Revisiting the Coleman Report: Deficit Ideologies and Federal Compensatory Funding in Low-Income Latino School Communities

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Abstract

The essay argues that the Coleman Report helped give credence to contemporary deficit ideologies in education by proclaiming that schools do not make much of a difference in the educational outcomes of students in poverty including Latino communities. Furthermore, the author explores how deficit ideologies influence compensatory funding, in particular Title I, and concludes with recommendations to improve compensatory allotments that reject deficit views for low-income Latino students.

Introduction

The United States Department of Education (USDOE) was founded in 1867 to collect information on schools with the goal of helping states establish effective school systems. A century later, in the midst of progressive "Great Society Initiatives" and civil rights legislation, the U.S. Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965[19] (ESEA), a comprehensive set of K-12 programs that includes the Title I and Title VII (now Title III) program of federal financial support for students in poverty and English Language Learners (ELLs), respectively. During the same time period, James Coleman and colleagues conducted an educational study on schools and inequality commissioned under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and sponsored by the USDOE entitled *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966). More commonly known as "The Coleman Report," this study still has implications on how we view our public K-12 education system.

The author argues that the Coleman Report helped give credence to contemporary deficit ideologies in education by proclaiming that schools do not make much of a difference in the educational outcomes of students in poverty including Latino students. Deficit ideologies focus on how biological, cultural, and/or environmental factors explain the underachievement of Latino students in poverty (Valencia, 1997). These ideologies aim to remedy academic deficiencies of Latino children and families in poverty by changing their cultural behaviors and beliefs that are seen as the cause of their low academic attainment (Gorksi, 2008; Olivos, 2006). Furthermore, the author explores how deficit ideologies influence compensatory funding, in particular Title I, and concludes with recommendations to improve compensatory allotments that reject deficit views for low-income Latino students.

The Coleman Report

The Coleman Report was monumental in its scope, findings, and impact on education. It drew on data from surveys of 600,000 students, 60,000 educators including several thousand principals and hundreds of school superintendents, and over 3,000 schools across the country, making it the second largest social science research study ever done in the U.S. at the time. Many politicians, educators, and education scholars thought that the study would reveal significant school resource inequalities, but it did not. Instead, Coleman and his colleagues claimed that their findings indicated that a student's background and socioeconomic status are much more important than measured differences in school resources (such as per pupil spending) in determining educational outcomes. Consequently, the Coleman Report was met with a strong academic and political backlash (see Bowels & Leven, 1968; Moynihan, 1968). In particular, Bowels and Leven (1968) severely critiqued the study's methodology including the sampling and response rate of the survey, pointing to an overrepresentation of suburban schools and an underrepresentation of schools in large cities. They pointed, as well, to statistical flaws

[19] Currently titled "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB)

in the research design and analysis.

Regardless of the early criticisms, the Coleman Report has persevered and continues to affect the public policy in education in significant ways. As Borman and Dowling (2010) lamented, "Despite past re-analyses of the Coleman data and decades of research on the effects of schools as organizations, the report's fundamental finding—that a student's family background is far more important than school social composition and school resources for understanding student outcomes—still retains much of its currency" (p. 1202). Ravich (1981) further articulated the effect of the Coleman Report:

> …its most pervasive effect was to encourage the feeling that the schools were unable to affect student achievement very greatly…Whether students did well or poorly in schools seemed determined for the most part by their human resources, and little, if at all, by anything that teachers or schools did…[therefore] it becomes difficult to argue on behalf of any given curriculum, requirement, or policy" (p. 719)

In addition, Espinosa (1985) explained that one reason the issue of school resources (e.g., finances, facilities) had been largely ignored is that:

> [p]roponents of [Coleman's] philosophy believed that future investigation into resource distribution and possible educational disparities would not provide answers on how to improve the opportunities or achievement of educationally deprived students. This helps to explain why attempts to extract information pertaining to school inequality and resource disparities were neglected by many researchers. (p. 3)

Consequently, federal funding for education research has tended toward studies focused on examining individual students' locus of control, motivation, and behaviors as malleable factors to improve student learning. Significantly less education funding has gone to examining the structural issues that contribute to unequal educational outcomes, allowing the Coleman Report and its findings to gain momentum. If educators take to heart the Coleman report that school resources do not make a difference, but student characteristics do, the implication are to focus on changing the culture and behaviors of Latino students and families in poverty so that they can resemble that of affluent families. Consider, as an example, this analysis from Goldsmith (2010):

> Most studies of peer effects use… a normative model because they theorize that students become like their peers. The peer-effect explanation dates back at least to the seminal work of Coleman and his colleagues, who argued that middle-class students often have beliefs and behaviors that associate with greater achievement and that in schools with many of these students, the students create a normative climate that promotes achievement. (p. 509)

