

Book Reviews

Achieving Educational Equality: Assuring All Students an Equal Opportunity in School. Herbert Grossman. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1998, 219 pages, softcover.

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From the 19th century to the present the democratic ideal of the United States has promised equal opportunity for all students. Equality of opportunity means that all members of a society are given the same chance to compete for positions in society and enter any occupation or social class. It does not, however, mean that everyone will have equal incomes and equal status. Ideally, equality of opportunity should result in a social system in which all members occupy their particular positions because of merit and not from family influence or wealth, heredity, or special cultural or racial advantages.

To conceive of equality of opportunity this way is to conceive of it as a race where everyone is competing on an equal basis for jobs and income. John Dewey and other liberal reformers implicated the role of education in this process by emphasizing that schools must help integrate the individual into the various occupational, political, and other adult roles required by society. This is often referred to as the integrative function of education. Dewey (1966) wrote:

It is the office of the school environment ... to see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he [sic] was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment. (p. 20)

The school's role in providing equality of opportunity to compete in the race brings into sharp focus the need to provide equality of educational opportunity for all participants in the race because education ensures that either everyone begins on equal terms at the starting line or it can control the race to ensure that competition is fair. As Spring (1998) explains, in the first instance the concern is with ensuring that everyone has an equal education at the beginning of the race. This common school model has, however, been criticized on the grounds that the school's effort to ensure fairness by dividing students according to individual talents so that everyone eventually ends up getting appropriate jobs has resulted in classifying and placing students in ability groups and tracks, thereby making them receive unequal and different educations. In the second instance, the concern is with identifying and developing everyone's abilities in preparation for running the race. Grossman's book *Achieving Educational Equality* is about the second approach, written to enable

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educators and educational policy makers to render the competition fair for those who have been historically marginalized and disserved by the education system.

Although politicians and educators argue that equality of educational opportunity is essential for equality of opportunity in society, what constitutes educational equality and how to achieve it for all students remain debatable areas. By meticulously identifying and describing inequalities existing in educational policies and practices worldwide, and in the US in particular, Grossman's book provides invaluable insights for anyone interested in the debate. By proposing actions for addressing these inequalities the book provides blueprints for educators and governments interested in bringing about change.

Briefly, the book explains the forces that create educational inequality, unwittingly or not, and what can be done to reduce this inequality. In the Introduction, Grossman identifies the children who are disserved by educational inequality worldwide. These include females; non-European Americans such as African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Asian-Americans; poor children; immigrants and refugees; migrant and homeless children; and children belonging to ethnic, linguistic, and cultural minority groups including gays and lesbians. Grossman identifies the consequences of this disservice as including failure in school, feeling of inferiority, reduced occupational opportunities along the upper rungs of the economic ladder, and social marginalization (pp. 5-12). Part One of the book describes the roles governments play in causing educational inequality and what they can do to eliminate it. Contributing factors identified by Grossman include government policies that: (a) deliberately brainwash and undereducate people for political control as in the cases of China, Nicaragua, Cuba, Chile, and Argentina (p. 13); (b) condone denial of access to education by girls as in Africa, Pakistan, India, and other countries in South Asia (p. 14); (c) allow education to be used as a means of cultural and linguistic domination as in the case of South Africa and Chinese policy in Tibet (p. 14) and to maintain economic and political control over people as in Brazil (p. 15); (d) allow discriminatory entrance examinations to determine access to secondary schools as in many developing countries (p. 16); (e) encourage or at least turn a blind eye to tracking processes in schools (p. 16); (f) underfund education and misallocate educational funds to areas that yield the least benefits of educational equality for students who need it most (p. 16). Grossman proposes that government reversal of these policies would curb the savage inequalities plaguing educational systems worldwide.

Part Two examines how schools foster inequality and how schools can be turned into a force for educational equality. Referencing mainly schools in the US, Grossman locates inequality in schools in teacher prejudice, discrimination, and lack of will on teachers' part to do what is right for students. Arguing that the teacher population in the US has remained predominantly European-American and middle class in the face of rapidly changing demographics among student populations in the US ("87% of all public school teachers are European-American," p. 179), Grossman also blames unequal school practices such as culturally, and linguistically inappropriate teaching and assessment practices on teachers' lack of knowledge about the cultural and linguistic

background of their students and lack of training in linguistically, culturally and contextually appropriate ways of teaching and assessing. Grossman draws largely on two previous books of his, namely, *Gender Issues in Education* (1994) and *Teaching in a Diverse Society* (1995), to identify other sources of educational inequality in schools. These include nonrepresentative curriculum materials, sexism, homophobia, and tracking and ability grouping. In order to develop school practices that foster equal educational opportunity for all students, Grossman proposes more use of curriculum materials representative of the diversity among students in US classrooms; the creation of a safe school environment for all students irrespective of their race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation; more emphasis on nonsexist roles and nonsexist educational approaches; and adopting teaching and assessment strategies that are culturally, contextually, and linguistically appropriate for students.

