

Education
Aspen Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives

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INTRODUCTION

If there is a consistent refrain in the vast literature concerning education in America, it is that it is good -- good for democracy, for employment, for social mobility, for building strong communities, and for eliminating racism. For the most part, the scholarly research implies a system now open to all, but still with fewer opportunities for minorities and the poor. Education is most often viewed as a resource that, when fairly distributed, can counteract poverty and racism, by providing equal opportunities for individuals in society to succeed, and by promoting knowledge and understanding. That the existence of structural racism in education goes generally unacknowledged in the literature is belied by the consistent call for more education among citizens to help alleviate prejudice. For if one understood racial and class bias to be manifest in structures and institutions of education, it would surely be inconsistent to advocate more of it in its present state as a means to the end of eliminating racism and poverty.

It is easy for scholars to be drawn into the claim that more education is better, not only for its normative appeal, but also because of the sheer quantity of evidence that supports the notion that education contributes in a positive sense to many individual-level outcomes that concern us. Over the last half-century in the United States, social scientists have presented highly consistent empirical findings demonstrating a strong and positive relationship between level of formal educational attainment and political, economic, and social phenomena. The better educated vote more, have higher-paying jobs, and are more socially active in their

communities than those individuals with less education. Extending these findings suggests that more education will help the disenfranchised to participate in politics, the unemployed to get jobs, and the socially disconnected to engage with their communities. Moreover, historians have most often characterized public education in the United States as a democratizing force, where schools enhance opportunities for all.¹ Since *Brown* and the Civil Rights movement, expanded access and the elimination of many racial barriers to public and higher education have clearly improved the lives of many minority and poor Americans. It is reasoned that more education is good because of the individual-level consequences of education, which include a number of desirable outcomes, including enhancing political knowledge, worker productivity, and social trust. In so doing, more education creates "human capital" and "social capital" that are considered beneficial for society, resulting in a Pareto-optimal or win-win situation for both individuals and society at large. The reasons for this positive bias toward more education may best be understood as the manifestation of a strong and pervasive liberal democratic political philosophy among scholars, which conceives of formal education as an equalizing force.

This conception, however, is at odds with a seemingly divergent conclusion that places education among the most powerful stratifiers in modern post-industrial society. The very same data that pinpoint the critical importance of education to social, political, and economic outcomes and inform the position that more education is good, also simultaneously identify education as the main mechanism driving the maintenance of inequality and hierarchy where the outcomes are scarce. In these instances, rather than adding aggregate value to society and economy, more education may have either no positive effect on enhancing equality or instead, a

¹ See, for example, Cremin 1961.

negative effect. More education in American society over the last quarter century has not produced a commensurate rise in many social, economic, and political outcomes. For example, citizen political participation in various forms of voluntary activity has remained steady, and voting has declined precipitously; the nation's stock of "social capital," by some accounts, is dangerously low; and real income has remained stagnant despite the aggregate increases in education. At the same time, education is more important than ever as a prerequisite for getting a job that pays well. Labor economists demonstrate that a student who invests in a college education will reap rewards in future income that far offset the cost of obtaining the degree. However, as more people have become better educated, the labor market has also become increasingly stratified, leaving those without the requisite educational credentials even further behind. At a time in which nearly one-quarter of the U.S. population is college-educated, we also have an unprecedented unequal distribution of wealth accompanied by growing disparity between rich and poor. For instance, since 1980, median wages for those with a high school education or less have fallen by 6 percent, while earnings for college graduates have risen by double that amount. As one of the primary mechanisms behind social stratification, education can also be conceived as exactly the opposite from an equalizing force. Instead, at the macro-societal level, education may reproduce and legitimate structural inequalities which in turn drive vast disparities in wealth, and nurture the persistence of the dominance of the in-group to the systematic disadvantage of out-groups.²

How can education be understood simultaneously as both an equalizing force and a

² This "revisionist" perspective identifies schools (dominated by the class elite), as critical to the maintenance of capitalism. See Bowles and Gintis 1976.

stratification mechanism? It is this question -- this apparent contradiction -- that animates my discussion of the literature on education in this review. Education, broadly conceived, is often proposed as a solution to a myriad of problems from averting drug use to imparting job skills to the unemployed. While there is certainly much hope to be found in the prospect of education, we would also be remiss to overlook the possible unfavorable consequences. Education may be positive and empowering at the individual level, yet at the macro-societal level, education may at the very same time have negative consequences and debilitating effects for those at the bottom of the social, economic, and political hierarchy. I suggest that in order to understand the persistence and pervasiveness of racism and poverty in American society, we need to turn a more critical eye to the claim that education is an equalizing force, and regard it with greater skepticism. This caution serves as a reminder that substantive equality is a standard which cannot be realized under the political-economic system present in the U.S., which is based squarely on an unequal distribution of power and resources.

