

RETHINKING EDUCATION AND POVERTY

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Educating the Children of the Poor

A Paradoxical Global Movement

FERNANDO M. REIMERS

In this chapter, I discuss the relationship between education and poverty globally in order to shed light on the nature of the relationship between schools and society and in particular on the question of whether schools can alter social organization and structure or whether they can merely reproduce them. To address this theoretical issue, I examine the relationship between educational opportunity and poverty around the world over recent decades and discuss the role of education policies as they influence that relationship.

From Educating Elites to Education for All

The idea that the “poor,” those occupying the most subordinate roles in social hierarchies—the large masses—could have access to formal education is, in historical perspective, relatively recent. For most of human history, the task of providing children with opportunities to develop specialized skills, such as literacy, numeracy, or more advanced knowledge, was reserved for children born into privileged circumstances, who often gained such opportunities from tutors or private schools. Significant milestones in advancing the idea that the poor should be schooled include the notion that educating all persons would reduce conflict, advanced by Jan Amos Comenius, a Moravian minister who lived in the seventeenth century. The ideas of Enlightenment-era philosophers about the fundamental equality of all persons and the power of reason and science to improve society, developments of educational models such as the *Lancasterian system for the education of the poor*, and various efforts of religious orders to educate poor children were also instrumental in the thought and movement toward more accessible education. But it was only with the creation of public education systems committed to educating all children—initially in Prussia,

subsequently in some European republics in the 1800s, and later in the United States and other newly independent republics in the Americas—that an institutional infrastructure was created to materialize the idea that the “poor” should be schooled. Certainly, the inclusion of subordinate groups in schools was a process spanning over decades, if not centuries, a result of the work of social activists and other progressive reformers who challenged practices, norms, and, on occasion, legislation when those did not fully support the educational inclusion of all students.

In the United States, for example, such struggles for educational inclusion began with the ideas of Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson in the eighteenth century, took force with the creation of the Common School and the advocacy of Horace Mann in Massachusetts in the mid-1800s, and extended throughout most of the 1900s with important contributions by the women’s movement and the peace movement by activists such as Jane Addams, who effectively advocated in favor of the inclusion of poor and immigrant children in the early 1900s. Subsequently, the civil rights movement advocated for the educational opportunities of African Americans and other ethnic minorities, successfully impacting a series of court rulings that challenged the institutionalized educational segregation and marginalization that African Americans had endured since being forcibly brought to the American colonies as slaves. In the 1960s, a series of progressive policies from the executive and legislative branches of government, initiated under the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, continued to advance the expansion of educational opportunity.

Globally, the incorporation of education as one of the human rights included in the Universal Declaration in 1948 provided direction to efforts by the United Nations (UN) to mobilize governments into expanding access to fundamental education to all children, including the poor. Global educational expansion, particularly in the developing world where most children and youth live, is therefore largely the result of efforts beginning in the second half of the twentieth century. During the 1980s, expansion had slowed down considerably as a result of limitations of the approaches used to intensify use of facilities and teachers during the previous decades, such as the creation of double- and triple-shift schools or multigraded schools in rural areas, and also as a result of the economic adjustment programs that were put in place by many governments in the developing world as a result of the debt crisis.

In 1990 many governments around the world and the leading international development institutions convened a global education conference, the Education

for All conference, in Jomtien, Thailand, to review the state of educational opportunity and recommit to a program of reforms that would continue to improve access and quality of basic education by the end of the century. A framework for action agreed at this conference included a commitment to reach, by the year 2000, universal access to learning, better education equity, and greater emphasis on learning outcomes and to broaden the means and the scope of basic education, enhancing the environment for learning and emphasis on partnerships as a way to reach these goals. Ten years later, government and international development representatives met again in Dakar, Senegal, at a conference to take stock of the Education for All (EFA) movement. It was obvious that the goals agreed upon in Jomtien had not been achieved, so the Dakar Framework for Action recommitted to these goals, this time identifying measurable objectives. The goals included:

1. Expand early childhood care and education.
2. Provide free and compulsory primary education for all.
3. Promote learning and life skills for young people and adults.
4. Increase adult literacy by 50%.
5. Achieve gender parity by 2005 and gender equality by 2015.
6. Improve the quality of education.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the United Nations's specialized agency to advance the right of education, undertook the responsibility to periodically assess progress toward these goals, developing an Education for All Development Index and producing an annual Monitoring Report. The indicators measured include net enrollment rates in primary education, adult literacy rates, gender parity indexes for primary and secondary enrollment and for adult literacy, and completion of grade 5 for students who begin primary school.

