

## **Educational Attainment and Economic Inequality: What Schools Cannot Do**

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It has long been an article of faith in the U.S. that education is the key to economic success. The faith works in two directions: (1) education is good for the economy in general and (2) education is good for the individual. The first article of faith is the assumption behind all the rhetoric connecting quality of education and international competitiveness. The second article is the reason teens are told, “stay in school.”

Policy makers evidently know the first article is false: while schools are blamed when the economy is poor, they do not get the credit when things go well (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Bracey, 2001). Regardless, the myth powerfully shapes the way schooling is thought about in the U.S. On the one hand, public schools are supported because the public believes the economy benefits when large numbers of an age cohort go to school for many years. On the other hand, individuals extend their schooling in the expectation of economic advantage. This appears to work to the advantage of schools, gaining both economic support and attendance.

However, the thesis of this paper is that the opposite is true. I will first make the argument that the relationship between educational attainment and economic success is more apparent than real. Then I will consider the ways in which these myths mask serious injustice at the core of U.S. national life. Finally, I will consider the implications of believing the myth and the ways the myth harms education. But before I begin the analysis, let me conduct a little thought experiment.

Imagine that U.S. schools were suddenly made perfect (whatever it is that one might mean by “perfect”). Imagine everyone obtains a perfect

education in all areas. If the myth that equates good education with a good, well-paying job were true, everyone would now have a good, well-paying job.

We know these conditions would not follow. Service sector jobs would not pay a living wage or provide health insurance. If everyone were equally well educated, even perfectly so, the surplus of labor would still mean some jobs would pay less than a living wage. In a competitive economy, the educated reap economic benefits only from their education *relative to others*'. This claim will be elaborated below.

This paper will argue that what schools cannot do, should not be tasked with doing, and should not promise to do, is reduce inequality in the context of a broad socio-economic matrix designed to produce inequality; nor can it much reduce inequity when the means used to distribute inequality are themselves unjust.

However, this paper is not intended to update Coleman's (1966) argument that home effects overwhelm school effect. On Coleman's view, schools cannot produce equality of academic results. There is much evidence that this task, however difficult, is possible (Meier, 2002; Edmonds et al., 1977; Lezotte & Bancroft, 1985). The argument in this paper is: even when schooling does all it can do to educate those who begin life disadvantaged, this educational success will make a difference for only a chosen few; in the competitive life of a capitalist state, the rich and powerful will assure the success of their children over others', individual exceptions to the contrary notwithstanding.

### **The Argument**

Many service-sector employers require a high school diploma or some years of post-secondary education. However, the job skills required are not particularly connected to these educational requirements, nor are wages simply related to the amount of schooling one has. Instead, wages are related to relative education. *It is not how much education one has that grants economic advantage in the job market; it is how much more education one has compared to others in that particular market.*

To understand why, we begin with what Tom Green (1980) called the Law of Zero Correlation:

...if there is a level within the system that everyone completes, then completing that level can have no bearing whatever upon any social differences that may subsequently arise within the population... there is a point in the growth of the system at which there is no longer any correlation between educational attainment and ... the distribution of non-educational social goods associated with educational attainment. (90-91)

In other words, *at any level of educational attainment, when that level becomes virtually universal, there is no advantage to be gained by attaining that level.*

Further, as a corollary of the Law of Zero Correlation, once attainment of some level has become universal or nearly so, to fail to attain that level is a distinct disadvantage. As educational attainment expands, *the advantage gained as a consequence of that educational attainment decreases, but the price paid for not attaining that level of education increases.* When the vast majority of an age cohort graduates from high school, there is no real advantage to being a graduate, but there is a significant disadvantage to *not* being one. Employers are free to screen candidates out of most available jobs, but only because there is a persistent surplus of workers to jobs (Campbell, 1966). This appears to be the situation in which we find ourselves today.

The implications of this analysis for equity and justice issues lie in what Green refers to as the Law of Last Entry:

It appears to be true that no society has been able to expand its total educational enterprise to include lower status groups *in proportion to their numbers in the population* until the system is “saturated” by the upper and middle status groups. (108)

Green’s analysis gives us serious reason to be troubled: lower social status groups will always have the last access to whatever level of schooling that makes an economic difference; more seriously, *when those lower-status groups gain access, that level of the system will no longer confer any economic advantage.*

Green provocatively states: “The reason we have a drop out *problem* is not that we have too many drop-outs, but that we have too few” (99). That is, there are so few who drop out that they can be effectively written off as unemployable. What we fail to notice when we advocate decreasing the dropout rate is that, even if the dropout rate were zero, the number of jobs available would neither increase nor decrease. Dropouts are not given jobs precisely because there are no jobs to give them (Campbell, 1966).

