

**A Reappraisal
of the Most Controversial
Educational Document
of Our Time**

By CHRISTOPHER JENCKS

THREE years have passed since James Coleman and his colleagues issued their now famous report on "Equality of Educational Opportunity." Virtually unnoticed at the time of its publication, this 737-page monograph has since become the best-known and most controversial piece of educational research of our time.

Like a veritable Bible, the "Coleman Report" is cited today on almost every side of every major educational controversy, usually by people who have not read it and almost always by people who have not understood what the authors meant when they wrote it. It has been used to support arguments for increasing integration in the schools—and to buttress the position of those who would accept segregated schools with community control. It has been cited as evidence that what black children need is good teachers—and as proof that such increases in per pupil expenditure will not close the educational gap between black and white.

The report has also inspired a growing body of scholarly exegesis, interpretation and criticism, so that anyone who wants to know what the report "really" proves must now plow through not only the baffling charts and tables of the original document but dozens of subsequent critiques and reanalyses, most of which are available only in mimeo-

graphed form to the cognoscenti. The time has clearly come for a reappraisal.

THE Coleman Report was a political football from its very inception. Like much American social science, it was initiated in order to avoid confronting a difficult political problem. In the summer of 1964 Congress had decided to pass a civil-rights law which was expected to end *de jure* school segregation in the South by cutting off Federal funds from segregated systems. The question inevitably arose: what about *de facto* segregation in the North? The expedient answer was that the Commissioner of Education should investigate the problem and report back in two years.

After nearly a year of bureaucratic squabbling and indecision in the U.S. Office of Education, Commissioner Frank Keppel decided to conduct an "Equality of Educational Opportunity" survey. The survey, theoretically covering nearly a million pupils in 6,000 different schools across the nation, was carried out in the fall of 1965. Prime responsibility for planning and analyzing it fell on James Coleman, a distinguished sociologist from Johns Hopkins University with a long record of interest in both education and survey research.

Coleman expected the survey to demonstrate three rather conventional propositions:

1. *Nonwhite pupils, North and South, usually attend different schools from white pupils.*
2. *Nonwhite schools usually have*

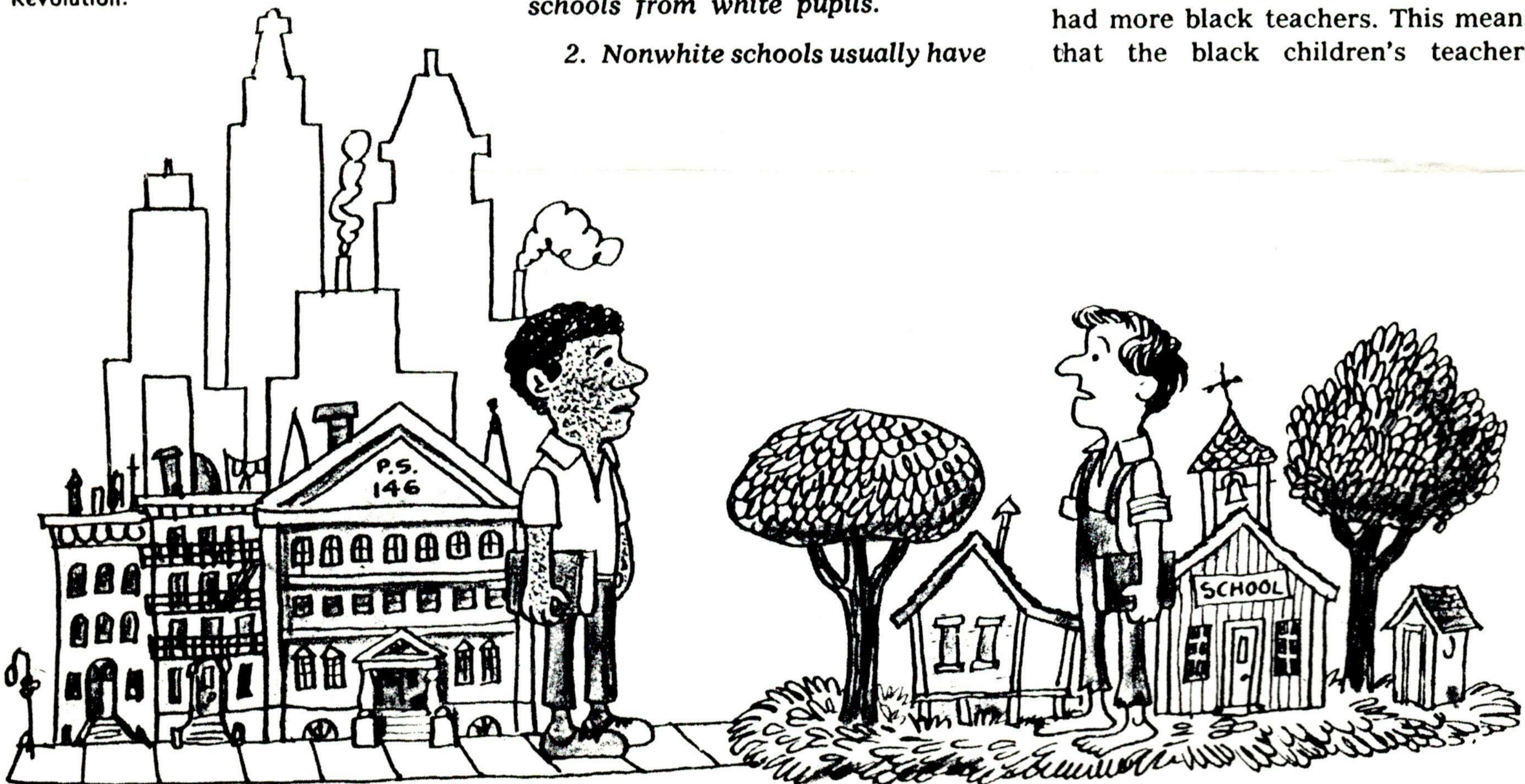
less adequate facilities, inferior curriculums and worse teachers, as well as less affluent and academically adept student bodies.

