



by Diane Ravitch

Compensatory education is all the rage. A miniprofession is sprouting up to staff the thousands of government and private programs. Low-income pressure groups have begun to demand it for their children instead of integration. It has captured the attention of the mass media, which report results like ball scores. The public and professional debate about compensatory education has focused on such issues as: Does it work? For what age student is it most effective? Which kind of student responds best to it? How many years of it are required to remove "disadvantages" to children's learning capacity?

This debate rests on two basic assumptions regarding the nature of compensatory education. First, that it consists of special services for culturally disadvantaged children; and second, that it is temporary, lasting only until the child has been "compensated" and can re-enter regular education on a par with his more advantaged peers. These widely held beliefs are typified by Operation Head Start, for example. The Head Start program is grounded specifically on the theory that one, two, or three years of compensatory education at the preschool level will wipe out the negative influences of home, culture and community, somewhat like an immunization shot. Early studies indicating that Head Start children do not generally maintain a "headstart" in I.Q. and achievement *after* they leave the program have led to proposals that the program start a year or two earlier and last a year or two longer. The proposals are natural outgrowths of the underlying assumptions: more time, more compensation is needed to overcome the cultural handicaps.

The vocabulary and philosophy of compensatory education are more appropriate to the task of breaking a bad habit than to that of providing a solid education. When the "compensated" child begins to regress on his return to conventional schooling, educators speak of his need for more cultural rehabilitation. As a psychiatrist writing in a recent issue of *Southern Education Report* put it, "We would not, after all, anticipate that starting a good diet at age 5 would protect a child against malnutrition at age 6." The analogy to compensatory education is obvious. What we call compensatory education is simply a balanced diet, educationally, which is withdrawn as soon as the child appears to be in good health.

It is axiomatic that the target group of compensatory education is culturally disadvantaged children. A typical definition of compensatory education is: "... organized efforts to help culturally disadvantaged children to obtain, as a part of their school program, the variety of experiences, the stimulation, language development, intellectual development, appropriate expectations from themselves and from others, etc., that they need for full development of their potential but have missed (and continue to miss) in home and community." Yet *precisely* the same words, with the deletion of "culturally disadvantaged" and possibly the phrase "but have missed . . .", would summarize the goals of many excellent public and private schools whose students are middle- and upper-class.

Various compensatory education programs claim to have developed a special means of "reaching" their students; a kind of mystique has emerged with special techniques and special languages which are applicable only to the culturally disadvantaged. But the unmythical fact is that the best of these programs, despite any gimmicks, would be as exciting to a middle-class child as to a lower-class child. Their common elements have nothing to do with cultural deprivation and everything to do with education as it should be for all children.

Compensatory education at its best is simply quality education. When the program operates at a high school level, then the student can move into a continuing program of quality education, that is, college; but when a student in elementary or junior high school is treated to only a few years of compensatory education, then those programs should be regarded as "temporary quality education." In fact, calling all compensatory programs either quality education or temporary quality education, depending on what happens next, would be far more than a semantic exercise. The change in labels would shift the focus away from the search for a miraculous crash program to a realistic appraisal of the problems of providing universal quality education.

Single-minded advocates of Head Start regularly insist that without preschool cultural compensation, the intelligence of the slum child may be irretrievably dimmed. Fortunately, a number of excellent programs at the high school level have demonstrated the contrary; the basic ingredient of success, in the best of the private and Upward Bound programs, is educational excellence. Some of the outstanding private programs are:

- SCOPP, a cooperative university-public school project in Pittsburgh, recruited undermotivated, underachieving C and D students who showed strong evidence of potential on I.Q. scores, reading scores, or other indicators. After two intensive summer sessions and regular weekend sessions during the rest of the year, 36 of SCOPP's first class of 42 gained college admission.

- The Princeton summer program selected underachieving public school boys from nearby towns, many of whom were considered rebels or discipline problems. Of the first class of 40, 35 later applied and were accepted in college.

- ABC-ISTSP (A Better Chance-Independent Schools Talent Search Program), initiated by Dartmouth College, recruits disadvantaged but motivated students. The students attend an academically rigorous summer session at one of several Ivy League colleges; then, if they succeed, matriculate into a top boarding school, one of 101 that supports ISTSP. Nearly 90 per cent of the students selected for an ABC summer have gained admission to prep school, and many of those have made the honor roll.