Misdiagnosis of any problem leads predictably to ineffective solutions. The policy solution to the “dropout problem” has been to expand educational opportunity, to make at least a high school diploma universal, when the problem is great inequality of both wealth and opportunity. As a solution to the problem of economic inequality, expanded access to education is useless because the high school diploma becomes worthless when it is universal. Indeed, as economic policy, expanded educational opportunity is worse than useless, since it creates a simulacrum of justice while attaching more culpability to failure.

A further proposition to consider is what Green calls the Principle of the Moving Target: “As the group of last entry reaches its target of attainment at the *n*th level, the target will shift” (111). Hence, we now hear calls to extend free public education into the post-secondary level. This “solution” will eventually result in a reproduction of the problem, albeit at a slightly higher level of the system. The problem, however, is never simple unequal attainment at any level of the system; the problem is how to decouple consequences in the economic sphere from achievements in the educational sphere.

Economic inequality may result from differences in talent, skill, interest, ambition, or amount of time invested in one’s career, to name but a few possibilities. Inequalities resulting from differences in any of these could be just (Walzer, 1983). On the other hand, economic inequalities might result from family wealth in prior generations, contacts, or preferences given for extraneous or inappropriate reasons. These causes of inequality would raise troubling issues of justice; we have the intuitive sense, rightly, that economic inequalities ought to be the result of one’s own efforts and merits. The public’s acceptance of inequality is grounded on the myths of equal opportunity and meritocracy; inequalities are earned and deserved, even chosen, and therefore just.

While we do not see inequalities in wealth or education as *prima facie* evidence of inequity, civic membership or citizenship is not like that. One of the premises of our constitutional form of democratic government is that we are all equal before the law, that we all have equal rights of citizenship, and that any form of second-class citizenship is a grave injustice, absent strong and specific justification (say, the disenfranchisement of felons). So, if one’s wealth were to buy one privileges within the economic sphere, a newer, more luxurious automobile, for example, that would not be an injustice. On the other hand, if one’s wealth enabled one to receive special treatment from the laws, either more favorable treatment in the courts, or success in having laws passed that favor you and yours, then that would be a clear injustice against others not so wealthy. The problem exists when inequalities in one sphere, where they are open and deserved, spill over into other spheres where our foundational mythologies say clearly they have no place.

The claim is that differential wealth should not lead to differences in educational attainment, *and* that differences in educational attainment should only lead to differences in wealth where those differences in wealth are the result of specific skills or knowledge obtained from one’s education, not simply because one’s educational experience gave access to wealthy and powerful friends.

There are two ways this frame of analysis points us to serious sys-

tematic injustice in our current situation: (1) the existence of a group of last entry, a group largely defined by circumstances of birth, wealth, and privilege—educationally irrelevant attributes—is a clear violation of the principle that differences in outcomes must be based on attributes relevant to the sphere of difference; and (2) the educational attainment target, while it has been a moving one, is perhaps becoming stable; it is clearly not possible for educational attainment to be raised infinitely. We are reaching the point where two things seem to be happening as the limits of expansion are reached. High school education is now effectively universal: 87.6% of the population have either a high school diploma or a GED by the time they are 24 years old (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007); it has stopped being a means to screen prospective employees. As it is not likely that education beyond some college is ever going to be universal or anything like it, the Moving Target is approaching its limit. More to the point, the Law of Last Entry is likely to exclude the group of last entry permanently. We can see this happening already in the fact that attending college is no longer enough to give much advantage in the market place. The real advantage lies in attending an elite college. To these schools, the group of last entry will likely be permanently denied access in any numbers (Stevens, 2007).

### **Structure of the Myth**

Consider the degree to which the myth relating education and economic progress, as pervasive as it is, is false. It is simply false at the social level, and in a more nuanced way it is also false at the individual level.

It is not one's level of educational attainment that contributes to one's economic advantage (one of what Green calls the "non-educational social goods associated with educational attainment" [42]); it is having more education than others. Having an eighth-grade education would suffice if people generally attained the sixth grade; having a high school diploma will not qualify for minimum wage if everyone else also has one.

Adam Smith and Karl Marx were correct on this point: it is surplus labor that keeps wages down at the bottom rungs of society, not any lack of educational attainment on the part of the workers. Rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, while the distribution of poverty is affected by educational attainment of individuals, the incidence of poverty is structural. The economy, quite without regard to the distribution of education among the populace, will determine how many individuals will be unemployed or employed in jobs that do not pay a living wage. If I am sufficiently educated, I increase my odds of escaping those jobs, but the jobs will exist and will go to those with less schooling than I.<sup>1</sup>

My increased schooling does decrease statistically the likelihood of my living in poverty, but *it does nothing to reduce poverty generally*. It is not my educational attainment *per se* that helps me; it is my schooling in the *absence of others*'.

