

bottom,” Bracey points out, “the remaining roughly 30 countries (including all the developed countries of the West) look very much alike in their [1996 study] mathematics scores.” The story is much the same with the science grades.

In any event, Bracey argues, emphasizing *average* scores obscures the enormous differences among American students. In the 1992 international assessment, for instance, pupils from the top third of American schools had

average scores as high as those of the top two countries (Taiwan and South Korea), while the lowest third of U.S. schools did not even do as well as the lowest-ranking nation (Jordan).

Educational reformers talk as if the typical American school is in need of major repair, Bracey concludes, but the schools that really need it are those with the least resources and the worst social environments.

Where the Black Family Foundered

“Migration Experience and Family Patterns in the ‘Promised Land’” by Stewart E. Tolnay, in *Journal of Family History* (Jan. 1998), Sage Publications, 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, Calif. 91320.

Did southern blacks who migrated north to Chicago and other cities earlier in this century bring with them a dysfunctional family culture—a legacy of slavery—that then played havoc with the urban black family? This thesis, popular in the 1950s and late ‘60s but then seemingly discredited by census studies, has been revived in recent years, notably by Nicholas Lemann in his 1991 bestseller, *The Promised Land*. Tolnay, a sociologist at the State University of New York at Albany, contends that southern migrants, in fact, “enjoyed *greater* family stability than native northerners.” The longer they stayed in the North, however, the more that advantage diminished.

In 1940, according to census data, 77 percent of the migrants’ children were living with two parents, compared with 72 percent of northern-born blacks’ children. Three decades later, the percentages had declined but the gap had widened: 69 percent of the families that had migrated during the pre-

ceding five years were intact, compared with 61 percent of their northern-born counterparts. The migrant “advantage,” significantly, was smaller for southern-born blacks whose migration had occurred earlier: 65 percent of their children were living with both parents. The next two decades saw a drastic decline in the figures—to 48 percent among “recent” migrants in 1990, 44 percent among “past” migrants, and 37 percent among northern-born blacks. Even so, the migrant “advantage” remained.

It is true, Tolnay notes, that the migrants’ edge is a bit exaggerated because migrant women whose marriages failed sometimes returned to the South, and so escaped being counted in the North. But that was a relatively small group. Even if they are included, the pattern—the greater stability of southern black migrant families—remains much the same. But this, Tolnay notes, only deepens the real mystery: what caused the erosion of that stability?

PRESS & MEDIA

Big Bad Bird?

“Educational Television Is Not an Oxymoron” by Daniel R. Anderson, in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (May 1998), 3937 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19104.

“The worst thing about *Sesame Street* is that people believe it is educationally valuable,” grumped Jane Healy about Big Bird and his friends in her 1990 jeremiad, *Endangered Minds*. She and other critics claim that the long-running, fast-paced

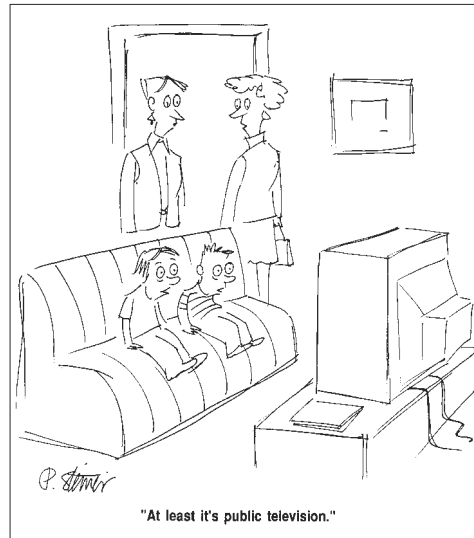
PBS television program mesmerizes youngsters, renders them intellectually passive, shortens their attention spans, and interferes with their language development. Extensive research cited by Anderson, a psychologist at the University of Massa-

chusetts at Amherst, shows that, to use a bit of *Sesame Street* argot, the criticism “just doesn’t belong.”

Instead of being mesmerized, preschoolers seem to engage in “selective looking,” he says. Put in a room with toys, the children looked at and away from the TV screen relatively often—an average of 150 looks an hour, some only brief glances, others lasting several minutes. Older kids tended to pay more attention.

“If, as Healy and others claim, attention to *Sesame Street* is reflexively driven by visual movement and shot changes,” Anderson points out, “then attention should be maintained even if the program becomes difficult or impossible to understand.” But when he and his associates made the show’s dialogue less comprehensible (e.g., by putting it in Greek), the children paid much less attention. That showed, Anderson says, that meaning matters. Healy drew a different conclusion: that children easily give up on TV that is challenging. But Anderson cites another study of educational TV which found that making an announcement for children somewhat harder to understand but still within their “developmental level” did not prompt young viewers to turn away.

The claim that *Sesame Street*’s short segments and fast pace reduce the attention spans of young viewers seems to have arisen from a 1975 report that attributed the “hyperactive” behavior of two-year-olds to watching the program. But the study had no control group (i.e. a comparison group that did not watch the program). And when Anderson and his colleagues made both an exceptionally fast-paced version of the program and a slow one, they found that



preschoolers’ postshow attention spans did not change.

Despite the intellectual passivity rap, Anderson concludes that research indicates that young children “are about as cognitively active and engaged” with educational TV programs as they are when they read or listen to stories.

In fact, he notes, several studies show that, even allowing for level of parent education and other characteristics, children who watch *Sesame Street* generally score better than others on tests of vocabulary and readiness for school. The payoff is apparently long-lasting, according to a major study published last year. It found that among 570 high school students, those who had watched such programs as *Sesame Street* as five-year-olds frequently had higher *high school* grades in English, math, and science. That result should give even Oscar the Grouch something to smile about.

The Swedish Solution

“Ombudsman to the Swedes” by Steven Price, in *American Journalism Review* (Apr. 1998), 8701 Adelphi Road, Adelphi, Md. 20783–1716.

Sweden has what a lot of Americans who are fed up with news media “excesses” say they want—a formal nonjudicial system for handling complaints against the press. But Price, a lawyer and Fulbright Scholar from New Zealand who is working at the *Hot Springs Sentinel-Record* in Arkansas, doubts that it provides a good model for the United States.

Sweden’s press ombudsman, who investi-

gates about 450 complaints a year, is appointed by a special committee with representatives from the press, the government, and the Swedish Bar Association. The office is funded by the media, not the government. All the daily newspapers have agreed to abide by a code of ethics concerning accuracy, privacy, and rights of reply. (Broadcasters sign the code but are not under the ombudsman’s