3. *Because they attend those inferior schools, nonwhite pupils learn less than white pupils.*

The survey confirmed the first proposition. Black and white pupils are seldom in the same schools, even in the North. Not only that, but the black pupils do learn much less than the white pupils, at least judging by standardized tests of verbal and non-verbal skill, reading comprehension, arithmetic skill and general information. The typical black first grader scores below about 85 per cent of white first graders. This relative disparity persists throughout elementary and secondary school, and thus the absolute difference between black and white children grows wider as they grow older. A 6-year-old who scores below 85 per cent of his classmates is about one year behind, while a 16-year-old is more than two years behind.

The survey did not support the second proposition, that black schools spend significantly less money per pupil than white ones, have substantially larger classes, get worse trained and less experienced teachers, operate in more antiquated and crowded facilities, rely on less adequate textbooks and equipment and so forth. On the contrary, the survey uncovered only one major measurable difference in these items between black and white schools: the black schools had more black teachers. This means that the black children's teachers

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The report points out plain truths often overlooked. For example: "In most cities, the black schools get short-changed . . . but most white Americans live in smaller and poorer places where schools leave almost as much to be desired as in the ghetto."

also come from poorer homes and do worse on tests of academic ability. Black schools in the urban North also tended to have somewhat older buildings and smaller play areas. In other respects, however, black and white schools proved surprisingly similar. Later analyses, while largely confined to Northern urban elementary schools, have shown that schools which serve rich and poor children also have quite similar facilities, curriculums and teachers.

How could the conventional wisdom have been so wrong? The apparent answer is that claims of discrimination have usually been based on the obvious contrast between Northern ghetto schools and white schools in a few affluent nearby suburbs or in the city itself. In most (but not all) cities, the black schools get short-changed. What all such comparisons evidently ignore, however, is the fact that most white Americans live in smaller (and poorer) cities and towns, where the school facilities, curriculum and teachers evidently leave almost as much to be desired as they do in the big-city ghettos, where most blacks live.

MORE important, even, was the report's conclusion on the third proposition, the expected cause-and-effect relationship between inadequate school resources and low student achievement. In fact, neither black nor white children of a given family background did significantly better in schools with high expenditures, large libraries, accelerated curricu-

