

**CAN EDUCATION ELIMINATE RACE,  
CLASS, AND GENDER INEQUALITY?**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Parents, politicians, and educational policy makers share the belief that a "good education" is *the* meal ticket. It will unlock the door to economic

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opportunity and thus enable disadvantaged groups or individuals to improve their lot dramatically.<sup>1</sup> This belief is one of the assumptions that has long been part of the American Dream. According to the putative dominant ideology, the United States is basically a meritocracy in which hard work and individual effort are rewarded, especially in financial terms.<sup>2</sup> Related to this central belief are a series of culturally enshrined misconceptions about poverty and wealth. The central one is that poverty and wealth are the result of individual inadequacies or strengths rather than the results of the distributive mechanisms of the capitalist economy. A second misconception is the belief that everyone is the master of her or his own fate. The dominant ideology assumes that American society is open and competitive, a place where an individual's status depends on talent and motivation, not inherited position, connections, or privileges linked to ascriptive characteristics like gender or race. To compete fairly, everyone must have access to education free of the fetters of family background, gender, and race. Since the middle of this century, the reform policies of the federal government have been designed, at least officially, to enhance individuals' opportunities to acquire education. The question we will *explore* in this essay is whether expanding educational opportunity is enough to reduce the inequalities of race, social class, and gender which continue to characterize U.S. society.

We begin by discussing some of the major educational policies and programs of the past forty-five years that sought to reduce social inequality through expanding equality of educational opportunity. This discussion highlights the success and failures of programs such as school desegregation, compensatory education, Title IX, and job training. We then focus on the barriers these programs face in actually reducing social inequality. Our point is that inequality is so deeply rooted in the structure and operation of the U.S. political economy, that, at best, educational reforms can play only a limited role in ameliorating such inequality. In fact, there is considerable evidence that indicates that, for poor and many minority children, education helps legitimate, if not actually reproduce, significant aspects of social inequality in their lives. Finally, we speculate about education's potential role in individual and social transformation.

First, it is necessary to distinguish among equality, equality of opportunity, and equality of educational opportunity. The term *equality* has been the subject of extensive scholarly and political debate, much of which is beyond the scope of this essay. Most Americans reject equality of life conditions as a goal, because it would require a fundamental transformation of our basic economic and political institutions, a scenario most are unwilling to accept. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "The genius of our country has worked out our true policy—opportunity."

The distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome is important. Through this country's history, equality has most typically been

understood in the former way. Rather than a call for the equal distribution of money, property, or many other social goods, the concern over equality has been with equal opportunity in pursuit of these goods. In the words of Jennifer Hochschild, "So long as we live in a democratic capitalist society—that is, so long as we maintain the formal promise of political and social equality while encouraging the practice of economic inequality—we need the idea of equal opportunity to bridge that otherwise unacceptable contradiction."<sup>3</sup> To use a current metaphor: If life is a game, the playing field must be level; if life is a race, the starting line must be in the same place for everyone. For the playing field to be level, many believe education is crucial because it gives individuals the wherewithal to compete in the allegedly meritocratic system, here in America, then, *equality* is really understood to mean *equality of opportunity*, which itself hinges on *equality of educational opportunity*.

## **THE SPOTTY RECORD OF FEDERAL EDUCATIONAL REFORMS**

In the past [fifty] years, a series of educational reforms initiated at the national level has been introduced into local school systems. All of the reforms aimed to move education closer to the ideal of equality of educational opportunity. Here we discuss several of these reforms, and how the concept of equality of educational opportunity has evolved. Given the importance of race and racism in U.S. history, many of the federal education policies during this period attempted to redress the most egregious forms of inequality based on race.

### **School Desegregation**

Although American society has long claimed to be based on equality of opportunity, the history of race relations suggests the opposite. Perhaps the most influential early discussion of this disparity was Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, published in 1944. The book vividly exposed the contradictions between the ethos of freedom, justice, equality of opportunity and the actual experiences of African Americans in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

The links among desegregation, expanded educational opportunity, and the larger issue of equality of opportunity are very clear from the history of the desegregation movement. This movement, whose first phase culminated in the 1954 *Brown* decision outlawing *de jure* segregation in school, was the first orchestrated attempt in U.S. history to directly address inequality of educational opportunity. The NAACP strategically chose school segregation to be the camel's nose under the tent of the Jim Crow (segregated) society. That one of the nation's foremost civil rights organizations saw the attack on

segregated schools as the opening salvo in the battle against society-wide inequality is a powerful example of the American belief that education has a pivotal role in promoting equality of opportunity.

Has desegregation succeeded? This is really three questions: First, to what extent are the nation's schools desegregated? Second, have desegregation efforts enhanced students' academic outcomes? Third, what are the long-term outcomes of desegregated educational experiences?