If we acknowledge that educational structures and institutions both function within and are products of the American democratic-capitalist system, then the revelation that education is at once a potential equalizing as well as a stratifying mechanism is a predictable redundancy rather than a contradiction requiring explanation. The acknowledgment also prompts us to avoid the mistake of separating issues of structural and economic oppression from racism. Some of the literature discussed below is careful to locate American education within this context. However, with its analytic emphasis on the individual-level determinants and consequences of education, more of the literature pays little attention to the broader context within which individuals are located. By not explicitly acknowledging this environment,

educational structures and institutions are typically treated as neutral, and thus implicitly non-racist. Under such circumstances, structural racism is considered exogenous, making it therefore possible to argue that more education among those traditionally disadvantaged is the solution for eliminating structural racism. I argue that this is a serious flaw in the way we think about education and its importance as a tool for maintaining or dismantling racism in America. I begin by reviewing in greater detail the literature characterizing the causal effects of education as an individual-level resource. Next, I discuss what has been learned about the effect of education on collective outcomes. The third section reviews the more specific question of school reform -- and in particular, the issue of school choice. Finally, I conclude by suggesting what kinds of policy interventions in education hold the greatest promise for combating racism.

EDUCATION AS AN INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL RESOURCE

Education is widely thought to have at least two causal roles: as a developer of cognitive capabilities at the individual level, and as a stratification mechanism at the macro-level. While a great deal of evidence supports the significance of the latter influence, the role of education in individual cognitive development is the causal effect scholars most frequently emphasize. Early educational theorists, notably John Dewey of the American democratic school, argued that formal education ought to have developmental as well as integrative and egalitarian effects.³ Gathering spirit from its Enlightenment roots, this position strongly influenced the development of the structures and institutions of public education in the U.S., and has continued to inform

³ Dewey 1966. Dewey argued that education, in addition to its role as a developer of intellectual skills and moral development, would also be both integrative (by enhancing economic productivity and encouraging a stable polity), as well as egalitarian (by providing more individuals with the skills to compete for privileges).

educational reform since Dewey's writings first appeared at the turn of the century. The expectation for education to enhance student achievement, that is, what goes on inside the minds of students, is perhaps best exemplified today by the preoccupation of educators with student test scores. The success or failure of curricula and new educational programs is most frequently evaluated on the basis of changes in these achievement scores.⁴

Economists since Dewey's time, and most recently within the human capital school of labor economics, concur with the developmental imperative of education, arguing that its greatest significance is the effect education has on the growth of knowledge, skills, flexibility, and problem-solving ability in workers. Indeed, labor economists have identified formal education and training as the most important investment one can make in human capital.⁵ Their concern with these characteristics of human capital is due to the positive effect that such qualities have on productivity and income earnings, as employers reward higher wages to those workers with educational credentials. Level of formal educational attainment is the strongest predictor of earnings, accounting for most of the variation in income among individuals.

Political scientists and sociologists also find education to be a particularly important predictor of individual-level social and political behavior. Even before the advent of the large sample survey, formal education was identified as the primary causal influence behind increased social and political participation, interest in politics, and adherence to democratic values. With the accumulation of empirical data from representative samples of the U.S. population came even greater dominance of what is known as the socio-economic status or SES model. Study

In this regard, more education for all was considered both efficient and desirable.

⁴ See, for example, Ravitch and Finn, 1988.

⁵ See Becker, 1993. On human capital more generally, and on its relationship to income, see Shultz, 1971;

after study has identified formal education as the critical determinant among indicators of social and economic status when predicting political behavior and attitudes, and education has been described as the "universal solvent."⁶ It is reasoned that people with higher levels of education have better-paying jobs and more financial resources, and can therefore more easily absorb the financial costs of contributing money to politics, for example. It is also argued that people who have been in school for more years are more socialized into democratic and civic values and develop interest in politics, which then facilitates increased political participation.

