



9-1-1975

Are Schools Truly Inept? A Reappraisal of the Most Controversial Report of our Time

Donald D. Chipman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/edconsiderations>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Chipman, Donald D. (1975) "Are Schools Truly Inept? A Reappraisal of the Most Controversial Report of our Time," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 3: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2090>

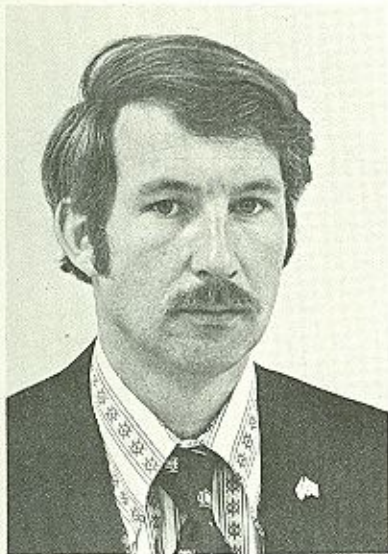
This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Considerations by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

The "troubled times of popular education" is a topic that shows up just about every year. The Jencks' report, however, bolsters the standard criticisms with sophisticated statistical analyses. Does the Jencks' conclusion still stand that the teaching profession is incapable of making any constructive contribution to the education of the lower-class child?

are schools truly inept?

a reappraisal of the most
controversial report of our time

by Donald D. Chipman



Donald Chipman, assistant professor of education at Georgia Southwestern College teaches foundations of education as well as history and philosophy of education. He is a representative to the Georgia Consortium for International Education and a consultant to the Special Studies Education Program at Southwestern College. He has also taught at Florida State University where he received his Ph.D. and has been a history teacher in California. He has been in the United States Navy since 1963 and has served as squadron education officer and instructor in the Naval Aviation Schools Command at Pensacola, Fla. He has published extensively on individualized instruction, as well as performance-centered and learner-oriented instruction modules for the Navy.

As Willy skipped down the dirt road, he was watching the red cloud of dust hovering over the approaching yellow bus. It was September, and he was about to enter his first year of public school. His parents, poor tenant farmers, were optimistic. Maybe someday he would be able to leave the Georgia red dirt farm for the slick crabgrass suburbs of middle class America. With an education, who knows, he might become a lawyer, a doctor, or even a mortician. With an education, Willy undoubtedly would be a success.

Somewhat typical of this scene, many Americans believe that schools are the golden stairway to success. With the closing of the frontier, in theory, schools replaced the California gold fields as the only pathway to the great American dream. What has happened to this belief and to what degree individuals like Willy will fulfill their expectations are the issues of popular educational polemics.

A recent survey indicates that Americans continue to maintain their romance with public education. According to a University of Michigan study, public schools are thought to be an effective social institution.¹ This is not unusual since Americans have had a recurring fantasy that schools can solve problems. It is difficult to assess how this notion first became a basic postulate. Certainly Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann, who constantly proposed that an educated citizenry would promote all that was socially good, popularized this belief. It is no wonder that when problems become apparent, someone proposes a new educational program. Obviously, since there were thousands of people killed annually on the highway, the solution was a new course: driver's education. Yet the slaughter continued, and only when the slogan "slow down and save a life" was changed to "slow down and save Exxon" did the number of deaths decrease.

Despite this romance, there appears a nagging antagonism that schools are not all they are supposed to be. Among these signs is the increasing literature concerning the apparent growth of illiteracy. A popular contemporary author claims that the U.S. is actually becoming a nation of illiterates.² The relaxation of college entrance requirements and the omnipotence of the television message are indications of this fact. Partially substantiating this allegation is a government survey which found that illiteracy among children was unexpectedly widespread. According to H.E.W. nearly five percent of the youths tested were found to be functionally illiterate. Projected on a national basis, this would mean that one million children between the ages of twelve and seventeen cannot read at a fourth grade level.³

These allegations are significant. Yet it should be noted that educators are somewhat callous when it comes to criticism. For years being an education critic was a game almost anyone could play; the only criterion was an audience large enough to disseminate the allegations.

