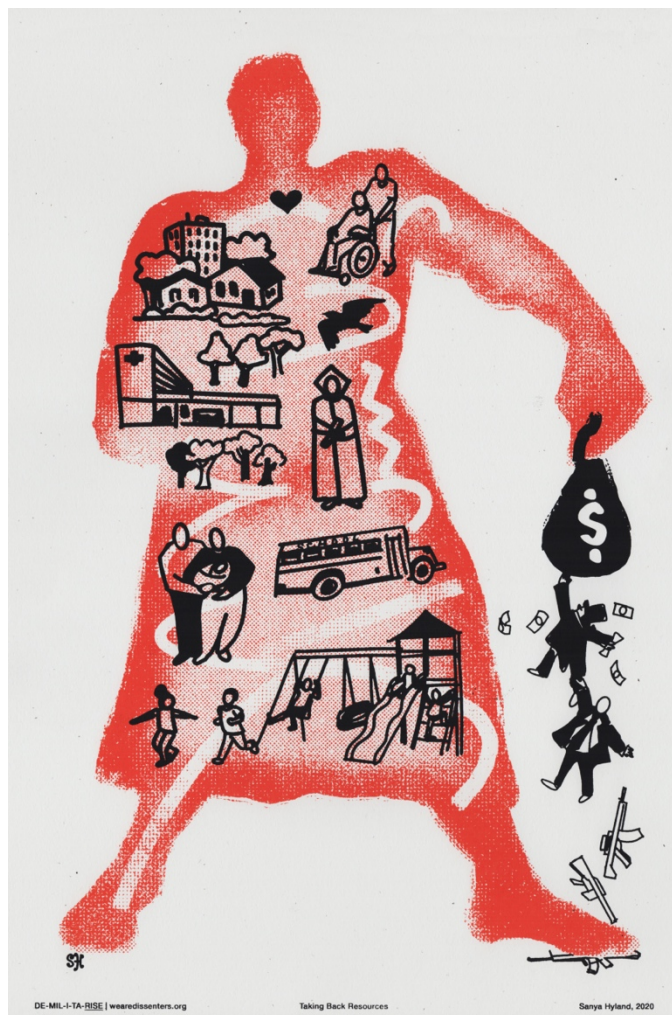


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Education Reform: What Is Really Achieved by Trying to Close Achievement Gaps?

by John Schlueter



"TAKING-BACK-RESOURCES " BY SANYA-HYLAND VIA JUST SEEDS

LeBron James, in a recent commercial, criticizes the well-worn narrative in which the black professional athlete is praised for their success despite their “humble beginnings” (<https://lebronwire.usatoday.com/2019/12/19/lebron-james-hopes-for-no-more-humble-beginnings-in-new-nike-ad/>). At the commercial’s climax James looks into the camera and asks, “what if there were no more humble beginnings?” However, this does not mean James is going to disperse his vast wealth to as many needy families as he can, nor does it mean he will launch some tax reform initiative that basically puts an end to millionaires or billionaires like himself. Instead, the commercial ends with him watching a fictional news story about his “I Promise” school on his phone, which shows an African-American girl standing in a classroom with a headline about “extraordinary test scores”. The implicit message is that education is the agent of increased economic opportunity and greater equality. The fact that this does not even need to be spoken means that we now take for granted that better education, or an equalization of educational opportunity, is the agent of greater socio-economic achievement or how we eliminate “humble beginnings” (a phrase that itself is a euphemism for poverty and economic injustice).

In essence, James’s commercial substitutes education reform for economic reform. This substitution is a fantasy—a fantasy so compelling that it has driven education reform for the last several decades. Why education reformers continue to expect education—and increasingly higher education—to be the site where we can achieve equality is the story I want to tell here, and it is a story epitomized in the obsession with the achievement gap. By calling attention to gaps in educational outcomes along class, race, and ethnicity, we admit that achievement itself is structural, or that disparities in outcomes don’t exist because of a group’s natural abilities, but because of deep inequalities. However, at the very same time, those deep inequalities are relocated within institutional spaces (classrooms) that can be “reformed.” Therefore, by working to reform those spaces, we can tell ourselves that we are addressing inequality. In reality, though, by re-making achievement gaps into a cause of inequality rather than its effect, education reformers address structural inequality while helping to ensure its continuation. In what follows, I will not only outline a long history of how education reformers mistake effects of inequality for causes; I will also show how doing so results in an extremely effective disciplinary practice that compels teachers, administrators, and students to do more and more with less and less. Finally, I will argue that, in order to value both equality and learning for what they are, we need to think about them completely independent of metrics of achievement.