Deficit Ideologies and Title I Funding

The two primary federal funding sources earmarked to support Latino students in poverty are Title I and Title III (previously Title VII), which are related to poverty and English Language Acquisition. There is no direct funding source designed for Latino students in K-12 schools. The Title III funding is designed for Latino (and non-Latino) students who are learning English as a second language and Title I funding is designed for Latino (and non-Latino) students who are in poverty. Even though Title III seems to be more specific to Latino students since some Latinos are second language learners; there are still more Latino students who are in poverty than there are Latino students learning English as a second language. In fact, most Latino students are English speaking. In addition, Title I is a significantly larger allotment than Title III. For these two reasons, I have chosen to focus on Title I funding instead of Title III funding in this paper. Arguing that Title I has equally if not a more significant impact on Latino communities than Title III. However, both are targeting different needs.

Title I was originally conceived as a compensatory vehicle for distributing federal funding to school

districts based on the number of low-income children enrolled (6,500 or 15%). The intent of Title I funds is to "supplement not supplant" the resources provided to children in poverty to support their education. In other words, Title I funds should specifically target students in poverty, but not replace general education funds. Because Title I funds are allocated to local educational agencies (LEAs)—school districts—state educational agencies are in charge of distributing the funds to districts, monitoring district programs for compliance, providing technical assistance and administering special state programs. The United States Department of Education most recent data on participation in the Title I program from school year (SY) 2009-10 show that more than 56,000 public schools across the country received Title I funding. That same year, Title I served more than 21 million children, many of which are Latino students. Of these students, approximately 59 percent were in kindergarten through fifth grade, 21 percent in grades 6-8 and 17 percent in grades 9-12.

A critical perspective on the rationale for compensatory education illuminates how deficit ideologies influence the design and perception of Title I and other similar compensatory funding programs such as Title III. According to Stickney and Fitzpatrick (1987, p. 4) the original rationale for compensatory education funding was based on the following premises:

1. The total environment has a profound influence on measured intelligence and scholastic achievement.
2. Schools are an important part of the total environment.
3. Improved schooling for disadvantaged children could compensate for inadequacies in measured intelligence and scholastic achievement caused by inadequacies in the total environment.

Therefore, deficit ideologies inform the rationale for compensatory education by believing that Latino (and non-Latino) students in poverty are "disadvantaged" and there is a need to "compensate" for the "inadequacies" of these students. Ironically, the majority of Title I and Title III proponents are well-intentioned educators advocating on behalf of student in poverty in the name of fairness. Again, Stickney and Fitzpatrick (1987) express this sentiment as well,

> …if the inequalities in the environment are principally responsible for the inequalities in achievement, then probably the only way to significantly reduce the inequalities in achievement is to significantly reduce the inequalities in the environment. In the meantime, in the field of education, that part of the environment that is compensatory schooling may be one of our most important, though modest egalitarian strategies. (p. 55)

However, the original 1965 legislation did not specify the types of services that districts should provide to students leading to abuses and misuses (e.g., tutoring, remedial programs). School districts are responsible for designing and running Title I programs, and allocating funding to schools to support educational services for children in poverty. Schools enrolling at least 40 percent of children from low-income families are eligible to use Title I funds for school-wide programs designed to upgrade their entire educational programs to improve achievement for all students, particularly the lowest-achieving students. One of the major challenges school leaders face in designing and implementing Title I programs is the lack of knowledge about what works to improve the achievement of students in poverty including Latino students. Without this knowledge, providing districts and schools with more resources will be ineffective unless those resources are used in ways that actually meet the needs of students in poverty and enable them to succeed academically.

Regrettably, Title I allotments are too commonly expended to provide a school wide remedial education in high poverty schools helping to create a culture of low expectations and low rigor (Jimenez-Castellanos, 2008) for low-income Latino students. For instance, Title I funds are commonly used to purchase test prep materials, grammar programs such as "Breaking the Code", and reading intervention programs such as "Success for All". These interventions are in addition to pre-packaged basal reading and math curriculums, such as "Open Court" and "Saxon Math," that stress skills and drills instead of critical thinking and culturally relevant pedagogy. Furthermore, most high poverty schools provide minimal history, science, art, music and physical education, since these subjects are seen as non-essential to improve standardized test scores. Ironically, this compensatory

approach to improving standardized test scores does not properly prepare low-income Latino students to meet the minimum standards, much less prepare them to learn complex, high order problem solving skills. Ultimately, compensatory education is operationalized through low expectations of children and selecting low rigor programs, curriculums and interventions to address their deficiencies (Jimenez-Castellanos & Rodriguez, 2009; Rodriguez, 2007). Thus, Title I represents an interesting paradox. On the one hand, Title I funding attempts to counter the Coleman Report's findings that school resources matter yet at the same time are designed and implemented based on deficit ideology.