A related global effort to reduce poverty, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which also launched in the year 2000, focuses on eight goals, two of which include specific education goals. The MDGs are to reduce extreme poverty and hunger by half; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development.

At present, the education goals agreed on in the Dakar EFA and the MDG frameworks are the operational definition of the global commitment

to educating all children. Note that the goals emphasize access to education, completion of a certain number of years of education, and parity between girls and boys. To the extent that global education has, in recent cases, focused also on quality has meant ensuring greater access to the opportunity to gain basic literacies, essentially to improve the efficiency of schools in attaining their basic goals. These goals do not focus on the content of what should be learned in education, the skills and knowledge that should be gained in school, or how those skills should empower children. In this sense, these goals are devoid of the clear purposes that undergird earlier narratives about educating the poor, a topic I will return to later.

What Can Education Do about Poverty?

The case for educating all children, and therefore also the children of the poor, was predicated on the assumption that the skills and knowledge gained in school might benefit them. The kinds of benefits that education was supposed to provide have been variously conceived over time. For Comenius, the first person on record to make the case for universal education, the misery that education could help overcome was the misery of violence and conflict that resulted from intolerance. He expected that education would empower people with the skills to work out their differences in peaceful ways. During the times of Comenius, this meant principally religious intolerance. This idea is also central to the inclusion of education as a human right in the Universal Declaration. The thirty articles included in the declaration were thought to be instrumental in securing peace and stability in the world, to prevent the return to the violence, destruction, and death of the previous two world wars. These ideas were also central to the creation of UNESCO as reflected in the preamble of UNESCO's constitution: "since wars begin in the minds of men . . . it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be built."

The philosophers of the Enlightenment expected broader benefits from education. The Enlightenment, a social project that replaced the aspiration of salvation with the aspiration of reducing human suffering as a result of the work of ordinary people to improve themselves and their societies, placed great hope in the power of human intellect and on reason and knowledge, particularly knowledge based on science. Enlightenment philosophers also postulated that through deliberation in the public sphere ordinary people would find ways to work together toward improvement of their communities. Education was therefore both a means of self-improvement, which would translate

into benefits to the individual, as well as a means of collaboration toward collective organization and improvement, translating into benefits to the society. The effects of educational opportunity, as it extended to individuals who had previously been denied it, would be material as well as civic, individual, and collective. It was Adam Smith, the famous figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, who first coined the term “human capital” to characterize the acquired abilities and talents that would return economic benefits to individuals and society in making them more productive, and Jean Jacques Rousseau, a seminal Swiss Enlightenment philosopher, who saw education as central to enabling individuals to accept a social contract. Benjamin Franklin, an American Enlightenment thinker, led the creation of universities because he saw them as part and parcel of preparing the inhabitants of the new political experiment for self-rule. Thomas Jefferson sketched a system of public education for males and saw universities also as indispensable to the new republic.

For almost a century, however, the expansion of the first systems of public education was largely predicated on civic purposes. Horace Mann, the first secretary of education of Massachusetts, advocated for the Common School largely in order to help assimilate immigrants and support the socialization of people from different walks of life into a common language and set of customs to prepare them for citizenship. It was the development of the concept of human capital in the 1950s that expanded the civic and political aims of education to include the expectation that education could also help people improve their material condition in life. In the United States during the 1960s, education was framed in the public imagination as part of the “war on poverty,” as a means to help the poor become non-poor. Similar claims were advanced as part of the global efforts coordinated by the United Nations during the three decades of greater educational expansion, following the adoption of education as a human right, in part as a result of the development of the theory of human capital.

Can Education Empower the Children of the Poor?

What does it mean to empower the poor? To the philosophers of the Enlightenment, who were convinced that ordinary people could improve their lives and reduce human suffering aided by their reason and the power of scientific knowledge, autonomy, agency, and skill were the central ingredients of social transformation. To the extent that public education served this project of self-government, the aims of education would be to cultivate human reason, autonomy, and agency. It is no accident that literacy is one of the universal goals

of public education. Not only does literacy have instrumental value in providing access to written texts and enabling self-study, it also allows individuals the ability to enter in direct dialogue with texts, including sacred texts, without intermediaries, and to form their own views resulting from such dialogue. Literacy is, in this way, a foundation of autonomous thinking. There are two ways in which education empowers any person, including the poor. The first is that access to knowledge and the development of the habits of mind, skills, and dispositions that result from education are in themselves worthy. Being able to read, write, appreciate a work of art, or create art is humanizing even if these abilities have no further consequence. In addition, because these skills enable communication with others and organization and transactions with others, they have also instrumental value; they are means to other ends. These ends can be private, as when gaining access to knowledge about how to best take care of one's health leads us to adopt habits that indeed improve our health. They can benefit others, as when learning how to negotiate our differences with others in peaceful ways reduces the pain we cause others (i.e., Comenius's aspiration), or they can be communal or social, as when learning the legal framework and processes leads us to live within the rule of law of the social contract (i.e., Rousseau's view of one of the ends of education).