- Yale Summer High School recruits disadvantaged tenth graders for its challenging one-summer program; about 90 per cent have ultimately entered good colleges.

These programs, working with a ratio of anywhere from three to ten students per staff member, could not be duplicated on a massive scale (though frequently half the staff consisted of college-age tutor-counselors). But all of them share certain features which are immediately relevant to general public education, not because they have reached the disadvantaged, but because they have obtained educational excellence.

The foremost quality of all these programs is that they are *organized* to produce excellence; they consciously or unconsciously recognize what John Gardner said a few years ago, that "If you don't pay attention to organization, you soon find that it is determining the philosophy and goals of your enterprise." Every system, large or small, has an environment; it is not money alone that creates the environment. Roles, expectations and attitudes are engineered into the structure of a program, and they become far more important than salaries or methods. The new roles and new relationships *are* the program, and it is important to contrast them with what has become the norm in public education.

To begin with, not one of these programs has a decision-making bureaucracy, far removed from the classroom, with priorities of its own. The administrative staff of the program is small and sees itself as a servant of the enterprise, not its master. The director of the program feels a personal responsibility for the students' success. If his program is part of a larger system, he knows that his future advancement depends on the success of his program and he is accountable; there can be no scapegoats.

The teachers are carefully selected for each program and come to their new role fully cognizant of its demands, responsibilities and challenges. They must be well-grounded in their subject, imaginative in their approach and willing to commit unscheduled hours outside the classroom to their students. Teachers are expected to design the curriculum, usually in departmental teams, and to exercise their judgment in finding the most effective approach to particular students. These important assignments give the teacher a commitment to what is taught and a sense of direct responsibility for the success of his students. Furthermore, status is imparted to the teacher as the person at the top of the decision-making chain, instead of the bottom. The success of a teacher is judged by his success with his students; the route of advancement for a teacher is to become a better, more successful communicant with his students, *not* to leave teaching for administration.

THE TEACHER is helped by the provision of small classes, which enable him to establish personal contact with each of his students and to understand their learning styles and problems. Participants in all the programs agree that small classes are essential in the vital communication skills, i.e., reading, writing, speech. Teachers in the highly successful ABC program at Dartmouth decided, after experimenting, that English sections should absolutely not be larger than eight students. They said: "We concluded that effective development of thought and expression, particularly skill in composition, founders on gimmicks or short cuts. There is no substitute for teachers and tutors having unhurried time for each student." Public educators might scoff at the unrealistic idea of attaining English classes of eight students; but what if this approach were conclusively proven to be necessary? Even within the present context, it could be achieved through such devices as the increased use of teacher aides and teaching machines and the reshuffling of classes to expand the class sizes in subjects where personal exchange between student and teacher is less urgent.

Remedial services are available in all these programs to whatever extent

each student requires them. However, the offering of these services is not predicated on the students' cultural deficiencies, but on his particular learning problems. Some students, even at the tenth grade level, have not learned to read properly; others must be taught how to listen. The same problems, and many others, can be found in any middle-class school; the school is not equipped to deal with their causes, which obviously are not always due to cultural deprivation; but the school can and must diagnose and eliminate the problem before it becomes a permanent impairment of learning capacity.

The relationship of parents to these programs is a strictly supportive one. The faculty understand that they must have the parents' sympathy, and that the parents must understand their vital role in affecting their child's attitude towards his education. Parents are kept fully and accurately informed. It appears that parent demands for control or veto power occur only where parents have lost faith in the schools' ability to provide quality education.

The curriculum and methodology employed in the various programs follow no particular pattern; where and how decisions affecting the learning process are made underlie the commitment with which they are implemented. When decisions such as curriculum development are made at a central headquarters, then teacher initiative and responsibility are engineered out of the school system; the teachers' responsibility for form and content is basic to the adaptability and dynamism of the whole environment.

