

SOCIAL
INEQUALITIES
IN THE AMERI-
CAN EDUCATION
SYSTEM(S)

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Interviews conducted by *Discourse* editors Hena Kapadia and Jimmy Zuniga.

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Jimmy Zuniga is a sophomore majoring in Psychology at Tufts University. In 2009, he teamed up with the Summit Institute to start a charter school in Redwood City, California. At Tufts, he co-created the Tufts Student Fund and has helped launch the Financial Aid Student Advisory Board, a committee that gives the Financial Aid Office feedback. He is also a Gates Millennium Scholar.

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The American education system has always had its roots in providing quality, free public education to the nation’s children. As the system has grown and been extended, inequalities have developed, some of which have been mitigated by choices offered, such as charter schools, and others amplified by a lack of options. In light of the financial situation that faces the country, and indeed the world, it becomes vital for us to understand the implications of funding for education and the way in which its systems are shaped. Will the changing education system affect us by producing a new set of world leaders, or will it exclude an entire section of society based on their income levels? This interview with Steven Cohen and Jeffrey Zabel looks at the social inequalities in American education, from the two seemingly contradictory points of view of educator and economist. What ultimately comes of the dialogue is a consensus that regardless of how it is done, something within the system needs to change – for the benefits of the students.

On the Education System(s) in America

Steve Cohen: What I would like to say first is that there really isn’t an American education system. There are at least 15,000 American education systems because there are all these different school boards. That’s been a great and powerful tradition in American education: to keep it local. Of course those are just public schools. Remember, public school districts in the United States number just under fifteen thousand. There are 107,000 K–12 public schools in the country. There are 4,600 charter and 35,000 private schools. That means there’s one third as many private schools as public schools, but there are 49 million kids in public schools and 6 million kids in private schools. That’s interesting.

There’s something about educational decision-making right there. The decision to keep them small is clearly a choice that those with resources advocate, and they advocate it by keeping independent schools small.

Most public schools tend to get bigger over time. This has changed over the last two decades because there's been a strong small school movement led by people like Ted Sizer, who unfortunately passed away this past October, and Debbie Meier. They formed the Coalition of Essential Schools, and all those folks really argue that the strength of the local tradition in America was smaller schools. The 1950s and the growth of the suburbs led to mega shopping-mall high schools, where you could take practically any subject under the sun. And they were seen as a benefit for the area; they could have a larger number of students, they could offer more, and they could have different kinds of courses. That has been a trend, but recently there has been a counter trend towards small schools.

Jeffery Zabel: The key is that the authority is locally determined at the school district level. More nationally-based systems would lead to a huge difference in the way decisions are made across the systems. I think that because school districts are so different in this country, it is important for the district to have local control. And I think that it also means that families that live in the districts are much more invested and are much more interested in the schooling of their children.

On Equalizing State Funding and Lowering the Achievement Gap Nationally and Internationally

Cohen: [The government] has sometimes tried [to lower the achievement gap] depending on the administration, but it hasn't happened. You know the movement (to cut public funding) came out of California. California public schools in the 1950s were the pride of the country – not just K-12 but also the junior colleges and universities. Starting with the Reagan governorship, California stopped subsidizing schools the same way, and that has had a major impact on California. If you take a look at today's [Friday, October 9th, 2009] *New York Times* – Paul Krugman has an article called “The Uneducated American” [he says]:

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If you had to explain America's economic success with one word, that word would be “education.” In the 19th century, America led the way in universal basic education...But that was then. The rise of American education was, overwhelmingly, the rise of public education, and for the past 30 years our political scene has been dominated by the view that any and all government spending is a waste of taxpayer dollars. Education, as one of the largest components of public spending, has inevitably suffered.