Over time, a robust body of knowledge developed in various disciplines, documenting beneficial effects of education directly to the individuals who are educated and indirectly to those influenced by such individuals (e.g., their children, families, or communities), the productive organizations to which they contribute, or their societies. The latest Global Education Monitoring Report, for example, an annual effort of UNESCO to document the advancements of the Education for All movement, summarizes the effects of education in several dimensions. The report provides ample evidence that people with more education are advantaged in a number of dimensions relative to those with less education. They are less likely to be poor, more likely to earn higher wages ("Globally, one year of school increases earnings by 10%, on average" UNESCO 2014, 13), more likely to be more productive for those working in the informal sector, more likely to start a business, more likely to draw profits from the business, and more likely to have children who are better educated. Countries with greater equality in educational attainment of the population have higher rates of growth (14). Educated people are also healthier, and their children are also more likely to survive and be better nourished and healthier. People with more education understand political processes better and are more likely to

participate in politics, support democracy, and be tolerant of differences and less tolerant of corruption (17–18).

The evidence documenting the effects of education is limited in several ways in making casual claims about its impacts on poverty. First, much of this evidence is essentially correlational in nature. Even when statistical controls are used, the basic analytic framework compares groups with different levels of education and assumes that the groups compared are essentially identical in the characteristics that are not observed and included in the analysis. Furthermore, this approach assumes that the benefits of education are invariant across income groups, that is, that the same benefits that, say, middle-class children derive from accessing a particular education level can be expected to accrue also to poor children as they gain access to that level. This approach also assumes that the observed benefits of education are relatively independent of context or time, that is, that the observed differences in earnings, for instance, associated with different education levels in one region or in one particular period of time might be expected in a different region or in the future. There are obvious limitations to such assumptions. People with additional education may be more likely to create their own businesses, but for those who work in contexts where there are barriers to business creation, they may be unable to reap the economic benefits of education. Similarly, people with additional education may be more productive in their jobs, but if there are no jobs available, those benefits will remain unrealized. The same goes for civic and political consequences of education. People with additional education may be more vocal, more supportive of democracy, or even more critical of corrupt governments, but in nations where those behaviors are negatively sanctioned by governments, they may be unable to translate their gained knowledge and understanding into visible change. It is possible that the changes that education produces in individuals may, over time and as a critical mass of individuals experiences those changes, translate into some form of collective action that eventually leads to social change. For instance, as more individuals become more tolerant because of their higher levels of education, they may, collectively, change the cultural and institutional norms to make them more tolerant. There is less evidence available that demonstrates how change at the individual level translates into this kind of aggregate social or cultural change, although some political scientists have speculated that one of the reasons political and economic elites do not favor reforms that more evidently empower the poor is because they fear the social pressures that would result from such empowerment (Tendler 2002).

Furthermore, there is another limitation with these analyses of the benefits of education. Benefits are generally assessed in relative terms, not with respect to a normative criterion. For instance, in comparing the income, health, tolerance, or political participation of those who have achieved a particular level of education with those who have less education, the empirical evidence documents whether there are differences in those outcomes of interest, not whether the benefit attained is sufficient or adequate by some normative criterion. For example, a study of a cross-national survey of political attitudes showed that adults with higher levels of education are more likely to support democracy and to be more tolerant of people of a different race and religion, those who speak a different language, immigrants, homosexuals, and people with AIDS (Chzhzen 2013). However, the magnitude of these differences varied greatly by region. This analysis shows that the probability that a person in East Asia will express intolerance toward people of a different race is 0.3 for those with incomplete primary education, compared to 0.2 for those with complete primary education. This difference suggests that those with more education are more tolerant, but is the fact that 20% of the people are racially intolerant adequate or sufficient for life without conflict in a racially diverse democracy? Similarly, the probability that a person with complete primary education will express intolerance toward homosexuals in Latin America is 0.4, compared to 0.25 for those with complete secondary education and 0.2 for those with university education, suggesting that the most educated are more tolerant. But is the fact that 20% of the university graduates discriminate against those who do not share their sexual identity adequate and sufficient to democratic life? To illustrate how these effects of education vary by context, in Europe and Central Asia the probability of expressing intolerance toward homosexuals is 0.8 for those with complete primary education, compared to 0.7 for university graduates, which are much higher levels of intolerance than in Latin America (Chzhzen 2013). The evidence on the benefits of education in several dimensions is thus limited to marginal benefits, not to helping individuals reach a minimum or absolute threshold of benefit.