Very few of the best programs have a professional guidance counselor, because teachers and tutors are expected to fill that role. The students receive constant support, encouragement and reinforcement from these people who know them well. This intensive personal guidance is built in as part of the teachers' and tutors' role and has tremendous meaning to the student, arising, as it does, from a personal relationship with a respected person. No professional counselor, seen once a term or even once a month, can fill the same need. Interestingly, this is a role which is often expected of the college teacher, although there the need may be expressed on an intellectual rather than emotional basis; but in public secondary school, the teacher's function as a wise counselor is relegated to an overburdened guidance staff.

And what happens to the student in this new environment? The environment tells him that the goal of everyone's efforts is his success; he is expected to succeed, and judging by the results of the programs mentioned, he does succeed, even after previous years of mediocre performance. He understands that he is expected to work harder than he ever worked in his life, and he does. All children need to feel the interest and encouragement of their teachers, no matter what their social class; if the same kind of interest is lacking at home, then it becomes *more* important that it be accessible at school.

THESE PROGRAMS are compensatory only in the sense that they recruit underachievers from disadvantaged backgrounds. But the programs themselves can only be described as super-quality education, equally desirable for all classes of children. Virtually all of the "special" techniques which have found their way into compensatory education programs, like team teaching and ungraded classes, have long been accepted in leading public and private schools. As an example, there has been a recent upsurge in the use of the Montessori* methods for teaching disadvantaged children because

* See *The Urban Review*, December 1967.

of Montessori's emphasis on the development of verbalization, sensory perception and conceptualization. Yet judging by the popularity of private Montessori schools in New York City and suburbs, middle-class parents find the same methods of equal value for their children.

Another important reform, spurred by the interest of the Ford Foundation, is the creation of a coordinated curriculum, that is, a single curriculum merging academic and vocational studies. The purpose is to make education relevant to life and work for *all* students. The merger would abolish the stigma now attached to occupational studies and would also eliminate the "general" curriculum which is a watered-down version of the academic. The idea is to translate academic concepts from the abstract to the immediate tactile experience, giving relevance and meaning to both; for example, the student who is having trouble learning to read would be sent to a graphic arts laboratory, there to work with a printing press.

Some schools which have received Ford money to develop a coordinated curriculum have not understood its universal application. They have persisted in seeing the coordinated curriculum as a means of reaching and motivating only the nonverbal and have failed to grasp the possibilities of enlivening the curriculum of the verbal. Yet many private schools have developed their own version of a coordinated curriculum, just because it is a better way to teach and to learn. And the Ford Foundation has clearly expressed its concern for the overall quality of public education, of which the disadvantaged represent a problem different in degree, not in kind. An educational strategist at the Ford Foundation, Mario Fantini, asserts that "Given an outdated educational system, *all learners are . . . disadvantaged.*" In this context, the children of the poor become not *the* disadvantaged, but the *most* disadvantaged.

Yet it would be jumping to the wrong conclusion to contend, as do some sociological romanticists, that there is no important difference between middle-class children and lower-class children. The differences are real and significant. Middle-class children, encouraged and protected by home and community, will succeed in a typical school and can survive even an inferior one. But the low-income child, laboring under the stresses of poverty, finds conventional schooling alien, irrelevant and programmed for his failure. But, given the best of all possible educational experiences, in which he is encouraged and supported, helped where he is weak, stimulated where he is strong, he will respond and can succeed. The kind of education that is desirable for all children is absolutely necessary for the lower-class child.

Why do some compensatory programs fail? Usually because of a failure to understand that compensatory education is in fact quality education. The belief that compensatory education consists only of an array of remedial techniques leads to underfinancing and the failure to provide a new and fully conceptualized environment. Partial programs are like throwing a too-short line out to a drowning man. Experience has shown that compensatory education in small doses has little or no impact, and the transition in New York City from the Demonstration Guidance Project to Higher Horizons is a classic example.

THE LATTER program worked with students in the upper half of the seventh, eighth and ninth grades at JHS 43, from 1956 until their graduation in 1962. These students showed marked improvement compared to three pre-DGP classes. Of the DGP students, 108 graduated with an academic diploma, compared to 43 in the preproject classes; 44 finished with no failures, compared to only 14 in the preproject group; 37 had averages of 80 per cent or better, compared to 11 in the preproject group; 168 were admitted to post-secondary institutions, compared to 47 in preproject classes.