During the post-war years, criticism was a common phenomenon. Individuals censured the schools for being overcrowded, which they were, for utilizing poorly trained teachers, which they did, and for many other reasons. At the time, educators were still experimenting with John Dewey's progressive theories. Consequently, teachers were castigated for being anti-democratic; anti-religious; anti-disciplinary; and, most popular of all, anti-intellectual. There was also a great deal of talk about a notion that schools were nurturing communism, McCarthyism, socialism, and fascism.

Utilizing a popular figure of the era, schools were accused of teaching Aldrichism. That is, they were promoting a form of juvenility patterned after the then popular Henry Aldrich of radio fame.⁴ Instead of the three R's, schools were supposedly teaching the three P's—paint, paste, and putter. Educators were described as rudderless rabbits, directing programs in which each child was encouraged to roam about, nibbling whatever flowers or weeds might, for the moment, attract his attention or tempt his appetite. It was no wonder that in such an environment, surrounded with doe-eyed teachers imbued with Munich meekness, children were supposedly learning to be savages. One of the most astonishing accusations came from an individual who said that Dewey and his theories were promoting Neo-American Nazism. After comparing a statement made by Dewey with a statement made by Hitler, this critic decided that progressivism was actually totalitarian in nature.⁵

In a somewhat more serious vein, historian Richard Hofstadter claimed progressives confused things so thoroughly that a half-century of clarification failed to hold in check the anti-intellectual perversion.⁶ Other writers, such as Arthur Bestor, Admiral Rickover, and more recently, Ivan Illich, have added their opinions. And so it has gone; each year a new version of the troubled times of popular education is published.

For the most part, it was not too difficult to point to the all pervasiveness of the institution and then neatly dispose of an attack. A good strategy was to throw out a few glittering generalities, such as "education is the adjustment to one's environment." Few can argue with this statement, whatever it may mean. If this strategy did not work, another approach was to play down the opposition. After being severely criticized, one famous educator replied with this little incantation:

I do not like thee, Dr. Fell
The reason why I cannot tell
but this I know and know full well
I do not like thee, Dr. Fell.⁷

Recently, however, a young Harvard professor, Christopher Jencks, has pinned the evasive educator to the wall. Until B.J. (before Jencks) Day, teachers were always allowed the courtesy of tinkering, molding, and dabbling with the institution in hopes of one day correcting some of the problems. Now even this concession has been rejected. This individual has put the world of academia into a tither by his contention that "schools do not make a difference." Using research gathered from the Coleman Report, Operations

Higher Horizons, and various compensatory educational programs, Jencks has fashioned a proposal that debases contemporary educational practices.

His thesis is that children are far more influenced by what happens in the home than in the school. Schools are simply an ineffective force in eliminating the skill deficiencies. Therefore, he concludes, basic reforms to eliminate poverty through education cannot be successful. The only thing that actually determines the character of the school is the type of student; everything else—the school budget, its policies, and teacher qualifications—is either secondary or completely irrelevant. In short, it matters not if one school district spends more per pupil than another or whether reading is taught by one method or another, or whether a child is taught in a one-room school or in an ornate building—schools do not count.⁸

The disclosure of such an idea is now beginning to affect bureaucratic thought. Bussing critics are citing this report as a rationale to bolster their arguments. If it is true that schools do not make a difference, then the composition of the student body has little significance in the educational process. It should be noted, however, that Jencks actually favors bussing. But, notes Jencks, this form of social engineering should be promoted for moral and political reasons only.⁹ According to recent reports, educational lobbyists claim that the Jencks' Report has been freely cited by the federal administrators in justification of education budget cuts.¹⁰

Throughout the educational establishment, Jencks has replaced B.F. Skinner and Ivan Illich as one of the most popular topics. These discussions run the gamut from the point that he has proposed an interesting thesis to the charge that he is nurturing a sophisticated form of intellectual white backlash.¹¹

One thing Jencks has accomplished is to document clearly a fact that was apparent: schools are unable to teach effectively lower class children. Over the years professionals labeled these students as the "poor," the "culturally deprived," the "culturally different," and the "disadvantaged." Of course, there are a few who believe that achievement has very little relationship to the environment. To these individuals, such as Arthur Jensen, intelligence is primarily a manifestation of heredity.¹² Thus, the term "culturally deprived" is simply another attempt by educators to parlay inferences into established truths.