Similar to the economists, some sociologists and political scientists have seized on the idea of education as a developer of capital, though in their vernacular it has been termed "social capital."⁷ The better educated are more likely to generate social capital by engaging in forms of behavior that require sociability, such as joining with others in clubs and organizations. It is reasoned that through this activity, norms of cooperation and trust are developed and reinforced, which thereby reduces the intensity and frequency of social conflict. Political scientists are concerned with the role of education in creating social capital because of its effect (in many cases, a reciprocal influence) on the development of citizens who are more likely to cooperate with each other in pursuit of collective goods, rather than engage in an antagonistic politics of self-interested behavior. In addition, while not explicitly identified as social capital, democratic values of political tolerance -- the willingness to allow free expression of unpopular

Mincer, 1974.

⁶ Converse, 1972, p. 324. On the effects of education on political behavior and cognition, see Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell, Gurin, and Miller, 1954; Key, 1961; Campbell et al., 1960; Dahl, 1961; Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995.

⁷ Robert Putnam's (1993, 1995) work on social capital is perhaps the most recognizable. See also, Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Coleman, 1988; Fukayama, 1995; Lipset, 1995; Schneider, Teske, Marschall, Mintrom, and Roch, 1997.

ideas -- are also strongly and positively influenced by level of education.⁸

Echoing the findings from research in economics on the relationship between education and income earnings, sociological studies of social mobility, status attainment, and stratification point to the strong relationship between years of education and occupational position. The common theoretical strands in this work are the meritocratic and functional theories of social stratification which posit that formal education provides individuals with the skills necessary for success in performing the tasks of occupations.⁹ Within this tradition, measures of intelligence have been identified as a critical intervening variable in the process of status attainment, though strong critiques of meritocratic theories have also been articulated.¹⁰ In short, a meritocratic approach implies that individuals with more education are smarter and better qualified, and therefore deserve to occupy higher positions in the occupational and social hierarchy. In contrast to the functional and meritocracy-based theories of social stratification, the role of education in status attainment has also been interpreted as the result of the organization of society around an educational credential system. Instead of acting as an agent of change on the mind of the individual, more education and degrees simply convey information about past performance or a pre-existing advantaged status. According to this argument, educational attainment confers credentials on those already pre-selected to achieve high status rather than

⁸ See, for example, Stouffer, 1955; Davis, 1975; Nunn, Crockett, and Williams, 1978; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus, 1982; McClosky and Brill, 1983; Gibson and Bingham, 1982; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991; Gibson, 1992; Chong, 1993.

⁹ Classic works on education and social stratification include Blau and Duncan 1967; Lipset and Bendix, 1959; Eckland, 1965; Sewell and Hauser, 1975; and Sewell, Hauser, and Featherman (eds.), 1976.

¹⁰ In support of IQ meritocracy theories, see Duncan, Featherman, and Duncan, 1972; Duncan, 1968; Herrnstein, 1971; and Herrnstein and Murray, 1994. Critiques of this perspective include Bell, 1972; Olneck and Crouse, 1979; and Krausz and Slomczynski, 1985.

adding further ability.¹¹

Social scientists have culled a great deal of evidence that strongly supports the observation that education is the critical individual-level resource for gaining higher earnings, political clout, and social position. Clearly, the best educated in America are also the most advantaged. Yet the question of why this is the case -- what it is exactly about education that places people in this social hierarchy -- has been left largely unanswered. While often not explicitly addressed, many of these studies implicitly embrace the logic of the meritocracy, which claims that education is so important because it develops capabilities in individuals that make them better suited to skilled jobs and professions and higher positions in political and social life. People with more education get jobs with bigger salaries because they are more qualified, and therefore, are awarded such positions on the basis of merit. People who are more educated become active in politics because they know more about politics and are better able to make decisions about complex matters, and so on. However, not everyone is so convinced of either this normative position, or perhaps more important, the empirical proposition that more formal education does indeed produce more intellectual and cognitive ability. The efficacy of additional educational resources for student achievement was called into question by sociologist James S. Coleman in his landmark 1966 study known colloquially as "the Coleman Report." In an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of Great Society educational policies, Coleman and his colleagues investigated the reasons why some children did better on tests of verbal proficiency, reading comprehension, and mathematics. Much to the dismay of educators and policymakers who advocated increased spending on public education, Coleman found that test performance

¹¹ See Collins, 1979.

was unrelated to the amount of resources spent on formal education. Instead, family background and the backgrounds of fellow classmates were the only significant predictors of student achievement. Students in Catholic schools, where average spending per pupil was significantly less (by as much as half) than public schools, consistently out-performed public school students. Other scholars have questioned the efficacy of formal education as it is presently constituted for the positive development of cognitive ability, noting the lack of a relationship (either positive or negative, except at the extreme margins) between standard measures of intelligence and educational attainment.¹² In their influential work on the relationship between education and economy in America, Bowles and Gintis highlight instead the strong and positive relationship between family wealth and level of schooling. By juxtaposing this set of findings, they suggest that it is not those who go to school who get smarter, but rather, it is the rich who are better able to go to school.