The Coleman Report and the Illogic of Reform

In the wake of the police killing of George Floyd, we can only expect the achievement gap in education to get even more emphasis and attention. However, the story of how education became the agent of equality begins with a

decades-old study that disproved that very hypothesis. The 1964 Civil Rights Act called for a study of inequality of opportunity in education along racial and ethnic lines. Known as the “Coleman Report,” this landmark sociological study, led by the University of Chicago’s James S. Coleman, involved 600,000 children in 4,000 schools and sought to find the source of achievement gaps between white and black students. The results were surprising. Most assumed that school inputs—particularly the amount of funding schools received and teacher quality—were the biggest factors responsible for different educational outcomes. However, what the Coleman Report found was that such factors mattered least, and what mattered most was who the children went to school with. In the report’s words:

Taking all these results together, one implication stands out above all: That schools bring little influence to bear on a child’s achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school. For equality of educational opportunity through the schools must imply a strong effect of schools that is independent of the child’s immediate social environment, and that strong independent effect is not present in American schools (325).

These “imposed inequalities” boil down to class differences, differences that overlap with, and are exacerbated by, racial/ethnic differences. The fundamentally classed-based root of achievement gaps revealed by Coleman’s report is what Richard D. Kahlenberg highlights in “Learning from James Coleman”:

The Coleman Report had suggested that the economic status of students in a school, rather than its racial makeup, was the key factor driving school quality. It concluded that the “beneficial effect of a student body with a high proportion of white students comes not from racial composition per se but from the better educational background and higher educational aspirations that are, on the average, found among whites.” The implication, Coleman noted, was that poor blacks and whites would benefit from attending middle-class white or black schools, and that poor blacks would not benefit academically from attending low-income white schools. This finding was replicated in subsequent studies...(62)

Again, the fact that poor black students would not fare better in low-income white schools underscores the class-based nature of academic performance. However, as translated into public policy, the Coleman Report did not lead to economic reform, but to the forced integration of schools through busing, which Coleman later argued led to “white flight” and even greater segregation.

The direct influence of socio-economic class on achievement was brought to the foreground by another landmark sociological study that built upon the data

collected in the Coleman report. *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (1972), by Christopher Jencks et al., concluded that educational reform does not result in a more equitable distribution of income. In Jencks's words, "As long as egalitarians assume that public policy cannot contribute to economic equality directly but must proceed by ingenious manipulations of marginal institutions like the schools, progress will remain glacial" (265). More about these "ingenious manipulations of marginal institutions" later. For now, what's important is that Jencks's study highlights what the Coleman Report showed but perhaps didn't say directly: income inequality—or "humble beginnings"—cannot be "solved" by educational reform. Many sociologists and others have taken issue with parts of the methodology and interpretation of the data in both the Coleman Report and *Inequality*; I am not a trained sociologist so I am not going to dive into those weeds. However, it is worth noting that [Coleman himself reviewed *Inequality*](#), and although he had major critiques of the work, he ended his review by underscoring its most important truth:

There is, however, an important point made. The point could have been made very simply, in a short paper. It is this: that equality of opportunity is distinct from equality of results (as measured by income), and attention given by governments to equality of opportunity must not distract attention from inequality of income, nor from trends in inequality of income (1526).

The story of education reform since the 60's is the story of how we have been "distracted" in exactly the way Coleman warned: educational policy has been driven by the belief that educational reform (what Coleman means by "equality of opportunity") is the agent of economic opportunity and greater economic equality for all citizens.