The second part of the myth is equally false, though not in quite the same way. The claim is, the quality of a nation's schooling determines (or at least strongly influences) a nation's wealth. *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) is perhaps the most widely known policy document making this argument, and today functions as received wisdom. While nations with universal education tend to be the countries that are most economically advanced, there are two things that keep that analysis from being quite as straightforward as the report pretends. In the first place, there is the chicken-egg question: as nations improve their economies and have greater surplus wealth, they are able to support wider educational opportunity. Second, *sufficient* schooling is all a society really needs; once that is attained more does not equal better. The first point is obvious, but the second needs some clarification.

Schooling is necessary for a technological society; engineers, doctors, teachers, even lawyers, are needed for the society to function well. Bureaucrats must understand the nature of the work they are expected to do. And so on. What is interesting to ask is, why the constant emphasis on *more*? Once there are enough schooled people to staff the schools, once there are enough engineers to design the bridges and the buildings, once there are enough lawyers to allow the legal system to function and to serve the civil, corporate, and criminal justice needs of a society, what is the need for more?

It is instructive that those who attack public schools as responsible for economic downturns clearly do not believe their own rhetoric. In the 1980s, as a consequence of an oil shortage, macro-economic mismanagement rooted in the waste of Vietnam, and corporate management decisions to spend corporate wealth on leveraged buyouts and inflated executive salaries, there was a recession. Schools were blamed. The well-orchestrated campaign against public schools, distilled in the apocalyptic rhetoric of *A Nation at Risk*, claimed that the economic problems were due to the failure of the nation's schools ("unilateral educational disarmament"), which were responsible for putting the "nation at risk."

In the event, the nation's economy went on to outperform all others for the next decade and a half, and the workers who were then in those "failing" schools became the most productive in the world. The cynicism of the "reform" movement can be perceived by noting that, so far as I know, no one who claimed to see such a clear connection between the poor economic performance of the early 1980s and the low test scores of

the era's schoolchildren (who were not, in any case, in the workforce at the time) could discern any possible relationship between the recovery and the quality of schools.

So, while attaining enough education to put one among the privileged is a good individual strategy, it does not alleviate the incidence of poverty in the society or improve the economy in general (beyond a minimal point). And so, as the policy designed to convince more people to stay in school longer succeeds, the only way for individuals to attain the benefits promised from more education is to get even *more* education.

Once, not really so very long ago, education was the province of the wealthy. Even after schools became free and universally available to the public, only a minority of families could afford to remove their children from the workplace; even free education had its opportunity cost, measured by what the student was not earning and not contributing to the family. At some point, people began to recognize that there was a strong and persistent relationship between the amount of education one received as a child and the amount of money one made as an adult. Over time, this relationship worked its way into the public consciousness, and a general perception developed that more schooling led to higher earnings. This is the set of circumstances that statisticians have in mind when they caution, "Correlation does not imply causation." Be that as it may, people will and do continue to infer causation from correlation. The connection between schooling and income is a reminder of that.

Additionally, there is just enough truth in the common impression to make it seem reasonable. As pointed out above, as a matter of individual choice, additional schooling likely *will* enhance earnings. As social policy, however, it is a Ponzi scheme.

### **Complex Justice**

Walzer's (1983) concept of spheres of justice allows us to apprehend the significance of the extent to which our society bleeds influence and effect from one sphere to another, and which spheres dominate. We can begin to see that inequalities in the economic sphere, while not necessarily unjust in and of themselves, create and perpetuate inequalities in other spheres. This is the operational definition of injustice. Specifically, once we see that the power of money buys educational attainment and unearned economic advantage for one's offspring, we can no longer avoid seeing injustice. We may argue that injustice is inevitable in a fallen world, and that this form of injustice is both relatively benign and practically unpreventable, but that is not the same thing as arguing that the situation is just. When Jimmy Carter said, "...there are many



things in life that are not fair, that wealthy people can afford and poor people can't" (Carter, July 12, 1977), the point he was conceding, often overlooked, is precisely that the policy under discussion was in fact unfair.<sup>2</sup>

There is a public virtue to be had in this sort of honesty, even when we decide for one reason or another not to act; the recognition that there is an injustice, even an incorrigible one, can lead to compensatory amelioration in other domains. For example, one might recognize that it is unjust that money buys educational opportunity and future economic advantage. We might also argue that for one reason or another it is not possible to prevent certain sorts of injustice. We might, for example, argue that the limitations on personal liberty needed to prevent this unjust reach from one social sphere to another are simply too great to justify on their own merits—what we might think of as a soft libertarian argument. However, once we have seen the injustice, we might be more open to policies of amelioration, such as progressive income taxes, near-confiscatory estate taxes, and generous funding for public education.