Despite evidence that education can empower people in various ways, and despite the fact that the educational opportunities available to the children of the poor have expanded as a result of the Global Education for All movement over the last six decades, there is much more schools can do to empower the children of the poor. The educational opportunities available to such children are limited not just because some of them do not go to school or learn to read

poorly; they are limited because the curriculum offered to them is itself limited and too narrow. It speaks to a conception of human talent that is a very dim reflection of the aspirations of the enlightenment for public education. Their experiences in school are not aligned with the goal of developing skills, autonomy, or agency; on the contrary, some of these experiences are toxic and convey to students messages that diminish their capacity for independent thinking and for the kind of empowerment that would enable them to improve themselves and work with others to improve their communities. We know that children need to learn much more than how to read to take charge of their destinies, and yet many education systems do little more than focus on improving the quality of literacy instruction, and perhaps numeracy. In some systems, the social and emotional climate is toxic, exposing some or all students to abuse and humiliation from peers or teachers.

A recent report of the National Research Council (Pellegrino and Hilton 2012) synthesizing available scientific research on the human qualities that have beneficial consequences to individuals and communities identifies them as belonging in three categories: cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Cognitive skills include processing (critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, logical reasoning, interpretation, decision making, and executive functioning), knowledge (literacy and communications, active listening, knowledge of the disciplines, ability to use evidence, and digital literacy), and creativity and innovation. Interpersonal skills include collaborative group skills (communication, collaboration, teamwork, cooperation, coordination, interpersonal skills, empathy, perspective taking, trust, service orientation, conflict resolution, and negotiation) and leadership (responsibility, assertive communication, self-presentation, and social influence). Intrapersonal skills include intellectual openness (flexibility, adaptability, artistic and cultural appreciation, personal and social responsibility, intercultural competency, appreciation for diversity, adaptability, capacity for lifelong learning, and intellectual interest and curiosity), work ethic and responsibility (initiative, self-direction, responsibility, perseverance, productivity, persistence, self-regulation, metacognitive skills, reflexive skills, professionalism, ethics, integrity, citizenship, and work orientation), and self-efficacy (self-regulation, and physical and mental health).

Most education systems are not aligned to help students gain a wide range of those skills. The vast majority emphasize some of the skills included under cognitive skills, largely knowledge and cognitive processing.

To assess the extent to which some of these skills were intended goals of education systems around the world, I surveyed a small group of senior education officers working for UNICEF, a UN agency involved in advancing educational opportunities for the most marginalized children around the world. The results are presented in table 2.1. Consistent with the available global figures, taking into account that these officers focused on the most marginalized children, most of them think that all or most students gain initial access. The percentage who report that students gain initial literacy drops considerably, from 50%, who agree to a great extent that most children have initial access, to 25%, who report that most students gain early literacy. A very large percentage do not think that students gain knowledge in schools, and even less think that students learn to use knowledge to solve problems or be innovative and creative. The majority thinks that schools do not offer students the opportunity to gain self-knowledge, develop character, work with others, or be tolerant of those who are different. Many of them have very negative views of the pedagogical efficacy of teachers or the emotional climate teachers create in classrooms.

To sum up, available evidence, albeit limited, suggests that education can be beneficial in a number of dimensions to individuals and the communities to which they contribute. The theoretical merit for such benefits is easy to see; educated individuals can cultivate qualities that transform them into people with the agency and qualities that the project of the enlightenment posed as necessary for self-rule. Available evidence suggests that it is probably the case that those who are most educated are also those with more agency, knowledge, skills, and health, with all the qualities that allow them to become self-authoring individuals and contributing members of their communities. We have less evidence demonstrating that the education the children of the poor receive actually empowers them in those ways, which leads us to examine what kind of educational opportunities are available to those children.

