Toward Equality of Results: Comment on Downey and Condron, “Fifty Years since the Coleman Report”

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Like all simple and unsophisticated peoples we Americans have a sublime faith in education. . . . The bare fact, however, that simple and unsophisticated peoples have unbounded faith in education does not mean that the faith is untenable. History shows that the intuitions of such folk may be nearer the truth than the weighty and carefully reasoned judgments of the learned and the wise. (Counts 1932: [AQ: 2])

The difference in achievement at grade 12 between the average Negro and the average white is, in effect, the degree of inequality of opportunity, and the reduction of that inequality is a responsibility of the school. (Coleman 1968: [AQ: 3])

Douglas Downey and Dennis Condron (DC) have provided a clear-eyed assessment of the findings of the Coleman Report and related literature. As DC demonstrate, contrary to much rhetoric that ignores the empirical findings, schools actually compensate for inequality that would occur in their absence (Gamoran 1996). Moreover, schools populated by low-income students are not dramatically less effective than other schools, and schools are not the main source of disparities in test performance. Despite persistent inequality in society as a whole, U.S. schools do more to compensate for inequality than they do to exacerbate it, particularly with respect to socioeconomic inequality in achievement.

With that said, DC are too quick to abandon schools as a potential source of social justice. First, the findings they report need to be understood in the context of a vastly unequal system of test performance, one that stands out among developed nations as excessively unequal (Gamoran 2014). There is room for improvement from all sides. Second, the primary evidence for the compensating effects of schools—that achievement inequality grows more during the summer, when school is not in session, than during the school year—has been demonstrated for elementary schools. During the secondary years, increases in socioeconomic inequality may yet occur due to differences in students’ experiences within schools, including tracking and differential course-taking (Gamoran and Mare 1989). Yet tracking’s effects are not immutable and have been attenuated in some contexts (Ayalon and Gamoran 2000; Bol et al. 2014; Broaded 1997; Gamoran 1992), indicating that better approaches to differentiation could do more to stem the growth of inequality.

Third, as DC acknowledge, findings about racial inequality in test performance differ from those for socioeconomic inequality, with some studies pointing to racial gaps that widen faster during the school year than during the summer (Downey, von Hipple, and Broh 2004). Again, however, specific interventions may limit growth

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in racial inequality (see Walton and Cohen 2011). Fourth, and perhaps most important, is that one should not mistake the schools we have now for the schools we could have. Research about the impotence of schools to reduce inequality draws on representative samples of schools. Yet innovative models of schools exist that, in contrast to the typical school, do not maintain inequality. In the 1980s, researchers pointed to Catholic schools—which exhibited more equitable distributions of achievement than their public school counterparts—as more closely depicting the “common school” ideal (Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993). Today, some charter schools—often in urban areas—seem to elevate school performance for low-income minority youth (Harris and Larsen 2016; Tuttle et al. 2013, 2015).

DC’s contribution is not only to provide an unvarnished depiction of the current role of elementary schools in addressing inequality but also to offer a realistic assessment of the prospects of schools to do more to compensate for inequality than they currently do: not just to prevent socio-economic inequality in test scores from becoming worse while school is in session, but actually to narrow the gaps over the course of the school year. This would require low-income students to make faster progress than middle- and high-income students, a challenge that is often unacknowledged in the rhetoric about schools and inequality. DC suggest this “would require that low SES students enjoy substantially better learning environments” than their high SES counterparts, and they point to examples such as KIPP academies and the Harlem Children’s Zone. Yet it is not clear these are “better” environments; rather, they may bring the kind of advantages that high SES students already enjoy to more disadvantaged populations. In addition, as DC acknowledge, treatments that have differential benefits can be offered to all students and still close achievement gaps because they boost learning more for those who face greater challenges. For example, the Tennessee STAR research indicates that small classes do more to boost achievement for black students than for white students (Finn and Achilles 1990), and values affirmation exercises that mitigate the effects of stereotype threat appear to elevate school grades mainly for minority students in environments where threats may be exacerbated (Hanselman et al. 2014).

In emphasizing the real challenge of using schools to reduce inequality, DC remind us of one of Coleman’s principal insights: Equality of opportunity does not guarantee equality of results. Coleman showed that providing similar resources to schools attended by black and white students did not achieve equal outcomes among these groups. Consequently, he redefined equality of opportunity as equality of results. This conceptual shift, perhaps even more than its empirical findings, is the true legacy of the Coleman Report, and DC do well to bring us back to it. Armed with stronger evidence than Coleman had at hand, DC demonstrate the inefficacy of relying on equal opportunity, that is, the provision of similar resources and environments to students of different backgrounds. Instead, if we wish to reduce inequality, we must focus on results.

REFERENCES


Author Biography