



UNDERSTANDING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE AT SCALE

A Project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform

Supplementary Education: Educating and Developing the Whole Child

An Interview with Edmund W. Gordon



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About Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale

This interview was produced for the Web site *Understanding Educational Equity and Excellence at Scale*, a project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. The site grew out of a forum convened by the Institute in 2006 which brought together a group of prominent education advocates and stakeholders to create a powerful, integrated framework that would reconcile divergent ways of defining educational equity and excellence, along with differing – and sometimes competing – views about which strategies work best to promote high-quality education for *all* students.

Please visit www.annenberginstitute.org/equity for more essays, multimedia materials, and interviews containing definitions of *equity* and *excellence* and descriptions of strategies educators today are employing. We invite you to participate in the dialogue by using the site's interactive features.

Interview conducted by Heather Harding, principal associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University

About the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University


The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is a national policy-research and reform-support organization at Brown University that focuses on improving conditions and outcomes in urban schools, especially those serving disadvantaged children. The Institute works through partnerships with school districts and school reform networks and in collaboration with national and local organizations skilled in educational research, policy, and effective practices to offer an array of tools and strategies to help districts strengthen their local capacity to provide and sustain high-quality education for all students.

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 **HEATHER HARDING:** *What problems do you think supplemental education seeks to remedy?*

EDMUND GORDON: The problems have to do with the under-productivity of schools with subpopulations and the under-productivity of those populations themselves. I got interested because of my interest in academic development, academic achievement, and to stress that the fact that low-income people of color function so much less well in school than the high-status people. And my concern is to find out why. Clearly, the quality of schools available to these two populations differs, but it isn't clear that they differ enough to account for the difference in these people.

So several years ago I began trying to see what other factors could be involved. And it was clear to me that students who come from more privileged backgrounds are exposed to experiences both in school and out of school that are different from those students who come from lower-status backgrounds, so that the major problem that we are trying to address is the personal and academic development of kids – the inequalities in the personal and academic development of kids.

As for education, I realize that it is about far more than academic achievement. It's about personal and cultural identity. It's about the development of a set of efficacy and sets of purpose. The variety of things that happen in the lives of children with sophisticated and able parents, the variety of things that happen in their lives that facilitate their development, that develops their heuristic development, all that stuff that is missing in the lives of kids with destitute backgrounds is the thing that I am trying to equalize.

The Importance of Out-of-School Learning


 *So this notion of the whole development is more than just academic – it's also personal and cultural?*

Yes. As I began to study factors that might be associated with this difference in academic achievement, I realized that there are so many other things happening in children's lives that influence their schooling. However, even though I began with a concern for academic development, I began to realize that it was not just academic development that these out-of-school learnings influence. They really influence the whole childhood, the


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entire person. And it may even be that the thing that leads some of us into out-of-school learning – that is, going there to try to improve academic learning – maybe this thinking, to the extent that we concentrate on academic learning, it may be that it has influenced the way in which children feel about themselves as they discover that they have capacities to succeed in a number of areas that may change the way in which they approach their academic growing, more than a chemistry tutorial and math.


 *I see.*

And certainly, as you look at the kinds of things that pass for supplementary education, it's clear that most of them – the less formal they are, the more they are likely to be directed at these non-academic learning areas which I am contending enable the academic learning areas.

 *I see.*

So when a kid is playing competitive sports and learning how to concentrate, learning how to focus one's efforts and energy, learning that systematicity is both a necessary and respectable thing to do, all of these have their payoff in academics, even though the youngster may be engaged in it for recreational purposes.

Geographic, Cultural, and Financial Accessibility


 *In the article you talk about both available and accessible supplementary education options. How do we create more readily accessible options for kids?*

One could come at that from a number of directions. You certainly want them to be physically, geographically accessible, so they ought to be in the neighborhoods where these could fit. But there there are some enriching experiences that occur out of that neighborhood, so you don't want to use geographic accessibility as your only one – it's got to be culturally accessible in that sense. It can't be so alien that to my culture and what I know about and aspire to that I refuse to seek it out, because you know it's just not me.

So with the habit of cultural accessibility, it's got to be financially available, financially accessible – and here I have some questions. I don't remember now whether we talked about it at the Brown meeting [February 2006 equity forum] or not. When I began this work, I was concerned with how I could get tax-levy money and philanthropic money available to make supplementary education services available to poor people. But I began to think about the possibility that parental investment in these services may be a part of the treatment. It may be that when my kids see me sacrificing to make these particular kinds of experiences available to them, my interest in doing that for them may be more important than the experience itself.

