

Poverty, Class, and the Cultivation of Economically Just Educational Policy:

The role of ideology

Few ideas have so thoroughly captured the collective imagination of the United States citizenry as the idea that education is the *great equalizer*.



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STUDY HARD AND DO WELL IN SCHOOL, the narrative goes, and nothing – not even dire poverty and all of its disadvantages – can keep you from achieving whatever you wish to achieve. I learned growing up in the United States that I lived in a meritocracy, where wealth and recognition were distributed in direct proportion to effort. You accumulate what you have merited. The flip-side of this ideology, of course, is that if you have accumulated little or have not managed to position yourself to accumulate more than a little, you simply have not worked hard enough. The trouble for me as a child only a generation removed from a long line of very poor Appalachian coal miners was that when I looked at my own family, the trope lost its truth. If the promise of meritocracy is real, how could my family have lost generations of young men to whooping cough, black lung, and other coal mine ailments, having labored through the most exhausting workdays I could imagine, and their families still come out poor?

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I now know, of course, that meritocracy is a myth, as is its ideological cousin, the notion that schools are great equalizers. I now know and like many researchers have documented (Gorski, 2013) how advantage begets advantage even in – *especially* in – the United States education system. I know that on average the most economically privileged children, especially if they are white, are sent to the most well-resourced schools with the most experienced teachers, the smallest class sizes, the most engaging pedagogies, and the most access to a well-rounded curricula that incorporate the arts and physical education, and that the least economically privileged children, especially if they are of color, are sent on average to more or less the opposite of that. Most importantly, though, I know this: the great equalizer and meritocracy myths are narratives that help to justify, using Jonathan Kozol's (1992) language, this *savagely* unequal distribution of opportunity. The trouble for me now, as somebody who works with schools and school systems full of leaders enthusiastic about creating policy to address socioeconomically based educational outcome inequalities, is that this reality is of little mitigating consequence against mass perception.

As a result, neither in the United States nor, I would add, in any of the other countries where I have helped schools and school systems address these issues, is there a lack of policy interventions against economic outcome inequalities. Rather, there is an abundance of policy interventions built on faulty assumptions, such as the assumption that we can fix socioeconomic class based educational outcome inequalities by fixing supposed deficiencies

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in people in poverty or by fixing supposed deficiencies in underpaid teachers teaching in high-poverty schools where they, too, are denied the resources they need to do so effectively. In fact, when I reviewed roughly the past 30 years of research on the greatest barriers facing students in poverty in the United States (Gorski, 2013), what stood out to me as the most formidable and most ignored barrier was purely ideological rather than practical (Robinson, 2007; Williams, 2009). The problem, again, was not a lack of interventions, but the fact that the people designing the interventions were doing so through a deficit lens – a lens that grays out the gross inequalities that are the roots of outcome inequalities. These include not only unequal access to educational opportunity, but also unequal access to healthcare, safe and affordable housing, and living wage jobs, among other commodities – among other basic human rights in a nation that can afford to provide them to everybody.

Some of the most common deficit approach interventions are mitigative in nature. Like hosting a canned food drive or distributing blankets to people who are homeless, they are no real threat to outcome inequalities because they do not change the conditions that cause outcome inequalities. For example, many schools offer tutors and assign mentors to students in poverty. Others, ignoring decades of research demonstrating that low-income people value education just as much as their wealthier peers, nudge low-income parents and guardians into parenting workshops and in doing so often further alienate them. It is important to acknowledge that this happens, not because purposefully repressive educators are targeting marginalized students. In some ways the reality

is scarier: these are the common practices in schools in the United States because ideologically most educators, from classroom teachers to state-level administrators, like most citizens more generally, have bought into the deficit view.

Making matters worse, the most popular poverty-related professional development frameworks in the United States, including Ruby Payne's (2005) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* and Eric Jensen's (2009) *Teaching with Poverty in Mind* focus on addressing the supposed deficiencies in students in poverty while largely or completely ignoring structural inequalities. More recently, Paul Tough (2013) and others have drawn on grit theory, the notion proposed by Angela Duckworth and her colleagues (2009) that suggests that there are certain attributes, the combination of which can be characterized as 'grit', by which we can predict which students will succeed in schools and which will not, all else being equal. Of course, all else is not equal and yet, more and more schools are adopting and misapplying the concept with their low-income students, focusing on cultivating their resilience in the face of inequalities rather than cultivating an educational and social environment free of inequalities. New generations of educators and education leaders are being trained annually through these frameworks to comply with the deficit approach and to feel, in doing so, that they are advocating in the best possible way for students in poverty.

This is why, although I was invited to write a brief article about an education policy issue and its influence on educational equity and social justice for families in poverty, I chose not to make the same mistake that characterizes most conversations about poverty and education in the United States. As long as educational leaders and policy-makers continue their dance around structural inequalities, we must assume that their policy initiatives are doomed and perhaps even *meant* for failure. As we imagine possibilities for a more equitable and just educational future, we must begin with ideology. Ideology drives policy. If we want more equitable policy, we need more equitable ideology. That, in the end, is the most practical finding of my educational policy research. ●

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