Poverty and Educational Opportunity

The Global Education for All movement has developed in three distinct stages: (1) the efforts of nation states to educate all children resulting from the creation of the public school, (2) the expansion of those efforts to most of the world resulting from the advocacy of the United Nations based on the recognition of education as a human right in 1946, and (3) the most recent commitment to global education resulting from the Education for All framework

Table 2.1 Views of a sample of UNICEF education officers based in field offices in developing countries

Statement	Not at all (%)	Not much (%)	To some extent (%)	To a great extent (%)	Total
All or most students gain initial access to school	8	18	24	50	38
All or most students gain early literacy in the first grades of school	8	36	31	25	36
All or most students progress through school at the expected rate	8	39	31	22	36
All or most students finish primary school	8	22	35	35	37
All or most students transition to secondary school	3	42	34	21	38
All or most students finish secondary school	11	46	38	5	37
Schools offer students the opportunity to gain knowledge	0	38	50	12	34
Schools offer students the opportunity to learn to use knowledge to solve problems	12	56	32	0	34
Schools offer students the opportunity to learn to innovate and be creative	14	64	22	0	36
Schools offer students the opportunity to gain self-knowledge and develop character	9	66	26	0	35
Schools offer students the opportunity to learn to work with others productively	6	63	31	0	35
Schools offer students the opportunity to learn to be tolerant and accepting of those who are different	6	47	44	3	32
Teachers use effective pedagogies	6	76	18	0	33
Teachers know the subject matter they teach	0	33	61	6	33
Teachers manage classes effectively	6	52	42	0	31
Teachers create a positive emotional climate in classrooms	3	63	33	0	30
Curriculum is relevant to the context where students live	9	43	46	3	35
Girls and boys have similar educational opportunities to receive a quality education	5	19	51	24	37
Disparities in the quality of education are an important barrier to achieve equality of educational opportunity	3	6	25	67	36

Source: Survey administered by the author to UNICEF Education Officers participating in the Education Leadership Development Program at Harvard University.

developed at Jomtien in 1990, perfected in Dakar in 2000, and reflected also in the 2000 Millennium Development Goals efforts, unquestionably transforming the structure of educational opportunity around the world. Indeed this movement is reflected in the creation of an educational architecture and the public school systems by national governments, with support from the international development commitment. Examined from a historical perspective, this movement is one of the most remarkable achievements of humanity. Seventy years ago, before education was recognized as a human right in the Universal Declaration, the vast majority of the world's children did not have the opportunity to set foot in a school, and today they do. Around the world, the fact that most people today have attained greater levels of education than their parents is testament to the ongoing expansion in educational aspirations and opportunity that resulted from this movement and the powerful idea that all persons, including the poor, should be educated.

Resulting from this global educational expansion, the children of the poor today have more opportunity to begin elementary education and in many places to gain knowledge and skills as a result of spending a portion of their lives in schools. In 2011, 137 million children enrolled in the first grade of primary school, representing 98% of the children of the relevant age to begin school in each country. This rate of initial access to school is 99% in the developed countries and 98% in the developing world, a remarkable fact given that the developing world accounts for 89% of the total number of children. On average, those children who begin school in the developing world will spend 11 years in school, compared to 16.4 years in school in the developed world. The figures are very similar for girls and boys. In the developing world, girls have a school life expectancy of 10.8 years, whereas boys can expect to spend 11.3 years in school (UNESCO 2014, 344–49). Of all children of primary school-going age, 90% were enrolled in school in the developing world, compared to 98% in the developed world. In the developing world, net enrollment rates were 89% for girls, compared to 91% for boys (355).

Despite this remarkable progress, there are still many children who are not enrolled in school, including some who never enroll and others who enroll but drop out before they complete a basic education. Disproportionately, those children who do not have access to education or drop out before completing a basic education are the children of the poor and marginalized; they are often children who suffer multiple forms of marginalization. Notwithstanding the large number of children in school, 57 million children are not enrolled in

primary school, and 55 million of those children live in the developing world. Of the children not in school, 54% are girls. About half of these children live in conflict-affected regions. Only 75% of those children who enroll in first grade complete primary school. Only half of the countries in the world have achieved universal primary education, but 70% have achieved gender parity, meaning they have equal numbers of boys and girls enrolled in primary education. There are gross disparities in the completion of lower secondary, with 69 million adolescents out of school, a 31% decline from 1999. Of the 69 million adolescents out of school, 67 million live in the developing world.

