The Search for Equality
As the age-old battle of rich vs. poor continues, can schools overcome the effects of class?

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No country takes the idea of equality more seriously than the United States. We have fought wars over it, and the origins of our public schools are dominated by the concept of equal opportunity and free education for all.

However, student achievement and economic outcomes remain highly related to social class and family background. That raises questions about the role of the school in achieving equality, and what schools can and can't do to affect cognitive and economic outcomes.

What should the school be expected to accomplish in the few hours it has each day with students who spend more than three-fourths of their time with their family, friends, and community? As middle- and upper-class parents jockey for the best schools for their children, hire private tutors, and worry about SAT scores, how are less fortunate students supposed to overcome a lack of money, power, privilege, and political connections?

How is education expected to overcome a system of inequality that leads the rich to pressure the government to reduce taxes while it cuts services for the poor, and provides the poor with second-rate schools, second-rate health care, and second-rate jobs?

Can schools overcome the effects of class?

A historical perspective

The notion of differences in class and heredity have been rooted in American thought since the pilgrims ventured from the Old World. In the 1880s, English philosopher Herbert Spencer maintained that the poor were "unfit" and should be eliminated through competition and by the survival of the fittest. At the turn of the century, author H.G. Wells linked peasant immigration to the downfall of America.

Today, the debate is couched in terms like "human capital," "brain drain," and "illegal immigration." Many Americans contend we are attracting low-wage, low-educated farm workers, hotel workers, and land speculators while discouraging the foreign-educated students, scientists, and engineers on whom the American economy depends.

Elwood Cubberly, a former school superintendent and Stanford University education professor who was one of education's most influential voices at the turn of the 20th century, feared the arrival of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. He argued they were "illiterate, docile, lacking in self-reliance and initiative, and not possessing the Anglo-Teutonic conceptions of law, national stock, and government." According to Cubberly, immigrant and working-class children had little need for an academic curriculum because they were lacking in mental ability and character; in fact, he insisted the common man demanded vocational training for his children.

From the 1950s through the 1990s, conservative psychologists such as William Shockey, Arthur Jensen, and Richard Herrnstein placed heavy emphasis on heredity as the main factor for intelligence. Their arguments were written in educational terms, but the implications were political and implied class warfare. Most disturbingly, they resulted in a stereotype explaining mental inferiority among the lower classes, especially for blacks, thereby rationalizing the need for vocational programs and putting African-Americans on the defensive.

The modern view of educational equality also emerged in the 1950s. James Coleman, a Johns Hopkins University education professor, outlined five views of inequality that paralleled liberal philosophy. According to Coleman, inequality was:

- Defined as the same curriculum for all children, with the intent that school facilities be equal.
- Defined in terms of the schools' social or racial composition.
- Defined in terms of such intangible characteristics as teacher morale and teacher expectations.
- Based on school consequences or outcomes for students with equal backgrounds and abilities.
- Based on school consequences for students with unequal backgrounds and abilities.

The first two definitions deal with race and social class, the next deals with concepts that are hard to define and hard to change, and the fourth deals with school finances and expenditures. The fifth definition is an extreme revisionist interpretation: Equality is reached only when the outcomes of schooling are similar for all students—those who are in the lower class and minority as well as those who are in the majority and middle class.

When inequality is defined in terms of equal outcomes (both cognitive and economic), we start comparing racial,
ethnic, and religious groups. In our society, this results in heated debates over how much to invest in human capital, how to determine the cost-effectiveness of social and educational programs, who should be taxed and how much, to what extent we must handicap our brightest and most talented minds to help those who are slow to catch up, and whether affirmative action policies lead to reverse discrimination. We can’t treat these issues lightly, because they affect most of us in some way and lead to questions over the wars that have been fought in the past.

In a more homogeneous society, such as Japan, South Korea, Norway, or Germany, this discussion would not deserve special attention nor require judicial measures. In a democracy, citizens and their children are entitled to similar treatment, especially because intellectual capital is a national concern, not designed for the benefit of one group of students or the exclusion of another.