Now if that's the case, we've got to rethink third-party payments. We've got to rethink the notion of making these services freely available to these people because part of the treatment may be in their having to invest in it. What we certainly know from experiences so far is that for populations in which supplementary education is not a part of the culture, getting people who have limited resources to invest in them is a chore. So when we were talking about availability and accessibility, we've got to be both available and accessible. We've got to be somehow within the reach of people, but you've also got to make them both attractive and possible for people.

Formal and Informal Learning


 *You said something before that I wanted to go back to. You also talked about informal and formal ways of supplementing education. What kind of families – or how do we know which families don't have access to supplemental education that actually leverages the academic outcomes, and are we not harnessing them right? Particularly the informal – so do they get it at home, or is it really lacking?*

Let's begin by giving an illustration of the difference. When a father sits down and reads with his children, that's informal. When he takes out hard-earned bucks and hires a tutor, that is formal. Now your question is, which of these loads on to academic achievement?

If you are asking now which one is more important – I don't think they have an answer for that question but I would speculate that it may be the father reading to the child. To the extent that kids grow up thinking of themselves as learning people, as learning beings who can impact if not control their own learning, they subsequently run into some difficult spots, but most of us will find a way to dig ourselves out of it if we had that background. If you don't have that background, that sets the self as a learning person, then, or academic efficacy or *endurer*, as they call it. If you don't have the well to dig into, then you get into trouble. Then the tutorial experience is specific to helping you dig yourself out of trouble.

So, if I had to choose between the two, I think that I would invest more in getting these parents to work on helping kids to improve their sense of self as learning selves than I would investing in the extra-tutorial help, the extra psychological testing, or the counseling, et cetera, all of which are important. But I don't think that they have the leverage that this change in the person himself or herself would have.

And of course that is one of the problems with the No Child Left Behind legislation; the supplementary education they're really talking about is some formal experiences that you combine that most certainly helps kids with specific problems, but it's not doing much for this sense of self as a learning person who can do it and who is responsible for one's own learning – it doesn't help that much.


 *Given that, it seems like you are pitching the informal solution. How do we support that from the outside?*

One of the ways is to improve the quality of life of the people. I sometimes refer to a community, a suburban community to which I moved more than fifty years ago. At the same time my wife and I moved to that community, there were folk moving from the Lower East Side – folk who were, at very best, lower-middle class but probably came out of upper-working-class backgrounds. And I marvel at the changes that occurred in those families over time. I sometimes kid them and sometimes say in talking about them that they moved to the country coming back to New York – to go to Radio City; they subscribe to the *Daily News*; they were doing the things that we associate with working-class folk. And after three, four or five, or certainly ten years there, they were going into town to go to the theater; they were subscribing to the *New York Times*. They were aspiring to get their kids into at least first-tier if not Ivy League institutions. They had become middle class because their life conditions had changed.

I think there is something to be said about the quality of the lives these families live that seems to load on to what we do for our children. We discovered many years ago when we were first with the U.N., and UNESCO was first working on family planning in India, they found that changing the quality of life for families had a higher correlation with lower birth rate than education with respective family planning. As the quality of life for these families increased, they stopped having as many babies.

I think the same is true here in education; as the quality of lives of families improves, there is something about that that gets played out in the things that we do to facilitate the development of our children. So if I were making policy, I'm beginning to think that maybe all of the effort that we are putting into school reform ought to be put on hold and we ought to put it in welfare reform, raising the floor on the people with their lives.

Models of Good Practice


 *Do you know of any sites that are doing this kind of work well right now, that are giving it some of this informal?*

You're talking about doing the informal well. I think a lot of what Jeff Canada is trying to do over at Harlem's Children Zone is going in the right direction. Many years ago there was an experiment, I think it was called the Pecan experiment, in which they tried to bring together a broad range of life-circumstances enhancement services, and a big part of that was vocational and economic planning for parents to raise their standing of living.