Jencks tends to side with the cultural theory of intelligence, noting that children from wealthy backgrounds have a double advantage of a rich environment plus favorable genes.¹³ This attempt to link educational success to social class advantages is a relatively new area of pedagogical interest. Seventy years ago such liberals as Thorstein Veblen and Upton Sinclair toyed with this notion. No one went quite so far to prove such a point as did a young educator by the name of George S. Counts. In 1922, his essay "The Selective Character of American Secondary Education" stated that high schools were simply sorting-out mechanisms. At public expense, these institutions were promoting only the privileged class, thus perpetuating the glaring inequalities of race, class, and ethnic lines.¹⁴

During the 1930's, Merle Curti was commissioned to write a historical analysis of the social ideas of educators. In general, he decided that the schools never abandoned their original

role of perpetuating Hamiltonian traditions. If there were attempts to utilize the schools for aiding the poor, these efforts were insignificant and in the line of individual action rather than any general concession on the part of the institution. Even progressive educational practices, such as promoting adjustment to the environment, only enhanced the affluent student's efforts, thereby increasing the disparity between various classes.¹⁵

Presaging Jencks by a decade, Patricia Sexton documented evidence which led Kenneth Clark to state that schools were anything but social class facilitators.¹⁶ In modern America children from the poverty area simply could not compete with the offspring of the elite. It was no mystery that children from the so-called houses of intellect, exposed to books, ideas, and travel, had a unique advantage. If there were opportunities for the lower class, they were relatively few. If the door of opportunity was open, it was not very wide. It was recently estimated that three percent of the working class children were able to ascend to a higher social standard. That the percentage was even this high was partially due to the unrestrictive ethnic policies of such professions as music and athletics.¹⁷

By the mid-sixties, this education-social class manifestation gained notable acceptance. The Coleman Report statistically supported the basic theories of Counts, Curti, and Sexton. Soon to follow were a series of research papers by Daniel B. Moynihan, Thomas Pettigrew, and others, describing the relationship involved in education and class structure.¹⁸ An H.E.W. survey, released in 1974, confirmed the speculation of these individuals. In this four-year study it was found that in families with less than \$3,000 annual income nearly fifteen percent of the youths were illiterate.¹⁹ In this atmosphere, it was not unusual that schools were accused of being an imperfect panacea. It was not unusual that schools were accused of sorting and certifying students, a process which tended to doom the lower-class child.

It was quite evident then that the poor were not benefiting from schools. Jencks, however, includes not only the poor but other social classes as well. According to him, economic success cannot be determined by the cognitive skill or the degrees attained. Thus why some middle class students are successful and others are not has very little to do with schools or schooling.²⁰ Yet James Coleman, whose document was the foundation of Jencks' Report, accuses him of over-interpreting the data. Social skills, entrepreneurial skills, and managerial capabilities were not measured; thus, notes Coleman, no one is sure how schools affect these traits. It cannot, therefore, be uncategorically stated that schools are unresponsive to all social classes.²¹

While other critics have realized many of these same problems, they did not abandon their faith in schools. Educational difficulties were thought to be endemic, problems that through tampering, manipulating, or even adding a "head start program or two," could be corrected. But Jencks has totally ruled out these possibilities. Even complete reorganization, notes Jencks, in which the primary concern of the educational process was for the lower-class students would not promote any beneficial change.²²

With the schools set aside, he has decided that equality is a problem of the entire society and that the only solution is to revamp completely the economic system and adopt socialism. With anything less, progress would ultimately be

glacial.²³ In suggesting this, Jencks is reinstating a time-honored goal of an extinct pedagogical movement. During the depression years, a group of educators supported this very objective. Known as the Social Reconstructionists, they too pointed to the failure of the educational system and advocated dramatic social change. Philosophically, the vanguard ranged from those who favored communism to those who wanted an intense system of regulated capitalism.²⁴