Such policies are more politically viable when they correct a recognized injustice than when they reduce justifiable inequality. Thus it is the mission of right-wing radio hosts to create the impression that progressives want equality of outcomes, not equality of opportunity. The assumption behind this argument is that we already have the latter, and the unequal outcomes are therefore just. In fact, to reduce the inequalities in our society, goes this argument, would be unjust, since it would require taking from the wealthy money they had earned and is rightfully theirs. This argument has traction only if one accepts the assumptions underlying it. Once the injustice of the class system we have produced in the U.S. becomes visible, different social policies to address it become possible, as happened during the New Deal.

The final consideration in this reflection is to consider the effect of these mythologies and realities on education.

### **Consequences**

First we should note that a critically important social fact has been changed, largely without our being aware: while it used to be we understood that more wealth led to more schooling, today it is thought that more schooling leads to more wealth. This change in the relationship between the educational sphere and the economic sphere has dramatically changed the meaning of "education."

There was a time, not so very long ago, when a clear conceptual difference existed between "education" and "job training"; the latter



was most commonly acquired outside school in some sort of internship, apprenticeship, or on-the-job training, either formal or informal; the former was connected not to job preparation, but to the use of leisure time. To quote Israel Scheffler (1976):

[Education is] the formation of habits of judgment and the development of character, the elevation of standards, the facilitation of understanding, the development of taste and discrimination, the stimulation of curiosity and wondering, the fostering of style and a sense of beauty, the growth of a thirst for new ideas and vision of the yet unknown. (p. 206)

The rapidity of this fundamental shift is brought home by the fact that in my lifetime the term “vocational education” went from an oxymoron to a redundancy. This leaves Scheffler’s question, “What is education?” not only unanswered, but unasked. Everyone knows what education is: it is schooling; it is preparation for a good job. That these answers miss the point is made clear if we stop for a moment and consider: we know a great deal about the economic value of education; we know a great deal about the personal value of education; we know a great deal about the civic value of education. It is instructive, then, to note that we hardly know what to make of the question: what is the *educational* value of education, in the sense Scheffler used the term? What are the *educational* goals of education—the goals *internal* to the practice? What do these questions even mean? These are difficult questions to ask in the current impoverished atmosphere. About the educational purposes of education—that is, the meaning of “education,” we are not only silent; we are oblivious and seemingly content to be so.

Up until now I have argued that schools cannot solve the problem they have been assigned and accepted. Education can, at its best, be an instrument of social mobility, but that is not the same as saying that it will reduce either inequality or poverty. There are many consequences of any myth upon which social policy is based. Here I wish to point to some educational consequences of this one.

First, it has dramatically expanded educational access, providing the means for many from the working classes, myself included, to enter the middle and professional classes in American society. Because the public believed that expanded educational opportunity created economic success for the individual and society (see, for example, Levin & Bachman, 1972), educational access expanded during the 1950s and 1960s in a way that would have been inconceivable a generation earlier (Campbell, 1966; Schreiber, 1964). Other factors included: expansion of higher education opportunity resulting from the G.I. Bill (The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944), the sheer weight of numbers of the Baby Boom generation

who desired to go to college in the 1960s and 70s, the surplus resources a booming economy allowed to be put into schooling, and the desire to postpone entry into the labor force, among other factors.

However, the inequality predicted by the existence of a Group of Last Entry is pervasive and persistent through the post war period, as overall completion rates reach close to 90%, but those of racial and ethnic minorities lagging far behind (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1990, pp 18-23). As a result, the benefits resulting from the economic expansion and the resulting expansion of educational opportunity were unequally and inequitably distributed based on race, class, and ethnicity, not on merit.

Further, these post-war social conditions were so effective in expanding educational opportunity because of the education-equals-earnings myth. That is, the government might have created the G.I. Bill from a desire to reabsorb returning servicemen back into the workforce gradually in order to prevent economic instability following WWII or to reward “the greatest generation” for their service, but individuals did not take advantage of the G.I. Bill because of a desire to keep the economy stable or as a way of saying “You’re welcome” to the society’s “Thank you.” Instead, individuals mostly chose to go to college because they believed it would give them an advantage as they re-entered the job market; they were there to get credentialed.