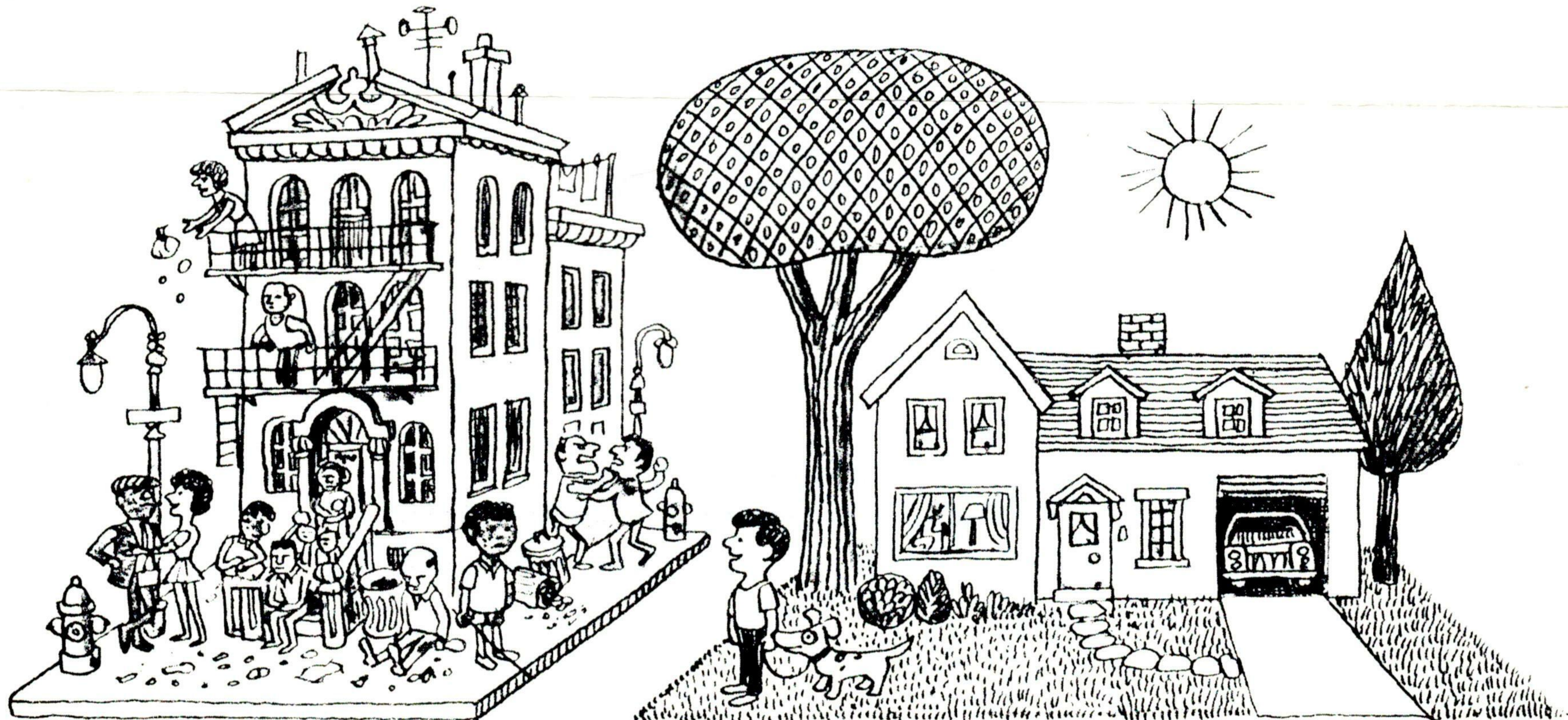
lums and so forth. Coleman and his colleagues believed that pupils did slightly better in schools with experienced and articulate teachers, but even this difference was surprisingly small—and the evidence supporting their belief has subsequently proved to be rather shaky.

The report suggests—though it does not state in so many words—that black children clearly get less satisfactory schooling than white children in only one major respect. If a child happens to have a black skin, the odds are very strong that he or she will end up with classmates from impoverished homes and a plethora of learning and behavior problems. A child who attends such a school may be short-changed even if it has first-rate facilities and teachers. Most black sixth-graders, for example, attend schools in which the majority of their classmates are reading at the fourth- or fifth-grade level. This means that even if a black child has the ability to read at sixth-grade level, he will probably not be pushed to do so. The instruction in his classroom will be aimed not at him but at the laggard majority. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that children learn more from one another than from their teachers. If black children attend schools where this “informal curriculum” is based on a vocabulary half as large and on concepts far less abstract than in a white school, their chance of developing academic skills is reduced.

Coleman and his colleagues were extremely anxious to determine

whether individual achievement was dependent on a school's social composition. After analyzing their data, they concluded that it was, but that a child was influenced by his classmates' social class background and aspirations rather than by their race. This implied that a poor black child would *not* benefit from attending school with poor white children, but that he *would* benefit from attending with middle-class children, black or white. Coleman and his colleagues also tentatively concluded that black children were more sensitive to peer influences than white children. This implied that a black child would benefit substantially from integration, while a white child would suffer very little. The apparent effects of integration were always small, however, relative to over-all differences in achievement between races, socio-economic groups and individuals.

