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Coleman's Third Report

MARJAN ŠIMENC*¹ AND MOJCA ŠTRAUS²

∞ The article analyses the (third) Coleman Report on private and public schools. The report scrutinises the relationship between private and public schools and shows that private school students show better academic achievement. Coleman concluded that these findings provided a strong argument in favour of public financial support for private schools. However, he identified a number of school characteristics that he believed to be related to student achievement.

According to his analysis, these characteristics were not limited to private schools; public schools exhibiting the same characteristics also had good results. Coleman interpreted the available data in favour of financial aid to private schools, although this was not the only possible interpretation. An alternative conclusion would have been to encourage these characteristics in public schools.

Why did Coleman disregard this possibility? Why did he deviate from his usual scientific rigour? The present article suggests that there appear to be two reasons for the narrow interpretation of the relationship between public and private schools in Coleman's third report. The first lies in Coleman's notion of contemporary society as a constructed system in which every individual actor holds a place in the structure and requires incentives in order to act to the benefit of society. In the case of education, the goal of the institution is to ensure the high cognitive achievement of students, and the incentive is related to choice and competition. The second reason is related to Coleman's vision of sociology as a discipline aiding the construction of an effective society.

Keywords: Coleman Report, private schools, public schools, competition, parental vouchers

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Colemanovo tretje poročilo

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☞ Članek analizira (tretje) Colemanovo poročilo o zasebnih in javnih šolah. Poročilo je preiskovalo razmerje med zasebnimi in javnimi šolami ter pokazalo, da so bili učenci v zasebnih šolah akademsko uspešnejši. Sklep poročila je bil, da so te ugotovitve močen argument v prid javni finančni podpori zasebnim šolam, vendar je identificiral tudi vrsto značilnosti šol, ki naj bi bile povezane z uspehi učencev. Po Colemanovi analizi pa se te značilnosti ne nanašajo samo na zasebne šole; tudi javne šole s takimi značilnostmi imajo dobre rezultate. Coleman je podatke interpretiral, kot da govorijo v prid finančni pomoči zasebnim šolam, vendar to ni bila edina mogoča interpretacija. Alternativni sklep je bil, da se te značilnosti spodbuja tudi v javnih šolah. Zakaj Coleman ni upošteval te možnosti? Zakaj pri tem vprašanju ni ravnal s svojo običajno znanstveno strogostjo? Članek predlaga, da za ozko interpretacijo razmerja med javnimi in zasebnimi šolami v Colemanovem tretjem poročilu obstajata dva razloga. Prvi izhaja iz Colemanovega razumevanja sodobne družbe kot konstruiranega sistema, v katerem ima vsak posamezni akter mesto v sistemu in potrebuje spodbudo, da bi deloval v korist družbe. Pri edukaciji je cilj institucije zagotoviti visoke kognitivne dosežke učencev, spodbuda pa je povezana z izbiro in s tekmovanjem. Drugi razlog je povezan s Colemanovo vizijo sociologije kot discipline, ki pomaga graditi učinkovito družbo.

Ključne besede: Colemanovo poročilo, zasebne šole, javne šole, tekmovanje, starševski vavčerji

Introduction: the three reports

Empirical research of education holds a special place in the work of American sociologist James Coleman. His study on educational equality marked a turning point in U.S. education policy. His report was based on an extensive empirical sample and paved the way for a new era in educational research, with its findings radically transforming the approach to equality in education.

In the report – produced by several scholars, Coleman being one of them – Coleman was appointed as the principal investigator of the project and is therefore known to many non-sociologists as the author of the *Coleman Report*. However, this was not the only report by Coleman that merits the status of a *Coleman Report*, i.e., a report using empirical research to question established beliefs. There are two other reports by Coleman that used a similar method. Both met with strong opposition, but were nevertheless received as reports (also) containing valuable findings and influencing the predominant comprehension in society.

The first of these two reports was entitled *Trends in School Segregation*, and was presented to the American Educational Research Association in April 1975. Coleman analysed data from 20 school districts and determined that court-ordered busing did not mitigate segregation in schools, due to the fact that, in addition to the intended consequences, the busing policy had other unexpected consequences. Parents of white children responded to the busing policy with a mass exodus termed “white flight”: white parents and their children moved to other school districts in order to avoid having their children sit in the same class as black classmates. The report elicited strong reactions. Coleman’s first report served as a justification for the busing policy, but the second report yielded strong arguments against this very policy. This gave rise to outrage amongst the proponents of the busing policy, as well as within the American Sociological Association. Both viewed the report as an attack on the desegregation policy; attempts were even made to revoke Coleman’s membership in the association.