This perspective provides another way to look at education as an individual-level resource. While formal education may indeed encourage the development of cognitive ability, it may also be the case that these skills are far less relevant to securing one's place in the social hierarchy of American life. Instead, the real importance of education to stratification may be the role it plays as a powerful socialization device, teaching students who are successful and who progress through educational institutions to also become initiated into the hierarchical norms of commerce, politics, and social life.¹³ In short, education may be a particularly effective means of reproducing cultural, political, and economic practices. Most students in college, business

¹² See Bowles and Gintis, 1976.

¹³ See, for example, Bourdieu, 1987, 1990.

school, law school, and even graduate school succeed by developing analytic and communications styles (in English) consistent with those rewarded in the marketplace of jobs in the U.S. Indeed, this may be precisely what the human capital economists are after -- educated workers who can assimilate easily into the workforce. While considering the individual-level resources that education produces in quite different lights, structural critics and human capital economists would nevertheless agree that the final outcome is the same: education helps those who are resource-rich to get ahead over those who are resource-poor.

Thinking about the individual-level causal effects of education in more than one way -- both as a creator of cognitive ability, and as a mechanism for the reproduction of current norms and practices (of domination) -- helps place the findings about the relationship between education and race into context. Though there are some exceptions, conclusions from most of the studies described above were drawn for the population as a whole, and did not provide separate analyses by race. What we do know about race and education we know mainly about African-Americans, and there is very little parallel research on other ethnic and racial minority groups. As far as level of educational attainment, since the early 1980s, similar proportions of white and black high school students were enrolled in school; about 52% between the ages of 18 and 19 were currently classified as full-time students. The gap widens sharply as age increases, however, with more white students completing college than African-Americans. In 1988, for example, 24% of whites between the ages of 25 and 29 reported having completed four or more years of college, as compared with 12% of blacks in the same age group (and

18% of “other” non-whites).¹⁴ In addition, there are significant differences in wages by race, even among those with the same level of educational attainment; African-Americans continue to earn lower wages than whites.¹⁵

COLLECTIVE OUTCOMES OF EDUCATION

Leaving aside for the moment the question implicit in the structural critique of whether individual-level resources are positive or negative, what follows from the human capital and social capital arguments about education is an inferential leap amounting to the proposition that what is good for the individual is also good for society. In other words, good individual-level outcomes of education will also create good collective outcomes. Fodder for the uncertainty of this reasoning can be found in a number of examples that challenge the empirical prediction of this leap. Does a collection of more educated individuals also create greater wealth, more political participation, and closer social relationships? In the economics literature, a more educated workforce supposedly brings with it more human capital in the form of workers better able to deal with complexity and change. Workers with a greater storehouse of characteristics representing human capital are thus expected to be more productive, which is considered a positive collective outcome. Skeptics may wonder whether more productivity is necessarily a good thing, citing, for example, the increased number of hours professionals spend being productive at the expense of other activities such as community involvement, family caretaking, and leisure. Even if one were to assume a more productive workforce had been created by

¹⁴ From Jencks, 1993, p. 239 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, and National Center for Education Statistics).

¹⁵ See, Juhn, Murphy, and Pierce, 1989.

higher levels of education, these increases have not resulted in more economic rewards for workers. While real income increased steadily between the post-World War II period and the early 1970s, those gains since 1972 have vanished, and real income has remained flat during a period of rapid growth in educational attainment among individuals. More education (and presumably more productivity) has not provided workers with any gains in real income.

Nor have the collective returns of a more educated society been obvious in the political or social realm. Those arguing for more education to increase political activity (and therefore, political equality), are hard-pressed to explain why participation in politics has not gone up in the aggregate during a time in which the average level of educational attainment has increased dramatically. Participation has declined over time just as education has increased.¹⁶ Citizen voting, particularly at the local level, has fallen precipitously, and most other forms of activity -- from communal activity and group membership to campaign work -- have remained stable. More education has not nurtured a more active citizenry, nor has it created more political equality. Indeed, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady provide important evidence indicating that there remains a great deal of participatory bias in the American democratic system favoring the views and political preferences of the well-educated and well-heeled.¹⁷ While we do not have good data to confirm whether this bias is increasing over time, nor is there evidence to suggest that the gap in political influence between the advantaged and disadvantaged is becoming narrower as levels of educational attainment are increasing in the aggregate.