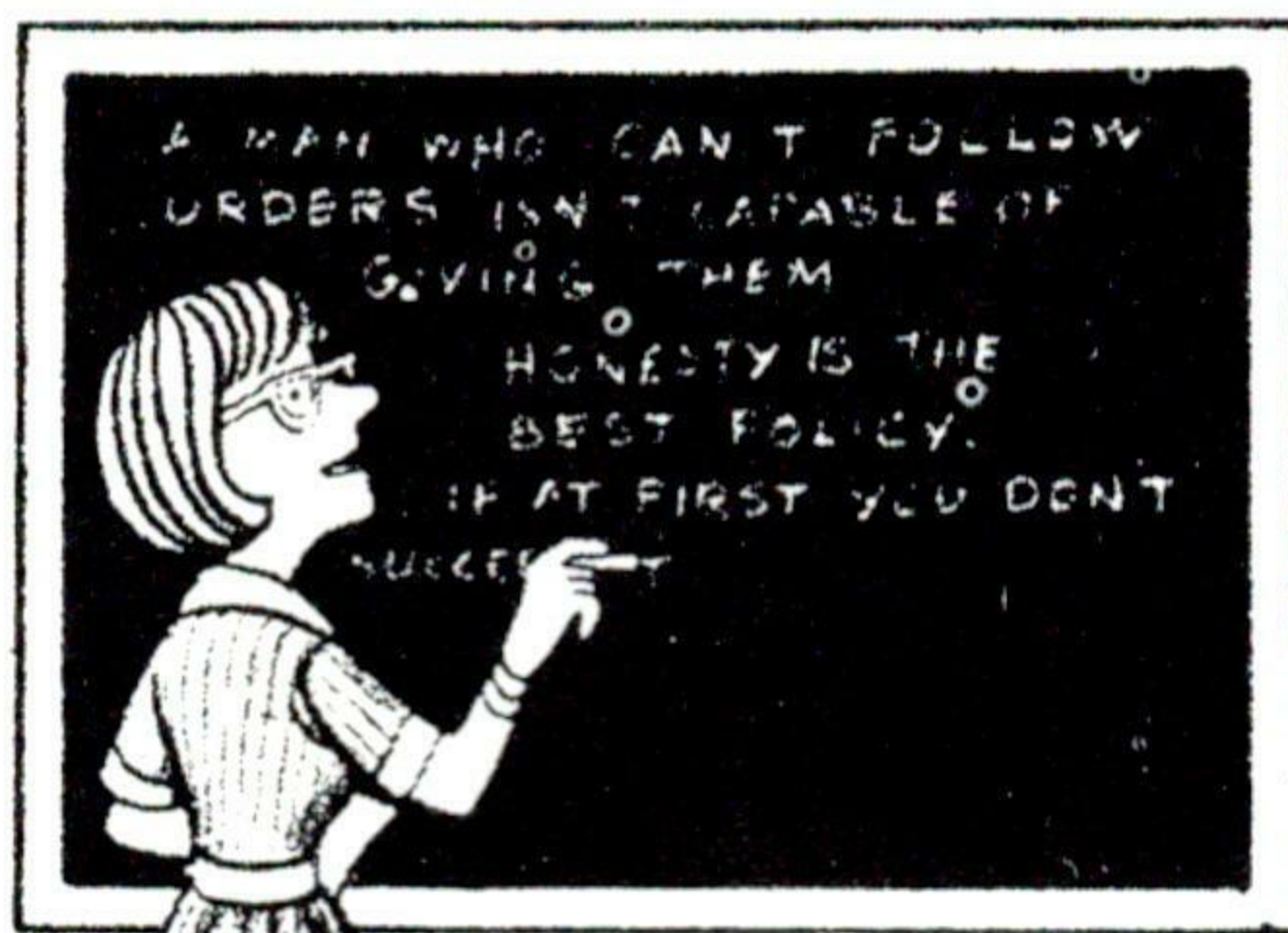
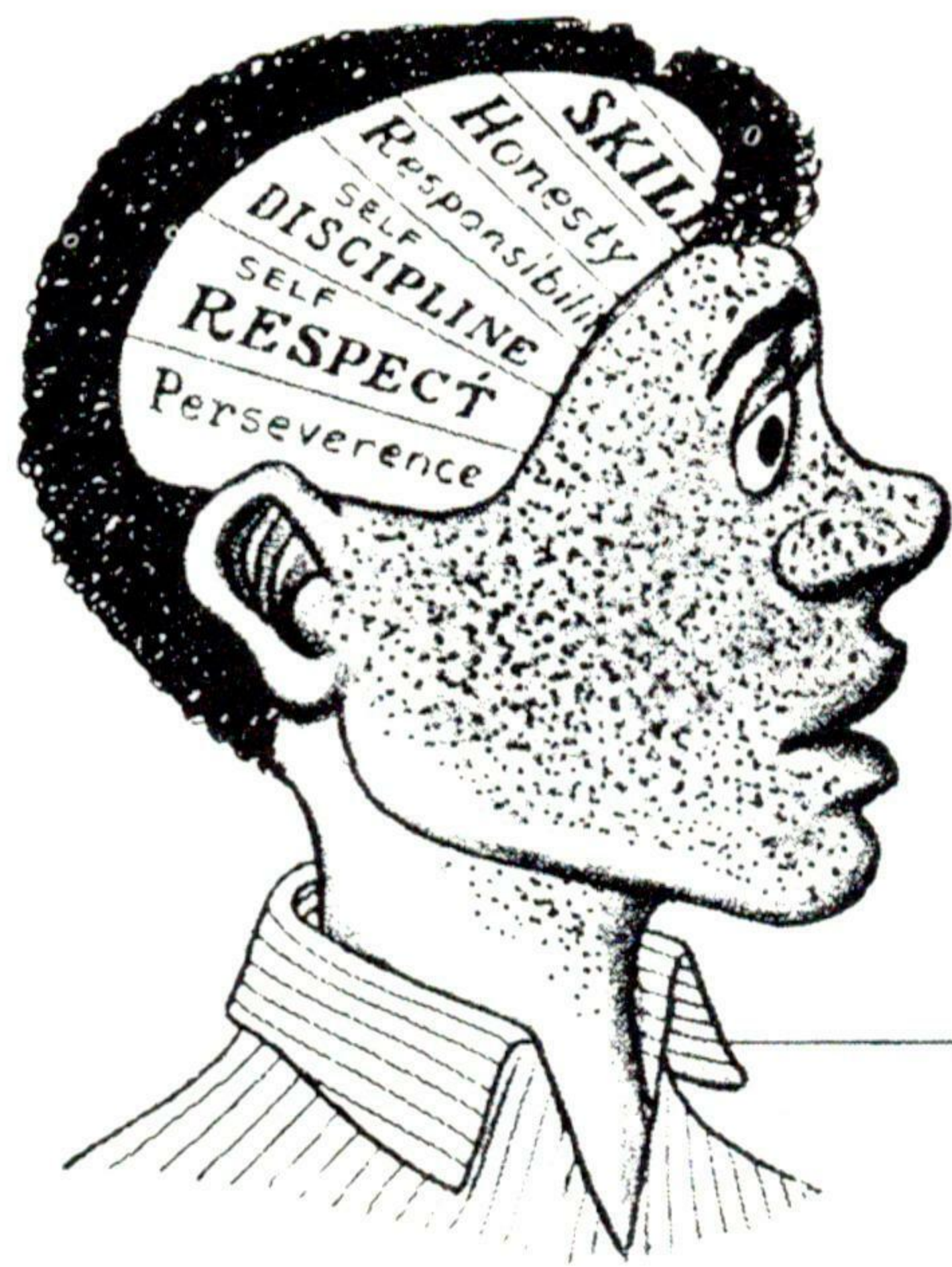
If differences between schools do not account for most of the observed differences in achievement, what does? By far the most important factor measured in the survey was the ethnic and socio-economic background of the individual child. In addition, there is a strong association between children's achievement levels and their attitudes. Among black children in particular, there is a marked relationship between their achievement and their personal sense of control over their own destinies. Yet even when family background and attitudes are taken into account, more than half the variations in individual achievement remain completely unexplained. Whether this