University teacher preparation programs are integral to the preparation of teachers for their role in fostering educational equality in schools. In Part Three of the book, therefore, Grossman discusses the unrepresentative, unmotivated, and underprepared educators graduating from university teacher education programs and puts forward proposals for the improvement of these programs. For teacher education to improve, Grossman proposes that professors themselves should acquire the knowledge, skills, will, and commitment needed to prepare teachers for working effectively in a diverse society (p. 18) and that universities should offer incentives such as scholarships to enable more non-European American individuals from poor, immigrant, and rural backgrounds to enter teacher education programs (p. 198) as these individuals are more likely to become committed to issues of inequality in schools. Grossman also attempts to map out the composition of an effective teacher preparation program, proposing, for example, the infusion of multicultural content in all courses in such a program and opportunities that expose prospective teachers to experiences in poor, inner-city schools and neighborhoods (p. 199).

The reactions of these three agencies—governments, schools, and university teacher preparation programs—to socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, gender, sexual, and linguistic diversity to promote unequal educational opportunities are presented to the reader with remarkable insider insights, for Grossman was born and raised in a culturally and racially diverse neighborhood in New York City. Through a scholarship he was able to obtain a Harvard education, which opened employment opportunities in professional education where he has remained committed to issues of diversity and equity in education. His work and research in these areas and the opportunities he has had to travel and work in a variety of positions in education in many different countries have all contributed to the broad-based knowledge about equity and diversity issues Grossman represents in his book.

The appearance of this book is timely for two reasons. First, it contributes to the renewed debate about citizenship even as savage inequalities among citizens living in the same society continue to mount and as ethnic and national conflicts, along with a general global migration, give rise to great movements of populations across national borders, creating a tide of new immigrants with diverse racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds in different countries around the world. Concerns about success for the children of these new

immigrants, as well as for historically disadvantaged students, have once again brought the issue of equality of educational opportunity to the forefront of the citizenship debate. *Achieving Educational Equality* functions as an additional resource for teachers, teacher educators, educational policy-makers, and schools willing to play active roles to dismantle educational systems that are unfair and perpetuate inequality in society. Second, the book is one of the first attempts to focus on the crucial issue of teacher education in the citizenship debate. Although citizenship has always been closely linked with schooling and education, and numerous educational materials professing to foster the ideals of democratic citizenship have surfaced during the last 30 years, not much attention has been paid to how teachers could be prepared best to translate these ideals and other democratic rhetoric into actual classroom practice. *Achieving Educational Equality* addresses this deficiency by describing the traditional one-day workshop intended to help teachers implement the ideals as insufficient and unrealistic and goes on to propose alternatives on which teacher educators could draw to structure programs aimed at the meaningful preparation of teachers to implement democratic ideals such as equity, diversity, and the eradication of stereotyping and prejudices in education. Ironically, Grossman's placing part of the blame on teachers and teacher education programs for the failure of American schools to achieve educational equality in schools reinforces the idea that teachers could be powerful agents in the educational scene, able to make a difference by virtue of the decisions and choices they make on a daily basis. For teacher educators and preservice teachers in particular, this book offers an illuminating portrait of policies and practices that foster and perpetuate educational inequality in schools. More important, it offers a vision of how educators can build truly multicultural school communities.

Yet for all Grossman's familiarity with inequalities in education, his book lacks an engaged analysis of the issues as they relate to the countries outside of the US mentioned in his book. This is a major weakness in a book that claims to place educational inequality in a global context. As an example, he locates many of the educational inequalities existing in developing countries within official intentions on the parts of the governments to control, exploit, and discriminate against their own people. For instance, he describes education in Nicaragua, the Soviet Union (which ceased to exist five years before Grossman published his book), China, Cuba, Chile, and Argentina as "a tool to maintain the regimes by brainwashing the masses" (p. 13). In the case of Cuba in particular, Grossman presents three important objectives of present Cuban education—to determine the crimes of American imperialism in different parts of the world, to explore the many advantages of socialism over capitalism, and to recognize other people's struggle against imperialism—as examples of this brainwashing and hence educational inequality (pp. 13-14). African governments (e.g., Ghana and Kenya) are described as dictatorial regimes determined to keep most of their citizens undereducated in order to maintain control over them (p. 21), while the governments of India and Peru are described as uninterested in supporting schools that serve the poor and powerless (p. 28). In the absence of any further elaboration of these claims, it is difficult for the reader to determine why Grossman considers education in these countries as