Given the deficit based compensatory approach used to serve students in poverty especially Latino students, it should not be surprising that Title I is not producing the desired results for Latino and other traditionally marginalized communities. Yet the author argues that low achievement is *not* caused by a student's culture, behavior or characteristics but instead the low quality instructional program provided. Why should we expect low quality programs to produce high academic outcomes? Some suggest that a lack of or negative correlation between Title I funds and achievement means money does not matter (Hanushek, 1986). However, there is *no* data to suggest that *less* funding including reduced Title I funds produce better results for Latino students in poverty (Baker, 2012). In the end, low expectations via compensatory education for Latino (and non-Latino) students in poverty, and not the Title I funding itself, helps to predict low achievement for students in poverty (Espinosa 1985; Espinosa & Ochoa, 1992; Jimenez-Castellanos, 2010).

While there is a great need for additional research on what uses of Title I funds are most effective, a growing body of evidence on the educational approaches and programs that are proven to increase achievement among students in poverty can provide a basis for how to better invest Title I dollars. However, many districts and schools do not have adequate information about which programs actually work. Without such information, districts have been slow to adopt proven, evidence-based practices with their Title I funds, particularly when implementing such practices requires a substantial departure from what the district is currently doing. There are several examples of promising practices for spending Title I funds that are supported by research and proven to improve the achievement of students in poverty.

Expanding quality preschool opportunities: Districts can use Title I funds to support preschool services for young Latino children in poverty by increasing access to reach more children or raising the quality of existing programs.

Implementing early literacy interventions: Title I can fund well-designed early interventions to address the reading challenges facing elementary school low-income Latino students. Intervening earlier can be more successful and cost-effective than providing remedial services in later years.

Engaging parents in a meaningful way: Districts can use Title I parent involvement funds to develop strategies that more deeply engage Latino parents in their child's education and address the particular challenges, needs and aspirations of parents in Latino communities.

Creating a culture of high expectations and college-readiness: Title I funds can support efforts to cultivate a college-going culture that focuses on ensuring that all low-income Latino students are held to high standards and provided with the support they need to succeed academically.

Extending quality instructional time: Title I can fund efforts to extend the school day or the school year to provide additional instructional time to help Latino student in poverty accelerate academically.

Maximizing Title I per pupil allocations: Emerging research suggests that focusing available district Title I resources in ways that maximize the per pupil allocation provided to schools may facilitate more effective Title I programming by ensuring that funds are not diluted.

Conclusion

Even though, many scholars have repudiated the Coleman Report over the years, it continues to have direct impact on how we view and fund public schools, especially high poverty Latino school communities. This essay examined the interrelationship among the Coleman Report, deficit ideologies and Title I funding in high poverty Latino school communities. The Coleman Report to some extent has given credence to deficit ideologies by asserting that a student's background and socioeconomic status are much more important in determining educational outcomes than are measured differences in school effects, leading many educators and policy makers to believe that the remedy to improving the educational attainment of students in poverty lies primarily in modifying their cultural behaviors and beliefs. Title I funding for high poverty Latino schools have been influenced by deficit ideologies, which use remedial education to compensate for students' academic deficiencies instead of providing high quality educational programs to eliminate the achievement gap (Jimenez-Castellanos, 2008).

To conclude this paper, a couple of anti-deficit recommendations are provided to help improve Title I funding and the education of Latino students in poverty. The hope is that these recommendations serve to improve the way we educate high poverty Latino schools, children and families.

Believe schools can make an impact—It is paramount for policy-makers, researchers and educators to believe that schools can make a difference in the lives of children especially Latino students in poverty. They must go beyond the Coleman Report to continuously examine how school structures and resources can be enhanced to improve the learning of students in poverty. Without this belief, it is too easy to become cynical, complacent and/or frustrated with the process of transforming education and begin to blame students and families. It is equally important for educators to hold high expectations for students. We need to make sure not to accept the achievement gap as normal. We need to provide an enriched not remedial curriculum for Latino students in poverty.

Keep and Reform Title I funds— Title I funds should and can have a positive impact on student lives, their learning and outcomes. Title I funds should not be eliminated since data suggests that less money will not solve the achievement gap between students in poverty and affluent students. However Title I reform should focus on how these funds are used to enrich the curriculum for Latino students in poverty to eliminate the achievement gap. To this end, there should be improved guidelines on how to support schools in effectively utilizing Title I funds based on anti-deficit research-based literature.

Improve Transparency and Accountability—Another opportunity to reform Title I, is to require district and school level expenditure reporting. Funding allocations should not only be reported annually but be publically available in a clear manner to increase transparency and communication to local and external stakeholders. At the same time, the accountability should improve to assure that these funds supplement not supplant general funds. The consequences should not be reducing funds, since students are the ones being primarily affected, but instead work with those educational leaders responsible in managing fiscal allotment such as administrators/school boards to improve use of funds.

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