However, this was not Coleman’s last empirical study to attract public attention. In 1980, he studied the relationship between public and private schools. His report, entitled *Private and Public Schools*, showed that private schools taught students significantly more than public schools. It is this third report by Coleman that is discussed in the present article.

The third report

Coleman's third report is a report on private schools. Like the first report, the third report was the result of the collaborative work of several authors; both co-authors, Thomas Hoffer and Sally Kilgore, later completed PhDs on the comparison between private and public schools. The report scrutinises the relationship between private and public schools in an attempt to show that private school students show better academic achievement and that private schools contribute to desegregation.

In his research, Coleman analysed the data collected in the baseline survey for the longitudinal study *High School and Beyond*. The study was commissioned by the National Center for Education Statistics and carried out by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago. The first survey was administered in 1980 and involved 894 public schools, 84 Catholic schools and 27 non-Catholic private schools, with a total of almost 60,000 students participating. Detailed information on the schools was collected, while the students completed a background questionnaire and underwent a cognitive skills test.

The analysis focused on the students' cognitive outcomes and their interest in university education. For the purposes of the study, cognitive outcomes were measured using reading, vocabulary and mathematics tests. In both sophomore and senior years, private school students from the Catholic schools and the other private schools performed better. When the draft report was published, Coleman admitted that the sample of non-Catholic private schools was too limited to lead to any conclusive findings on other private schools, so they were not included in further discussions. In terms of the students' aspirations to continue their education at university, the results followed the same pattern: a higher number of students at Catholic high schools were willing to go to university compared to public school students.

What remained unclear was whether the better achievement and higher aspirations were the result of the education, i.e., the work of private schools, or merely a characteristic of the students who chose to enrol in these schools, i.e., the result of selection bias. In order to respond to this question, Coleman performed a series of tests. The first test focused on the impact of the students' family background and measured the impact of all of the background characteristics that were most closely related to achievement. After this control, the gap in achievement decreased, but private schools still remained in the lead.

Coleman then went on to verify the increase in achievement between the sophomore and senior years. The growth rate was similar in both Catholic and

public schools, but with a drop-out rate in public schools that was twice as high as in private schools, the advances in knowledge between the sophomore and senior years were significantly higher in private schools than in public schools.

Furthermore, there was a significant difference between private and public schools in the homogeneity of achievement. In Catholic schools, the children of parents with various levels of completed education were found to have comparable academic achievement, while disadvantaged students in public schools showed significantly poorer results. In the senior year, the differences between minority students and other students reduced somewhat in Catholic schools and increased slightly in public schools. These three findings all pointed to the same trend, leading Coleman to conclude that private schools were better than public schools when it comes to cognitive achievement.

The next question to be resolved was which differences between public and private schools accounted for the better achievement of private school students. Coleman identified two school factors related to student achievement. He found that private school students tended to be more engaged in academic activities, to attend school more regularly, to do more homework and to take more academic courses. Private schools set higher academic demands, leading to better achievement. The second factor was student behaviour. Private schools tended to have a better disciplinary climate, which also affects student achievement. This part of Coleman's report anticipated the effective school movement.

After the cognitive effects, Coleman tackled the social divisiveness of private education. He introduced a distinction between two types of segregation: the segregation between the public and the private sector, and the segregation between schools within each sector. Private schools did in fact enable the well-off to become segregated from public schools, so the number of black students in private schools was significantly lower than in public schools (in Catholic schools, the share of black students was half that in public schools). This difference was mostly the result of income inequality: only children whose parents could afford to pay the tuition fees were enrolled in private schools, making this type of segregation inevitable. However, Coleman pointed out that segregation also existed among public schools. This segregation was reflected in residential mobility, allowing parents to segregate their children from minority students. When it came to segregation within the sector, it was the public sector that was more affected. The private sector was found to be less prone to this type of segregation, and Coleman even calculated that private schools had in fact contributed to reducing segregation in American schools.