Coleman's report essentially lays out two paths forward. One path is to deal with inequality directly, which is the path we have not taken, and to which I will return later. The second is to keep searching for the "strong effect of schools that is independent of the child's immediate social environment." The search for such "independent effects" is the path we have always chosen, and it has compelled a seemingly never-ending process of reform, which puts enormous pressure on teachers, institutions, and students themselves. Twenty years after the Coleman Report, Ronald Reagan's 1983 Report "[A Nation at Risk](#)" brings us to the same crossroads. First it calls out, correctly, the overwhelming expectations we place on schools:

Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them...That we have compromised this commitment is, upon reflection, hardly surprising, given the multitude of often conflicting demands we have placed on our Nation's schools and colleges. They are routinely called on to provide solutions to personal, social, and political problems that the home and other institutions either will not or cannot resolve. We must

understand that these demands on our schools and colleges often exact an educational cost as well as a financial one.

However, instead of directly addressing these problems we have tasked education with solving, the report again resolves that educational institutions provide students with Coleman's "independent effect":

All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgement needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interests but also the progress of society itself.

Two decades later, George W. Bush's administration comes to the same crossroads, and once again chooses the same path with the "[No Child Left Behind](#)" act, which resolves "to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind."

In the meantime, neoliberal economic policies are driving what Janet Yellen called "[the most sustained rise in economic equality since the 19th century.](#)" But don't take my word for it; even the IMF itself has come to the same conclusion. [An IMF report](#) addressing the failure of neoliberalism to deliver on its promises puts it this way: "since both openness and austerity are associated with increasing income inequality, this distributional effect sets up an adverse feedback loop. The increase in inequality engendered by financial openness and austerity might itself undercut growth, the very thing that the neoliberal agenda is intent on boosting. There is now strong evidence that inequality can significantly lower both the level and the durability of growth." Although neoliberalism has been a global failure, in the U.S., the role that education reform has played to buttress these failed economic policies cannot be understated. For example, a much-lauded study written by Harvard economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz called *The Race Between Education and Technology* (2008) completely ignores neoliberal economics and lays the blame for increased inequality on the failure of educational attainment to keep pace with technological innovation. Goldin and Katz marshal an enormous amount of data to argue for an ideal relationship between education and technology, which keeps income inequality in check. They argue that this relationship was maintained for most of the 20th century. However, in the late 70's, there was a period in which subsequent generations failed to maintain the pace of educational attainment of previous generations. In other words, "education lost the race to technology." (1) Goldin and Katz thus concluded that if the "supply of college workers increased from 1980 to 2005" at the same rate it had in previous decades, "the college premium, rather than rising, would have fallen" (321). By "college premium" they mean the amount a college degree is worth in dollars, and because there were fewer workers with that credential, the ones who had it were paid more and drove income inequality in the wrong direction.

Goldin and Katz's work is the logical outcome of studies of education since Coleman as it pertains to the history I'm tracing here. I say that because it is the complete inverse of the Coleman-Jencks understanding that educational attainment has little to do with "results," or income inequality. *The Race Between Education and Technology*, then, with all the force and publicity of a major Harvard study, removes neoliberal economic policy from the equation and re-creates educational achievement—and achievement gaps—as the reason for inequality. (2) According to one [report](#), the book significantly influenced many of the advisors who helped President Obama craft his education policy, which again stressed educational achievement as a primary path towards great equality.

This illogic of reform is so ingrained that, in a [recent special article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*](#), the lack of social mobility is re-cast as the "failed promise" of higher education, and Danette Howard, senior vice president at the Lumina Foundation, can say, in complete earnestness, that "The *only thing* that mitigates intergenerational poverty is higher education" (italics mine). Really? Howard's statement only makes sense if we forget that income inequality reproduces itself and we remake one of the effects of that inequality—unequal educational outcomes—into a remedy of it.

The illogic of this reformist position is bolstered by correlation between education and income. One cannot dispute the data that shows that the more education one receives, the more money one makes. So, the reformer might say, this is why we need to close achievement gaps, because if a greater diversity of students attains more quality education and higher academic achievement, they too will make more money. However, the correlation between education and income does not prove that education is an agent of equality; it only proves that education can buttress existing economic inequality as much as it can mitigate it. Again, research like that of Goldin and Katz takes enormous pains to lay the blame for *the most sustained rise in inequality since the 19th century* on dips in educational attainment in certain years in the 70's or 80's. But the structures of inequality are too comprehensive to be remedied by "more education" (not to mention the fact that the [wealth advantage of having a college degree](#) has been steadily shrinking since the 1930's and 40's). However, instead, policy makers and education reformers have simply doubled, and tripled, down on the belief that what must be fixed is education—and we've done this by believing it's not just access to education that matters, but *how* we educate underserved populations. We don't need economic reform, in other words, we need more and more "ingenious manipulations of marginal institutions."

