

THE IMPACT OF RECENT SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL TRENDS ON EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIVERSE POPULATIONS

The proposed symposium would bring together researchers from several countries to analyze the impact of recent trends on educational equity. It would follow up on an invited presidential symposium that I chaired at the 2005 AERA meeting. The symposium included authors of a book that I had edited on school reform in 16 countries, as well as other researchers. I am currently completing a second edition of the book, which will be published early next year. It is clear that there have been significant educational changes in many countries in the past five years. As before, I would plan on inviting both researchers who had worked on the book and others (a total of five, including a discussant) to ensure that the symposium represented a range of perspectives.

The symposium would discuss recent social and educational trends. It would also discuss the change process itself, and the link between the educational changes each country has experienced, or debated, and its broader societal context. Of particular interest are the attempts by countries to adopt policies in response to new political, social, or economic circumstances, while at the same time maintaining traditional values and practices. The policy discussions in each country reflect the tension between the two approaches and the difficulty in meeting what often turn out to be conflicting goals. But even when a country reverts to traditional practices, these practices generally look very different from those of the past because they are strongly influenced by both the changed societal context and by the education reforms.

The symposium would highlight five key trends. As an alternative, the symposium could be built around one of these trends if that approach seemed preferable in the context of the other sessions planned for the meeting.

Key Trends

1. The increasing visibility of tensions between contradictory policy goals

Countries around the world are faced with difficult policy choices among conflicting goals. The concern in some countries—China, Japan, and Turkey, for example—is that the intense pressures to pass university entrance exams are inconsistent with attempts to reduce the emphasis on rote learning because rote learning seems more directly relevant to the demands of the exams. In countries like England and the United States, there is a similar concern about whether the growing emphasis on test-based accountability is narrowing the curriculum. In addition, the simultaneous increase in testing and school choice has highlighted the inherent contradiction between the two policies, since testing encourages standardization of curriculum, while school choice is intended to encourage innovation. There is also a concern that school choice has the potential to increase social stratification and might, therefore, be inconsistent with goals of equity.

2. The growing influence of test-score comparisons on public policy

Countries are increasingly making policy decisions based on the results of international and national test-score comparisons. These policies include, for example, more school choice, more attention to high-poverty children, new programs for teacher training and professional development, more standardization and, above all, more testing and accountability requirements designed to evaluate the performance of school systems, schools, and teachers. The focus on testing and accountability has been a long-term trend in the United States and England, but several countries, including Germany, Sweden, Australia, Israel, and Chile are currently moving in that direction. Not surprisingly, this trend is highly controversial in these countries, with concerns about whether it weakens students' educational experience, as noted earlier, and whether it is relevant to addressing the underlying societal and educational factors that are the main contributors to low achievement.

3. The continuing gains in access to education, accompanied, however, by a continuing or widening gap between rich and poor

Countries throughout the world have continued to experience gains in access to education—with dramatic increases in higher education in some countries—although at the same time the gap between rich and poor has continued or widened. This trend is perhaps most dramatically shown in China, Russia, and South Africa, after the reforms initiated during periods of major political and economic change. While many families have escaped from poverty and entered the middle class, there is a visible gap between the large number of families who continue to live in poverty and those with extreme wealth. That social gap is reflected in an achievement gap. At the same time, increased expectations have made the problem highly politicized.

4. The continuing struggle between centralization and decentralization

There has been a trend toward decentralization in a number of countries that have traditionally been highly centralized. The rationale varies across countries. Some countries decentralize in an attempt to respond more effectively to an increasingly diverse population. In others, it is a response to a cumbersome bureaucracy or cynicism about public schools. Countries also decentralize when national resources are scarce, particularly after periods of major political and economic change. The decisions made about decentralization have direct implications for educational equity, particularly when they affect resource distribution and school choice. For example, China, which decentralized in the 1980s, has returned some responsibility for resource distribution to the national government in response to concerns about widening gaps between rich and poor regions, while Sweden is returning to a more centralized system because of a concern that increased school choice will lead to increased social stratification.