These two examples reveal the difficulty of making the inferential leap from individual-

¹⁶ See Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry, 1996; and Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993.

¹⁷ See Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1996, chapter 16.

level outcomes to macro-societal outcomes, and illustrate the necessity of placing the identification and interpretation of the causal effects of education in relevant context. The value of the resources conveyed upon individuals by educational attainment must be considered in relation to what level of resources are held by others in the society. The value of education to social outcomes like income earnings and political participation must be assessed in relative terms to how much everyone else has. While a college degree was worth a great deal twenty-five years ago, it is worth far less today, precisely because so many more people in the population have a similar level of education (almost 25% in 1996 compared with about half that amount in 1972). African-Americans have much higher average educational attainment today than a quarter-century ago, yet this advancement has not kept pace with the increases in education among those they compete with. In this regard, the importance of individual-level resources like education to collective outcomes should be conceived of in relative terms.¹⁸

Economist Lester Thurow makes a similar argument: "As the supply of educated labor increases, individuals find that they must improve their educational level simply to defend their current income positions. *In effect, education becomes a defensive expenditure necessary to protect one's 'market share.'*"¹⁹ Consistent with Thurow, fellow economist Fred Hirsch has argued that more education for everyone leaves everyone in the same place.²⁰

More education in the aggregate does not necessarily improve conditions at either the macro-societal level or the individual level. Instead, more education simply shifts the baseline upward. Indeed, if the pace of gains by disadvantaged groups does not keep up with the

¹⁸ See Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry, 1996, chapter 6 for a fuller explication of this idea.

¹⁹ Thurow, 1972, p. 78, emphasis original.

²⁰ Hirsch, 1976.

growth in education by advantaged groups, the former fall further behind even as they are making progress in level of educational attainment in an absolute sense. Being the first person from a family to graduate from college may be an achievement in itself, but may nevertheless still fall short of what is necessary in a labor market flooded with college graduates. Far from a simple theoretical exercise, this situation reflects the current reality of more rapid gains in education by the advantaged over minorities and the poor in contemporary America, the latter of whom continue to operate at a distinct educational disadvantage.

While education is becoming a more dominant social sorting mechanism, it is also the case that American society is becoming much more educationally homogeneous. According to data from the General Social Survey, the standard deviation around mean years of educational attainment for those 25 years and older has decreased by almost one-half of a year between 1974 and 1994, from about 3.5 to under 3 years of formal education. When looked at from the perspective of generational cohorts, the change is even more dramatic. For the generation that reached educational maturity at the end of World War II, the standard deviation around average years of education was 3.5 years. With a mean of little over 11 years, two-thirds of the population 25 years of age in 1945 had between 8 and 15 years of education. That is, those who ranged from no more than an eighth-grade education to those who ended their education just one year shy of a college degree (a spread of seven years), were within one standard deviation. In contrast, the mean educational attainment for those who reached educational maturity in 1994 was exactly 14 years, with a standard deviation of only slightly more than two years. Two-thirds of 25-year-olds in the mid-1990s have completed between 12 and 16 years of education. This four-year difference represents just over half of the

heterogeneity of the 1945 cohort. Thus, at the same time society is becoming more educationally homogeneous, we are also sorting more intensively on these smaller and smaller educational differences. If these trends continue, the qualitative aspects of education will likely be weighted much more heavily. While a Harvard degree has always been worth more than a degree from a less prestigious college or university, these distinctions will likely intensify as the variance around the mean years of educational attainment continues to decline. The implications of this trend of rewards being meted out on the basis of smaller, and more qualitative distinctions, are ominous for those who have less resources to begin with and fewer connections in the relevant social networks. The recognition of the increasingly high stakes around educational attainment and achievement are mirrored in the current political retrenchment away from progressive policies of affirmative action.

These conclusions about the collective outcomes of education are sobering for minorities and the poor, who have more to lose from the educational progress of advantaged groups. While it is important to recognize that expanded education in the population does not have all positive effects, these findings should also not be interpreted to mean that education has no positive effects. Precisely how education policy can be fashioned to combat rather than contribute to the maintenance of racism is the challenge we face. The complexity of the challenge can be illustrated by examining in greater detail one such policy innovation that has been advocated as a mechanism for closing the gap between rich and poor in America by improving the “delivery” of publicly-funded education through school choice.

