers review how occupational skills are acquired, how career decisions are made, and how early work experiences influence career choices. Studies of post-secondary education are being initiated; one such study investigates community colleges which are unusually effective in instructing previously unsuccessful students.

If all of these efforts are to be carried out at a high level of sophistication; if their results are to be cumulative, with findings in one area being useful in another; if they are to be done in such a way that there is maximum likelihood that the final outcomes will actually change things and lead to an increase in educational equity, then there has to be a leadership function performed by the Director's office, assisted by the Planning Office, with the Equity staff as a key part of that process. This effort needs to concentrate on both (a) an ongoing dialogue with the program groups which attempts to help all NIE staff understand the many facets of the varied equity issues which NIE must investigate, and (b) a continuing effort to synthesize what is being done

not only throughout NIE, but in the education community generally. Thus, during the planning and program review process, the equity staff will be in a position to make a significant contribution to the development and monitoring of NIE's research projects, both by discussing equity issues with program staff as plans are developed, and by providing the Director's office with equity analyses as program plans are reviewed.

The outcome of these efforts should be a research agenda which focuses the limited funds which NIE has available on areas which have the maximum likelihood of producing results which can make a difference. What is important, in other words, is the rationale for the research and the probable uses to which positive results could be put. Simply taking an interesting study which would have been done anyway and breaking down the data by race, sex or socioeconomic status as a bow to an "equity focus" will not meet this criterion. Indeed, the research might then be unnecessarily complicated with little probability of producing information of any particular importance. Rather, after clarifying the nature and operations of those mechanisms which have denied a full set of educational options to Blacks, Hispanics, women and the poor, research needs to be focused on how to effectively remove these barriers, and how to deal with and overcome the present effects of past discrimination. Doing this research will often raise difficult methodological problems. Such research will require the full attention of the researcher; it will not be accomplished as an afterthought, something tacked on at the last minute to projects fundamentally focused on other questions.

This is not to deny, as has already been noted, that there is serious need for carefully focused research on fundamental, basic issues of human learning. Any forward movement in our understanding of the conditions under which people are most likely to learn presents opportunities to improve all of American education, including that of the groups who, in the past, have not been effectively served by our educational institutions.

As a practical matter, then, responsibilities would break down as follows:

- 1) The fundamental responsibility for maintaining an equity focus lies initially with the Associate Directors and program staff.
- 2) Assistance is to be provided by the equity staff, both (a) through consultation as research areas are defined and program plans are formed, and (b) through the provision of papers, discussions and seminars concerning the equity problems of specific groups in our society.
- 3) Equity is a major concern in research area planning, and the equity staff, as part of the Planning Office staff, will provide reviews of program plans for the Director's Office from an equity perspective.
- 4) The final responsibility for maintaining the concentration on equity issues lies in the Director's Office.

The goal of all of these efforts is to make NIE a center of excellence focused on a serious unsolved problem of American society. The alternative is to risk frittering away millions of dollars on inadequately conceived research projects with minimal results, and of no help to those most in need of greater understanding and assistance.