Coleman adopted a similar approach when dealing with economic divisiveness. In this respect, he also managed to show that the public sector

exhibited more internal segregation with regard to income than the private sector. In the bigger picture, however, private schools were shown to have contributed to greater segregation between students in terms of income. Religion was found to play a similar role, and Catholic private schools were shown to have contributed to greater segregation between students in U.S. schools with regard to religion.

Based on these findings, Coleman introduced the discussion on the efficiency of financial aid enabling access to private schools. As financial assistance would allow children from less well-off families to go to private schools, Coleman believed that such a policy would lead to a higher share of black students in private schools, thus reducing segregation in the education system. According to his interpretation, all of the facts pointed to the conclusion that financial aid enabling access to private schools would be beneficial, as it would result in better cognitive achievement as well as less racial segregation.

Reactions to Coleman's third report

The report was a surprise to everyone, including the Department of Education, which delayed its publication by six months and then convened a consultation in April 1981, at which the report was severely criticised. The final version of the report was released in the autumn of 1981, and it was published as a monograph entitled *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared* in 1982.

Criticism was directed against all of the major highlights of the report. Some responses focused on the applied method, pointing out that the use of a different method would have yielded different results. If three further background variables had been added to the 17 used by Coleman in his analysis, the advantage in favour of Catholic schools would be virtually non-existent. In his analysis, Jay Noell (Noell, 1981) included four additional variables in addition to the 17 used by Coleman: gender, handicap status, region of residence and early college expectations. With these additional variables taken into account, the difference between the cognitive achievement in public and private schools became almost negligible. Furthermore, no background analysis could replace the measurement of student achievement prior to entering high school, which would have been the most reliable indicator of whether or not students enrolling in private schools were indeed more capable. Coleman had no such data available.

The measurement of differences in the achievement of students in the sophomore and senior years was questioned because the cognitive test was not designed to provide a reliable measurement of advances. With regard to the

alleged anti-segregation effect of private schools, critics pointed out that a comparison would have to be made between the effects schools had at a local level, since the global comparison did not generate accurate results.

Critics also called into question the ambiguous status of elements conducive to achievement, namely discipline and the academic demands of the school. In some instances, Coleman treated these as elements correlating with achievement and considered them as statistical regularities and patterns. On other occasions, these elements were viewed as being a result of education policy, suggesting that a causal relationship exists between school policy, student behaviour and student achievement. Coleman's analyses provided no basis for this latter assumption.

With regard to the potential impacts of increasing support for private schools, critics highlighted a number of contentious issues. The fact that private schools select their students significantly affects the functioning of these schools. The selection of students is therefore closely related to the operation and success of private schools, with less motivated students predominately being confined to public schools. Murnane thus raised a question that is crucial to Coleman's emphasis on the advantages of private schools:

"In particular, it is important to learn whether such policies would bring about beneficial change in the in-school behaviours of troubled and in-different students or whether the policies would only make it easier for individual schools to avoid working with such students (thereby relegating them to another school whose effectiveness would suffer as a result). ... The distinction is critical in evaluating whether a particular policy change would be a useful strategy for reforming a school system committed to educating all students" (Murnane, 1984, p. 271).

Furthermore, Coleman's report provided no data indicating how private schools would respond to increased demand. They might respond by extending their offer or they might simply increase their tuition fees. It was even less clear how the increased number of students would affect the work and functioning of these schools, so it was impossible to conclude that the introduction of vouchers would result in less segregation and better achievement for all students, as claimed by Coleman.

From today's perspective, what was put forward appears to be a series of valid and well-argued considerations. However, what is also clear from today's perspective is that selection bias cannot be eliminated using the approach adopted by Coleman. Other types of information and other methods are required.

Murnane (Murnane, 1981) also pointed out that Coleman's third report is quite similar to the first one in terms of openness to interpretation. Upon the publication of the first report, public attention did not focus on the abundance of important new data on education contained in the report; the report mostly became known for the theses that schools did not matter and that busing was the most efficient way to improve the education of minority students. According to Murnane, it took years of theoretical analyses and social upheaval before it became clear that these theses could not really be deduced from the database available to the authors at the time. Murnane went on to express his concern that Coleman's third report might suffer the same fate when it comes to the relationship between the achievements in public and private schools and the consequences of introducing vouchers. These claims had no basis in the collected data, but were so prominent in the report that they might well overshadow the numerous well-founded findings contained in the report.

