

Introduction

The extension of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act through the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has been of great interest to educators, education researchers, and the American public. The title of the reauthorization itself, perhaps by political design, waves the flag of equity and has galvanized people across the political spectrum. Yet only four years later there are many questions about the potential impact of NCLB and whether it will in fact be able to create educational equity through testing and accountability. This collection of articles from the pages of the *Harvard Educational Review* suggests that, as with previous sweeping solutions to entrenched educational disparities, the promised outcome is unlikely. Developing a common national barometer for student and school progress, particularly across socially significant groupings, has certainly been an asset for educators and policymakers, but accountability alone will not yield equity. We must recognize that the gaps in educational achievement that we are so fond of discussing are produced by even more unwieldy gaps in opportunity. Ironically, educational institutions are not expected to reflect these opportunity gaps; they are in fact often asked to correct them. Any proposed remedies for achievement gaps must include a broader discussion that addresses these larger gaps in opportunity, and with this volume we aim to open that discussion.

The history of public education in the United States tells us that issues of equity and have always been tied closely to educational attainment. President John Adams once said, “Laws for the liberal education of youth, especially for the lower classes of people, are so extremely wise and useful that to a humane and generous mind, no expense for this purpose would be thought extravagant” (Institute for American Liberty, 1998). And today, under a law initiated by President George W. Bush, it is federal policy that no child should be left behind. These voices from the oval office across more than two centuries of national history show just how committed our nation, at least in principle, has been to the equal education of all its citizenry.

Unfortunately, achieving educational equity has been far more elusive in reality than in principle. From a broad perspective, there is certainly reason to celebrate the development of our national education infrastructure. One fundamental principle of mid-nineteenth century’s common schools was to alleviate the burgeoning social-class tensions of the time. Horace Mann, the father of these schools, advocated for his vision of an education system that was “common in the highest sense, as the air and light were common; because it was not

only the cheapest but the best, not only accessible to all, but as a general rule, enjoyed by all” (Reese, 2005, p. 11).

The establishment of common schools resulted in substantial increases of enrollment rates for previously uneducated populations, which led to the relatively high level of access in the U.S. today. When the common school era ended around the turn of the twentieth century, an unprecedented 51 percent of Americans between the ages of five and nineteen were attending grade school (Snyder, 1993). One hundred years later, America’s public schools are serving over 48 million students (National Council of Educational Statistics [NCES], 2006). It seems then that the dream of access held by Horace Mann and others has in many ways been realized. But what of the class divisions he was concerned about? And what about race and gender differences? Has the vastly increased access to school provided the equal opportunity for all that American leaders, from John Adams to President Bush, have worked for? Sadly, the answer is no; in fact, inequality in education remains one of the most pervasive issues in our field today. The 1999 National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, shows that White seventeen year olds scored on average over 30 points higher than their African American counterparts (NCES, 2006).¹ Similar gaps in achievement also exist across socio-economic and regional groupings. Ultimately, it is clear that equal access is not synonymous with equal achievement or equal opportunity.

Today, what is still true is that young people from groups with fewer resources, such as lower socio-economic status, limited social capital, or non-dominant cultural position, are often far less likely to have access to first-rate educational opportunities (Diamond, 2006). Socioeconomic differences are associated with inequities in educational resources, teacher qualifications, and class size. Disparities in social capital relate to differences in the knowledge of social systems as well as social connections that mediate students’ educational attainment. And non-dominant cultural positioning often correlates with lower expectations and systematic exclusions, to the detriment of the students in subordinate cultural positions (Carter, 2005). Moreover, even in seemingly equitable educational settings — students in the same suburban school with comparable levels of effort, for example (Ferguson, 2002) — social forces still contribute to unequal achievement within schools. Thus, it seems that groups of students with socially significant differences such as wealth, maternal education level, race, and community climate, will have disparate levels of academic achievement. We are left then, searching for ways to remedy a complex set of educational problems, so that the vision of educational equity that generations of American leaders have held can become a reality.

Successive reform movements over the last century have sought panaceas to resolve the complex problems of achieving equity in educational attainment, and all have had limited success in leveling the educational landscape. The progressive education movement of the early twentieth century, which was largely influenced by Dewey’s ideas of the dualism of education and democracy, has been criticized for lacking the social conscience to adequately chal-

lenge the racism and sexism of the time (Berube, 1995). The *Mendez v. Westminster School District* (1946) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court decisions, along with subsequent education and school desegregation efforts, aimed to address educational disparities by challenging the “separate but equal” concept that, by legitimizing the de facto segregation in schools, was clearly having a negative impact on the achievement of Black and Latino populations (Carter, Flores, & Reddick, 2004). Unfortunately, the political will of mainstream America to embrace race and class diversity may have been overestimated. Today, more fifty years after *Brown*, many U.S. schools are rapidly resegregating (Orfield & Lee, 2004). Thus, the promise of educational equity through desegregation seems to have been undone by prejudice and racism in the greater society.