brainwashing, indoctrinating, and unequal. An engaged analysis of the issues he has raised, focusing especially on an examination of the close link between education and the culture, needs, and visions of a particular society could have provided the reader with a better understanding of the "truths" that Grossman has constructed about the education systems of these countries. After all, truth cannot be constructed or understood outside of its social or cultural context. Equally, because the interpretation of truth does not exist apart from some set of ideological precepts, Grossman should have provided the reader with the ideological yardstick by which he is interpreting these countries' educational systems.

Other educational inequalities identified in the book as being caused by the governments of these countries include a total lack of interest in correcting educational inequality, deliberately underfunding rural education, and allowing schools to offer inappropriate curriculum to rural students, all done in an effort to maintain economic and political inequality (p. 15). Again, the issues are analyzed and presented far too simplistically to make any meaningful addition to the reader's understanding. An analysis of the issues against the background of persistent poor economic performance, the weight of foreign debt, the declaration of free primary education since the 1970s, which has led to high increases in school enrollments but a corresponding decrease in educational quality, disproportionate spending on defense, and rampant corruption, to mention a few of the forces that shape educational policies and practices in these countries, would present a scenario completely different from what Grossman has presented in his book.

The solutions Grossman proposes for addressing the educational inequalities existing in these countries are as problematic as his diagnoses of their causes. For instance, he proposes that governments replace discriminatory entrance examinations to secondary schools with a ballot system, as Argentina has done, in order to allow less affluent students whose parents cannot afford to pay for the extra tuition needed to pass the entrance exams a better chance to attend secondary schools (p. 16). This proposal raises several questions including, for example, whether access to secondary education by a lottery system is itself a process that ensures fairness to all. For example, what happens to academically capable students who may not win the lottery?

In a similar vein Grossman proposes that governments declare war on tracking and ability grouping in schools in order to reduce educational inequality. He argues that in US schools especially tracking and ability grouping have done more harm than good because many students are placed in low tracks and ability groups not on the basis of their test scores, but to segregate students by skin color (p. 75). Although there is enough evidence to support these claims about the US education system, the proposed solution obviates the reality that many attempts by school officials in the US to eliminate or reduce tracking in their schools have so far been undermined by European-American parents who have reacted by withdrawing their children from such schools or by influencing the school board to fire the official who introduced the detracking policy. Clearly this was the situation in Selma, Alabama, in 1990 when Norwood Roussell, Selma's first African-American school superintendent, tried to correct the racial imbalance in the curriculum tracks by increasing the

percentage of African-American students in college preparatory and advanced placement tracks to 10% and was notified by the white-dominated school board that he was being dismissed. Roussell said in an interview in the February 21 issue of *Education Week*, "Of course, as you can imagine, most of the students in the bottom level were black, although many had standardized test scores as high as or higher than those in the upper level" (Spring, 1998, p. 107). It required a school boycott by African-American students before he was reinstated. White parents reacted by threatening to remove their children from public schools and sending them to private institutions.

Throughout the book the reader will find several more examples of these underanalyzed claims and propositions, indicating that on certain issues the book is not thoroughly researched.

A further problem with the book has to do with an editorial flaw. The author uses the Chicago referencing style, but there are works and quotes cited in the book that are not referenced in the chapter notes. For example, in chapter 7 citations on pages 95-100 and citations throughout chapters 17 and 18 are not referenced in the notes. These omissions seriously detract from the book by leaving the reader in a kind of informational limbo and by creating doubts in the reader's mind about the credibility of the sources cited in the book.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, I enthusiastically recommend the book to all educators interested in issues of equity, diversity and multicultural education. It contains several propositions for transforming schools into communities of difference able to acknowledge and honor all students rather than questioning or submerging their legitimacy.

Reference

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Critical ethnography in the field of education is the result of the following dialectic: On the one hand, critical ethnography has grown out of dissatisfaction with social accounts of "structures" like class, patriarchy, and racism in which real human actors never appear. On the other hand, it has grown out of dissatisfaction with cultural accounts of human actors in which broad structural constraints like class, patriarchy and racism never appear. (Anderson, 1989, p. 249)

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