However, Coleman's third report can also be considered as a criticism of his first report. By trying to identify the characteristics of successful schools, Coleman in fact criticises the false interpretation of his first report. The view that "schools don't matter" was formed on the basis of (a misinterpretation of) Coleman's first report. The report revealed how strong an influence parents had on student achievement, which gave rise to the belief that schools were completely powerless compared to the overwhelming impact of parents. It is true that, in his first report, Coleman himself never stated that schools were irrelevant, but it is also true that his first report contained no indication to the contrary that would exclude the possibility of such interpretations.

One of the critics made this very point, emphasising that the key result of the study was not the advocacy of policies toward private schools, even though Coleman himself addressed this as a vital point. What was crucial was that "schools do make a difference" when it comes to how much students learn:

"To my knowledge, the authors offer the first large-scale statistical confirmation of what educational ethnographers have been reposting for several years ... about the characteristic of 'effective' schools" (Finn, 1981, p. 510).

According to Finn, these findings were "almost revolutionary" in the light of the prevailing trends in education, although he goes on to add that this revolution had already started at the level of official policy and was called "back to basics". It seems that Coleman was merely articulating something that was already in existence and confirming a trend already in progress in schools. In this respect, Finn draws attention to the unusual effect of science: "Experienced

teachers certainly knew that how they handle their math classes affected how much math students learned, but they have not had any support of social scientists in an era when it is increasingly important to demonstrate quantitatively that something ‘works’ before you can do more of it” (Finn, 1981, p. 511).

This was an unexpected consequence of Coleman’s research. Without deliberately intending to do so, Coleman contributed to the formation of a new public space. Since his findings had a strong empirical and mathematical/statistical foundation, and as such were based on hard science, they were able to pave the way for new standards in teaching and education. It appears that a teacher’s experience was no longer sufficient; the teacher’s practical experience must be grounded in science in order to be valid. In his first report, Coleman made no explicit assertion that schools had no impact on student achievement; nevertheless, the repercussions of his report were not limited to responses to explicit claims but also included reactions to what was merely implied. It appears that some of these implied assumptions even provoked a stronger public reaction than the meticulously elaborated theses.

From school to parental vouchers

Coleman identified a number of school characteristics that he believed to be related to student achievement. According to his analysis, these characteristics were not limited to private schools; public schools exhibiting the same characteristics also had good results:

“When we examined, wholly within the public sector, the performance of the students similar to the average public school sophomore, but with the levels of homework and attendance attributable to school policy in the Catholic or other private schools, and those levels of disciplinary climate and students behaviour attributable to school policy in the Catholic or other private schools, the levels of achievement are approximately the same as those found in the Catholic and other private sectors” (Coleman, 1981, p. 25).

Coleman considered this fact to be a confirmation of the “school effect”, i.e., a confirmation that what is behind the better performance of private schools is the specific functioning and organisation of these schools rather than the specific (better) structure of the enrolled students. Since his research showed that private schools were more effective, particularly for underprivileged students, and since private schools did not contribute to segregation, Coleman concluded that the findings of his research provided an argument in favour of financial support for private schools.

Critics were quick to question the accuracy of this deduction (Murnane, 1984). Given that discipline and academic demands correlated with good cognitive achievement in both public and private schools, financial incentive for private schools was not the only possible conclusion. An alternative conclusion, or perhaps even the primary conclusion, was encouraging these characteristics in public schools. So why did Coleman disregard this possibility?

One possible explanation is that it was difficult to provide such a learning environment in public schools. Coleman pointed to a number of differences between private and public schools that could explain why a stimulative learning environment was rarely present in public schools. For instance, public school principals have less autonomy in managing the school, which Coleman illustrated with a typical example: "Public schools have greater constraints on suspending or expelling students than do private schools ..." (Coleman, 1981, pp. 25–26).

In a different article, Coleman similarly stressed that "the constraints imposed on schools in the public sector (and there is no evidence that those constraints are financial, compared with the private sector) seem to impair their functioning as educational institutions, without providing the more egalitarian outcome that is one of the goals of public schooling" (Coleman, Hoffer & Kilgore, 1982a, p. 9).