**Excellence, equality, and equity**

Other factors that prevent equal school spending are not simply symptoms of racism or class prejudice. They deal with notion of values and the rights of people: The preservation of neighborhood schools, concern about big government and state-imposed policies, fear of increased taxation, and the inability of politicians to curtail well-to-do parents from supporting their own neighborhood schools and property values.

The question is: How much education equality should we seek? We can have greater equality by lowering standards or by pulling down bright students. We can have more equality by handicapping bright students (as in affirmative action) or by providing an enormous amount of additional resources for slow-performing students (as in compensatory funding). But eventually we come to a slippery slope and ask: How much money? Who should pay for it?

Every efficient and innovative society has learned to recognize and reward various abilities, talents, and creative endeavors. In school, and in other aspects of American society, the chief instrument for identifying ability and talent is a standardized test. Educators like John Gardner say it’s not surprising that the testing and accountability movement is the source of criticism and hostility, because tests encourage the sorting and selecting of students into special tracks and programs. Although students have multiple chances to succeed, Gardner is still concerned that the search for talent and the importance “of education in our high-tech and knowledge-based society will lead to increasing inequality among educated and uneducated individuals.”

We also can distinguish between equality and equity. Equality has to do with similarity in opportunity or results, but equity (or fairness) deals with a person’s or group’s effort and the reward (or outcomes). Inequality occurs when a person or group works harder but achieves little reward or, in reverse, when a person or group works less and receives most of the rewards.

Inequity involves lack of opportunity, where our laws and/or social institutions discriminate against certain people or groups based on a perceived characteristic. To be sure, how a society is designed determines what happens to people in education, jobs, health care, and housing, as well as in how income and wealth are distributed.

Here, we aren’t trying to achieve equality, which assumes that everyone is entitled to equal rewards, regardless of effort or ability. Such an assumption has more to do with affirmative action and quotas. With equity, we are seeking some sort of fairness, what Harvard professor John Rawls would refer to as a “just society.”

If we want to avoid a stacked deck, the existence of inequality and inequity must be addressed. The potential effects are more than just economic; the outcomes have social, political, and emotional consequences that detrimentally affect the productivity and vitality of our nation. If you can’t find viable work and feel like the deck always is stacked against you, the argument can be made: Why go to school? Why try to find a job? The system is unfair and unjust. It’s easier to drop out.

**The college question**

When we talk about equal opportunity, the question becomes: Should everyone have the right to go to college? Why cut off education in the 12th grade? The pool of abilities and talent varies, and the academic limitations of some children can’t be traced to poverty or deprivation.

Children from upper-class homes have the advantage of social capital, with parents who can move to a successful district—where schools are cleaner and more modern, teachers are better paid and generally have more education and experience, and the school climate is more conducive to learning. Others who are less fortunate start out on a less equal footing and continue to experience family, school, peer group, and community handicaps that only increase their disadvantages— and thus are often doomed to disappointment.

Despite ability or talent, children from advantaged homes have parents with political and social connections who help them get into Ivy League colleges and high-paying jobs. Competition for good jobs requires that you get into the right university, not just any university.

You don’t have to be a genius to get into Yale or Harvard or to work on Wall Street; many people who accumulate the usual clutch of mansions, fancy cars, and millionaire baubles possess lesser abilities and are “C” students. Ironically, the business world is depressingly full of millionaires who ignore their head start in life and equate their net worth with brains, and they have children born on third base who think they hold the major league record for triples.

We would like to believe in the image of a person who rose from nothing and who owed nothing to parentage. This is part of the American dream and the notion of the self-made person (usually a man). There is just enough possibility and truth in
these stories, a testimony to American social mobility.

But the humblest and poorest rarely rise to the top. Statistically the odds do not coincide with popular literature or folklore. For every poor or working-class person who becomes a captain of industry or a super athlete, hundreds of thousands are doomed to live out their life in the same quintile in which they started, or slightly move an inch or two higher. All you have to do is listen to the songs of Muddy Waters, A.P. Carter, and Johnny Cash—and you hear a sad story about the human condition and the reality of life.