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What's interesting is the notion of equalizing at a lower level, not at a higher level. Public schools in this country have always been funded by property taxes, and property taxes are unequal, so schools are unequal. There have been a few attempts to undo this, and some lawsuits that have been thrown out. The *Rodriguez* case that went to the Supreme Court in 1973 was a major blow to those who hoped that equal funding would find its way. Even states that tried it have had an awfully hard time. Vermont passed a “Robin

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Hood Law,” which was going to fund all schools at one level. For example, Manchester, Vermont, can tax itself additional money to pay for education if it doesn't like the level that the state is giving it. But for every dollar that the town gives itself in taxes, it has to give the state a dollar as well, which is distributed to other districts. Well, Manchester did what a lot of communities do: they said, “I don't like that idea, that's not what we were counting on.” So instead they set up a non-profit foundation [which] was allowed to spend on some things and not others. So it's not directly serving students in terms of adding to the per-pupil spending, but things that would have gone out of the budget now go to students there, because there's another pot of money.

I did a little study last spring for the Weston public schools – they asked me to come look at their social studies curriculum with a group of other teachers. They had a nice program for K-12 social studies, but one of the things that was so impressive to us was the Weston Educational Fund. With it, they had supported teachers to go to Australia, because that was what the second grade curriculum was. What really struck us was that this was funding not just for teachers, but for elementary teachers, who almost never get funding to do anything for social studies because over the last couple of years the testing of kids at the elementary level has been English and math. It was a fabulous initiative, and when we went around it was great to see some of the elementary teachers so invested in teaching. At the same time, if you go one town over to Waltham, that's not happening. It's not because people in Waltham are bad people, it's because people in Waltham don't have the funds that the people in Weston have. So there's not equality – it's not close. It's better than it used to be, it's better than it was before education reform in 1993, and there have been changes, but not nearly enough.

Zabel: The financial reform of 1993, which was geared at redistributing state aid towards low spending schools, had a big impact initially. But when we had our first recession this decade, the inequality in spending got larger because the state aid contributions got lower. I suspect that [this] will continue, that in fact the inequality in spending across school districts in Massachusetts will continue to get worse. I think we saw a fairly substantial worsening of the inequality with the last recession, which was mild compared to what we have now. So I think that there could be some major changes. If they [states] start cutting back aid to towns and cities particularly in the form of education spending, that could have a considerable impact.

Hena Kapadia and Jimmy Zuniga: According to a report that McKenzie¹ published about US schools, if the US had closed its achievement gap with other OECD countries like Finland and Korea, the GDP in 2008 could have been between 1.3 trillion to 2.3 trillion dollars higher. Do you think that is an accurate reflection of how important education is? The same report says that the US spends an average of 60 percent higher per student.

Zabel: That would be the benefit side of the equation. It's also important to consider what the cost would be to close that achievement gap, which would be considerable as well. Places like Finland and Korea have much more homogenous populations, and they tend to be much easier and less costly to teach. But we have a lot more so called "high priced students" who are more costly to teach, particularly students with English as a second language.

On Charter Schools

Cohen: [Arne] Duncan, Secretary of Education, certainly would like to see more charter schools. I would not be in favor of charter schools run by for-profit companies. Things like the Edison schools, Chris Whittle's stuff - I think that's a sham. There's only one way I can think of to make money off of schools, and that is to only take easy-to-teach kids. That's not what our purpose is as a society. Let's have a million different kinds of schools. I don't want just one kind of school [because] I don't think there's one kind of kid. I think providing choice in the educational marketplace is fine, but I think it's very important to think before just setting up charters as the safeguard for all schools. An interesting aspect of American educational systems is that most of the public think that American public schools are not very good, but most of the public really like the public schools they send their kids to. That's a very interesting phenomenon. They get from the paper that public schools are bad, but not their kids'. Even though there are a third as many private schools as public schools, there are almost 88 percent versus 12 percent [of students] in public schools versus private schools. So the majority of our kids, for a long time to come, are going to be going to public schools. Charter schools are a form of public school, but I think charter schools as a group cover a wide variety of sins. Some of them, I think, are worthy educational experiments and practice worthy educational ideals. There are others that I am sort of withholding judgment on. I think that there is work to be done in schools and experiments can be made in private, charter, and the regular public school systems. What most worries me is the notion that all charters are innovative and all regular public schools are traditional. Neither of those are true statements.