Probably the only other place that you would go for an example is in the history of this country's treatment of veterans. The kind of stuff we did with the veteran's benefits, the GI bill, where we deliberately changed the quality of life and the opportunity structure


for veterans and actually saw radical changes in the population of folk who are being treated. Most of the people who got those benefits were people from relatively modest backgrounds – a lot of them from city slums, relatively underdeveloped. But if you look at those folk as adults, say, twenty years after World War II, they were the people who went into the U.S. industries and commercial establishments at a level that they simply could not have done twenty years before because we didn't have that many educated and technically trained people. So that effort at both educating and improving the quality of life of large numbers of people ended up positioning the United States into the major industrial power of the later part of the twentieth century. Which, I contend, could not have happened with the empire, with the human capital that we had in, say, 1940, or even 1950.

If you were looking, though, for an experiment or a demonstration project, there are not many of those around and, as I suggested, the work that Jeff is doing probably comes closest to it. He is investing more heavily in institutional service that is raising the quality of life of people who are being served – although he does invest a considerable amount of those resources in trying to change those parents' knowledge of and attitude toward the things that they might do.

 *Say more about investing in institutional services versus improving the quality of life.*

He has two charter schools. He's got a preschool program. He's got something that's called Baby College, training parents how to be parents, that emphasizes nutrition services for kids. These are more institutional than raising the quality of life for those parents. However, his work at improving job opportunities or job placements for parents does speak to changing or improving the quality of life.

What Is “Excellence at Scale”?


 *I want to get back to the Harlem Children's Zone in a minute. But I also want to ask you this question. A lot of the talk at the meeting was focused on equity and excellence at scale. My sense of the conversation, at least the first day, was that there were competing notions of what excellence at scale meant. So I'm very interested in hearing you talk about how you would define excellence at scale and maybe comment on the current standards of excellence that are shaping school reform efforts.*

Well, certainly when we talk about academic excellence these days we've got to be thinking about what is required in advanced technological societies for individuals and groups to have meaningful roles in those societies. In a book that I am just writing – the galleys for that should be off the press soon – before, I call it the *affirmative development of academic ability* and in there I talk a great deal about *intellective competence*. And it is pretty much like social competence – the competence to use one's intellect to meet the requirements of living.

It is beginning to appear that unless that is developed at a level that we would call *excellence*, you simply aren't going to be able to survive in the next period. You've got to be able to use numbers to solve problems; you've got to be able to use words to solve problems, you've got to know how to bring order to chaotic information sources. We've got much more information than any of us know how to use, and unless one can organize it so it can be used, it's just competencies. [W.E.B.] DuBois used to think of it as the requirements for the education of the "talented tenth" – well now, the characteristics, the intellectual characteristics that you've got to meet in order to survive in this society, and I would call that *excellence*.


There is a schematic problem there, because usually when we talk about "excellence," we are talking about a hierarchy, reaching the highest levels, and if we can achieve the end of bringing everybody to that level, we can – I'm not quite sure that it is still called *excellence*, because it's the norm of the whole group. But when I talk about *equity* and *excellence*, I'm talking about universalizing intellectual competence – bringing *all* groups in, just about everybody, to the point that they can use information critically, that they can use number and formulae to solve problems, that they can reason logic, that they can use analogies for reason, that they can manage the symbolic representation of information in more than a single form. So when we talk about people who are multilingual, when we talk about people who cannot only operate in a quantitative world but in a world of the humanities.

So my "excellence" is the achievement of what I would call *intellectual competence*, competence to meet the demands of a technologically advanced society. And the *equity* piece means – here, I haven't quite determined whether I want to say that it is universally achieved or whether I want to argue that it at least not be tied to one's social division. You ought not be able to predict intellectual competence by the gender, language spoken, the race, the social class of the persons.


 *Yeah.*

If we could get just that far in my lifetime, I would be delighted. But ultimately, if we are talking about a world in which democratic principles are ordered, it's going to mean that these are going to have to be universal competencies. Everybody that is functioning in the system is going to have to have those abilities.

Next Steps

 *So, back to supplemental education. Where does one start wrapping services around this school, the K–16 school structure?*

I wouldn't wrap it around the K–16 school structure. I'd wrap it around the lives, the life histories of people.