Just as important, even for many of the children who have gained access to school, there is evidence that many of these children do not learn very much in school. The task of systematically assessing basic literacies among students is relatively recent and not yet a common practice in most countries. It was only in the late 1960s that the concept of educational opportunity in the United States, Sweden, and other countries began to include opportunity to learn and not just to enroll in school. The systematic measurement of student learning is even more recent and focuses on a narrow range of cognitive skills, typically literacy, numeracy, and, on occasion, science. The first international comparative studies, conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, initially included only a few countries dated also from the 1960s. Similar cross-national efforts conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) began only in the year 2000. For most of the developing world, regular assessments of student learning are also relatively recent. For the Education for All movement, the latest Global Education Monitoring Report indicates that there is just too limited information globally to determine whether students are learning what is intended in school or what kind of learning achievement gaps exist in various countries. There are still 774 million adults who cannot read, and two-thirds of them are women. At the preschool level, only 50% of children have access to preschool, although this figure is 85% in the developed world and 45% in the developing world (UNESCO 2014, 338).

Indicative of how government efforts matter, however, and also of how international collaboration influences and supports government efforts, between 1999 and 2011, the most recent period of the Global Education for All movement, the number of children out of school was cut in half, and primary net enrollment in the developing world increased from 82% to 90% (UNESCO 2014, 355). In all indicators reflecting the Global Education for All goals, there

has been progress. But, again, relative progress is different from reaching targets in an absolute way. The latest UNESCO report on the progress made with the Education for All goals, however, indicates that not a single one of them will be achieved by the intended deadline of 2015 (15).

To sum up, while the Global Movement for Universal Education has fundamentally expanded educational opportunity in ways that give most children the opportunity to enroll in school, this is not to say, by any means, that the educational playing field has been leveled. Despite the efforts to build educational institutions available to all, today the single most important determinant of how many years of school a person will be able to attain, or of how much they will be able to learn, is their social origin, reflected in the education level of their parents. This is, of course, understandable because there is no “education ceiling,” so even as the children of the poor attain more years of schooling, in a context where there are clear benefits to being educated, it is to be expected that all parents will do what is within their means to educate their children. Powerful forces transmit educational inequality across generations; some of them operate outside the school in the cognitive, social, and emotional support that parents provide at home, in the access to health and nutrition that results from parental education and income, or in the quality of life in the neighborhoods and communities that are associated with various levels of education. Other forms of transmission of intergenerational educational inequality result from the educational resources that parents with different levels of education can provide their children, through direct purchasing of education services to replace or supplement the services provided by public schools. In addition, the quality of public institutions often varies in ways that mirror the socioeconomic differences of the groups of students they serve. These forces are powerful, and they work against the school’s goal of “leveling the playing field,” for even as the children of the poor gain skills and knowledge relative to those of their parents, their distance relative to the children of the non-poor may remain the same or even widen, because all parents are passing on their advantages to their children in ways that are proportional to the resources they command. In contexts of social and economic inequality, often widening, some parents just have more resources to give their children.

Education and Inequality

Poverty is both an absolute and a relative concept. As an absolute concept, poverty refers to the absence of some essential conditions that diminish the

humanity of the individual as well as to a form of deprivation that challenges the basic rights of the individual. The notion that there is a minimum level of caloric intake a person needs to stay alive, for instance, informs the definition of a "poverty line," a level of income necessary to eat and stay alive. The declaration of human rights is an attempt to define those essential conditions that individuals need to preserve their humanity. In including education as a human right, we can think of education poverty as a form of deprivation of the most basic forms of education, for example, access to literacy, which undermines a person's ability to become fully human. To a great extent, it is with this notion of education poverty that the goals of the Education for All movement are aligned. They aim to ensure a basic level of education for all persons.

Conversely, poverty is also a relative concept, relative not to an absolute minimum standard but to a standard that reflects the conditions of others. This view of poverty is more aligned with the possibility of participation in the institutions of society, with social inclusion rather than with abject deprivation. The Education Millennium Development goal that seeks parity in education for women and men, for instance, is aligned with this view of poverty as inequality. The idea is that in order to have equality in the opportunity to participate in society, women and men need not have a minimum level of education but equal opportunity to achieve various levels of education. It is possible to achieve this goal of parity and not meet the basic goal of universal education, for instance, as long as girls and boys are enrolled at similar rates in various levels of education. Poverty as inequality, therefore, is more concerned with the social distance that such inequalities would foster. One of the paradoxical results of the Global Education for All movement is that it has produced gains in absolute access to basic education, even as there are large levels of educational inequality. This leads us to question whether focusing on the elimination of basic educational deprivation is sufficient to address the goals of Education for All. It is possible that, several centuries ago, those who laid the intellectual foundation of the public school movement could not have anticipated that it would be possible to include all children in school while simultaneously increasing educational inequality, because the idea that people in vast numbers would be interested in education beyond a basic level was inconceivable. Very few people aspired to postprimary education even one hundred years ago; even fewer aspired to postsecondary education. There were few jobs that required such education, and, for the most part, participation in work, community, or civic life did not require more than basic skills and knowledge. As things have