THE QUESTION OF SCHOOL CHOICE

School choice policy and its relationship to racial and class bias is an interesting reform to consider not only because the question of the distribution of public funding is currently on the agenda in many school districts across the U.S., but also because of the interesting political alliances that have emerged in support of programs such as charter schools. Poor and minority families supporting the establishment and expansion of charter schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Jersey City, New Jersey, for example, have found themselves allied with politically conservative Republican governors and mayors, who press the market metaphor in the delivery of education in a more efficient manner to taxpaying customers. For the former, school choice provides the opportunity for greater control over resource allocation, and the possibility of contributing to the development of a more meaningful curriculum.

The variety and uneven distribution of school choice programs across the U.S. -- from 1970s policies that created specialty schools, alternative schools, urban magnet schools, and voucher programs, to the more recent charter school phenomenon -- highlights the extent to which these reforms are locally and communally based. The distinctly non-federal location of the school choice policies has led some to believe that the resulting reforms will have the added benefit of creating social capital and stronger communities. It has been suggested that school choice can deliver better education for students, as well as induce greater psychological investment and community involvement from parents by engendering a sense of ownership of local schools.

While contemporary advocates of charter schools might convince one to believe otherwise, the idea of school choice is far from a recent invention. Rather it is their popularity and the speed with which such programs are spreading across America which is new. Indeed,

the concept of removing control of schools from public school bureaucracies and allowing market forces to drive educational imperatives was introduced by the economist Milton Friedman in the mid-1950s.²¹ The first experiment in charter schools was undertaken in Alum Rock, California in the 1970s with limited success.²² Between the early 1970s and the early 1990s, there were only a handful of educational voucher and charter school programs in the U.S., but in the last several years, the growth of this form of school choice has skyrocketed. Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia have enacted charter laws, and it is estimated that in the 1997-98 school year, some 700 charter schools will serve 170,000 students, compared with an estimated 32 charter schools in operation in 1993-94.²³ In addition to the recent phenomenon of charter schools and vouchers are the more familiar options of urban magnet, specialty, and alternative schools, such as the Bronx High School of Science in New York City and the Latin School in Boston. It is estimated that special schools like these number just over 2000.²⁴ It is magnet schools and controlled choice plans that have been the most popular of urban school reforms. Since the mid-1970s, the number of magnet schools has increased to nearly 2500 schools with more than one million students.²⁵ Magnet schools are typically found in urban areas, and especially in large racially heterogeneous cities. Data from the 1990 National Education Longitudinal Study reveal that students residing in cities were three times more likely than high school students nationally to attend magnet schools. Perhaps the

²¹ See Friedman, 1955, 1962.

²² See Mecklenberger and Hostrop, 1972; Cohen and Farrar, 1977; Henig, 1994.

²³ Henig, 1998 provides an excellent summary of school choice options, including charter schools. These estimates are from the U.S. Department of Education, *A Study of Charter Schools*, 1997. See also, Finn et al., 1997.

²⁴ See Steel and Levine, 1994.

²⁵ Steel and Levine, 1994.

most famous of magnet school reforms is that of District 4 in New York City, located in a poor and predominantly Latino section in East Harlem. District 4 has often been used as a model of how low income minority communities can succeed in improving educational options for their children.²⁶

Because of the relatively small proportion of students attending schools that reflect school choice options, and the degree of variation among them, there is little scholarly consensus on either the effectiveness of these types of schools either on student achievement, or on how school choice affects poor and minority communities.²⁷ In brief, however, there are arguments for why public education as it is currently constituted is in need of reform (in the form of school choice), why school choice is good, and how school choice can also be bad, especially for disadvantaged minorities. The most significant and convincing argument about the demerits of public education as we know it is made on the basis of inefficiency. For instance, political scientist Paul Peterson has argued that the bureaucracies that run public education in the U.S. do so in a monopoly.²⁸ Not only might the money be better spent, but critics of public education argue that this “monopolistic” control of resources and therefore educational programs results in an unresponsive bureaucracy that is hostile to innovation and change. By invoking the market metaphor, these critics argue that the lack of competition for public school bureaucrats discourages parental involvement and ownership in their children’s schools. In addition, critics of traditional public education also point to the lack of growth (and in some

²⁶ See Fliegel, 1989; Fliegel and MacGuire, 1993.

²⁷ Henig's 1998 review essay considers in detail the myriad of studies and arguments on the outcomes of school choice.