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ects unmeasured genetic differences in aptitude or unmeasured differences in environmental influence is a fairer for speculation. One that did not seem to report, however, was unmeasured effects of differences between school environments. The survey showed that the differences between the best and the worst pupils in the school are invariably far greater than the differences between the best and the worst pupils. Indeed, eliminating school-to-school differences would only reduce the total variation in achievement by 20 per cent. This does not definitely prove that schools have no role in generating inequality, since there theoretically be systematic discrimination against certain kinds of pupils within schools. Still, it is hard to believe that within-school differences play a large role in equality when between-school differences play such a large role. Coleman and his colleagues therefore concluded that the major reasons for unexplained academic achievement lie outside the school.

THIS brief summary of the Coleman Report's major findings hardly does justice to the voluminous text, but it does suggest why the report has become a major focus of political debate. The report was published at a time when the country was vacillating between two different strategies for helping the disadvantaged. Some people advocated racial integration and socio-economic integration of the schools—and of the larger society. Others argued that integration was unworkable, undesirable or the only realistic strategy was to accept segregation and make black schools as good as white ones. The Coleman Report implied—though not say explicitly—that integration would help achievement much. But in so doing anything was likely to be the report seemed to bet that integration was better than what had to be called “compensatory education. Yet at the time the finding that equal interest and pupil effort were strongly associated with achievement



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seemed to give oblique support to those who believed that parental participation and/or control over all-black schools might make a critical difference to student achievement.

The report's conclusions were inevitably subjected to stringent and sometimes extravagant criticism. The report had been prepared in great haste to meet the Congressional deadline, and the authors had had no time to examine many obvious objections to their tentative conclusions. Skeptics have been able to offer a variety of speculative reasons why the report's conclusions might be wrong, and those who have political reasons for wanting to discredit or ignore the report have naturally found such speculations very persuasive. For the past two years I have been part of a group of Harvard social scientists trying to determine whether any of the hypothetical objections to the report's conclusions are actually correct. My judgment is that the report's broad conclusions were sound, even though many of its specific methods and findings were wrong.

One common criticism of the survey has been that more than 10 per cent of the school districts in the original sample refused to cooperate, including such major cities as Chicago and Los Angeles. Some districts evidently feared that

the Federal Government would use the survey to prove they were discriminating against minority groups. Other districts—especially those being sued for *de facto* segregation—feared that minority groups would get hold of the survey results and use them in court or in the press. Some districts also feared that simply asking questions about sensitive racial issues might stir up trouble in the schools. In addition, many schools in nominally cooperative districts failed to return data because it was too much bother or perhaps—a more serious matter—because they had something to hide. As a result, complete returns were received from only about 60 per cent of the schools in the original sample.

There were clearly some small differences between participating and nonparticipating schools, and selective participation may well have led to a slight underestimate of the qualitative differences between black and white schools. But there is no reason to suppose that nonparticipation led to an underestimate of the relationship between school quality and student achievement. It hardly seems likely, for example, that the dynamics of education in Chicago and Los Angeles, which refused to participate, differ significantly from Detroit and San Francisco, which agreed to do so. On the contrary, the dynamics of education are probably much the same in one big city as in another.

The problem of nonparticipation is therefore probably a nonproblem.

A second criticism of the survey has been that the information provided by the superintendents, principals, teachers and pupils in the sample schools may not have been accurate. This criticism arose largely because of doubt that black children's teachers and facilities could really be the equal of those given white children. Since the Office of Education made no site visits to check up on the accuracy of replies given by principals and teachers, no definite answer to this charge is possible. Data supplied by state departments of education suggest, however, that the principals' replies about facilities were probably fairly accurate. Direct interviewing of parents in two communities likewise showed that most (though not all) of the pupils' responses were reasonably accurate. And the replies of principals, teachers and students to similar questions show a fairly high level of internal consistency for most "objective" items. On the other hand, questions which involved subjective judgment of any kind did not elicit internally consistent answers. The results of such subjective "attitude" questions must therefore be treated with great caution.

A THIRD criticism of the report has been that the authors should not have concentrated on the determinants of verbal ability to the exclusion of reading, mathematics and general information. Those who believe that black people are peculiarly "nonverbal" have even argued that the decision to stress verbal ability was fundamentally racist. Unfortunately, black children did as badly on the tests of other abilities as on the verbal tests. Furthermore, while some individual children did well on one test and badly on another, schools as a whole either did well on them all or badly on them all. A Northern urban elementary school's mean verbal score, for example, correlated almost perfectly with its mean reading and math scores. Under these circumstances it hardly matters which test we use to measure over-all school achievement.

A fourth line of attack on the report has been more technical. The authors of the report employed a number of dubious statistical techniques and made a variety of mechanical errors in handling and labeling their data. But they also recognized that such errors were likely, given the extreme haste with which they worked, and they were generous in helping others reanalyze the data more meticulously. These analyses have shown that while the report's broadest conclusions were correct, many important details were wrong. In particular, and contrary to what some critics have argued, the net effect of the report's various errors was to *under-estimate* the importance of family background and *over-estimate* the importance of school in determining achievement.

A fifth criticism of the report has been that the authors made unwarranted causal inferences from their one-shot survey, which by its very nature could reveal only patterns of association rather than prove causation. Two examples illustrate the problem.

