

Luck in the Educational System

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Ron Glass has written a passionate, insightful essay in “Left Behind Once Again: What’s Luck Got to Do with Current Education Policies and Practices?” He takes to task current and former policy makers for blaming those children who are victimized by poor life circumstances and maltreatment in the educational system. While he agrees that people can be held responsible for their formed characters and actions, he questions the extent to which bad constituent luck and bad luck in circumstances mitigates the responsibility of children from low income, culturally and linguistically diverse (LI/LCD) families for their generally poor educational achievement and subsequent social and economic failure. While he is not willing to totally excuse the poor performance of these children, he places most of the blame on society and the “ranking and sorting mechanisms of schools that reinforce dominant ideologies that already systematically disadvantage the poor.”

He is right to castigate the Bush-Cheney regime for testing policies that are running amok, narrowing the curriculum, and causing a profound demoralization in our public schools. Still, his singling out of Bush-Cheney overlooks the complicit role of both Republicans and Democrats in Congress in passing NCLB. Moreover, NCLB is high stakes mainly for schools and educators, and only indirectly at best for poor children. So, despite the rhetorical satisfaction of taking aim at Bush-Cheney, Glass might better target the governors and legislatures of seventeen states (so far) who are instituting high stakes tests that determine high school graduation for any deleterious effects on LI/LCD children.

LUCK AND EDUCATIONALLY RELEVANT ATTRIBUTES

Let us focus on the issue of responsibility and luck that Glass raises. I want to do so in light of the distributive behavior of the educational system.¹ There are four sets of distribution implicating the educational system: educationally-relevant attributes, educational benefits, surrogate educational benefits, and Non-Educational Social and Economic Benefits. Now the quintessential educationally-relevant attributes in the population are educational ability, tenacity, and choice. They combine to generate the distribution of educational benefits, such as knowledge, skills, judgment, and even character. People may come to know more or judge better as a result of their greater ability, their trying hard to learn, or their decisions to persevere in school when they might drop out. Initially, this appears to be morally unobjectionable, since what else is likely to generate a distribution of educational benefits in which some come to have more than others? And those that come to have more “earn” better grades and receive higher diplomas, degrees, and testimonials than others — those surrogate educational benefits that represent the possession of educational benefits and that create the possibility of a fairly efficient educational system, since it is otherwise time-consuming to determine exactly what a person knows or can do.

There seems to be no problem here. If people choose not to persevere in school, it doesn't seem unjust if they come to know less or have fewer skills than those who choose to stay in school. However, the educational system functions in our society to help determine the distribution of non-educational social and economic benefits by means of a normative principle of social justice that can be stated as follows: "Those having a greater share of (surrogate) educational benefits *merit* or *deserve* a greater share of social and economic benefits (such as income, earnings opportunities, status, and prestige)." Now this, too, might be morally unobjectionable, *if* there were many such normative principles operative in our society. That is another way of saying that there might be many roads to a decent life, only one of them through the educational system. But, such is no longer the case. Indeed, the educational system is the now dominant mechanism by which we allocate the young to life's chances. (It is irrational to trust in winning the lottery, marrying the boss's son or daughter, or becoming Elvis or Michael Jordan.) This is the hidden premise in Glass's analysis of luck that allows him to make a case for the unfairness of it all: doing well in life is pretty much a matter of doing well in school for longer periods of time than your peers.

While educational ability may be randomly distributed throughout the population, in that no identifiable social group has a monopoly or native advantage, it is pretty clear that LI/CLD children first come to school with less *nurturing* and impaired tenacity and choice: the stuff of constitutive and circumstantial luck. They are more likely to fall behind in school, be identified as special needs, and drop out of school than their better-nurtured peers. Thus, it is unsurprising that they cannot compete.

In some respects, however, their situation is more dire than Glass recognizes. The normative principle connecting the educational system to the social and economic system is a principle of *shifting* benefits and liabilities. Given any level of the educational system, it can only differentially distribute social and economic benefits to individuals when the school-age population attainment of that level is far less than 100%. If everyone completes a particular school grade, then completing that level, in and of itself, can neither advantage nor disadvantage anyone. That claim is true *a priori*. But, as the school-age population approaches 100% completion of a particular level, we can reason that the advantages of completion begin to decline at some point (probably around 60–65%), while the liabilities of failing to complete that level escalate. The high school completion rate in America is now about 78% for the school age population. This represents a situation where possessing a high school diploma is no longer a big deal anymore. But where dropping out of high school was once a realistic choice at far lower rates of high school completion, the liabilities of doing so today are immense for life's chances. And, while advantaged social groups no longer receive differential benefits from high school completion, for them high school completion is now a step into the selective world of higher education where the birth cohort completion rate is far lower and the relative advantages of college and university completion are clearly demonstrable.

But note the situation of the low-income, culturally and linguistically diverse group. On social, racial, ethnic, and linguistic grounds they are identifiably the “group of last entry” into the educational system. While we urge them to stay in school for the presumed social and economic benefits of attainment through policy and social exhortation, many still drop out at far higher rates. The social “inheritance” of those who do drop out of high school is a probable life of low-paying, dead-end jobs, periods of unemployment, and a higher potential of incarceration. But, even were we successful in overcoming their resistance to further schooling, what happens as they begin to attain at the same rate of their advantaged, mainstream peers? Surprise! They would swell the high school completion rate to 100% where there will be zero advantages to high school completion, only to find that their advantaged peers are advancing higher into the selective tertiary sector of the educational system where they can maintain their advantage over the group of last entry.

We are perpetrating something like a massive hoax on LI/CLD children. Imagine a high stakes game in which everyone is compelled to participate, but in which we give a certain favored group a head start. We then tell LI/CLD children that they need to reach a certain target in order to get a prize. But when they reach the target, we inform them that they do not get the prize because the target has been raised. And for those LI/CLD children who do not like the game and drop out, we make them pay an increasing penalty as they fall to the sidelines. As the group as a whole fails to win a prize and many lie injured on the sidelines, can we say to them with a straight face, “Well, I guess that is just your bad luck, you obviously didn’t try hard enough?”

I have no illusions about our ability to unrig this game. As long as we permit the educational system to be the only route to productive adulthood, the LI/CLD young will forever be the “unlucky” losers in our society. There are alternatives to the educational system, however, should we find the will and moral courage to confront what we are doing to the “unlucky” amongst us, for example, opening up a multitude of practical educational alternatives to the (academic) educational system for the young en route to productive adulthood or providing a decent social floor below which no one in our society is permitted to fall. Luck would then have little to do with it.

1. I owe this account of the distributive behavior of the educational system to Thomas F. Green, David P. Ericson, and Robert H. Seidman, *Predicting the Behavior of the Educational System* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1980).