²⁸ Peterson, 1990. Chubb and Moe, 1990, make a similar argument supporting a market mechanism of school choice.

cases decline) in student achievement scores at the same time that funding for public education has increased. In short, critics suggest that consumer-parents are not getting their money's worth from traditional public schools. Arguments for why school choice is good mirror the claims of the critics. In particular, advocates of magnet and charter schools maintain that schools with greater local control are more innovative and flexible, adapting and changing when programs succeed or fail, thereby creating greater promise for improved achievement among students. In addition, they reason that have the option to choose schools makes institutions more responsive to parental desires (and prejudices, perhaps), and creates a sense of community and ownership.²⁹

To the question of how school choice reforms affect the poor and minorities, there are also few clear answers. The long-term effects of some of the most ambitious and far-reaching school choice policies in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Jersey City, New Jersey remain to be seen. Evidence from the District 4 schools in New York City provide support for advocates' claims that school choice helps minority parents with limited resources because it gives them the option of sending their children to better schools outside of the neighborhood school. By most accounts, District 4 has been a success. However, others are more skeptical of the effect that school choice, and in particular, voucher programs and charter schools will have on minority children in cities. For example, Henig (1994) has argued convincingly that choice programs create a local sorting process of their own, resulting in the most motivated and resource-rich in the community to take advantage of choice options and send their children outside the poorest

²⁹ In an interesting analysis, Schneider et al. 1997 demonstrate the positive effect of parental involvement in school choice on the development of social capital.

of neighborhoods. This may be beneficial for these students with more entrepreneurial parents. But under the terms of most charter school and voucher programs, the departure of students from publicly-run local schools also means a reduction in funding, the result of which is the further decline of already weak and resource-poor neighborhood schools. Those students whose parents cannot or do not take advantage of school choice options are left further behind. In so doing, school choice might also contribute to further racial and class-based segregation. School choice remains, disproportionately, a viable option for children from higher social and economic backgrounds. For instance, while almost 17% of children whose parents have a graduate or professional degree went to a non-traditional public school, only 2% of students from families where the highest level of parental education was high school attended similar schools.³⁰ Studies from the Alum Rock, California district where a voucher program was introduced, showed that knowledge of the program and its options was lowest among Mexican American parents, who had less formal education themselves.³¹ Similar studies of parents in Montgomery County, Maryland showed similar information deficits among the minority and the poorest parents.³² At the same time, and until recently, more minority students have gotten the chance to attend schools by choice, mostly because public school choices such as magnet schools were much more likely to be located in central cities with significant minority populations. However, with the advent of charter schools and voucher programs, this pattern may change, and there is also some evidence to suggest that white families are the bigger

³⁰ See, *Public and Private Schools*, 1997.

³¹ See Bridge, 1978.

³² See Henig, 1996.

beneficiaries of urban magnet schools.³³

The only thing that is definitive about the question of school choice in educational reform is that there are no obvious answers to the question of whether these policy reforms will help alleviate structural racism. While providing options of choice, and shifting more control of schools to parents and local communities may offer opportunities for participation and voice, it is not clear what the substantive outcomes of ownership will be. Centralization (here, federal authority) may have lost the efficiency battle, but a sufficient degree of commitment to equal treatment and fair outcomes through “local” control is also not certain from the decentralized system mandated by school choice. Further, extending the market metaphor to public education may have the unintended (though perhaps predictable) consequences of further stratifying scarce resources among minorities and the urban poor in an effort to ensure advancement in the current structure of economy and society. Despite these cautions, school choice does hold some promise in the possibility that urban communities can reconfigure educational institutions that may transform rather than reinforce some of the structural barriers to equality.

PRACTICAL POLICY INTERVENTIONS

A discussion of innovative and practical policy interventions for combating racism must begin by raising the question of: what are the structural and institutional locations of racism in education? In general, I have argued for taking seriously the proposition that the structure of the American political-economic system places out-groups, which include the poor and racial and

³³ See Eaton, 1996.

ethnic minorities, at a systematic disadvantage, not only by virtue of their relatively low placement in the educational hierarchy, but also because the legitimacy of this unequal structure is propagated in part by American educational institutions themselves. In other words, education in America is endogenous. Starting from this position presents the obstacles to change as difficult at best, and intractable at worst. Placing emphasis on structural inequality of such range and proportions also perhaps invites pessimism based on an assessment that class and racial bias may be impossible to combat and counteract with educational policy alone. My discussion of the literature on education, however, is not intended to invoke such a response. Rather, I intend the emphasis to be a gentle, if unpleasant reminder that policies that seek to redress the consequences of economic and racial prejudice, cannot unproblematically assume that providing more resources for competition in an unequal system will eliminate the inequality.³⁴ If education does indeed contribute to the maintenance of social stratification, sorting those with high attainment and credentials at the top of the hierarchy, and those with less toward the bottom, we cannot expect that mechanism in its same form to also dismantle the hierarchy.