Coleman associated public schools with limitations preventing them from functioning well as schools; however, he made no attempt to analyse why these limitations had been introduced. His discourse seems to imply that public control over education should be viewed as a source of difficulty rather than as democratic leadership guiding schools to act to the benefit of the population and society. Coleman considers the public domain to be related to limitations, to something that is bad in itself, as it prevents a public institution from operating effectively. He nonetheless fails to investigate why society is preventing its own institutions from functioning properly.

Coleman also failed to address another fact uncovered by his research, namely that there are major differences between public schools, just as there are significant differences between private schools, and that the ascertained differences between the private and public sectors are in fact minute compared to those within each of the sectors. Despite the different framework conditions (tuition fees, selection upon enrolment, the possibility of expelling students, different parent motivation, etc.), the fact is that certain private schools resemble certain public schools more than other private schools. As one of the commentators in the debate on the differences in knowledge levels of public and private school students put it:

"In sum, although there is some disagreement about the existence of

different outcomes in public schools and in private schools, the biggest disagreements occur with respect to the significance and interpretation of the small differences that occur and with respect to the posited causes of sectoral outcome differences” (Persell, 2000, p. 391).

This comment seems to imply that Coleman’s interpretation of the differences between public and private schools was not unbiased. Coleman appears to have strayed from his general principle of making sure his claims were well argued and empirically supported. Why did he deviate from his usual scientific rigour?

In the introductions to his articles, as well as in the monograph *Public and Private Schools*, Coleman links his work to establishing facts. The object of his research is topical and contentious; it is a subject of public debate and a juncture of conflicting interests. Coleman sees his role as contributing to ensuring that public debate is founded in facts:

“The role of private schools in American education, however, has emerged as an important policy question in recent years. Although any answer to this question depends in part on values, it also depends on facts ... These conflicting policy efforts are all based on certain assumptions about the role of private and public schools in the United States. Examining the assumptions, and showing their truth or falsity, will not in itself resolve the policy questions concerning the role of public and private education in America. Those policy questions include certain value premises as well, such as a relative role of the state and the family in controlling a child’s education. This examination will, however, strengthen the factual base on which the policy conflicts are fought” (Coleman & Hoffer & Kilgore, 1982a, p. 4).

Although Coleman makes no explicit claim that there is a clear dividing line between facts and values, his words imply just that. His contribution is related to extracting the relevant substantive issues and facilitating a more informed debate. For Coleman, that is the main virtue of his third report: the prevailing impression had been that Catholic schools used outdated teaching methods and that any education obtained in a Catholic school was inferior to an education obtained in public schools. Coleman’s study showed that this impression was not (no longer) true. Thanks to his research, the public debate on private schools would be of better quality, as discussions on the effectiveness of private schools would no longer be based on prejudice and opinion, but rather on scientifically established facts.

However, Coleman modifies his position slightly in his discussions with critics of his third report. Critics reproach him for not maintaining the division between facts and values in his reasoning, causing the reader to have difficulty separating the descriptions revealing significant new findings from recommendations that go beyond what can be derived from facts.

Coleman's response starts with a reference to the distinction between a "policy argument" and a "disciplined inquiry" introduced by one of his critics. His arguments then follow two lines. On the one hand, he tries to show that there is no significant difference between research aiming to contribute to the formation of public policies and research undertaken solely for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of reality. An interest in contributing to public debate does not undermine the scientific integrity of research.

For Coleman, the impression that a disciplined inquiry involves an approach that is fundamentally different than that of a policy inquiry, and that scientific research consists in the researcher acting as a "passive judge, weighting evidence and coming up with an authoritative judgement" (Coleman, Hoffer & Kilgore, 1981b, p. 541) is misleading. Even in the case of a disciplined inquiry, the researcher should be viewed as an investigator actively exploring in several directions, abandoning paths that contradict facts and continuing along those consistent with facts. In this process, "statistical tests are used as constraints, as reins to keep the developing concepts consistent with reality itself" (*ibid.*). Because research is about exploring several different paths, it is no longer limited to merely establishing facts. Even though Coleman does speak of a "conception of reality", he notes that this does not imply that the researcher is ever finished or ever reaches a final, "incontestable conception of reality" (*ibid.*).