Productivity: The Actual Outcome of Reform

In our present moment, education reformers, like LeBron James and Bill and Melinda Gates, are turning to nonpublic models, like charter schools, after coming again to the same crossroads that Coleman brought us to, and,

again, choosing the path of searching for "independent effects." This has not worked out. However, in this section, I will argue that, in practice, the real outcome of the reform model of closing achievement gaps is increased pressure on teachers and institutions to do more and more, and to do it with less.

Coleman himself gives legitimacy to the search for a magical "independent effect" of schooling. [In 1966 he writes](#): "Schools are successful only insofar as they reduce the dependence of a child's opportunities upon his social origins Thus equality of educational opportunity implies, not merely 'equal' schools, but equally effective schools, whose influences will overcome the differences in starting point of children from different social groups"(72). In Coleman's estimation, equality is a kind of "after effect" of a certain type of schooling that releases the student from her socio-economic background. [His rhetoric becomes even more heightened a year later](#): "This is a task far more ambitious than has ever been attempted by any society: not just to offer, in a passive way, equal access to educational resources, but to provide an educational environment that will free a child's potentialities for learning from the inequalities imposed upon him by the accident of birth into one or another home and social environment" (21). The task of education and educational reform is now clear: instead of being an argument for a more direct solution to inequality, the former "ineffectiveness" of schools to make up for said inequality now becomes the bar by which schools shall be judged.

The closing of achievement gaps is evidence for a school's ability to exert this supposed "independent effect." However, such initiatives are founded on an unspoken contradiction. In education, the last decades have marked a turn towards neoliberal policies and practices as post-secondary schools have been re-valued as economic engines and producers of late twentieth-/early twenty-first-century workers. Any educator or administrator is by now very familiar with such policies and practices: the de-professionalization of faculty, the exponential growth of contingent faculty, the growth of the managerial class, public disinvestment, standardized course learning outcomes, accreditation processes focused on assessments of student learning, and seeing students as "consumers," just to name a few of them. As neoliberal managerial practices have taken hold of higher education, neoliberal economic policies have created vast wealth disparity—the very inequalities that drive achievement gaps. So, herein lies the contradiction: somehow education reformers expect the neoliberal college or university to correct the inequality created by neoliberal economic policies. This simply cannot be done—but that's the point. As long as this contradiction remains unspoken, closing achievement gaps seems like an achievable, and even progressive, goal, rather than a chimerical one—and so we all work harder and harder chasing it.

This contradiction—wherein neoliberal educational management practices are used to correct inequalities created by neoliberal economics—means that closing achievement gaps has become the main metric for judging schools and teachers. In other words, achievement gaps are a school-centric problem, rather than evidence of the

insidious, corrosive, and far-reaching effects of inequality. For example, Robert Evans, in "Reframing the Achievement Gap" explains how education reformers see education as both the solution and the problem:

Reduced to its core, their logic is: all children are created equal, but all children are not performing equally in school; the gap typically worsens as children advance through the grades; the fault must therefore be the schools', so the solution must lie in school; the necessary knowledge and tools are available, and schools must be pressed to apply them (583).

So, in other words, reformers become so invested in closing achievement gaps that doing so becomes a goal that loses its reference to the socio-economic causalities "outside" of school.

