Reframing the Equity Debate

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It is not difficult to find factors outside of school that have enormous influence on student performance and education opportunity. From maternal health (or drug abuse) and parental stimulation (or neglect) to balanced nutrition (or junk food) and neighborhood safety (or peril), the conditions outside school inevitably create disparate opportunities for students. The question is not whether these factors are significant and long-lasting with regard to students' education performance but how schools can, nevertheless, maximize the equity of opportunity for students. The debate continues to be dominated, however, by two unproductive extremes that cast more heat than light on the issue.

The First Extreme: Evidence of Success Is Teacher-Blaming

The first extreme in the equity debate sounds like this: So you have evidence that some poor kids in some poor schools did very well. Bully for them and the heroic teachers who helped them break the mold. But these examples have not been brought to large-scale application even after decades of publicity—that is why they are still exceptional. And when you scream "NO EXCUSES!" at teachers based on unsustainable anecdotes, you just feed the public's lust to blame teachers for everything that's wrong with schools. We're doing the best we can under difficult conditions; and if you don't think it's so, roll up your sleeves, go to work in a high-poverty school, and give me your spiel about "no excuses" in a few weeks. Besides, until we can fix institutional racism rampant in schools, nothing is going to get better anyway.

The Second Extreme: Failure to Improve Is Lazy and Immoral

The second extreme in the equity debate goes like this: We know what works in education as surely as we know what works in medicine and engineering. There are replicable practices that can be taught and applied consistently, whether it's building a bridge, treating a wound, or learning to read. When we fail to apply those time-tested procedures, then people can die in a hospital from avoidable infections, careen off an unsound bridge, or enter the workforce without the basic skills necessary for economic survival. The only reasons we don't apply procedural disciplines to classrooms is that the people in charge either don't value children as much as they value hospital patients and bridges, or they aren't as smart as doctors and engineers. Quit whining about how hard teaching is for poor students—every job is hard—so buck up and get it done, or make way for someone else who can. Anyone who can't see this is just making excuses to protect incompetent administrators and teachers.

Reframing the Debate

The preceding arguments can, in one form or another, be heard in boardrooms, union halls, professional development meetings, and kitchen tables around the land. Neither leaves much room for discussion. When the

operating premise of a discussion is that the opposing side is not only wrong, but also incompetent and immoral, the engagement shuts down communication.

We must choose whether we wish to engage in a debate held for the purpose of informing public policy and increasing our understanding of a complex issue or a rhetorical bullfight in which one participant taunts, tortures, then kills the other. The inhumane metaphor is indeed unpleasant—so are many contemporary education debates. On the other hand, a multivariate framework would allow education leaders, policymakers, teachers, and students to create more nuanced models of how equity can be enhanced in schools.

A Multivariate Framework

If we are to engage the power, passion, and research available to improve education equity, then we must first change the way we debate the issue. Let's begin with the recognition that life has lots of variables. Do you want to guide a conversation in your school or community out of the rhetorical toxic waste dump and into a zone of analysis and problem solving? Then begin with the recognition that there's never a single cause for education results.

Environment influences student performance as surely as altitude and air temperature can influence airplane performance. When a pilot acknowledges those factors, she's not implying that the plane can't fly; but she knows that on a hot day at high altitude, the plane requires a longer runway or a lighter load to take off safely. Just knowing all about how the plane works at sea level at moderate temperatures is not enough.

Similarly, teachers and school leaders operate in a multivariate context. They know that economic status*and* environmental factors *and* leadership and teaching *and* nutrition *and* parental support all influence student results. The most helpful inquiries allow us to compare the relative effect of different influences on achievement, as John Hattie (2009) does in his meta-analysis of more than 800 meta-analyses,*Visible Learning*. Using different methodology, Ken Leithwood and his colleagues (2010) demonstrate the virtues of a combination of leadership and teaching factors that are associated with improved education equity.

The multivariate framework would make us more skeptical of silver-bullet solutions, now frantically sought by schools with the worst performance and, in today's environment, the most abundant funds. The combination of thin research, excessive claims, desperate need, and temporarily available funds that must be spent in haste creates a fertile environment for advocates of silver bullets.

Multivariate analysis is more difficult and takes time because it does not settle for the facile question, What works? Rather, a multivariate perspective asks the question, What are the conditions—in the classrooms, homes, schools, boardrooms, and the lives of children themselves—under which some teaching practices have the greatest positive influence? Rather than asking, What program did you use? a multivariate inquiry asks, How did you use it, and what were the contexts for learning, teaching, and leadership?

The Limits of Multivariate Analysis

Those with bad memories of being in graduate statistics courses with mind-numbing terms such as*multiple analysis of covariance*, *factor analysis*, *multidimensional scaling*, and the endless strings of Greek letters that represented variable relationships may recoil at repeating that experience. However, I am not asking teachers and administrators to perform statistical calculations, but rather to be critical consumers of research. They should be skeptical of two-variable studies that claim, "We bought this program and student achievement increased 10 percent!" It requires no statistical training to ask, "What else did you study? What were the conditions? What do you know about the students and teachers in the study? What else was in their curriculum?"

Moreover, some multivariate analyses fail to add meaningful insight to the practical problems of teaching and leadership just by asking many questions and adding more variables to the equation. When the first six or seven variables explain most of the variation in student achievement, we don't need to study another 20 variables. Part of

being a critical consumer of research is the understanding that a 50-variable equation is not 10 times better than a 10-variable equation.

Practical Applications for Teachers and Leaders

When teachers and leaders adopt the multivariate framework for debates about education practices and policies, they can guide the discussion from dogmatic certainty to appropriate nuance. We might hear fewer thunderous declarations that "research proves that student achievement will increase when . . ." and more careful statements such as, "Students are more likely to improve performance when the following combination of conditions, teacher actions, leadership support, and student actions take place . . ."

This circumspection acknowledges that research, like the humans who report it, is imperfect. Our quest for equity will best be served not by angry rhetoric but by the application and testing of alternatives that consider a range of professional actions and environmental contexts.

References

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