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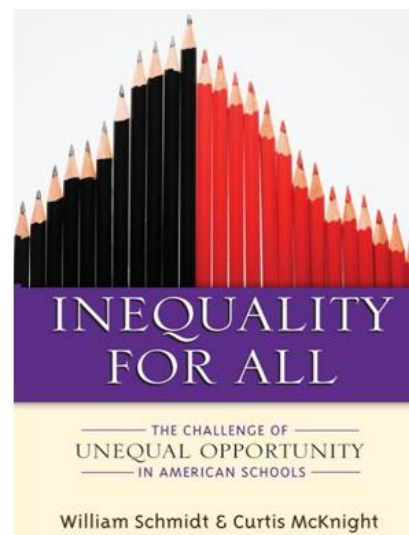
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Schmidt, William H. & Curtis C. McKnight. (2012) *Inequality for All: The Challenge of Unequal Opportunity in American Schools*.
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Does the U.S. realize ideals such as "liberty and justice for all" and "a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"? The authors of *Inequality for All: The Challenge of Unequal Opportunity in American Schools*, William Schmidt and Curtis McKnight, answer this question with a swift "no" as early as the second paragraph of their Preface. They begin their book by making the obvious, though often overlooked, point that in order for these ideals to be realized, equal distribution of educational opportunities must be provided to each and every child in the country. Using careful methodology and several large longitudinal data sets, the authors point



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out that the main obstacles to high achievement for both low-SES and minority students are inequalities in opportunities to learn. While not a new finding, the authors provide greater nuance on behalf of this claim by arguing that students in middle-income school districts are actually the ones who experience the greatest variation in opportunities to learn.

The book provides a powerful and compelling account of why children in America – all children, even the children in the middle class – are simply playing a game of chance when they go to school each morning. Why is this? Indeed, most parents who live in middle-income school districts probably believe that their children must be receiving a good education simply because they reside in a middle-income district. However, what these parents don't see is what **Schmidt** and McKnight demonstrate through their analysis: variation *among* districts might not be the main problem. Rather, they claim that the variance is greatest – and most dangerous – when it occurs *within* the classroom. Even in the same school, students can find themselves in classrooms that are widely disparate in terms of opportunities to learn. Variation occurs not just in what is taught, but also in the length and depth of instruction provided. The authors spend much of their time analyzing the subject area of mathematics, with some attention to science education. However, it is easy to see how their arguments may very well be extendable to other content areas as well.



The authors' argument is premised on an underlying notion of "opportunity to learn," defined as "the set of experiences that schools organized to help students acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are specified in those official standards" (Schmidt & McKnight, 2012). Their central argument is that the differences in these opportunities to learn lead to vast educational inequities. Some may suggest that differences in learning are due to individual differences in children. However, the authors argue that we cannot know if this is true because schooling is not equal for all children.

First, Schmidt and McKnight tackle issues of social class, race, and equality of opportunity. Overall, the authors determine that the variation in the content that was

supposed to be taught to students was not systematically related to racial composition or socioeconomic status. Although intentions of districts were the same (as evidenced by curricular standards), the policies implemented by districts led to extremely different opportunities to learn for students in high-poverty districts than high-SES districts. Therefore, an outsider looking at district standards might believe that high SES and high poverty districts are not so different. The real difference emerges with the implementation of these standards.

This raises an important question. Typically, achievement tests show that children in high-poverty districts perform worse than their mid-to-high income peers. Is this a difference in intelligence? Or, is it attributable to differences in opportunities to learn? Put another way, would children in high-poverty districts still differ from their peers if they were offered similar opportunities? The authors suggest that although the intentions of districts appear to be good (with similar standards for all children), these standards do not seem to be ensuring that all children receive equitable opportunities. This is particularly sad once one remembers that it has been almost sixty years since the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954), which proclaimed both that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" as well as that "in these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education."

Schmidt and McKnight go on to demonstrate that there are extreme differences in content covered in classrooms, primarily by asking teachers to indicate the number of class periods over the course of the school year in which they taught each of a list of topics. The statistics presented are compelling and frightening. A particularly telling example involves a simple topic – geometric shapes (circles, triangles, etc.). In more than 60 districts surveyed, 60% of first grade classrooms and 66% of second grade classrooms covered geometric shapes. This might seem like a decent percentage – until the authors calculate (assuming 25 children per classroom) that this means between 5,000 and 6,000 children in those districts alone did not have the same opportunities to learn geometric shapes. Tragically, this is *just one* topic in the primary grades, where fewer topics are introduced and where

students should be receiving a strong foundation for the mathematics they will learn in the next eleven grades.

The situation is just as bleak in high schools. In algebra courses, the authors found that teachers, on average, spent around 1/3 of their class time on intermediate algebra topics (slope, systems of equations, quadratic functions, etc.). Of greater importance, though, is the range of time teachers spent on these topics. Some teachers reported spending only 12 class periods on this, while others reported spending over 100 periods on these same topics. Certainly, any parent would be horrified to learn that, within the same school, two courses entitled “Algebra” could cover completely different topics, giving some children a competitive edge while quite possibly limiting the future college and career prospects of others. Clearly, opportunities to learn mathematics at both the elementary and high school level vary enormously.