changed, and as it has become obvious that there are significant rewards to higher levels of education and to high-quality education, the Global Education for All movement has been accompanied by a parallel movement of more education for all. This means that there is no ceiling in sight to how much education people can aspire to get, and therefore those who can will aim for higher and higher levels of education, expanding the distribution of knowledge and skills even as most people gain access to school or even complete primary school. Such a spread in educational gains would be in itself complicated in a number of ways—for instance, allowing individuals equal participation and deliberation in the public sphere—but it is particularly complicated if the main predictors of such inequality are the social origin of students. When this is the case, the education system becomes not the “balance wheel of the social machinery” that Horace Mann imagined but one of the mechanisms of reproduction of social inequality, part of the superstructure that reproduces the material relations of economic production that Karl Marx described.

Globally, there is evidence of much educational inequality and insufficient evidence that government efforts are closing it. Perhaps this should not be surprising, as reducing educational inequality is rarely an explicit policy objective, and it is not, except for gender inequality, one of the goals of the international development institutions that lead the Global Education for All movement. Educational inequality is interesting not only because it can lead to social exclusion but because it signals that the efforts of the Education for All movement are not keeping up with the efforts of individuals and families to improve their own educational capital.

The fact that reducing gender inequality was one of the objectives of the Education for All movement is useful to test whether making the reduction of inequality a priority matters. Achieving greater gender equality in education has been an explicit priority of the Global Education for All movement, at least since the Jomtien declaration in 1990, and a very clear objective of the MDGs and EFA Dakar Framework for Action of 2000. On all available indicators, it is evident that the gender gap is rapidly closing. For the decade between 1985 and 1994, the percentage of adults who were literate in the developing world was 76% for men compared to 58% for women, a difference that made a man 30% more likely to be literate than a woman. The gap was smaller for those between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four: 85% for men versus 75% for women. Twenty years later, the gap for the young is 92% for men versus 89% for women. Similar reductions in the gender gap are observed in other education

indicators. In the developing world, the gross enrollment ratios at the preprimary level are 45% for boys and girls; net enrollment rates in primary education, which were 85% for boys and 78% for girls in 1999, were 91% for boys and 89% for girls in 2011; of the total number of out-of-school children, 58% were girls in 1999, compared to 54% in 2011; the percentage of children who reach the last grade of primary school is 72% for boys and 73% for girls; enrollment in secondary education is 80% for men and 78% for women; and enrollment in upper-secondary education is 55% for men versus 52% for women. Among adolescents who are out of school, 55% were women in 1999, compared to 50% in 2011 (UNESCO 2014).

There are significant gaps in educational opportunity that are associated with socioeconomic status of the family and location of residence. For instance, in all countries for which there is data, the percentage of four-year-olds with access to some form of preprimary education is greater for children from wealthier families than for their poorer counterparts (UNESCO 2014). The effects of social disadvantage are cumulative and compound over time; they begin with disadvantage at home, extend into different opportunities to access preschool, and continue with access to different levels of education quality, translating into differential rates of completion of primary school and transition to subsequent levels. Boys from the wealthiest 20% of households will achieve universal completion of primary school by 2030 in fifty-six of seventy-four low- and middle-income countries, but girls from the poorest 20% of families will reach that goal in only seven countries (7). At the lower secondary level, “there are wide inequalities in completion, with rates reaching 61% for the richest households but 14% for the poorest” (3). In forty-four of the seventy-four countries for which there are detailed demographic household surveys, there is “at least a fifty-year gap between when all the richest boys complete lower secondary school and when all the poorest girls do so” (7). Children with disabilities are particularly poorly served by public education systems as many countries lack effective policies and programs of inclusion.