Coleman believes that the role of rivals in any given discipline is to verify the researcher's deductions and point out any deficiencies. He associates science with competition and internalises the external criticism of results: the very nature of research demands that results be verified by others from outside. Critical responses are therefore not viewed as unwarranted attacks against the inquiry, but rather as an indispensable part of it. According to such a conception, no inquiry is complete until it has received the reactions of others who will identify any potential deficiencies. Yet Coleman goes on to add:

"These become starting points for investigations of possible alternative conceptions of reality; but until one of those alternative conceptions is developed and proves more consistent with the evidence from reality, the original conception stands" (*ibid.*).

This position is markedly different from the introductions in which Coleman presents his research as the establishment of facts that are distinct

from values. Coming to the defence of his work, he introduces a conception of research in which the final result is not facts, but rather a model of reality. From the epistemological point of view, Coleman's position appears to be a mixture of Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn. Like Popper, Coleman emphasises that a scientist must formulate bold theses that can be refuted; however, unlike Popper, he does not view the refutation of a thesis as a refutation of the theory. In this respect, Coleman is closer to Kuhn. Just as an old scientific paradigm cannot be deemed refuted just because individual theses have been refuted, Coleman believes that the true refutation of the results of his research does not lie in the rebuttal of individual findings, but in the formulation of a new explanation providing a complex interpretation of reality.

Coleman's position on the role of research becomes even more radical in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In a lecture at a conference entitled "Social Theory and Emerging Issues in a Changing Society", he describes the evolution of social organisation from primordial through spontaneous to constructed. Primordial organisation is face to face: any individual enters it at birth. Spontaneous social organisation is generated "from two-person transactions" in which both parties have an interest in the transaction. Constructed society is an artificial formation established for a specific purpose. Just as we are able to build artificial environments with roads and buildings, people can create artificial and purpose-built institutions. Hence, the brief for sociology is clear: "It should be a theory developed to aid in the construction of social organization" (Coleman, 1991, p. 8). The aim of sociological research is no longer to establish facts, but to facilitate the construction of society.

Coleman's understanding of sociology as an engaged science originates from his conception of contemporary society. Society as such is constantly evolving; the construction of society is in progress, regardless of whether or not science is involved in these processes. Hence, it is better if science is involved. Coleman thus concluded the inaugural speech after his election as president of the American Sociological Association with an appeal to sociologists to participate in the transformation of society:

"The construction of society will go on, with or without sociologists, as the institutions of primordial social organization crumble. It is the task of sociologists to aid in that construction, to bring to it understanding of social processes, to ensure that this construction of society is not naïve, that it is indeed a rational reconstruction of society" (Coleman, 1993, p. 14).

It appears that Coleman himself followed these guidelines throughout his life. He developed his theory not only to describe reality, but to contribute

to the construction of a better society. A better society includes clear incentive for action and, in the field of education, such incentive is related to choice, competition and vouchers. In a discussion on the role of choice in education, he stated the following:

“The movement toward choice is the first step in a movement toward getting the incentives right in education—incentives for both the suppliers of educational services, that is, schools and their teachers, and for the consumers of education, that is, parents and children. The incentives for schools that a voucher system would introduce would include an interest in attracting and keeping the best students they could. The incentives for parents and students would include the ability to get into schools they find attractive and to remain in those schools” (Coleman, 1992, p. 260).

His attitude towards the family clearly reveals the radical nature of his commitment. The family as a primordial social organisation is in decline, so social innovation is required: “If we make that conceptual change – as we must, given the rapid disintegration of the family – the term most used by architects, design becomes relevant, and the terms most used by economists, maximization and optimization, become relevant as well: In thinking seriously about educational institutions as being constructed, the idea of designing the institution to maximize the child’s value to society becomes appropriate” (Coleman, 1993, p. 11).