In addition to the main points made above, Schmidt and McKnight accomplish several other goals in this book. An extensive section regarding the controversial issue of tracking illustrates that tracking at the middle school level (particularly in mathematics) produces clear differences in content coverage and therefore in learning opportunities. This will be discussed further below. The authors also engage in a discussion of the impacts of teachers, textbooks, and tests on opportunities to learn. I applaud the authors for taking care not to demonize teachers when demonstrating that far too many teachers are not prepared to teach mathematics. They point out that teachers are faced with conflicting guidance from textbooks, standards, and assessments, and therefore must choose what to teach on their own. Overall, all of these sub-arguments directly relate to and support the authors’ main point that it is troubling that students in the United States, even students in the same schools, receive vastly different opportunities to learn.

Overall, Schmidt and McKnight have authored a timely and well-written book. As illustrated above, they indicate the difficulties of educating today’s students and paint a dire but much-needed picture of the vast differences that arise across states, districts, and even classrooms. The purpose of this section is to elaborate on three strengths of the book.

The organization of this book is one of its biggest strengths. Each chapter follows a similar formula, in which the authors clearly state their opinion then support it with well-aligned and well-supported sub points. One does not need to be a mathematician, statistician, or expert on education in order to understand the claims made by the authors. Schmidt and McKnight have clearly explained all of the rigorous analyses they have used in a way that is jargon-free and accessible to a wide audience. It is rare to find an account of such thorough, meticulous statistical analyses that is so easy to read, and the authors should be applauded for their efforts in this area.

A second strength of the book is the careful methodology used by the authors. Schmidt and McKnight answer these questions using data collected in six large-scale, national and international studies within the past two decades (namely, the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), The Teacher Education and Development Study – Mathematics (TEDS-M), The 1999 TIMSS-Repeat Benchmark Study (TIMSS-R), the Longitudinal Study of American youth (LSAY), the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), and the Promoting Rigorous Outcomes in Mathematics/Science Education (PROM/SE)). When performing their secondary data analyses for the purposes of this book, Schmidt and McKnight made clear the decisions they made in coding the data. Their concise explanations and rationales for their methods are a major strength of the book.

The discussion of tracking is an excellent addition. It supports the authors' major contentions while at the same time exposing a real but often overlooked problem in the American educational system. As argued by David Labaree (2010), in American education, "someone has to fail." That is, every parent wants the best possible opportunities for their own child. Since it is not possible for every single child to have the absolute best opportunities, some students end up receiving fewer opportunities. One way this can be seen is through tracking in our present educational system. Some parents push for their children to be in advanced, honors, or accelerated courses. On an individual level, this makes sense – every parent obviously wants the best for his or her

children. In terms of a large group of children, it is impossible for all of them to be “the best”. The current tracking system results in “winners” and “losers” in terms of educational outcomes due to the huge variation in the sum of content that is covered over the course of a student’s education.

Although tracking is not unique to the United States, other countries have more clearly defined and well-structured tracks, which are immensely different from the U.S. approach. For example, using data from more than 14,000 seniors in 30 high schools across 18 school districts in the United States, the authors report finding more than 1,500 course sequences in the subject area of mathematics, with approximately 10 students in each track. This leads to great inequity, even among students who attend the same high school. Graduates of the same high school can therefore graduate with extremely different mathematical experience, preparing them quite differently for college and/or careers. The authors take care to point out that they do not believe all students should take the same mathematics courses; however, they do state that the number of mathematics tracks available to students should be less than 1,500. It is hardly possible to argue with this view. I feel that this smaller story of issues surrounding tracking within the larger argument about educational inequality was well done and worth being told.

The main area where Schmidt and McKnight could have strengthened their argument is by providing a greater explanation of the relationship of their work to the Common Core State Standards. The authors’ demonstration of inequalities is commendable. However, I would have liked to see them take it a step further. The authors may have been overly cautious in exploring the relationship between their work and the Common Core State Standards. Schmidt and McKnight hint throughout the book but hesitate when it comes time to make concrete recommendations regarding the implementation of these standards. This in some ways can be considered a strength of the book, as the authors certainly cannot be faulted for making claims that are unsupported by their data. However, at this crucial point in American education reform, it becomes important to have a dialogue regarding how to fix some of the problems that Schmidt and McKnight present. Throughout the book, the authors bring

up the Common Core State Standards, but abruptly end the discussion each time by saying that only time will tell.

One of the main reasons to study history and to consider longitudinal data sets such as the authors have done is to make recommendations for the future. The general tone of the book is that the United States needs Common Core Standards. In the final pages of their book, after approximately two hundred pages detailing the disjointed American educational system – with approximately 15,000 local school districts and 137,000 schools (Schmidt & McKnight, 2012) – the authors take a firm stance on this issue, stating that these standards are coming at a critical point in history. Yet many of the authors' conclusions beg the reader to question this very assertion. For example, Schmidt and McKnight clearly indicate that the topics that are required by state, district, or school standards are taught in a variety of ways by teachers within the same school building. If teachers within the same school building teach vastly different content to their students despite having similar standards to follow (as demonstrated by the authors throughout this book), how will simply changing the standards change the problem? It is my belief that this question is worthy of much more attention than given to it by the authors. The book, while well-written and important, would have most likely had a bigger impact if issues such as these were addressed by the authors.

Schmidt and McKnight have written a remarkable, systematic account of realities of today's education system in the United States. As demonstrated throughout this review, the book has several strengths, including the organization, the careful methods used, and the in-depth discussion of "tracking" in the current educational system. The authors make a convincing argument for "leveling the playing field" for all children; however, it would have been more effective had they included more discussion regarding how their data can provide suggestions for the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, as well as provided reasoning as to why they believe the Common Core State Standards are the remedy. Despite this omission, Schmidt and McKnight have been successful in writing a book that is both valuable and accessible to a wide audience, ranging from parents to teachers to administrators to researchers.

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About the Reviewer

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