The report uncovered a strong association between teacher verbal ability and student achievement in second-

ary schools. Though they listed a number of qualifications, the authors concluded that able high school teachers probably boosted student achievement. Yet the report's data could equally well lead to the conclusion that school systems were assigning able students to schools with able teachers, or that they were assigning able teachers to schools with able pupils. Since we know from experience that both practices are widespread at the secondary level, it seems rash to assume that there need be any direct causal link between teacher ability and student achievement to explain the observed association between the two.

Fortunately, these problems are far less serious at the elementary level. Students are allocated to elementary schools largely on the basis of residence, race and social status, all of which were measured in the survey. With luck and ingenuity the effects of such allocation can be discounted and the effects of various school characteristics can then be estimated. Since there is little evidence that student transfers at the elementary school level are based on ability (as distinct from family background), the mean achievement of first graders entering a given elementary

school can also be used to estimate the mean initial ability of sixth graders in the same school. With these precautions, causal inferences are considerably safer than at the secondary level; and when these precautions are taken, it turns out that facilities, curriculum and teacher characteristics are even less important than Coleman and his colleagues supposed. A student's peers may, however, have a modest effect on his achievement.

Another instance of ambiguous causation was the association between attitudes and achievement. The survey showed, for example, that students who did well on achievement tests were more likely to say that their parents expected them to go to college. The authors concluded that parental expectations probably had an important influence on children's achievement. Yet it would be equally reasonable to conclude that children's achievement had an important influence on their parents' expectations. Most parents know that if their child cannot read competently, he is unlikely to attend college, and the child is likely to be aware of this attitude and report it when asked. This same difficulty arises with all the report's infer-

ences about the effects of attitudes on achievement.

WHAT, then, is the present consensus about the policy implications of Coleman's survey? The answer is that no consensus exists, even among experts. My own judgments are as follows:

(1) The resources—both fiscal and human—devoted to black and white children's schooling are not dramatically different, except perhaps in certain parts of the South. Nor do we devote substantially greater resources to educating middle-class children than to educating lower-class children.

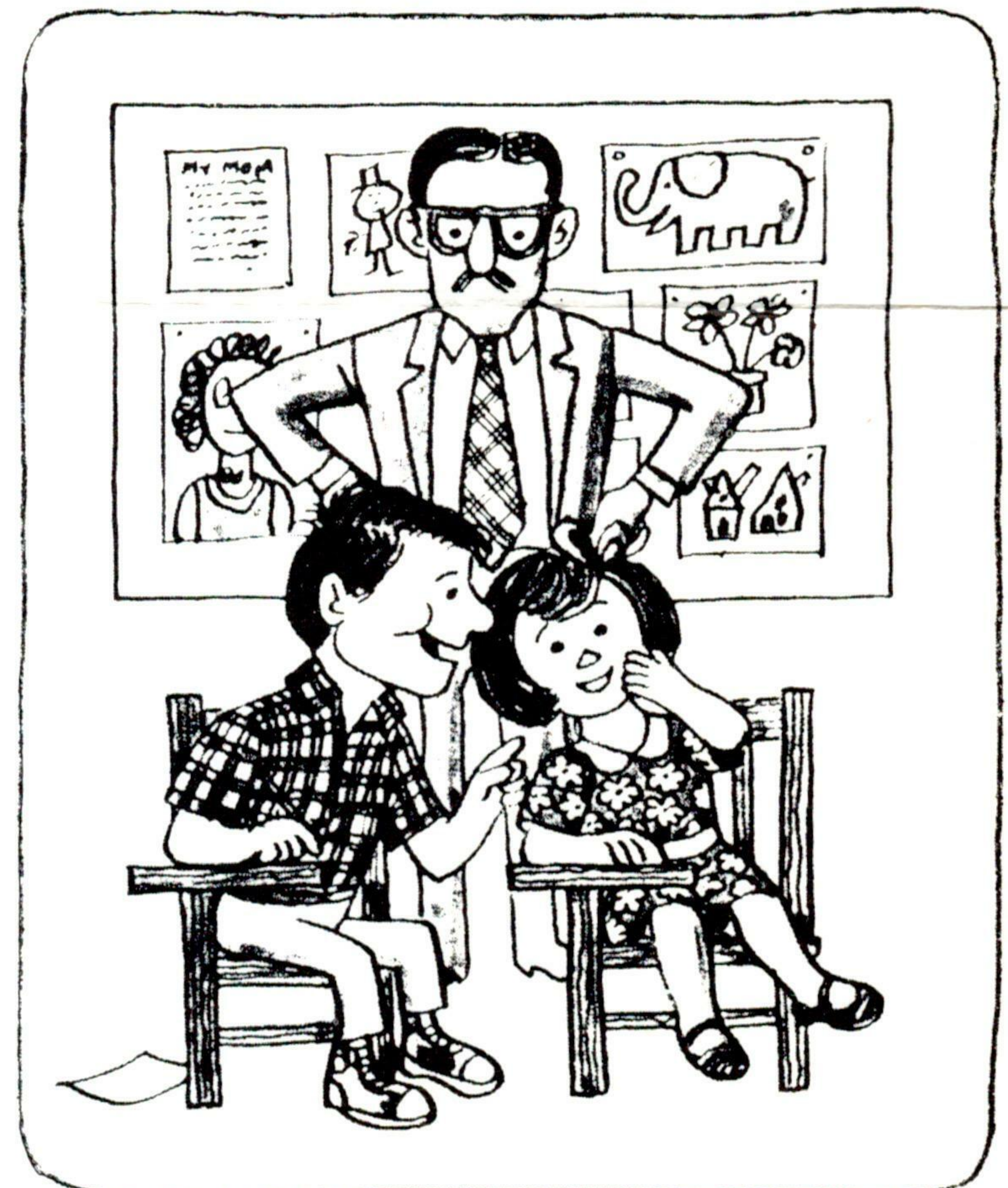
(2) Variations in schools' fiscal and human resources have very little effect on student achievement—probably even less than the Coleman Report originally implied.

