book review

What begat the achievement gap?

History of Chicago schools provides few answers

Schools Betrayed: Roots of Failure in Inner-city Education
By Kathryn M. Neckerman

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

The most urgent issue in American education for the last half century has been the failure of large numbers of African American children and older students to complete their education and reach an average level of competence. It is 10 years since the publication of The Black-White Test Score Gap, the collection of studies edited by Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, in which the education deficit was labeled starkly as the single most important obstacle to black advancement. Progress since then has not been marked.

At the beginning of Schools Betrayed, Kathryn Neckerman cites psychologist Kenneth Clark, who 40 years ago wrote in Dark Ghetto, “The dominant and disturbing fact about ghetto schools is that the teachers and the students regard each other as adversaries. Under these conditions the teachers are reluctant to teach and the students resist learning.” Clark’s research had been cited in the key Supreme Court decision banning state-imposed segregation in public schools, but one suspects on the basis of this quotation that he was already doubtful that desegregation alone would solve the problem of an adequate education for urban blacks. Not, of course, that desegregation was simple: it turned out to be awfully complicated and has never been substantially achieved in northern and midwestern cities.

Neckerman explores the origins of the black-white education gap in Chicago between 1900 and 1960, and for half of its length her book reads like a detective story. She examines three explanations of why inner-city schools failed blacks, and to each she says, no, that’s not it.

The first is the economic decline of northern and midwestern cities, which heightened financial pressures on the schools. In a word, they simply didn’t have enough money to deal properly with growing numbers of poor and black students. The second is racial barriers to employment in the North, “more subtle but no less real” than in the South. The third possibility is the rise of an “oppositional culture,” in which “academic effort [was framed] as a betrayal of racial identity—‘acting white.’”

On the issue of resources, she documents rising expenditure for the schools (in 1980 dollars) during this entire period; rising salaries for teachers, particularly in the 1950s; and declining numbers of students per teacher. Her conclusion is that “the urban decline thesis cannot by itself account for the problems of inner-city schooling that emerged…in the 1940’s and 1950’s.”

She notes that during most of the first half of the 20th century the issue in the Chicago schools was European immigrant children. Early on, black students had an advantage in enrollment over immigrant students, and a small advantage in graduation from high school. Immigrant parents often opposed continuing education for their children, as status could be earned in their communities through hard work and employment in small business. There were also routes to achievement through the labor union office, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Democratic Party, all hardly available for blacks.

In the postwar period she documents a widening education gap between black and immigrant students. Did insufficient or poor jobs for blacks give them less reason to stay in school? Neckerman points to the opportunities in the public sector and the civil service, where there was much less discrimination, and in the independent professions, namely law, medicine, dentistry, and the clergy, which “offered a chance to avoid some of the discrimination that private-sector employees faced,” and all of which required education. She does not dispute the widespread degree and depth of discrimination, but holds that in this situation education offered some advantage, some hope: “The economic returns to education…was [sic] similar for black and immigrant workers.” Yet the gap in taking advantage of educational opportunities grew.

We can measure urban decline and labor market discrimination to some extent through quantitative research. Tackling the “oppositional culture” explanation is harder. Neckerman asks why an oppositional culture should have arisen, as in black communities education was almost the only route to achievement. (She does not refer to the underworld,
sports, and entertainment as alternatives to status in black communities, but surely they played a role in shaping attitudes toward education.)

So where does Neckerman find the answer? Her research into the Chicago schools leads her to three theories of her own.

First is the growth of segregation in the Chicago schools. Clearly, this was related to immigration from the South and the resulting areas of black concentration, which were shaped by residential and labor market discrimination. At the least, the Chicago school authorities countenanced this development, but in response to community pressures they also facilitated it through school assignment and school districting. She writes that “the public schools lost legitimacy in the eyes of the black community.”

The second is the failure of vocational education to do much for black children. Vocational education began as an effort to connect to the world of work those children not headed for college, but in time it diverged between a higher track that afforded training that led to jobs, and a lower track that was simply an alternative to expected academic failure. Access to the top tier required at least basic numerical and language skills. She writes that vocational education “offers one example of how black students could be disadvantaged by policies that were ostensibly race neutral.” One reason blacks were denied the upper tier was that discriminatory trade unions would prevent them from using the skills they learned.

The third is that the Chicago schools’ programs of remedial education, which developed during this period, were neither sufficient nor well enough funded. The black schools were worst off, overcrowded, and with large classes: “...the schools’ race-neutral remedial policies had racially disparate effects, because they were implemented in an environment that—both inside and outside the school—was profoundly unequal.”

Neckerman returns in her last chapter to Kenneth Clark’s quotation and the problem of “authority and engagement.” This theme will be familiar and sad to school observers. The head of the Chicago Teachers College said in 1940, the black “is warned to beware of the white man and many of his attitudes...are colored by this caution. Teachers ‘pick on him’ not because he misbehaves but because he is black.... The Negro boy is drilled on what his rights are. Every teacher...knows that the first reaction of a Negro when she threatens to punish him is to say, ‘The law won’t let you hit me.’” All this is long before the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s and the expansion of the rights of school children.

This volume is a deep and full exploration of the schools of our second largest city, as Chicago was during this period, drawing on bodies of research that go back a hundred years. I find Neckerman’s distinctions, between the explanations she finds less supported in the research and those she eventually alights on, less sharp than she does. Both sets are so dependent on the web of discrimination in employment, residence, and status that it is hard to differentiate among them.

Certainly, theories rooted in discrimination have lost a good deal of explanatory power in the years since the period she explores. Still, our progress in dealing with the education gap has not been encouraging in the last decade or so. Nevertheless there is no alternative to continued effort. Neckerman’s sober and intensive study offers us little new guidance, and the only available answer is more of the same, on a wider and deeper scale.

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