 *Does that mean it is geographically based? You think about a neighborhood?*

You might think about a neighborhood as a place to start, but I say, look, I can't do this all over the United States, so if I could get it here and increase it here. Or, a campaign I'm about to start – and may get shut down for – is beginning with the Black middle class. I don't think Black middle-class folk make nearly the contribution to academic achievement that we should. If you look at the statistics a few years ago, we were looking at the kids who scored above 1350 on the SAT. I think this was in the late 1990s – there were about 65,000 of them in this country – there were 150 Black people, there were 23,000 Asian kids. At that time Blacks were making up maybe 15 to 18 percent of the population, Asians were making up maybe 5 percent of the population. And they greatly outdistanced themselves, not to mention the way in which the European American folk outdistance themselves.


In most societies, it is your middle class, your upper class that make the heaviest proportionate contribution to higher-achieving people. But if you look at the data on the children of African American parents who have completed college, as a group these kids were functioning about as well as European American kids whose parents had completed high school. So that meant that even though we were getting more Black people into the middle class, Black middle-class students were not achieving at a level that would be predicted by that class. So I'm trying to get a group of young people to join me in a campaign to try to get the Black middle class to take this seriously: What is it we have to do for and with our kids, in the schools that they go to and the homes that they live in, that's going to greatly increase our contribution to the higher-achieving group?

Now if I could pull that off, then I would probably go to the upper-lower class of Black people – people who are not so overwhelmed by life that they can't be expected to do anything else. They say now, What can we do? And there are a lot of things we can do at home. Ben Carson, the neurosurgeon guy, tells the story about his grandmother who used to help him with his homework – and it wasn't until he reached junior high school that he realized that she was illiterate.

So you don't necessarily have to be educated to support children's academic development. It certainly limits the things you can do, but there is a lot more that an educated people can do to have successful experiences with schooling. We have much better statistics now than we had fifty years ago about the relationship between nutrition and health and school achievement – it rapidly changed the ways in which people feed kids and the ways in which people protect their health. We know about the amount of time that youngsters spend watching TV and we know that there is a relationship between that and school achievement – it's a negative one. If we could get our folk to start controlling the amount of the time our kids spend in front of the TV, I think we can do something.

I wouldn't use geographics as my major determinant of this. The way to start is something that might get me a small enough area or small enough group to try to get something done. But there are lots of pockets of people in the society where we can start, and somewhere I think it could pay off more quickly. Suppose we could get Linc and Jack & Jill and 100 Black Men and 100 Black Women taking this message seriously. I think it would change things and it would eradicate the achievement gaps. We would certainly start to reduce them, because we would be contributing more to the right end of the distribution.

Getting the Message Out

 *Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you would add, that's hot in your mind right now?*

One of the things that we are trying to get off of the ground is a campaign that is directed at young parents. We know that our people have a higher incident of teenage pregnancy than some of the other segments of the population. But also, we have a higher percentage of single-parent homes, and if young women get pregnant early it is more likely to curtail their education, which is likely to make them less able as adults to facilitate the development of their children.

There's this old African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." We contend that it takes a healthy, developed or, at least, developing adult to orchestrate the development of a child. So for this segment of the population, we've got kids raising kids as they would, or underdeveloped folk in the roles of parents. I would like to see a major campaign to work on the life skills of the folk to make them better people, stronger people, more competent people. Part of that competence would be in the raising of their kids, but a big piece of it is competence as citizens, competence as people.

Going back to an earlier point that I was discussing, the argument is that if these parents are themselves more able, more competent, feeling more efficacious, they communicate that to their kids and it raises the performance of their kids. But it could also better enable them to orchestrate some of the out-of-school learning experience for their kids. You get an added kick out of it. So if you had given me a question and gave me a chance to make that little piece, I could have brought that up or remind school people.

I don't want to let schools off the hook with supplementary education. I think schools are important, but I think schools make a mistake when they let the society place on them the responsibility for the total development of kids. I was saying that the schools have often set themselves up for failure, when we don't hope to deliver the message that there are all of these other sources of educated experiences that are important, so important that some people would argue they enable schools to work. I don't know whether you are familiar with the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu and his forms of education-relevant capitals. And what he is arguing is that schools work well when kids come to

school with these educationally relevant sources of capital to handle. So if you've got good health, if you've got educated adults around you, if you've got sets of membership in the society, all of these things enable schools to work. We school people need to get that message across just as the people in medicine and public health came to realize that unless you do something about the context in which health is to be maintained, you can't simply solve the problems of good health maintenance with first-class medicine, first-class medical treatment, which is important, but you've also got to clean up the swamps and get rid of the garbage and pipe the sewage out, et cetera. So that's about my message.