5. The increasing influence of religion on the education system

Several factors have contributed to the growing influence of religion on education systems: increased immigration and diversity, increased school choice, and political changes. In some cases, families sort themselves into schools by religious affiliation; in others, the country's dominant religion is influencing education policy. In England, donors affiliated with religious organizations sponsor some academies (schools that provide alternative educational options). Charter and voucher schools in the United States are sometimes associated with religious groups. In Australia, government subsidies to religious schools have increased, along with attendance at these schools. In France, the debate continues over headscarves and other religious symbols in schools. In Israel, the ultra-orthodox high schools ("yeshivas") are subsidized by government funds even though they do not have to meet the requirements of public schools. In Canada, requests for religious and cultural accommodations are coming both from new immigrants and from groups who have been in the country for a long time. In Russia and Turkey, the dominant religion has gained more power over school policy in recent years. These trends are the subject of considerable debate in each of the countries involved.

By Way of Example

The discussion that follows elaborates on the first trend outlined above—increasing access/social stratification—to demonstrate the type of issues that the symposium might consider. It takes as an example the tensions between accountability, school choice, and equity, as shown in England, Australia, Sweden, and the United States.

In England, the national government controls curriculum and testing, but families can choose from among a wide range of schools, including academies intended to provide alternative educational options. But the variation among schools is limited by the national curriculum and tests: schools cannot move too far from the norm when they are held accountable for students' scores on national exams and when parents choose schools by their published rankings based on these scores. The tradeoff between choice and equity is also of concern to some policy makers, who fear that choice is leading to an education system increasingly defined by socioeconomic status which, in turn, will lead to further social stratification in the society as a whole.

Australia is also moving in the direction of standardization and test-based accountability. At the same time, the government has increased subsidies to independent schools, both religious and non-religious, and middle-and upper-class students are increasingly attending these schools. The inherent tensions, therefore, are similar to those in England. Critics claim that standardization and test-based accountability are at odds with educational innovation that encourages problem solving, critical thinking, and civic engagement. Increased participation in independent schools has also raised concern about potential increases in social stratification, particularly in the context of Australia's growing diversity.

Sweden, with its strong egalitarian tradition and growing diversity, faced tensions between goals of equity and an education system that is becoming more stratified. The achievement gap, although lower than in many other countries, has continued. There is concern that the gap might be exacerbated by increases in independent schools and by tracking in upper-secondary public schools. The risk is that Sweden's egalitarian tradition will be undermined by increased stratification in the education system, which is occurring at the same time that the country is becoming more diverse.

The United States has had a long history with test-based accountability. The current iteration, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB), has become extremely controversial. There are concerns, as in other countries, that children are being denied a broad-based education because of the incentive to narrow the curriculum to focus on the material covered by the test. The incentives established by NCLB also appear to conflict with other valued goals. A stated purpose of NCLB was to ensure that no child was left behind. Yet, it is precisely the most vulnerable children—those in high-poverty communities—who are most likely to be given a narrowed curriculum because it is their schools that have the lowest test scores. NCLB then compounds the problem because it creates a strong incentive to focus mainly on those students who are just below “proficiency” levels on their state’s test, at the expense of those who can get acceptable scores without additional attention. Therefore, some students are being denied learning opportunities they might otherwise have enjoyed, an outcome particularly risky for students in high-poverty communities, who are less likely to receive these opportunities outside of school. Further—in contrast to most other countries that have adopted test-based accountability requirements—the United States has neither a standard curriculum nor a standard test used for accountability purposes; the decisions about both are left to the states. The lack of standardization, along with the accountability pressures, creates a conflict between the goals of high standards and high test scores. In the United States, each state can, if it wishes, game the system (and raise test scores) by simplifying its test or setting the proficiency cutoff lower, thereby creating an accountability system that risks decreasing, rather than raising, standards. Each of these issues has implications for educational equity.

Placing the Proposal in a Broader Context

The proposal has summarized several trends that have become more salient in recent years. What has remained quite consistent is the key educational problem faced by countries worldwide: the achievement gap between students living in poverty and those from more affluent families, a tension that is exacerbated by increasing social stratification. There also remain unrealistic expectations about what school reform by itself can accomplish in the absence of policies to alleviate poverty. These expectations, when not met, have led to cynicism about the quality of education and the value of devoting additional resources to school reform.

However, there are positive trends. Most important are the expansion of access at all levels of education for diverse population groups, and the greater expectations of those who previously had little opportunity for access to education. For some countries, these

changes are in the early stages. For others, they have been going on for decades. When viewed over a period of a few years, the gains in most countries seem small. When a longer time frame is considered, however, it is clear that major positive change has occurred—both for the individuals involved and for the societies as a whole. That is reason for optimism.