George S. Counts was the leader of the former faction. His speeches savoring the Russian experiment and his continual denunciation of American social practices prompted a unique form of pedagogical revolutionary zeal.²⁵ Similar to Jencks, he believed that the only promise for the future was in the adoption of socialism. The root cause of suffering and deprivation was the system. He differed from Jencks in that he sustained his faith in the efficacy of the teaching process. Given the right commitment, schools could not only teach the poor, they could effectively promote equality. To accomplish such a task, Counts toyed with the idea of indoctrination. In education, he stated, indoctrination was an unavoidable tool. Even neutrality with respect to basic issues was tantamount to giving support to the forces of conservatism.²⁶

Given the proper commitment, noted Counts, teachers could prepare the coming generation for economic change. Instead of studying the aristocracy, they could concentrate on how men struggled to find economic security. They could point out that inflation, depression, poverty, and corruption were the by-products of a laissez-faire Capitalism. In general, stated Counts, no idea was to be kept from the student on the grounds that it was dangerous. Each child was expected to have an opportunity to examine critically communism, fascism, socialism as possible social alternatives.²⁷

Jencks advocates socialism as an end, yet fails to provide any hint of possible means. He notes that a successful campaign for reducing economic inequality requires a change in the game plan, but he fails to state to what degree and how. Two things must be apparent, he states: first, those with low incomes must begin requesting a new disposition, and second, those with high incomes must begin to feel ashamed of economic inequality.²⁸ The only inclination as to how this change is going to take place is through some form of political manipulation, all of which, by the author's own confession, will inevitably be slow. Schools under these circumstances are considered by Jencks to be no more than "marginal institutions." Yet, if socialism is the objective, then rugged individualism must be afforded a place of lesser value. Under a centrally planned economy, marketing decisions are ultimately subordinated to the desired goal. It follows then that with a reduction of entrepreneurial decisions, certain political rights are also enjoined. Thus, in such a system a willingness to cooperate and to develop a community spirit takes on added importance. Under these circumstances schools would assume more responsibility, not less. In the countries that practice socialism, and the term is a bit vague, schools are thought to be vital. Scandinavian schools are looked upon as the training ground for the development of *samfundslaere*, an understanding of the society.²⁹ The promotion of the new proletarian man has been a long term goal of the Russian educational system. To nurture such attitudes, schools, by the very nature of the

system, would have to be more than just "marginal institutions."

That schools perpetuate the status quo is an established principle. If the status quo is the defense of rugged individualism, then schools tend to favor that position. Once socialism is adopted, then it is probable that schools will see to it that the word from the top is properly disseminated. If schools don't count, it is in the narrow sense that they are ineffective promoters of dramatic social change. That schools were a manifestation of the status quo was a lesson that was quite apparent to the social reconstructionists. While Counts was discussing how instructors would change society, make it better and more wonderful, teachers were still making posters, ordering supplies, and yelling "quiet students." The fact that educators have not substantially changed society or promoted egalitarianism could be a virtue, but that does not mean that schools are inept.

It is a certainty that in comparison to home life as an influence upon achievement schools take a back seat. In America this is possibly a proper thing. Yet this does not totally eliminate the effectiveness of the educational process. It has been demonstrated, in a massive United Nations study, covering thousands of students in twenty-two countries, that the influence of the home background is reduced in specific study areas. In such subjects as literature, science, and foreign language, indications are that the influence of what happens in school is significant; hence the conclusion that schools do, in fact, matter.³⁰

It is understandable that Jencks foresees no effective role for the schools to play in the promotion of new social and economic planning. The issues involved are debatable ones which would conjure a wide variety of opinions. Many individuals believe that, even given the chance, schools should not take any active part in social engineering. Why should children be forced to assume a responsibility of such magnitude? If social change is needed, let it be the task of adults, not children.

Since schools do not or cannot function as primary developers of equality, Jencks wants them to be places where each individual may find something of interest. Schools should function not to fulfill some future objectives, but simply to render services to those individuals in desire of some form of instruction. If a family feels the need to prepare their child for Harvard, then they should be allowed to choose freely a high school which would prepare that child. Above all, notes Jencks, the schools should be pleasant places to be.³¹ At the present time, in Alum Rock United Schools District, San Jose, California, educators are experimenting with this exact type of administrative thinking. After receiving a federal grant, this district established several diversified school programs. Parents receive vouchers with which they may purchase the style of educational program appropriate for their children. Open classrooms, special subjects, and a school for the future are some of the curricular programs available.³²