(3) The report's assertion that peers have a consistent effect on achievement may or may not be correct. My guess, based on available data, is that peers do have an effect, but that it is relatively small.

None of this denies that unusually dedicated and talented individuals can create schools in which initially disadvantaged children learn a remarkable amount. But it does deny that the achieve-



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ment levels of large numbers of disadvantaged children can be appreciably enhanced by spending more money, hiring better teachers, buying new textbooks or making any of the other changes that reformers normally advocate.

If improved student achievement is our goal, the Coleman Report's implication is obvious: we must alter the whole social system rather than just tinker with the schools. There is plenty of evidence that major changes in a child's social and cultural environment will affect his intellectual development, often dramatically. Bruno Bettelheim and others have chronicled the impact of the Israeli kibbutz on hitherto deprived North African and Yemenite Jews. Here in America we know that children raised on Long Island do far better, even in first grade, than those raised in Appalachia. Similarly, children raised in Jewish homes do better than those raised in Christian homes, even in the same city. And the World War II draftees who grew up in the America of 1917-1941 did far better on standard tests than the World War I draftees who grew up in the America of 1900-1917. Intellectual skills are, therefore, not just a function of genetic differences. But neither are they a func-

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tion of school differences. If the Coleman survey convinces us of that basic truth, it will have served its purpose.

Does this mean that we should simply let inferior schools rot? I think not. Good schools *can* make a difference—if we know what kind of a difference we want them to make.

Underlying the comments of most people who discuss the Coleman Report is the assumption that academic achievement is the most important objective of schooling, and that if school reform does not affect achievement, it is worthless. Yet despite much popular rhetoric, there is little evidence that academic competence is critically important to adults in most walks of life. If you ask employers why they won't hire dropouts, for example, or why they promote certain kinds of people and not others, they seldom com-

plain that dropouts can't read. Instead, they complain that dropouts don't get to work on time, can't be counted on to do a careful job, don't get along with others in the plant or office, can't be trusted to keep their hands out of the till and so on. Nor do the available survey data suggest that the adult success of people from disadvantaged backgrounds depends primarily on their intellectual skills. If you compare black men who do well on the Armed Forces Qualifications Test to those who do badly, for example, you find that a black man who scores as high as the average white still earns only about two-thirds what the average white earns. Not only that, he hardly earns more than the average black. Even for whites, the mental abilities measured by the A.F.Q.T. account for less than a tenth of the variation in

earnings.

WITH these observations in mind, go visit a slum school and ask yourself what the school is actually doing. You will usually find that it seems to share the employers' priorities. It devotes very little time to academic skills. Instead, the teachers spend their days in a vain effort to teach the children to behave in what they (and probably most employers) regard as the proper way. The teachers' ideas about proper behavior are silly in some respects. Nonetheless, they are probably right in feeling that what their children need first and foremost is not academic skill but such "middle-class" virtues as self-discipline and self-respect. It is the school's failure to develop these personal characteristics, not its failure to teach history or physics or verbal skill, that lies behind the present upheavals in the schools. And it is this failure to which reformers should be addressing themselves.

From this perspective the best index of a school's success or failure may not be reading scores but the number of rocks thrown through its windows in an average month. The Coleman survey does not speak to this question. ■

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