Since 1954, progress toward the desegregation of the nation's public schools has been uneven and limited. Blacks experienced little progress in desegregation until the mid-1960s when, in response to the civil rights movement, a series of federal laws, executive actions, and judicial decisions resulted in significant gains, especially in the South. Progress continued until 1988, when the effects of a series of federal court decisions and various local and national political developments precipitated marked trends toward the resegregation of Black students. Nationally, in 1994-1995, 33 percent of Black students attended majority White schools compared with the approximately 37 percent who attended majority White schools for much of the 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

Historically, Latinos were relatively less segregated than African Americans. However, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s there was a steady increase in the percentage of the Latino students who attended segregated schools. As a result, education for Latinos is now more segregated than it is for Blacks.

Given the long history of legalized segregation in the south, it is ironic that the South's school systems are now generally the country's most desegregated, while those in the northeast are the most intensely segregated. However, even desegregated schools are often resegregated at the classroom level by tracking or ability grouping. There is a strong relationship between race and social class, and racial isolation is often an outgrowth of residential segregation and socioeconomic background.

Has desegregation helped to equalize educational outcomes? A better question might be which desegregation programs under what circumstances accomplish which goals? Evidence from recent desegregation research suggests that, overall, children benefit academically and socially from well-run programs. Black students enjoy modest academic gains, while the academic achievement of White children is not hurt, and in some cases is helped, by desegregation. In school systems which have undergone desegregation efforts, the racial gap in educational outcomes has generally been reduced, but not eliminated.

More important than short-term academic gains are the long-term consequence of desegregation for Black students. Compared to those who attended racially isolated schools, Black adults who experienced desegregated education as children are more likely to attend multiracial colleges and

graduate from them, work in higher-status jobs, live in integrated neighborhoods, assess their abilities more realistically when choosing an occupation, and to report interracial friendships.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these modest, but positive, outcomes, in the last decade of the twentieth century, most American children attend schools segregated by race, ethnicity, and social class. Consequently, [fifty] years of official federal interventions aimed at achieving equality of educational opportunity through school desegregation have only made small steps toward achieving that goal; children from different race and class backgrounds continue to receive segregated and, in many respects, unequal educations. . . .

## Title IX

Title IX of the 1972 Higher Education Act is the primary federal law prohibiting sex discrimination in education. It states, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied benefit of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance." Until Title IX's passage, gender inequality in educational opportunity received minimal legislative attention. The act mandates gender equality of treatment in admission, courses, financial aid, counseling services, employment, and athletics.

The effect of Title IX upon college athletics has been especially controversial. While women constitute 53 percent of undergraduates, they are only 37 percent of college athletes. This is undoubtedly due to the complex interaction between institutional practices and gender-role socialization over the life course. Certainly, the fact that the vast majority of colleges spend much more money on recruiting and scholarships for male athletes contributes to the disparities.

In spring 1997, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to review a lower court's ruling in *Brown v. Cohen* that states in essence that Title IX requires universities to provide equal athletic opportunities for male and female students regardless of cost. Courts have generally upheld the following three-pronged test for compliance: (1) the percentage of athletes who are females should reflect the percentage of students who are female; (2) there must be a continuous record of expanding athletic opportunities for female athletes; and (3) schools must accommodate the athletic interests and abilities of female students. As of the ruling, very few universities were in compliance with the law.

Gender discrimination exists in other areas of education where it takes a variety of forms. For example, in K-12 education official curricular materials frequently feature a preponderance of male characters. Male and female characters typically exhibit traditional gender roles. Vocational education at the

high school and college level remains gender-segregated to some degree. School administrators at all levels are overwhelmingly male although most teachers in elementary and secondary schools are female. In higher education, the situation is more complex. Faculty women in academia are found disproportionately in the lower ranks, are less likely to be promoted, and continue to earn less than their male colleagues.

Like the laws and policies aimed at eliminating race differences in school processes and outcomes, those designed to eliminate gender differences in educational opportunities have, at best, only narrowed them. Access to educational opportunity in the United States remains unequal for people of different gender, race, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

### **EQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY AND EQUALITY OF INCOME**

Despite the failures of . . . many programs to eliminate the inequality of educational opportunity over the past 45 years, there is one indicator of substantial progress: measured in median years, the gap in educational attainment between Blacks and Whites, and between males and females, has all but disappeared. In 1997, the median educational attainment of most groups was slightly more than twelve years. In the 1940s, by contrast, White males and females had a median educational attainment of just under nine years, African American males about five years, and African American women about six.