When the achievement gap becomes this "school-centric," self-referential problem, enormous pressure is put on teachers. For example, in a particularly potent moment in his essay, Evans describes speaking with teachers, whom he greatly respects, and who have devoted their careers to equity and social justice for all students, and hearing them "reject as a cop-out any hesitation about schooling's potential to reduce the achievement gap." Many of these educators believe that "differentiated instruction," or tailoring teaching to the needs of students, with a focus on equity, is a "real key to closing the achievement gap." Evans admits that this methodology has great potential, but to expect it to close the achievement gap is wishful thinking. However, and this is the point I want to make now, instituting such a methodology, with the goal of closing achievement gaps rather than simply increasing student learning, does discipline the teacher. By discipline I don't mean reprimand; I mean it "motivates" the teacher to do more, and more, and more:

Differentiated instruction greatly increases the scope and complexity of teachers' work—the planning and the actual instruction—and thus demands extra sophistication, time, and energy. And it becomes more challenging as class size grows, as heterogeneity increases, and especially as students move to the upper grades, by which time the cumulative gaps in their performance have widened considerably and the curriculum is innately more content-driven and less amenable to individualization (588).

When teachers are made to chase the closing of achievement gaps like a carrot on a stick, they become susceptible to the constant reform initiatives that have become the air we breathe as educators. [Lilia Bartolome has called this](#) "the methods fetish," in which "the solution to the current underachievement of students from subordinated cultures is often reduced to finding the 'right' teaching methods, strategies, or prepackaged curricula that will work with students who do not respond to so-called 'regular' or 'normal' instruction" (1). For his part, Jencks warned us of these constant "ingenious manipulations of marginal institutions" years ago. But what makes this disciplinary practice so effective is that it seems so right: what teacher worth their salt wouldn't want to do everything in their power to help each and every student

succeed? However, the root of this effort must be acknowledged along with the practice, and that root is the fantasy that education—if done just right—can do what it cannot: create equality.

As reformers make the closing of achievement gaps a self-referential problem, the educational institution itself is then cut off from its socio-economic context. For example, take the case of Georgia State University, which has recently garnered national headlines for "[eliminating](#)" the [achievement gap](#) in its graduation rate between white and black students, and between students who are eligible for Pell grants those who are not. However, in order to be Pell eligible, your household income cannot exceed \$50,000, and much Pell money goes to students whose household income is much lower. In other words, being non-eligible for Pell does not mean you are not suffering from economic inequality. So, whereas the overall GSU graduation rate is around the national average, it is still far below top public research universities where students have much higher household incomes on average. Again, here is a case where, in isolating structural inequity within a single institution, we make relatively small differences in income (Pell-eligible vs. non-Pell eligible) stand in for deep inequalities.

GSU has seemingly achieved the "independent effect" Coleman was looking for, except, even when achieved, that independent effect only serves to mask inequality not just outside the institution, but inside of it as well. The latter is exemplified in how GSU turned [300 students into supplemental instructors](#), who do work that looks a lot like teaching, but for less than what an adjunct would make—further blurring the lines between higher learning and the economic mandate to be more educated in order to do more for less. Starting in the 1990's, GSU began using SI's to aid students in certain classes with high fail rates. [According to the application packet](#), SI's devote approximately 10 hours a week to various duties: attending the class itself, running/preparing materials for 2-3 study sessions a week, tracking attendance, meeting with coordinators, etc. As an article in the *Atlantic* states, "It would have cost the university millions of dollars to hire professional tutors to do this work...but recruiting and training 300 student leaders...costs almost nothing." Actually, SI's get a stipend of \$1500 a semester. Divide that by 10hr/week for 16 weeks and you get about \$9/hr. At this point, are we closing achievement gaps or are we preparing students to enter an economy in which productivity is high and pay is low?

Demographic data on student success is important, and focusing on underserved populations is crucial. But data without critique results in progress without purpose. The achievement gap asks us only to close it; it does not ask us to interrogate how we prepare graduates to accept a world in which: 1) [the U.S. populace is more educated than ever before](#); 2) [worker productivity has increased steadily since the 70's](#); BUT 3) [income inequality, exacerbated along racial/ethnic lines, has steadily increased since the 70's](#). In other words, if closing achievement gaps is the goal, education reformers must not ask what the purpose of higher ed is in a world where students need more education to get jobs in which they

produce more for less. GSU is often touted for eliminating achievement gaps despite significant cuts in funding; however, doing more for less is the logic of an economy that produces achievement gaps in the first place. GSU's outcomes are not an anomaly, they are the logical product of an economy obsessed with squeezing every ounce of productivity out of its workers and institutions.

