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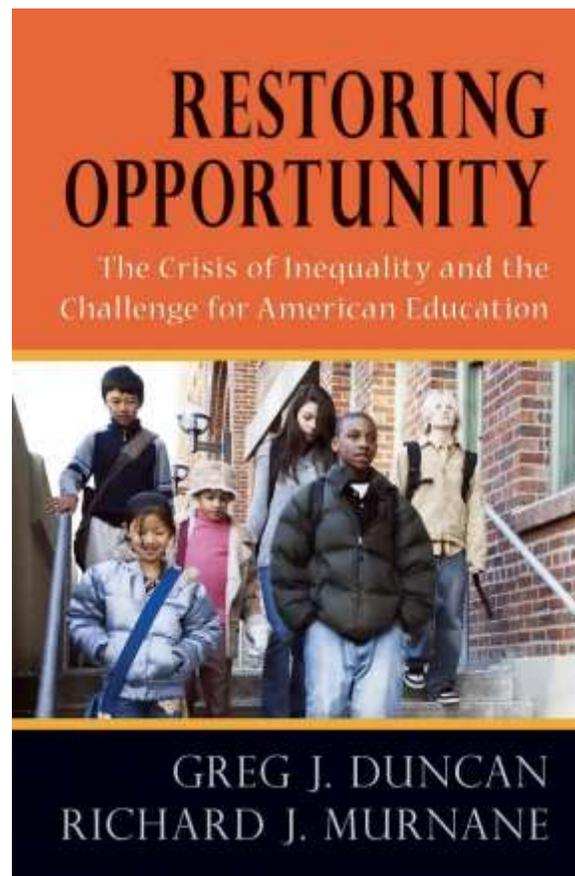
Duncan, G. J., & Murnane, R. J. (2014). *Restoring opportunity: The crisis of inequality and the challenge for American education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Pp. 189

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A timely and noteworthy text, Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane's *Restoring Opportunity: The Crisis of Inequality and the Challenge for American Education* presents a concise yet thorough examination of one of the most pressing issues plaguing American education today: educational inequity. Over the past 30 years, notable disparities in achievement along racial and socioeconomic lines have caught the attention of educators, researchers, and policymakers alike. While often referred to as an "achievement gap" in public rhetoric, experts in the field have recognized it as an "opportunity gap" (Darling-Hammond, 2010) and an "education debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2006), noting the unequal access to high-quality education available to students. An updated contribution to this line of thinking, *Restoring Opportunity* questions the ability of today's schools to provide every child the opportunity to pursue the American Dream in achieving upward mobility.



Renowned experts in the field, Duncan and Murnane convincingly argue that unless significant reform is made, the American educational system will only perpetuate growing inequalities in income and opportunity, disintegrating the long-held belief in the “land of opportunity”. Bringing decades of experience in research examining economic influence on child development and educational attainment, the authors present a comprehensive overview of current challenges of the public school system, beginning with an explanation of their origins and concluding with proposals for their solutions. With historical data and analyses, examples of initiatives with proven success, and a repeated emphasis on the systems of supports and accountability schools need to thrive, this text makes a valuable contribution in helping make reform a reality, making it possible to provide high quality education for *all* youth, even in our nation’s largest and most challenging urban school districts.

The first half of the book succinctly depicts the numerous factors that have contributed to the current polarization of the American education system and build the authors’ compelling argument for needed reform. Delving into an examination of historical and socioeconomic trends since World War II, the authors provide an explanation of how dynamic forces such as technological innovation and the labor market have drastically altered the educational landscape and driven a wedge between achievement levels of high- and low-income families. Unlike previous generations who have used educational advanced attainment to improve job opportunity, students from low-income families are thwarted from attaining higher level degrees because of rising college tuition costs and weak academic preparation in high school, thus restricting their chances of obtaining higher skilled and higher paying positions. Next, the authors shift to local contexts, bringing the relationship between family income and educational attainment to life with examples of how conditions at home

are manifested in school success. Conditions often associated with low-income home life—lagging developmental inputs, inadequate health care, increased exposure to stress, and parents’ lower educational levels—put students at a disadvantage from a very early age. Combined with school factors that the authors subsequently detail—increasing concentrations of poverty bringing high levels of student mobility, English Language Learners, and behavior problems, plus lagging academic improvements in instruction—students from impoverished backgrounds face a system that perpetuates inequities rather than deters them, making it even more difficult to gain access to improved life opportunities.