However, the main goal of educational reform is not merely to give all groups the opportunity to receive the same quality and quantity of education. According to the dominant ideology, the ultimate goal of these reforms is to provide equal educational opportunity in order to facilitate equal access to jobs, housing, and various other aspects of the American dream. It thus becomes crucial to examine whether the virtual elimination of the gap in educational attainment has been accompanied by a comparable decrease in other measures of inequality.

Of the various ways inequality can be measured, income is one of the most useful. Much of a person's social standing and access to the good things in life depends on his or her income.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the dramatic progress in narrowing the gap in educational attainment has not been matched by a comparable narrowing of the gap in income inequality. Median individual earnings by race and gender indicate that White men still earn significantly more than any other group. Black men trail White men, and all women earn significantly less than all men. Even when occupation, experience, and level of education are controlled, women earn less than men, and Black men earn less than White men. It is only Black and White women with comparable educational credentials in similar jobs who earn about the same.

The discrepancy between the near elimination of the gap in median educational attainment and the ongoing gaps in median income is further evidence that addressing the inequality of educational opportunity is woefully insufficient for addressing broader sources of inequality throughout society.

This discrepancy can be explained by the nature of the U.S. political economy. The main cause of income inequality is the structure and operation of U.S. capitalism, a set of institutions which scarcely have been affected by the educational reforms discussed earlier. Greater equality of educational opportunity has not led to a corresponding decrease in income inequality because educational reforms do not create more good-paying jobs, affect gender-segregated and racially segmented occupational structures, or limit the mobility of capital either between regions of the country or between the United States and other countries. For example, no matter how good an education White working-class or minority youth may receive, it does nothing to alter the fact that thousands of relatively good paying manufacturing jobs have left northern inner cities for northern suburbs, the sunbelt, or foreign countries.

Many argue that numerous service jobs remain or that new manufacturing positions have been created in the wake of this capital flight. But these pay less than the departed manufacturing jobs, are often part-time or temporary, and frequently do not provide benefits. Even middle-class youth are beginning to fear the nature of the jobs which await them once they complete their formal education. Without changes in the structure and operation of the capitalist economy, educational reforms alone cannot markedly improve the social and economic position of disadvantaged groups. This is the primary reason that educational reforms do little to affect the gross social inequalities that inspired them in the first place.

### **BEYOND ATTAINMENT: THE PERSISTENCE OF EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY**

Educational reforms have not led to greater overall equality for several additional reasons. While race and gender gaps in educational attainment have narrowed considerably, educational achievement remains highly differentiated by social class, gender, and race. Many aspects of school processes and curricular content are deeply connected to race, social class, and gender inequality. But gross measures of educational outputs, such as median years of schooling completed, mask these indicators of inequality.

Not all educational experiences are alike. Four years of public high school in Beverly Hills are quite different from four years in an inner-city school. Family background, race, and gender have a great deal to do with whether a person goes to college and which institution of higher education she or he

attends. The more privileged the background, the more likely a person is to attend an elite private university.

For example, according to Jacobs, women trail men slightly in representation in high status institutions of higher education because women are less likely to attend engineering programs and are more likely to be part-time students (who are themselves more likely to attend lower status institutions such as community colleges). Gender segregation in fields of study remains marked, with women less likely than men to study in scientific and mathematical fields. Furthermore, there is substantial race and ethnic segregation between institutions of higher education. Asian-Americans and Latinos are more segregated from Whites than are African-Americans. Whites and Asian-Americans are more likely to attend higher status universities than are African-Americans and Latinos.<sup>8</sup>

These patterns of race and gender segregation in higher education have direct implications for gender and race gaps in occupational and income attainment. Math and science degree recipients are more likely to obtain more lucrative jobs. A degree from a state college is not as competitive as one from an elite private university. Part of the advantage of attending more prestigious schools comes from the social networks to which a person has access and can join.

Another example of persistent inequality of educational opportunity is credential inflation. Even though women, minorities, and members of the working class now obtain higher levels of education than they did before, members of more privileged social groups gain even higher levels of education. At the same time, the educational requirements for the best jobs (those with the highest salaries, benefits, agreeable working conditions, autonomy, responsibility) are growing. Those with the most education from the best schools tend to be the top candidates for the best jobs. Because people from more privileged backgrounds are almost always in a better position to gain these desirable educational credentials, members of the working class, women, and minorities are still at a competitive disadvantage. Due to the dynamics of credential inflation, educational requirements previously necessary for the better jobs and now within the reach of many dispossessed groups are inadequate and insufficient in today's labor market. The credential inflation process keeps the already privileged one step (educational credential) ahead of the rest of the job seekers.<sup>9</sup>

One additional aspect of the persistent inequalities in educational opportunities concerns what sociologists of education call the hidden curriculum. This concept refers to two separate but related processes. The first is that the content and process of education differ for children according to their race, gender, and class. The second is that these differences reflect and thus help reproduce the inequalities based on race, gender, and class that characterize U.S. society as a whole.