Once we buy into the closing of achievement gaps as a metric of institutional effectiveness, we immediately find ourselves complicit in reproducing inequality. Because if we buy into this, we buy into Coleman's "independent effect," which posits that educational institutions can somehow stand outside their socio-economic reality and correct it in some way. Once we buy into the romance that educational achievement can be a corrective for inequality, we buy into a founding myth of neoliberalism: that one's equality with others is a product of one's ability to achieve.

Achievement: A Progressive Take and a Radical Response

Despite the illogic of reform—or the practice of seeing educational achievement as a corrective for inequality—research continues to tell us that achievement is structural. Kevin Welner, a professor at the University of Colorado Boulder's School of Education who specializes in educational policy and law, makes this point again in a recent [Washington Post article](#):

Opportunity gaps drive achievement gaps. Yet U.S. policies proceed as if achievement can be boosted without corresponding investments in opportunities. These gaps arise from inequities inside of schools as well as outside of schools. In fact, outside-school factors appear to account for [most of the measured variance](#) in achievement among different groups. Yet U.S. policies proceed as if these gaps mainly arise from schools and should be closed by school-centric policies.

Welner, who is also the director of the [National Education Policy Center](#) at UC Boulder, is calling attention to the persistent error—now at least 60 years in the making—of asking schools to not only solve a problem not of their own making, but to treat it as a problem that they created! Again, this is the logic of reform: re-placing a societal problem within an institutional space (classroom) and imagining that by reforming that space we are dealing with a larger systemic problem, and so elide that very problem.

Welner's more "progressive" take re-replaces socio-economic inequality as the main cause of disparities in academic achievement. This progressive stance is also espoused by Lawrence Mishel, president of the Economic Policy Institute. [In the most succinct way that I have found](#), Mishel explains why school effectiveness cannot be measured by an achievement gap metric, but must be measured *in the context* of rising economic inequality:

while adequate skills are an essential component of productivity growth, workforce skills cannot determine how the wealth created by national productivity is distributed. That decision is made by policies over which

schools have no influence -- tax, regulatory, trade, monetary, technology, and labor-market policies that modify the market forces affecting how much workers will be paid. Continually upgrading skills and education is essential for sustaining growth as well as for closing historic race and ethnic gaps. It does not, however, guarantee economic success without policies that also reconnect pay with productivity growth.

The link that is forced between education and income, or between more education for diverse populations and greater economic equality, serves to obscure the real link—or lack thereof—between productivity and pay, which can only be treated via economic policy, not education reform.

Once we confront achievement gaps we arrive at a crossroads—and what I've tried to show here is that we keep arriving at this crossroads over and over again. There are two paths to be taken, and these paths are embedded in the findings Coleman made years ago: "schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school." Coleman assumes the first path (the one we always have taken), wherein we must keep searching for that "independent effect," putting greater and greater pressure on teachers, schools, and (as is the case with GSU) students themselves to produce it. This path has not worked well in the sense of ameliorating inequality; however, as I've argued, it has worked extremely well as an institutional disciplinary practice.

The second path, and the one down which we have not ventured, means we must see what has always been before us: equality as completely separate from achievement—academic or economic. This, to me, is the most exciting and "radical" option. Right now, equality is tethered to achievement through education. This means that, for the reformer, greater equality can be reached through schooling that closes achievement gaps. And for the more progressive critic, this means that *equalizing* socio-economic conditions is justified in order to close *achievement* gaps. In either formulation, equality is legitimated by its relation to achievement, and because of that, I don't believe that we value it enough to create it. As long as equality is tethered to achievement, we remain in the neoliberal ideology—and ideology that tells us if we are free to achieve then it is fair to let the chips fall where they may.