Of course the political rhetoric advocating more education is a simplification of an otherwise complex, and in some cases, imaginative range of policy recommendations. Moreover, questioning the desirability of more education within the historical context of the state-enforced practice of excluding African-Americans and other racial minorities from access to public education throughout the history of the United States, may seem a bit odd at first.³⁵

³⁴ Many others have made similar points, however most with regard to income. See, for example, Jencks, 1993.

³⁵ See Katznelson and Weir, 1985, chapter 7.

Whatever doubt associated with the claim, however, can be quickly dispelled if one recognizes that the process, the structures, the institutions of education in America are not value-free. The idealized values of a democratic ideology -- the big four in the American creed of liberty, equality, fairness, justice -- are in short supply in America's public schools. What has been accurately described by Jonathan Kozol as "savage inequalities," is a system of public education in America where students in some places lack minimally adequate classrooms, textbooks, and instruction, and where the students in these places are overwhelmingly poor and black. These observations may lead one, in the social scientist's vernacular, to infer only correlation and not causation. But the persistence and pervasiveness of the associative relationship, and more important, the havoc it wreaks on substantive liberty, equality, justice, and fairness should compel us to search harder for the causal relationship and to propose a solution.

When we ask, how this can happen in America, we must be willing to take seriously the logic of the structural critique that identifies schools as a key element of capitalism and inequality in the United States.³⁶ We must be willing to suspend our bias toward a shared element in the ideology of both capitalism and democracy that keeps inequality firmly in place. We must be willing to recognize that merit is a constitution far more precarious than we are otherwise encouraged to think. The myth of merit, however, is critical to the maintenance of things as they currently exist, for merit is used as a justification for inequality of outcomes in a system where the rules are assumed to be equal. The place of education is in the role it plays as both the sorting mechanism that confers degrees and other scarce outcomes, as well as propagates the

³⁶ It is important to acknowledge Katznelson's and Weir's argument that the weakness of the revisionist position is its reluctance to acknowledge the agency of the working class.

myth of the meritocracy. It is necessary to have some mechanism which reliably reproduces the ideology that maintains the positions of power for those at the top who benefit from the system as it already exists. When outcomes are positional or scarce -- when not everyone can be rich, and not everyone can get into Harvard -- the liberal democratic ideology must have a procedural answer to its production of unequal outcomes. The way around this problem, or in other words, the way to explain unequal outcomes in a system that is built around procedures of equality, is to propagate a myth of the meritocracy. Education is critical here because in a highly credentialed society and economy like the U.S., it is the institution that confers the many of the degrees and titles necessary.

Education can be both good and bad. In its role in the meritocracy as a certification system, education controls access and limits power. But education, both formal and informal, also holds the possibility for increasing qualities in individuals such as: reason, curiosity, creativity, imagination. The challenge is to formulate institutions, structures, and practices that recognize the importance of these qualities that education can help foster.

The challenge for educational reform is to identify more precisely the locations of racial and class bias, and then to configure practices that eliminate or at least mitigate prejudice. For it is clear from the research that education has individual-level effects that are desirable for the disadvantaged to possess in equal measure to those who dominate discourse and the system of rewards. In this regard, education does have the potential to change the composition of the population at the high end of the hierarchy, and to incorporate more minorities and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. While advocating equal opportunity for more education does nothing to alter the existence of unequal system, it can change who sits at the top

of the hierarchy. The promise of education, though, is the potential it has for developing critical and moral qualities in citizens so that they can identify prejudice and domination, and challenge the legitimacy of the hierarchy itself. The solution requires a philosophy that recognizes the danger of domination, and an institutional structure that activates the agency of those who would otherwise be exploited. In short, the role of education in eliminating the political problem of racism must be one that is explicitly political. In other words, it must be one that recognizes substantive equality, and not merit-based achievement, as its standard of success. Will such a strategy help solve the problem of racism in America? We can not be sure of such an optimistic prediction because we have no historical precedent. But if we are to move in the right direction, we must surely attempt it.

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