Supported by numerous graphical representations, the data presented by Duncan and Murnane in this section of the book powerfully portray the various socioeconomic forces initiating challenges even before children of low-income families enter school. The visual depiction of gaps and inequities adds a jarring effect to stimulate a call to action, especially for those to whom quantitative data is most persuasive. Additionally, by integrating seminal qualitative research studies in this field—namely that of Lareau (2011) and Kidder (1989)—and using their portraits of real students and teachers, the authors bring the statistics to life and present a compelling case for why a high-quality education is necessary to remedy these disadvantages. For readers such as myself who are educators having worked in schools with many high needs students, these accounts vividly resonate with personal experiences and relationships with children and families. For readers who have had little prior connection to impoverished schools and the challenges faced by students and teachers, these stories will surely open their minds to consider the broad scope of the issues and the magnitude of the impact of policies and practices on so many people’s lives.

The second half of the book proposes solutions for the educational problems previously outlined. Identifying programs and

exemplary practices at each level of schooling, the next three chapters specifically focus on the systems of supports and practices of accountability present in successful schools serving predominantly low-income students. The authors intentionally use the work of large metropolitan districts—Boston, Chicago, and New York—to demonstrate how such necessary reform is possible even in the most challenging urban areas. With improvements of curriculum and instruction, educational supports, strategic staffing, and professional development, the Boston Public Schools prekindergarten program has narrowed gaps and better prepared children with the skills needed to thrive in kindergarten and later years. At the elementary level, a relentless focus on improving instruction, comprehensive assessment systems, recruitment of strong leaders and teachers, and additional supports have resulted in high levels of learning in the University of Chicago Charter School network. While recognizing urban school districts have a greater number of schools to serve, the authors synthesize the work of the charter management organization to outline specific supports in place—leadership training, literacy coaches, consistent assessment systems, and teacher stipends—can indeed be replicated to promote success. Moving up to the high school level, the small-school initiative undertaken by the New York public school district and supporting foundations demonstrates how emphasizing community participation, opportunities for personalization, dedicated teachers with a common vision, and a rich and rigorous curriculum, helped the New Century High Schools increase graduation rates and offer better life chances for students of low-income families in the area. Finally, Milwaukee’s New Hope program, whose intentional design recognizes the integrated components of work, income, health insurance, childcare, and education, exemplifies the important influence of public policy for supporting struggling families and the positive impact programs can have when issues such as education are not

viewed in isolation. Consistently with plausible detail and data the authors argue that effective educational reform requires comprehensive strategies and a collaborative commitment from the community.

Perhaps most importantly, the book closes with an analysis of what historically has *not* worked in educational reform and beckons policymakers and district leaders to avoid short term, simplistic “silver bullets” in trying to improve schools. Here lies its strength: the repeated emphasis on the need for systemic, comprehensive solutions, and a “broad definition of schooling” so that initiatives become “well-integrated parts of a coherent strategy” (p. 142) to boost educational attainment. Throughout each chapter, Duncan and Murnane repeatedly stress a focus on two major components of reform: broad systems of supports and effective practices of accountability. With specific examples of what these components look like in schools—observations and coaching, collaborative departmental organization in district offices, teacher recruitment and training practices—the authors make the case that high quality education *can* be made accessible to all students. The “Building Blocks for an American Solution” outlined in chapter nine summarize the effective components of reform detailed throughout the book, providing a framework of focus for future initiatives. Additionally, the authors note that creating effective schools cannot be accomplished by individual schools or charismatic leaders alone—a more comprehensive approach must be taken. At the same time, acknowledging these reforms are not cheap, simple, or magical endeavors, Duncan and Murnane present the entire snapshot of the programs, portraying options and revealing both lessons and ongoing challenges even successful schools face. With such a pragmatic and balanced approach, the authors actually strengthen their appeal, seeking ways to mitigate barriers and to encourage a dedicated effort to fix the inequities of the system.