The success of the Demonstration Guidance Project led to the creation in 1959 of an expanded version, Higher Horizons, covering 64,000 students. The program was a disaster from the start. Whereas the per capita cost of DGP had been \$250, the per capita cost of Higher Horizons was \$40. Whereas Demonstration Guidance Project had worked with the top half of each class, Higher Horizons, with its meager resources, included all of the students in its schools. The annual expansion of services which had been planned for Higher Horizons was never permitted by its budget.

In a 1964 evaluation of Higher Horizons, it was found that while the number of students in the program tripled, the number of teachers had only doubled. The average class size was 28-29, startlingly high for a compensatory program. The ratio of professionals per 1000 students averaged about 60. Higher Horizons schools were beset with the same problems as non-experimental schools, like pupil transiency and teacher turnover, both an indication of disinterest or dissatisfaction with the school. The average rate of pupil transiency was 38 per cent. About one-third of the staff were substitute teachers; the teacher turnover rate ranged from 43 to 55 per cent annually.

GIVEN THESE dismal statistics, it is not surprising that the students in the program showed no significant improvement on virtually any indicator of achievement or attitude, and that the program was finally abandoned.

Aside from the obvious defect of underfinancing, Higher Horizons fell prey to the vitiating effects of expansion and centralization, which seem to dilute and destroy the successor to many a good pilot program. Expansion itself does not seem to lead inevitably to dilution, but centralization or bureaucratic absorption of a program's decision-making powers does.

The College Discovery and Development Program, a cooperative venture between the New York City Board of Education and the City University of New York, illustrates the manner in which a large system can unintentionally sap its satellite of effectiveness and integrity. Just completing its second year, College Discovery and Development Program annually selects several hundred highly disadvantaged underachieving ninth graders each year for a three-year program, at the end of which it is hoped that they will achieve admission to City University by obtaining a minimum average of 80. The first class of 579 had an academic average of about 75, which program officials think was probably inflated, since most came from special service schools where they were not in a college preparatory curriculum and competition was slight. CDD students are programmed separately in five existing academic high schools designated by the Board of Education. After a year of small classes and the usual gamut of remedial practices, the CDD students had an average of about 73, roughly comparable to that of the regular academic students in their schools. The first year was no spectacular success, but, given the risk involved in purposely recruiting students with the greatest gap between achievement and potential, it is too soon to declare the program a failure.

Yet the program had obvious flaws, many of which it acknowledged and criticized, and almost all of which stemmed from the conflicts within the program's leadership. CDD was conceived by City University and was supposed to have been directed by CUNY, with the cooperation of the Board of Education. CDD intended to provide a "new . . . different . . . powerful and consistent learning environment." But program officials underestimated the tenacity of the Board's bureaucracy when it came to relinquishing control over decision making. In describing the five high schools which the Board had selected for CDD centers, the CDD report observes drily that two are located in markedly deteriorating buildings in slum neighborhoods,

a third in similar condition is in a deteriorating neighborhood, and a fourth is established in portable buildings in a high school originally designed as an elementary school. Actual control of the program in each school is in the hands of the principal, to whom CDD is just one of many responsibilities. Yet each principal has more authority than the overall program director of CDD. The principal not only selects the teaching staff, but CDD must quietly negotiate with him over the choice of students, with the program choosing two-thirds, the principal one-third. CUNY assigned college faculty to act as curriculum consultants in each school, but the consultants were frequently ignored in the first year when they unknowingly failed to observe the protocol of clearing recommendations through the respective department chairmen.

IN CDD's first annual report, the students are analyzed from every possible angle, but hardly a word describes the teaching staff. Equally revealing was the *sub rosa* struggle of the program's summer session to obtain an integrated teaching staff from the Board. Such omissions reflect a self-justifying attitude that academic failure is entirely the fault of the child and his environment; in this equation, the teacher's experience and attitudes are unimportant. Certainly no worthy compensatory education program would consider the teacher an anonymous, interchangeable quantity.