Except for the point that schools do not serve the middle class and upper class child, a fact which, according to Coleman, has not been well substantiated, Jencks has added very little new to the views of the past critics. His ingenuity has been in his ability to synthesize items which were most obvious. However, he does tend to go beyond his data when he states that the teaching profession is actually incapable of

making any constructive contribution to the education of the lower class child, now or in the future. The inability of schools to promote achievement among the poor, he notes, has led him to the conclusion that most educators just don't know how to instruct these individuals properly. Furthermore, this situation is not just a condition of malice but simply one of ignorance; and until we know, no amount of money or pressure could correct it.³³

By this condemnation, the author has debased the teaching profession. That teachers make mistakes, that they are mindless is not altogether a highly kept secret. Yet this personal inadequacy is not monopolized by the educational institution. Indeed, notes Charles Silberman, this problem is diffused remarkably well throughout the entire society.³⁴ One need not look beyond newspapers to see a blatant example of this in Watergate. But unlike other professions, teachers are condemned to suffer forever this malady. By carefully removing the teacher from any future plans, Jencks has removed the pathways for effective professional improvement. Evidently teachers are to withdraw into limbo until, through some stroke of luck or other metaphysical means, it is suddenly discovered how to teach children of the poor.

Although it cannot be documented, it appears that educators are becoming more aware of their responsibilities to the lower class child. This is not a concerted effort on the part of any state or higher educational institutions but, more so, a manifestation of the economic situation. With the decline in the birth rate and the unavailability of jobs, a better quality of teaching candidate is being brought into the ranks. Thus, educators are upgrading the profession with the addition of talented, responsible teachers.

In addition, a recent study indicates that when a concerted effort is made, children of the poor can learn. Two University of California psychologists, Howard Adelman and Seymour Freshbach, have completed a study involving sixty students, all black males, a year and a half or more behind their age group, whose families make less than \$3,000 a year. The students were sent to a special enrichment school oriented toward reading improvement. It was found that these students can substantially raise their achievement scores through properly administered enrichment programs.³⁵

In Michigan, Ronald Edmonds, assistant superintendent of public instruction, has indicated that schools do count if the teacher makes a commitment to that end. State financial incentives are offered to the schools which are responsive to lower class children. These schools receive additional funds for each student who is able to break out of the lower achievement level. The result has been gratifying. Students who were formerly categorized as poor achievers are making substantial progress.³⁶

There is no issue that teachers are not doing an adequate job educating the lower class child. In fact, Willy will most likely drop out of school by the tenth grade. This is well documented by a variety of studies. Yet, it does not mean that given the proper dedication, this situation could not be remedied. If there are lessons from the experiments of Freshbach, Adelman, and Edmonds, it is that with well administered programs individuals like Willy can learn.

In final analysis Christopher Jencks' *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* represents a new form of educational criticism. Filled

with statistical data, this report assumes added significance. Although many of his theories are in the speculative area, his condemnation of the schools' inability to teach the lower class child is of concern. Despite the relative truth of many of his proposals, one fact is apparent; government officials are using Jencks' Report to bolster their position on key educational issues. For that reason the Jencks' Report is of monumental importance.³⁷

With the end of the Vietnam War, the conclusion of the Watergate affair, inflation, recession, and the energy crisis, it is likely that the honeymoon which educators have been enjoying is quickly coming to an end. When money is in short supply, when Americans are frustrated, and when taxpayers are upset, schools are inevitably one of the first public institutions to receive the brunt of renewed criticism. In this instance the Jencks' Report is a landmark and may well be the first of an avalanche. Without a doubt, Pandora's door is open; schools are not the golden stairway they are thought to be. Willy will not have an overwhelming chance of making it into the barbecue, crabgrass set. Thus, in this case, the

sophisticated criticism as fashioned by Jencks cannot be avoided by the old ostrich trick or a little limerick such as:

I do not like thee Christopher Jencks
For reasons I am unable to think,
But this I know and know by instinct
I do not like thee Christopher Jencks.