In the 1980s, in response to the infamous report on American educational woes, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), a powerful player joined the education reform movement: the business sector. Startled by the suggested connections between the U.S. economic struggles of the 1970s and declining educational achievement nationally, businesspeople descended upon public education in a variety of roles, including philanthropy, policymaking, and school leadership (Berube, 1995). The thought was that achievement could be improved if business models of efficiency and the business community’s substantial financial resources could be tapped. Berube notes, however, that the assumed generosity of the business sector was overstated, and the transferability of business organizational models to educational institutions was unsuccessful. Critics such as former labor secretary Robert Reich noted that corporate giving to primary and secondary education was actually relatively low, compared to the overall investment in higher education. He noted further that the giving that did exist was motivated considerably by taxbreaks, which paradoxically, undermined the ultimate goal of the collaboration by weakening the revenue base that schools draw on in the first place (in Berube, 1995). In the end, high hopes for improving opportunities for disadvantaged students with the help of the business community were undermined by the economic interests of those of higher socioeconomic classes.

Today, the latest panacea for resolving inequity in U.S. Education is that of accountability. In the forward to the NCLB Act of 2002, President George W. Bush notes that NCLB’s reforms “express my deep belief in our public schools and their mission to build the mind and character of every child, from every background, in every part of America” (p. 1). And while the policy outlines several areas needing school reform, including prioritizing effective programming, reducing bureaucracy, and empowering parents, the accountability component is generally the primary force of policy. Unfortunately, the impact that NCLB will ultimately have is debatable. Many states and school districts are not able to keep up with the NCLB proficiency requirements and, consequently, are reporting increasing numbers of failing schools. Another primary criticism of NCLB is that federal money is not available to support the mandated testing, which drains the educational resources of states and districts and forces

them to cut other areas of programming. Connecticut has gone so far as to sue the federal government for mandating the legislation, without providing the resources to support it (Blumenthal, 2006; Sternberg, 2006).

Still other scholars point to the hopelessness of accountability alone as a way to rectify educational inequity in the face of the vast social, economic, and power disparities that exist across groups in the United States. Kantor and Lowe (2006) suggest that NCLB actually represents a gradual decline in federal involvement with social issues, in that it centralizes efforts to achieve social equity around education in a true, although not explicitly acknowledged, panacean approach. In the end, after more than a century of reform efforts our schoolchildren still do not have equal opportunities. Perhaps, then, what is missing from these popular reform efforts is the recognition that educational achievement does not exist in a vacuum; it parallels social structures that can enable or inhibit it. Thus, the story does not begin with an achievement gap, but with a more fundamental gap in opportunity that precludes achievement of educational equity in many ways. The recognition of, implications of, and potential solutions to such opportunity gaps are the subject of this volume.

By no means is the acknowledgment of these broader obstacles inhibiting educational inequity novel. Education scholars for many years have been discussing the impact that social inequities have on the promise of opportunity through education, both in the United States and abroad. And in our seventy-six years of history, the *Harvard Educational Review* has fully participated in these discussions by providing a venue for practitioners, theorists, and researchers to present important work that advances our understanding of opportunity gaps. In this volume, we revisit several of these important works, with the hope of troubling the tradition of narrow solutions to complex educational problems. History has shown us that differences in educational achievement among groups cannot be addressed by one-dimensional approaches such as pedagogical shifts, desegregation, or accountability. We must first acknowledge not only that there is a gap in educational achievement, both in the United States and abroad, but also that a larger gap in opportunity precedes its manifestation in the educational realm.

Thus, we produced this volume to revisit influential contributions to the pages of *HER*, largely over the last twenty years, that chronicle the societal parallels to disparities in educational achievement. These works both document how these parallels are manifested in our educational settings and present informed approaches that have found success through bold and imaginative actions. Part One, Social Structures, Institutions, and Education, explores broader social inequalities, both domestic and international, and their relationship with educational achievement is discussed in realistic terms. These authors are not despairing; rather they suggest areas where educational initiatives may have a positive impact within the context of more systemic inequities. Part Two, The Interactions among Schools, Students, and Communities, narrows the lens of these inquiries, and focuses on the manifestations of disparities in opportunity, such as race and class-based power dynamics, in the school con-

text. Issues of tracking, preferential treatment, and school culture are connected to these larger social inequities, which ultimately have adverse affects on the most vulnerable students. Finally, Part Three, Expanding Opportunities, Fostering Achievement, presents remedies that are truly promising because they employ strategies that acknowledge the greater systemic issues and do not profess to be panacean solutions. Here, the class and racial power dynamics of the larger society are exposed and countered. Additionally, once these skewed lenses, are removed we see the true potential of collaboration across communities, classes, and professions. In all, Part Three shows that well-informed initiatives with humble perspectives can make a difference, creating real opportunities for students in need.

As John Adams suggested long ago, creating equity in education is an investment, one that requires more than economically shrewd and politically luke-warm solutions. It requires a clear vision of the true landscape of opportunity, an understanding of our schools as one of many stages where these opportunity gaps play out, and finally imaginative solutions that are modest yet effective. It is our hope that these pages tell just that story, a story that, in the world of educational reform, may replace our naïve overconfidence with informed and hopeful prudence.

Note

1. On average, Whites scored 294.6, while African Americans on average scored 263.9. The total population mean for seventeen-year-olds was 287.8.

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