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Zabel: Well, I'm not an expert on charter schools, but it's clearly a hot button issue now, and there are pluses and minuses for charter schools. I think it's important to experiment and to try new things like charter schools are able to do. They're less beholden to unions that may put some bounds on what they're able to do, so I think it's important to allow charter schools to have that flexibility. On the other hand, it's a viable concern of teachers in public schools that this will take away from them and potentially take away some of the better students as well, only making their job more difficult. So it's a tough balancing act, but I think that the charter schools play an important role.

On Testing

Cohen: I'm very skeptical about tests - multiple choice, standardized tests. I think they do tell you something; they give you a little snapshot of one certain ability that kids have or don't have. I think it's great to do well on tests but it doesn't give a full picture; it just tells you how well you do on that sort of a test. The idea that one single test is used in 10th grade for math or English or now for science in Massachusetts to determine a kid's high school graduation seems patently unfair and is not good educational practice. I don't think it's fair to the student - that's how I feel about high stakes tests.

New York State has had the Regents Exams for what feels like forever. The Regents were part of your grade. They counted as sort of a "fifth" quarter. So they were averaged into your grade with the other four-quarter grades so you could actually fail the Regents and still graduate. To me that was fairer because it's not just putting everything in one basket. Even those who write standardized tests oppose the use of one test to determine graduation. But control over policy in education has been taken away, in large part, from educators.

Look what they've done to test teachers in Massachusetts. The exam is called the MTEL and it's preponderantly a multiple-choice test—just think about it. If you're taking a history test and you're being asked fifty multiple choice questions about history, the one thing you would have to say without even seeing the test is that the questions would be random. That's a lot of history to cover - it's worldwide. In a sense you're being held responsible for anything that happened to anyone anywhere any place any time. That's a lot to know, and to me, that's not a very good way to determine if someone should be a teacher. I think the same principle applies [to students] - it's not a good way to decide if a kid is eligible to get a high school diploma. I think there are numerous ways to think about evaluating kids, and after years of experience I know that one size never fits all.

One of the challenges for me as a teacher is, how do I figure out how to get this material to be something that a student cares about, something that matters to him enough to learn? That's the intellectual work of teaching and that's really tough. Teachers are usually best served if they can work together and then help fit their own students' needs. If you want other teachers to just use an outside curriculum, I guarantee you it's not going to work as well as one that a teacher has had the time to create, play with, experiment with, and test.

What you need to focus on is if we were able to level the playing field, what would be the value added of each school to the performance of the students? When you do that you get a very different ranking of schools in terms of performance, and that's the kind of approach that we take and the one that is typically taken in the economics of education.

If there is one national curriculum, it won't stand a chance. Because the fact is that if I'm teaching a bunch of kids who look like you, or who live in South Boston or Edina, Minnesota, I'm going to have to teach it differently. I'm going to have to think: what do you know about? What do you care about? How am I going to make this relate to you? How am I going to get you to relate to it? How am I going to get you to use this material? Because the only way you will really learn it [the material] is if you find a way to use it.

One of the things Ted Sizer writes about in *Horace's Compromise*, *Horace's School* and *Horace's Hope* is "the return to public exhibitions." Others might call public exhibitions "oral reports," but Sizer has a little something different in mind. I've seen it done fabulously at the middle school level, at the elementary school level, and at the high school level. Not uniformly great, but, on occasions, fabulous.

You can also assess using good-old-fashioned essays. But again, I think there's a difference between saying go write an essay and having a teacher really serve as a coach for students to do something like that, particularly the first time they're doing it.

I'm talking about exhibitions and essays, but what goes with that is a different structure to some schools. A teacher

can't be running 180 projects simultaneously and expect 180 successes. So you need to have structured schools where teachers have smaller loads. That gets us back to the private-public disparity we saw at the beginning. There's a reason many independent schools limit class size to 12 or to 18. Some schools use portfolios, and the portfolio is really just a collection of what the student has done. But what the student has to do for a final portfolio often is to review and revise previous work. Take that essay you wrote in October and make it better. If you want to think about whether someone has made progress, what could be a better system than to have them take something they have done and make it better. Well, if you've learned how to write something, if you've learned how to research something, if you've learned how to think things through a little more, you'd be able to get pretty good evidence. The objection to this is almost always, "Well that's subjective." The point is, really, that so are standardized tests. If you start looking at most multiple-choice tests, very few of them really only have one answer [that] all [can] agree on. And if they do, it's not a very interesting question. Any question you pose that is worth thinking about has some degree of subjectivity to it, but that doesn't mean there is no standard.