Conclusion

The children of the poor today have more opportunities than ever to be educated. This is true globally, and it is the result of a global movement that has intellectual roots in the Enlightenment and gains momentum with the creation of public education systems as part of efforts of nation building. This movement gains momentum with the inclusion of education as one of the

human rights in the Universal Declaration of 1946 and the creation of the United Nations System and is advanced by the specialized agencies that advocate for and support reforms to achieve the right to education. Since 1990, this movement has focused on achieving specific goals, universal primary education, and closing gender gaps, and substantial progress has resulted from such focus. Despite these efforts, however, the basic goals set out in the Education for All movement and the Millennium Development Goals have not been achieved yet.

More complicated, and to some extent paradoxical, is the fact that there is pervasive educational inequality globally, even as more children gain access to basic education. This paradox results from the fact that schools as institutions do not operate in a vacuum; they serve children who live in families, communities, and regions, and who are affected by the powerful forces of the social class of their parents, location of residence, and the barriers and discrimination that face many marginalized groups. Schools can only do so much in serving children, but they cannot alone counter the influences of these other social institutions.

When the children of the poor have access to school, as most do today, schools clearly serve them, if not for other reasons, because what is learned in school has intrinsic value in humanizing students. In this sense, the educational access resulting from the global education expansion that has taken place over the past six decades has contributed to reducing poverty, educational poverty at least. There is also evidence that what is learned in school has potentially valuable consequences for individuals and communities, and contributes therefore to reduce other forms of poverty: poverty of income, poor health, and poor civic health. In this sense, it appears that schools as institutions have enough autonomy from the social structure to distribute benefits in ways that challenge the existing distribution of wealth, status, and privilege. It is not evident, however, that schools do enough to empower the children of the poor. The documented benefits of schools are almost always measured in relative terms and rarely by reference to a normative standard that specifies what kinds of qualities make a person autonomous, efficacious, or competent. Perhaps it is poverty in these standards that we hold schools to that ultimately accounts for why they fail to do more to empower the poor, enough for them to challenge the social norms that keep them in subordinate roles.

Another complicating aspect of the history reviewed in this chapter is the paradoxical relationship between education poverty and educational inequality.

When everyone is trying to get more and better education, it sets a high bar against which to measure the success of governmental interventions to support the education of the poor. So far, in more places than not, educational inequality continues, even as more poor children gain access to education. This is true for inequality of learning outcomes and of educational attainment. So far, reducing educational inequality has not been an explicit objective of the Global Education for All movement.

This poverty of aspirations about how schools could empower the poor translates in the priorities of the Global Education for All movement and the efforts of international institutions and governments to support educational change. This global movement has emphasized, for most of recent history, educational access and attainment, rarely examining curriculum or focusing on what kind of pedagogical experiences have the greatest potential to produce self-authoring individuals. When reform efforts go beyond access and expand the aspirations for the number of years of schooling that should be free and mandatory, they focus on basic literacies and in simple strategies such as developing assessment systems that measure student achievement in those literacies. Absent from these efforts are discussions of what competencies allow a person to develop skills to be autonomous, even though there is an abundant and robust body of scientific knowledge that describes those competencies and the experiences that help develop them. But this knowledge has not yet made its way to large-scale efforts of global educational improvement, and as a result the global education conversation continues to focus on access and financing, to some extent on measuring student achievement, and barely addresses the nature of the pedagogical experiences that empower students in suggesting that teachers are an important determinant of the quality of an education system. What kind of curriculum and pedagogy empower the poor and how to identify and develop the teachers who can create those experiences for students are footnotes to the Global Education for All movement. This is clearly a missed opportunity as there is evidence that when governments and global coalitions set clear goals, they can make great progress toward achieving them, as has been the case in closing gender equity gaps in education access and completion.

Schools undoubtedly matter to the poor. The fact that most children today can set foot in school—when only seventy years ago they could not—is nothing short of remarkable. Those who have gained such access, and whatever skills they may have drawn from it—basic literacy, numeracy, artistic apprecia-

tion, a sense of self, the ability to work with others—are better off for it. However, if we are going to make progress in advancing a world that is more just, where all people not only have the opportunity to be spared the most abject forms of educational exclusion but the opportunity to come together with others from different social origins, to have the skills to participate as equals in the public sphere as was imagined by those who created the intellectual foundations of a world ruled by ordinary people and by human reason, and to collaborate in reducing human suffering, then we will have to become more ambitious and overcome the poverty of our own aspirations for the education of the poor. Only with this audacity might we, in time, be seen as those who took the Education for All project, this four-hundred-year history based on Comenius's idea, forward toward a world of greater justice and peace.

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