**Merit and achievement**

An achievement-oriented society based on academic credentials and standardized tests condemns many people who can’t compete on an intellectual or cognitive level to the low end of the spectrum. It’s the classic problem: The rich, who have more resources for better education, get richer while the poor get poorer.

Gaps between the haves and have-nots have dramatically increased in the last decade. Over the last 25 to 30 years, one-fifth of the population on the income pyramid improved its prospects while the rest lagged behind. Under the Bush administration, the top 10 percent gloomed almost all of the economic growth because of increased globalization, Wall Street greed and corruption, and free-market economic policies that create unstable conditions for working- and middle-class people.

Surprisingly, despite the recession, no one has rebelled. The majority has not imposed higher taxes on the wealthy; in fact, the opposite has occurred.

In education terms, however, what counts today is how the government spends money on intellectual capital—federal support of schools, college scholarships, retraining of labor, etc. Human capital—educated and credentialed professionals and business people—is the key for creating economic capital. The irony, however, is that inequality is exacerbated by the rise in human capital.

Inequality is greater in cities such as New York, Boston, and Los Angeles because knowledge workers easily find work in these cities and earn considerably more than people who engage in routine tasks, or low-tech and low-end jobs. The other side of the coin is that they contribute more to society and therefore deserve to be paid more.

In simple economic terms, how much more can we raise the salary of an expert janitor? Is it $1 or $2 an hour? Consider the janitor’s raise vis-à-vis the raise for an expert computer programmer, scientist, or attorney.

Americans now produce fewer and fewer products, but we produce intellectual property—pharmaceutical research, computer chips, software, etc.—that has dramatically increased the nation’s innovative, information, and high-tech economy. This type of intellectual capital has led to millions of new jobs—the most important reason for focusing on human capital.

Bill Gates is critical of the nation for rationing education on wealthy and suburban children at the expense of low-income and urban students. He has personally committed $1.2 billion for high school reform that would ensure that all students receive a college prep curriculum. But will the efforts of Gates and other reformers help achieve a more meritorious society?

People are human, complicated by a host of flaws that include greed and arrogance. If those who advance come to believe they have achieved economic success on their own merits, they may come to believe they are entitled to what they get—and the hell with stupid, slow, or lazy people.

In a society that prizes merit and achievement, the reward structure is linked to a person’s natural ability. Barring drastic government policies, the search for merit and achievement will move capable people to the top and less capable people to the bottom. Some say this is the most ideal society, as it gives everyone the chance to rise to the top, but it has serious implications for average people, and for those who have fewer opportunities because of class. If left unchecked or unregulated, it leads to increasing inequality.

**Is that what we want?**

Trying to figure out the interactions of environment and heredity is a hopeless policy issue. Rather, the crux of the problem is to deal with the disadvantages of a limited environment because of class factors that twist and deform the spirit and lead to the plight of the next generation.

We need to find a balance, a safety net that protects the lower classes and that children and parents of various abilities and talents can accept. The issue can be exemplified in reverse—the recent period that de-emphasized programs for the talented and gifted, due to pressure to create heterogeneous classrooms with a wide range of academic abilities—and in the passage of affirmative action legislation. Part of the search for balance (or fairness) is to adopt an uncompromising commitment to produce more effective schools in lower-class communities.

There is no set of recommendations for achieving equality or excellence that can please the entire American populace. Perhaps someone in a little cabaret in South Texas (a Johnny Cash scene), a coffee shop in Hoboken, N.J. (a Philip Roth location), or a church in Yoknapatawpha County (William Faulkner’s fictional but real place) can figure out a solution, as our leaders and statesmen cannot come to a consensus, and instead regularly engage in negative nabobs of negativism.

All we can hope for is some balance—that some sense of fairness in the search for talent and in the reward system fosters growth and innovation, and that there is some sense of fairness in the distribution of wealth.

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