Coronavirus Learning Loss and Male Black Students

The Coronavirus pandemic has given rise to an unprecedented situation in American public education. School buildings have been closed and students and their teachers are isolated at home. The problem of access to education when school buildings are closed is especially dire for those students whose families have insufficient incomes to provide their children with essential communications technologies. There are an estimated 30 million children eligible for the National Lunch Program, an indicator of family poverty. Half of the students in the United States attend high or mid-high poverty schools. In the pandemic era of public education, poverty is a pre-existing condition. Of course some will have computers in their homes provided by their schools. Some will have access to the Internet. Many will not.

Attending schools predominately serving students from high or mid-level poverty families is associated with comparatively low levels of basic skills learning. Forty percent of students eligible for the National Lunch Program, according to the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), scored at below the Basic level in grade 8 reading. Less than half that percentage, 17%, of those ineligible for the National Lunch Program, coming from more prosperous families, did not reach the Basic Level. Nearly half of the latter were judged Proficient or Advanced, as compare to just 19% of those students eligible for the National Lunch Program. Students who read below the Basic level may be unable to “interpret the meaning of a word as it is used in the text,” and unable to “locate information.” Their reading abilities are not useful skills for them for subject-area learning, for using computers and the Internet, or even employment in their later everyday lives and for fulfilling their responsibilities as voters.

As well as income, race matters. While less than a third of White students attend high or mid-high poverty schools, three-quarters of Black and Hispanic students do so. Thirty-one percent of White students eligible for the National Lunch Program
score below the Basic Level and, on the other hand, 27% of those were judged to have reading skills that were either Proficient or Advanced. The reading skills of slightly more than half of Black students eligible for the National Lunch Program were ranked below the Basic level and just 11% were judged Proficient. None were found to have Advanced reading skills. Among student from more prosperous households, just 14% of those White students scored below the Basic level, as did 33%, one-third, of such Black students. 49% of White students ineligible for the National Lunch Program were ranked as Proficient or Advanced readers in grade 8, as were 25% of Black students from households with incomes rendering them ineligible for the National Lunch Program, a percentage lower than that of White students eligible for the National Lunch Program.

White students in grade 8 eligible for the National Lunch Program are taught to read only slightly better than are ineligible Black students. Or, to put it another way, middle class Black students are not taught to read as well as White students from poorer households. At this level of analysis, racial classifications predominate over economic status. A contributing factor to this seemingly paradoxical situation is that because of patterns of segregated housing, even middle class Black students are likely to attend schools serving predominately lower income families, segregated schools that are frequently under-resourced for the tasks facing their teachers.

Having considered economic status and the related racial and ethnic data, let us look at gender. Dividing the data by gender, as well as by race and by eligibility for the National Lunch Program—our proxy for family income—we find that 31%, nearly a third, of female Black students not eligible for the National Lunch Program score at the Proficient level and above in grade 8 reading. White male students eligible for the program do so only 21% of the time. (The below Basic groups encompass 37% of the eligible White males and just 25% of the ineligible Black females.) Cutting the data in this way it appears that economic status and gender difference predominate over race. We can assume, then, that the reason that it appears that lower income White students read better than middle income Black students in grade 8 is that
male Black students perform so much worse than members of other groups, including female Black students. More than half of male Black students fail to reach the Basic level in reading in grade 8 and only ten percent are taught to read to the Proficient level (and, according to NAEP, the percentage reading at the Advanced level “rounds to zero.”)

Male Black students, then, more even than such as male Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native students, are the most endangered of not being taught vital basic skills, in general, and now most endangered by the likelihood of Coronavirus learning loss.

According to the National Center of Educational Statistics there are nearly four million male Black students in US public schools. Over two million of those may be among the students who at grade 8 would be reading below the NAEP’s Basic level, even in normal times. Of course, these are not normal times. A worst-case scenario would describe a Coronavirus learning loss for half of America’s male Black students equivalent to all or most of that expected in the grade they started in fall 2019. Their predominately under-resourced schools in effect need to teach an additional class at each grade—an additional class-equivalent attended by these students who had not been taught the skills they need during the pandemic.

Do districts like New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Houston and Detroit, those with the largest numbers of Black students, have those resources? Their situation is even more severe than that indicated by national statistics. Their male Black students without basic reading skills in grade 8—and therefore one can assume throughout their schools, as NAEP grade 4 data is about the same—average 60% of the total. Where are those resources—or, to be blunt—where are those dollars to come from?

The catastrophe facing these most vulnerable of America’s children is not limited to them. Hispanic children are nearly as endangered, as are all children whose families
are not able to duplicate from their own resources those usually provided by
schools. Districts like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Houston and Detroit cannot
afford to meet this extraordinary challenge. America cannot afford not to.

Michael Holzman