For the most part, educational criticism through the years has not been based primarily upon sound irreducible facts. The critics who were anti-Dewey lashed out with information borrowed from the stresses and strains of the era. These critics never conducted massive surveys or gathered statistical information before declaring that progressives were replacing education with politics for all or worse pabulum for all. Until B.J. Day, educational criticism was primarily a manifestation of emotionalism and romanticism, and educators could successfully snub the critics with any reliable slogan. The Jencks' Report has elevated the practice of criticism to a new level of sophistication. Never before have so many facts been cited to substantiate ideas which were anything but novel.

FOOTNOTES

1. *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 7, 1954.
2. Vance Packard, "Are We Becoming a Nation of Illiterates?," *Readers Digest*, 104, (April, 1974), 81-86.
3. *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 4, 1974.
4. Bernard Iddings Bell, *Crisis in Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 1949), p. 17.
5. Ernest E. Oertel, "Experimentalism Begets Fascism?" *School and Society*, 52 (August 3, 1954), 76-77.
6. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Random House, 1963), p. 389.
7. William H. Kilpatrick, "A Note From Professor Kilpatrick," *School and Society*, 55, (February 7, 1949), 159.
8. Christopher Jencks, et al., *Inequality A Reassessment of the Effects of Family and Schooling in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 256.
9. Mary Jo Bane and Christopher Jencks, "The Schools and Equal Opportunity," *Saturday Review*, September 16, 1972, 41.
10. Godfrey Hodgson, "Do Schools Make a Difference?" *The Atlanta Monthly*, 231 (March 1973), 35-46.
11. Kenneth Clark, "Social Policy, Power and Social Science Research," *Harvard Educational Review*, 43 (February, 1973), 113-121.
12. Arthur R. Jensen, "How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement?" *Harvard Educational Review*, 39 (Winter, 1969), 1-123.
13. Jencks, *Inequality*, p. 69.
14. Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of The School* (New York: Random House, 1961), p. 225.
15. Merle Curti, *The Social Ideas of American Educators* (Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adam and Co., 1935), pp. 583-588.
16. Patricia C. Sexton, *Education and Income* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. xiv.
17. Carl Weinburg, *Education and Social Problems* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1971), p. 47.
18. See "Equal Educational Opportunity," *Harvard Educational Review*, 38 (Winter 1968), ?. Also Gerald Grant, "On Equality of Educational Opportunity: Papers Deriving From the Harvard University Faculty Seminar on the Coleman Report," *Harvard Educational Review*, 42, (February 1972), 109-125.
19. *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 8, 1974.
20. Jencks, *Inequality*, p. 263.
21. James S. Coleman, "Equality of Opportunity and Equality of Results," *Harvard Education Review*, 43 (February, 1973), 137.
22. Jencks, *Inequality*, p. 255.
23. Jencks, *Inequality*, p. 255.
24. C.A. Bowers, *The Progressive Educator and the Depression* (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 44.
25. George S. Counts, *New York Times*, August 6, 1930.
26. George S. Counts, "Education for What?" *The New Republic*, 71, (May 25, 1932), 10-16.
27. George S. Counts, *The Social Foundations of Education* (New York: Charles Scribners & Sons, 1934), pp. 542-544.
28. Jencks, *Inequality*, p. 265.
29. C.W. Dixon, *Society, Schools and Progress in Scandinavia* (London: Pergamon Press, 1965), p. 47.
30. Benjamin S. Bloom, "Implications of the IEA Studies for Curriculum and Instruction," *School Review*, 82 (May 1974), 413-436. Also L.C. Cumber and John P. Keeves, *Science Education in Nineteen Countries: International Studies in Evaluation* (New York: John Wiley & Sons; (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell), 1973).
31. Jencks, *Inequality*, p. 256.
32. *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, July 7, 1974.
33. Christopher Jencks, "Inequality in Retrospect," *Harvard Educational Review*, 43 (February, 1973), 152.
34. Charles E. Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 11.
35. Seymour Freshbach and Howard Edelman, "Remediation of Learning Problems Among the Disadvantaged," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 66 (February, 1974), 16-28.
36. Ronald Edmonds, "A Black Response to Christopher Jencks' Inequality and Certain Other Issues," *Harvard Educational Review*, 43 (February, 1973), 77-91.
37. Hodgson, "Do Schools Make a Difference." 34-46.