However, if equality is completely independent of achievement, then we are forced to either abandon its having any value, or we are forced to value it in and of itself. I would argue that we do the latter: equality is, and must be, a value a just society holds as a good in and of itself, simply based on the belief, as stated in the Constitution, that we are all created equal. Equality is the ultimate tautology, but it also doesn't stop at the moment of "creation." The effort to close achievement gaps over the last 70 years does show us that we care, to some extent, about equality. But it also makes sense that children

are usually the focus of those efforts, as supposed victims of “accidents” of birth and background. What we have been far less capable of, though, is continuing to value equality as those children become adults. Here, the Constitution cannot help us. We simply have to decide to continue to value equality in and of itself. For example, consider the following thought experiment: let’s say every student in America, no matter their class, race, or ethnicity, achieves a college degree. Let’s also say that, despite this, “results” are still very unevenly distributed. Do we interpret inequality as “meritocracy” because everyone has achieved a college degree? Or, do we embrace equality as a value in and of itself regardless of equalized achievement? I would argue that only by choosing the latter, do we show ourselves that we care enough about equality to work to create more of it. It may seem naïve to suggest that we value equality in and of itself, but the alternative is to embrace the insidious contradiction that the effects of inequality can be made into remedies for it, and then to maintain that belief despite living in a world that shows us otherwise.

And what happens to learning when it, too, is separated from achievement? Again I go back to Coleman’s “ambitious” project to “provide an educational environment that will free a child’s potentialities for learning from the inequalities imposed upon him by the accident of birth into one or another home and social environment.” I think that a child’s—or any student’s—potentialities for learning will be unleashed precisely by embracing their “accidents of birth into one or another home and social environment,” but within schools that no longer attach learning to achievement.

Ironically, we may see such freed potential in the least likely of places—prison. Whereas education reformers relocate structural inequities within the institutional space of the classroom, and try to remedy them there, prison is an institutional space that replicates a kind of “equality,” that should exist in a greater degree outside of its walls. (3) Consequently, for those prisoners serving life sentences who are also taking classes, we can see what learning becomes when it is disconnected from achievement outcomes and supposed economic opportunity.

In a paper for the *Harvard Educational Review* entitled “Complex Sentences: Searching for the Purpose of Education inside a Massachusetts State Prison,” Clint Smith deals with precisely this population and this question. Because education in prisons is usually justified in that it reduces recidivism by increasing the former inmate’s possibility of securing gainful employment, Smith must ask: “Do those serving life sentences . . . deserve access to educational opportunities behind bars.” Like the thought experiment outlined above, which “tests” our commitment to equality, Smith’s question asks us to test our commitment to learning itself. Smith goes on to write, “If we answer this question affirmatively, then it seems we must find a different means by which to assess whether or not these programs are working . . . we must understand how these programs facilitate community building, identity development, and cognitive liberation.” In other words, by considering what learning means for those for whom no

metrics of achievement matter, we discover what learning is.

This is echoed by prisoners themselves. When education is separated from achievement, it becomes connected to self-repair, self-creation, earnest intellectual endeavor, and belonging. Or, in the words of [Edward Ramirez](#), who is serving a life sentence for murder at Graterford Prison and taking college classes there, “the incentive at Graterford is to build yourself.” As it turns out, this incentive is highly motivating. As Felix Rosado, who is also serving a life sentence, explains, “In high school I used to sit in the back of the classroom and sleep, but here I was always at the front row, eyes wide open.” If learning is really connected to achievement, academic or economic, then we would expect the opposite of what Rosado has explained. And here’s the ironic twist: the connection between learning and becoming produces better outcomes. In college prison programs in California, [more prisoners are completing their classes](#) and with better grades than their college counterparts.

Of course, one might object, what option is there for a person serving life in prison other than to embrace learning for itself? However, I would argue that the young Felix Rosado falling asleep in class already knew that learning is not measured by achievement, and achievement does not overcome inequality. In other words, we cannot expect achievement to inspire learning any more than we can expect closing achievement gaps to create greater equality. This is exactly what learners serving life sentences show us, and by removing achievement’s attachment to either equality or learning, we free ourselves up to understand how to value learning and equality in and of themselves.

Notes

1. However, this is only true for men. For women, the rate of educational achievement increased during this period (Goldin and Katz, p.249).
2. Overall, however, “since 1973 the share of the workforce with college degrees has more than doubled; over 40 percent of native-born workers now have degrees beyond high school. Additionally, the proportion of native-born workers that has not completed high school or its equivalent has decreased by half to just 7 percent.” (prospect.org/features/schools-scapegoats/)
3. Incarceration itself is driven by inequality. However, life in prison, as dehumanizing as it may be, is one in which the prison population is basically equal, and in which economic inequality doesn’t factor.

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