Coleman himself admits that the expression *maximise the child’s value to society* is unusual, but he insists on using it; just as he insists that it makes sense to subject the upbringing of children to a cost and benefits analysis and to consider the possibility of incentives. His notion of upbringing obviously also includes payments to parents that will increase the child’s value to society:

“The bounty, or potential for payment, would be initially held by parents, restoring to them, in effect, property rights over a portion of their children’s productivity. These rights, this bounty, would be marketable by parents to whatever actor undertook to take responsibility for developing the child in a way that would reduce the costs and increase the benefits to the state ... This new property right would be something like a school voucher ...” (Coleman, 1993, p. 13)

The suggestion of a general upbringing voucher paid by society to parents to cover all of the costs related to raising children in order to ensure that the child will be as beneficial as possible for society only goes to show what

radical views on the functioning of society Coleman adopted in the last part of his life. Yet it seems that these radical claims are merely an unreserved expression of views that had been present from the very start of his career in some inarticulate way.

It has been demonstrated how Coleman interpreted the results of his study comparing public and private schools to favour financial aid to private schools, even though the data allowed for other interpretations. He adopted a negative attitude towards public schools, comparing tuition fees to a “protective tariff” protecting “the public schools from competition by private schools” (Coleman, 1981, p. 28) and claimed that tuition fees benefited the producers rather than the consumers. His reasoning used the (alleged) fact that Catholic private schools were more successful than public schools to conclude that public support for private schools is required, thereby resorting to the language of economics, which reduces education to an “industry” and public schools to an “overregulated industry” (Coleman, 1981, p. 30).

Polemicalising with his critics, Coleman was even more uncompromising: “Defence of public education in the name of equal opportunity often amounts to little more than a defence of the producers of education for the poor rather than the interest of the consumers, the poor themselves” (Coleman & Hoffer & Kilgore, 1981b, p. 537). This attitude points to an important motivation behind his advocacy of private schools. According to Coleman, a system where private schools do not receive public aid will “harm most the interest of those least well-off and protect those public schools that are the worst” (Coleman, 1981, p. 30). Support for private schools, even elite ones, is in the interest of the most disadvantaged people. In this very persuasive political rhetoric bringing together the rich and the poor in support of private schools, Coleman seems to forget that students who are not motivated to learn and would as such be expelled from private schools may well be the students who are “the least well-off”. Underprivileged students are not all students who want to learn but cannot afford to go to a high-quality school that would allow them to advance; some of them are students expelled from more demanding schools in an effort to maintain high academic demands. It is these latter students who prevent some public schools from being as demanding as private schools, which can simply rid themselves of such students.

In spite of his commitment to empirical research, Coleman does not undertake an empirical inquiry to establish who these unmotivated students who would be the first victims of ruthless competition in the field of education actually are. Perhaps there is in fact no need to undertake such an inquiry: the 1966 study had already revealed that there is a link between socioeconomic status

and school achievement. All that is missing is the information on who the students with no motivation to learn – students whom public schools should expel but are unable to do so due to regulations – actually are. In the course of his analysis of the equality of opportunity, Coleman could have addressed the question as to whether these inequalities correspond to income or racial inequalities, yet – surprisingly – this issue was never raised. In the light of his extraordinary ability to ask pertinent questions, it seems that Coleman also has the ability to completely disregard certain issues.

Conclusion

In the course of his career, Coleman completed a journey from emphasising a neutral role of sociology, which is merely there to establish facts, to insisting that sociology must contribute to the efficient construction of an effective society. His view of society is primarily that of a set of individuals making decisions. The key task in the construction of society is finding the right incentives. Once this is done, the system will operate optimally. According to Coleman, effective education is based on choice and competition.

In the light of the above, there appear to be two reasons for the narrow interpretation of the relationship between public and private schools in Coleman's third report. The first is his notion of contemporary society as a constructed system in which each individual actor holds a place in the structure and requires incentives in order to act to the benefit of society. In the case of education, the goal of the institution is to ensure the high cognitive achievement of students, and the incentive is related to choice and competition. The second reason is his vision of sociology as a discipline aiding the construction of an effective society.

As a result of these two baseline attitudes, Coleman interpreted the available data in favour of financial aid to private schools, even though this was neither the only possible interpretation nor the interpretation dictated by the data.

The result of this analysis of Coleman's third report is of a more general nature. The report provides a good illustration of the narrow-mindedness of claiming that data require a certain organisation of education, or that private schools are more or less successful than public schools. Coleman interprets data within the framework of his vision of society. The data themselves say little about the way schools should operate; they only start to become meaningful against the backdrop of a vision of education and society. If the vision is one of choice, consumption, the market and competition, then the data are bound to say something in favour of this vision.

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