There is one caveat to the authors' choice of "supports" for effective improvement: this general solution needs more focus on teacher quality and preparation. In each level of schooling, teachers are cited as an indispensable resource for enabling students' academic success. Repeatedly the authors implore a need for "an adequate supply of teachers who understand how young children learn" (p. 66) and "well-educated teachers who believe that all their children can succeed" (p. 74). While Duncan and Murnane (2015) press for supports for teachers, including professional development, coaching, incentives, curricular materials, and stipends, in order to recruit talented individuals and prevent burnout in the profession, they acknowledge that considerable more financial investment is required and these expenditures "represent an essential investment in the nation's future" (p. 143). However, in states such as mine, North Carolina, policymakers have not adopted this mindset, as education is routinely subject to budget cuts. As Bastian (2015) reports, recent decisions to eliminate recruitment programs, end pay increases for advanced degrees, and maintain low salaries have "contributed to the erosion of the infrastructure that supports high-quality teaching and retention in the profession" (p. 3). Presenting creative and effective solutions that state and local districts—beyond charter schools—are attempting in order to overcome low government funding would help make these supports a reality for public school systems.

Additionally, although the authors briefly mention examples of recruitment programs such as Teach for America and the Boston Teachers Residency Program, a weakness of the book is the lack of attention given to the university teacher preparation programs by which a majority of teachers become certified. As the primary source of the teaching work force, these programs have come under increased scrutiny of their effectiveness with researchers calling for improvements in pedagogies, mentorships,

and experiences provided (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2012). Because studies suggest that student teachers' field placements are highly influential in decisions teachers make of where to teach (Kirchhoff & Lawrenz, 2011; Whipp & Geronime, 2015), revisions to programming, partnerships, and clinical placements can better provide teaching candidates with the knowledge and experience to prepare them for conditions in the classroom, especially in the urban environment (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, & McQuillan, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010). While supports advocated by Murnane and Duncan (2015) such as coaching and continued professional development would help, without adequate preparation entering the profession, teachers are likely to leave urban school environments (Darling-Hammond, 2010), thus making it a vital element of reform. In addition to a focus on preparation, research related to teacher recruitment from university programs, particularly teacher candidate characteristics such as commitment to urban education (Ronfeldt, Reininger, & Kwok, 2013; Whipp & Geronime, 2015), could support the authors' call for high quality educators in high needs schools.

All in all, *Restoring Opportunity* is a valuable resource for a wide audience, namely anyone grappling with challenges of low achievement in many of the nation's schools. For district leaders and administrators, it presents real solutions to make the daunting task of improving our public school system actually seem attainable. For K-12 educators, it emphasizes the vital role they play in improving the life chances of our nation's youth, encouraging the teacher leadership that contributes to substantive change. For prospective teachers, this text makes an extremely complex issue much more comprehensible, not only helping prepare them for the contexts into which they are about to embark and mitigating turnover and burnout, but also igniting a passion to make a

difference in their school and community. This comprehensible and comprehensive approach is perhaps even more valuable for policymakers who may not have firsthand knowledge and experience working in the schools whose conditions and consequently

outcomes they are dictating. With clarity and purpose Duncan and Murnane call for urgently needed collaborative, deliberate, and strategic education reform, leaving no doubt that educational equity is an imperative for the future success of our youth and nation.

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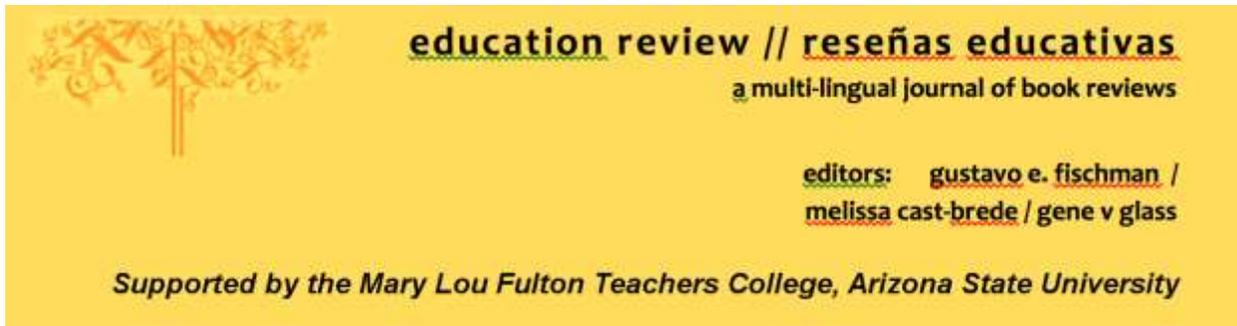
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