Ironically, it is the common notion of "compensatory" education that prevents many educators from recognizing that what they must provide, at all levels, is *quality* education, an education that cannot be produced piecemeal from a headquarters cookie-cutter. The very definition of compensatory education permits educators to blame the students who don't respond to their programs, instead of questioning whether first, the conventional education and then, the additive program, which may be just more of the same, fails to meet the needs of the students. If compensatory education were recognized for what it is, quality education, the absurdity of a limited one-, two-, or three-year program, particularly at the preschool or elementary school level would be apparent. After all, of what value to the student is temporary quality education? No one would then be surprised or disillusioned when the termination of a "temporary quality education" program also terminates the academic progress of its pupils.

Secondly, if compensatory education were understood to be quality education, program planning would proceed differently, discarding the illusory goal of "saving" a new group of children every year or every few years. Only sustained quality education makes a difference. Until vast funds make it available for all, it might be preferable to concentrate on long-range quality education at a single pyramid of schools rather than diffusing funds and effectiveness throughout the system. At least the lobbying for new funds and the debate over how to spend them might focus on the *issues* of education instead of a hapless search for new tricks and expedient panaceas.

Third, the present concept of compensatory education, with its missionary overtones, favors the underachiever at the expense of the achiever. Almost every program, particularly within the public schools, rejects the achiever because "he doesn't need us." But if the term "compensatory" education is replaced by quality education, then it becomes clear that the achiever in the ghetto school needs a good education as much as an underachiever and stands to benefit by it even more. One of the few programs which deals directly with this inequity is the Brandeis Bridge Program. Brandeis observed that 60 per cent of the disadvantaged students it accepted (who had been superior students in their own schools) performed unsatisfactorily in their freshman year, compared to an overall freshman rate of 10.9 per cent. The Bridge Program accepts superior disadvantaged students who

have already been admitted to college and gives them a rigorous summer of preparation. Eighty-five per cent of its first group are completing successful college careers. Based on this performance, numerous college admission boards have become willing to accept good students from poor schools who complete the Bridge Program.

Finally, the condescension and cultural snobbery which so frequently offend the recipients of compensatory education might be eliminated altogether if it were considered quality education. It is not simply a question of labels, but of the attitudes that accompany the labels and the way the attitudes influence the substance of the program itself. Educators must launch an attack on inferior education, not on cultural disadvantage. Educators cannot change society except by giving each child the education he requires, regardless of his social class.

Efforts to rehabilitate the product must cease, and instead be directed to pondering how to change the process. The major problem facing education, to quote Mario Fantini again, is the creation of "a system of universal education from early childhood through college, a system which has the capability of educating fully a diverse student learning population."

The present public school system is geared to the middle-class child, even as the middle-class is abandoning the public schools in the urban areas for what they think is a better education in the suburbs. Thus, not only is the lower-class child not reached by conventional education, but apparently conventional education is not even good enough for the child that it is directed to.

WHAT is to be done? A beginning, at least, is to ask the right questions, to know what must be sought. The end of the quest will not be a miraculous technique for compensating disadvantaged children speedily and economically; so long as the everyday diet of education is inappropriate, there can be no easy solutions. And surely, everyone wants to see more money for remedial services, smaller classes, and all of the other standard enrichment devices. But most urban school systems are not presently organized to use the money in ways that would provide basic reforms; they are saddled with overcentralized bureaucracies, zealously guarding their power and effectively throttling change. To speak of curriculum reform, of encouraging teacher initiative, or of any specific improvement is fruitless until the necessity for institutional reform is confronted. The very framework of public education must be rethought and restructured. This will require radical decentralization of school systems and radical redefining of the roles of teachers, principals and students, built into the organization of the school to endure beyond the first flush of enthusiasm, but engineered in such a way as to make that enthusiasm a part of the edifice. The role of organization must be calculated and understood so that it can be made to serve the purposes of education rather than to subvert them.

Though it was not planned that way, compensatory education has become a channel for demonstrating the ineffectiveness of traditional public education, for altering the dialogue among educators, and for infiltrating new ideas and new techniques into the schools. It would be a mistake to see compensatory education as a salvage and reclamation component of the old order. Its universal implications have given impetus to a new spirit of inquiry into the basic purposes and procedures of education that will not easily be satisfied.

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