The government had expected only a small number of veterans to use the Bill, since such a small percentage of the population had gone to college prior to the War. An assumption of the lawmakers was that only the people who would have gone to college anyway would go under the G.I. Bill. This was not what happened, and the unanticipated consequences of the G.I. Bill are what made it such a socially transformative piece of legislation (Olson, 1973).

The consequences of the G.I. Bill echoed into the next generation. Colleges that had expanded to make room for the returning veterans now had extra seats to fill. In addition, given the expectation that more education leads to better jobs, the children of the baby boom decided in record and ever-expanding numbers to go to college. This combination of circumstances—excess capacity and increased demand—led to near-universalization of high school graduation and rapid expansion of higher education attendance. While the broader circumstances of the post-World War II economic boom had a great deal to do with why completing high school and/or attending college became more possible, they do not explain why such a rapidly increasing number of students chose to take advantage of the opportunity.

In a different vein, as educational access has become broader and more

democratically distributed, its definition has fundamentally changed, as discussed in the previous section. As this shift accelerated over the past few decades, education stopped being anything different from training; “education” stopped meaning anything at all. Schools had changed so that they no longer had much of an independent mission apart from meeting the economic need of the society and affecting the economic prospects of their “customers,” who used to be called students. We talk today of the civic purposes and functions of education and schooling even if we no longer take seriously what was once the central mission of schools: to produce good citizens (however one might define “good citizen”). We focus obsessively on the economic purposes and functions of education and schooling. Critics of this discursive focus so far have not helped clarify education’s educational purposes much; instead of economic or civic functions, critical voices tend to be most concerned with schooling and educational objectives connected to social justice and equality.<sup>3</sup>

Now let me be clear: I firmly believe all of the above goals and purposes of education and schooling are both important and legitimate. Schools should help prepare children to take their place as productive and contributing members of their society. Schools should help prepare children to take their place as fully prepared and functioning members of the civic polity within which they will live. Schools should, in intimate connection with these tasks, help make society more just. Though these tasks are conceptually individuated, they are different facets of what full membership in a society means. Each task here, and others as well, is connected to a robust and relatively autonomous sphere of civic life, and that is as it should be. Different spheres of life should engage and make demands on each other where they overlap (Blacker, 2007).

If the above argument has validity, we come to the point of this paper: *society, educational policy makers in particular, needs to be more realistic, more modest, in setting our expectations of school effects*. One consequence of our focus on the civic, economic, and social justice functions of schooling means it has become almost unintelligible to speak about the *educational* purposes of education and schooling. To say schools should serve an educational function is not to deny that they serve other functions, but forgetting that is not the danger we face. We need to remember that, while schools have multiple functions, whatever else is going on, and whatever “education” means, *education is the central mission of schools*. That is what we are in danger of forgetting, “we” being both policy makers and educators themselves.

Further there are serious negative repercussions for educators to make promises they cannot keep, for this opens schools to charges of failure. We see this today in the many attacks on the very idea of

public education (see, e.g., Friedman, 1955; Chubb & Moe, 1990). In addition to letting the very idea of democratic education be lost to our consciousness, defining the mission of schooling as the equalization of opportunity in an economic system in which inequality is woven into its very fabric means that such commitments set schools up to fail to reach an impossible goal. As argued above, even if schools were perfect, or, more realistically, even if schools were all that could be asked of them, inequality would still exist, people would still live on the margins of economic disaster, and the rich and powerful would still possess the social and cultural capital to give their children undeserved advantages in the competition that is capitalism.

Our goals must be more modest: policy makers must recognize that, while schools can and must be partners in ameliorating social injustices, they cannot do so while the broader cultural surround not only accepts but celebrates, under other names, the very injustices schools are supposed to reduce.

Until we understand the purposes and nature of education, we are unlikely to address them very effectively, public schools will remain unable to define or defend successfully their mission in the public square, and educators will be unable to fulfill the core purposes of their calling. Defining schooling only or primarily as a means to economic ends seriously distorts the process of schooling. In addition, until the problem of inequality is framed primarily as a *social* problem, not one of schooling, we are unlikely to be effective in making things better. Indeed, until the sort of persistent, inherited inequality that is endemic to our economic system as an inequity, we cannot even see it as a problem. And, consequently, we cannot properly conceive of the educational problems proper to schooling.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> And the inequality is stabilized by the fact that both the winners and the losers in the competition sincerely believe that the outcomes are deserved and therefore just.

<sup>2</sup> In this case, Carter was conceding the unfairness of denying poor women access to abortions that wealthier women already had access to, but the broader point is germane.

<sup>3</sup> To see this sort of critique at its best, see just about anything by Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, or Joel Spring, to name perhaps the most eloquent critics.

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