It's really about the use of information; it's the ability to make an argument, the ability to write clearly, the ability

to express ideas. All those things are needed in all sorts of different fields; I understand the dismay that some people have that this seems soft or subjective, but subjective doesn't mean standard-less.

Zabel: A lot of the research that I do looks at testing and what factors affect school performance. It's really the main objective measure of school performance that we have and it has its plusses and minuses. With "No Child Left Behind," all states are mandated to have standardized testing for their public schools. I've done a lot of work looking at that and thinking about efficient uses of resources, and there's a lot of controversy, not just about testing but about the high stakes component of testing that is holding schools responsible if they don't seem to be showing progress. There's a lot of work in what the appropriate way to evaluate schools and their performance is, and the approach that I have taken, and the one that has become quite popular now, is a value-added approach. That is, you can't just look at raw test scores across schools and say that the ones with the higher test scores are better, because they also tend to have more money and better students.

What you need to focus on is if we were able to level the playing field, what would be the value added of each school to the performance of the students? When you do that you get a very different ranking of schools in terms of performance, and that's the kind of approach that we take and the one that is typically taken in the economics of education. They have a set of inputs that cost something and they produce an output that is worth more, and it's that difference between the input cost and the output value that is the value added of the firm. It's often more of a relative ranking than an absolute ranking in terms of which schools seem to contribute more to the performance of the students. I think that the testing helps to a certain extent, because I think that the purpose of the MCAS in Massachusetts and of No Child Left Behind is to bring up the bottom and close standards. I believe in standards. I believe we shouldn't be graduating students if they're not able to meet minimum standards in terms of reading and writing and mathematics. You know we're only doing them a disfavor by sending them out into the world without those skills. It has a different impact on the high performing schools because they've already got those skills, but I think it's important for the low performing schools to hold them to standards.

The question is: is it the best use of resources to put more money into the schools – particularly in the low performing schools – and bring these students up to the rest? It could cost a considerable amount of money. We have to think about the benefits and the costs of doing that versus some other approach we might take towards increasing the education of our population. It's one thing to say we should bridge the achievement gap, but it's another thing to see how much it would cost and what the true benefits of doing so are. It's a very costly endeavor.

There are other things that we might do. There are lots of factors that contribute to a student's education and one of them is their family background. I think that to really be able to bridge the achievement gap we have to think about how we can provide more assistance to families, particularly single-parent families that are not making reasonable incomes.

On the Future

Cohen: Arne Duncan's policies are all over the map right now and I'm a little worried by many of them. The testing is sometimes seen as just Bush's issue because of "No Child Left Behind" but Clinton was a big tester too. Testing is seductive because it's cheap, and it supposedly gives objectivity. For all the reasons we've talked about earlier, I don't really think that's the case. We should be rethinking NCLB, not just tinkering [with it]. I do not think that means centralization of education, but rather recognition that, as Paul Krugman pointed out, this takes the money, time, and commitment of smart and dedicated people. The M.A.T. (Masters of Arts in Teaching) students who come to Tufts will be great teachers. Now we have to help them build the schools that will let them do their work well.

Zabel: [In terms of the impact of the Obama administration,] well, this is not a federal decision, and the federal share of spending on local schools is not large. I mean some of the stimulus money could go that way, but that's a short-term fix. In a year or so there won't be any stimulus money, so I think then the federal government's role will be pretty minimal. I think it's an incredibly hard issue, and it's going to be with us forever. Particularly now, when there are only so many resources we can spread around to all the different needs we have, we need to stop thinking about throwing more money at it [and start] using our resources efficiently to get more bang for our buck.

Notes

¹ McKinsey & Company, Social Sector Office, *The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools*, April 2009.