One aspect of the hidden curriculum is the formal curriculum's ideological content. Anyon's work on U.S. history texts demonstrates that children from more privileged backgrounds are more likely to be exposed to rich, sophisticated, and complex materials than are their working-class counterparts.<sup>10</sup> Another aspect of the hidden curriculum concerns the social organization of the school and the classroom. Some hidden curriculum theorists suggest that tracking, ability grouping, and conventional teacher-centered classroom interactions contribute to the reproduction of the social relations of production at the workplace. Lower-track classrooms are disproportionately filled with working-class and minority students. Students in lower tracks are more likely than those in higher tracks to be assigned repetitive exercises with low levels of cognitive challenge. Lower-track students are likely to work individually and to lack classroom experience with problem solving or other independent, creative activities. Such activities are more conducive to preparing students for working-class jobs than for professional and managerial positions. Correspondence principle theorists argue that educational experiences from preschool to high school are designed to differentially prepare students for their ultimate positions in the work force, and that a student's placement in various school programs is strongly related to her or his race and class origin. Critics charge that the correspondence principle has been applied in too deterministic and mechanical a fashion. Evidence abounds of student resistance to class, gender, and race differentiated education.<sup>11</sup> This is undoubtedly why so many students drop out or graduate from high school with minimal levels of literacy and formal skills. Nonetheless, hidden curriculum theory offers a compelling contribution to explanations of how and why school processes and outcomes are so markedly different according to the race, gender, and social class of students.

## CONCLUSION

In this [essay] we have argued that educational reforms alone cannot reduce inequality. Nevertheless, education remains important to any struggle to reduce inequality. Moreover, education is more than a meal ticket; it is intrinsically worthwhile and crucially important for the survival of democratic society. Many of the programs discussed in this essay contribute to the enhancement of individuals' cognitive growth and thus promote important nonsexist, non-racist attitudes and practices. Many of these programs also make schools somewhat more humane places for adults and children. Furthermore, education, even reformist liberal education, contains the seeds of individual and social transformation. Those of us committed to the struggle against inequality cannot be paralyzed by the structural barriers that make it impossible for

education to eliminate inequality. We must look upon the schools as arenas of struggle against race, gender, and social class inequality.

## NOTES

1. This essay draws on an article by Roslyn Arlin Mickelson that appeared as "Education and the Struggle Against Race, Class and Gender Inequality," *Humanity and Society* 11(4) (1987): 440-64.
2. Ascertaining whether a set of beliefs constitutes the dominant ideology in a particular society involves a host of difficult theoretical and empirical questions. For this reason we use the term *putative dominant ideology*. For discussion of these questions, see Nicholas Abercrombie et al., *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Stephen Samuel Smith, "Political Acquiescence and Beliefs About State Coercion" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1990).
3. Jennifer Hochschild, "The Double-Edged Sword of Equal Educational Opportunity." Paper presented at the meeting of the American Education Research Association, Washington, D.C., April 22, 1987.
4. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944).
5. Gary Orfield, Mark D. Bachmeier, David R. James, and Tamela Eitle, "Deepening Segregation in American Public Schools" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Project on School Desegregation, 1997).
6. Amy Stuart Wells and Robert L. Grain, "Perpetuation Theory and the Long-Term Effects of School Desegregation," *Review of Educational Research* 64(4) (1994): 531-55.
7. To be sure, income does not measure class-based inequality, but there is a positive correlation between income and class. Income has the additional advantage of being easily quantifiable. Were we to use another measure of inequality, e.g., wealth, the disjuncture between it and increases in educational attainment would be even larger. Although the distribution of wealth in U.S. society has remained fairly stable since the Depression, the gap between rich and poor increased in the 1980s and 1990s. Although accurate data are difficult to obtain, a 1992 study by the Federal Reserve found that in 1989 the top one-half of one percent of households held 29 percent of the wealth held by all households.
8. Jerry A. Jacobs, "Gender and Race Segregation Between and Within Colleges" (paper presented at the Eastern Sociological Society, Boston, MA, April 1996).
9. Randall Collins, *The Credential Society* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).
10. Jean Anyon, "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work," *Journal of Education* 162(1) (1980): 67-92; Jean Anyon, "Social Class and School Knowledge," *Curriculum Inquiry* 10 (1981): 3-42.
11. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, "The Case of the Missing Brackets: Teachers and Social Reproduction," *Journal of Education* 169(2) (1987): 78-88.