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What About Student Disadvantage?

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equity in education is examined in Harris’ (2007) article, High-Flying Schools, Student Disadvantage, and the Logic of NCLB. It is a well known fact that one of the major flaws of our educational system is inequity. Harris takes a closer look at some of the causes of inequity. Not surprisingly, one of the major factors that determine achievement is a student’s social and economic status.

Among the implications cited by Harris of lower socio-economic status are that students often do not receive proper nutrition and are sick more frequently, therefore missing more school, and are thus less prepared to learn than other students. Additionally, many (not all) parents living in poverty have less healthy emotional and physical relationships with their children due to the economic pressures of their daily lives. This stress can raise a student’s affective filter and make it extremely difficult to learn in a school environment.

Harris (2007) also cites the recent Early Childhood Longitudinal Study which tests students’ academic ability early in their kindergarten year. The results found that African American kindergartners were one half of a standard deviation below white kindergartners. This gap is almost the same differential of the gap that is seen in the later school years. This would indicate that the schools are not entirely responsible for the achievement gap since these children are tested before they begin their school careers. The role of social and economic status appears to be critical in academic achievement.

The author also does not discount the role of schools entirely, however. While the gap in academic ability is large in the early years, it does widen somewhat as students progress through school. There is evidence that this could be alleviated if schools were to adopt more effective and appropriate instructional practices. Therefore, the implication is that the combination of efforts geared toward both student disadvantage and school efficacy is needed in order to solve this educational crisis.

Another important factor Harris (2007) considers, and one that has become increasingly critical through federal legislation, is accountability. NCLB requires that all students regardless of race, income, ELL status, or Special Education achieve a basic level of proficiency on state standardized tests. This approach focuses on learning levels, then, both inside and outside of school, and does not account for student disadvantage. Harris suggests that as an alternative to this learning level approach, accountability systems should focus on learning gains, or year-to-year levels of students’ scores. Such an accountability system expects schools to overcome student disadvantages that existed before they entered school.

While there is significant evidence that student disadvantage is a prime indicator of achievement, there are reports that discount this fact. Harris (2007) cites the Educational Trust and Heritage Foundation and their reports of “high-flying” schools. However, there is inherent mis-calculating in these reports as they misidentify schools that are “high-flying.” They attempt to give examples of schools that are high poverty and also high achieving. Where these reports are flawed is in their reporting of schools as “high-flying” where students have not achieved basic reading or mathematics skills. In fact, a low-poverty, low-minority school is 89 times more likely to be in a state’s top third than a high-poverty, high-minority school. (Harris, p. 367)

Of course, any accountability system will invoke some negative response. Unfortunately, our current system does not account for student disadvantage which is clearly and inarguably a significant aspect in determining student achievement. Government policy needs to do more for our disadvantaged students, not only by its expectations and measures of achievement, but also at the basic needs level. The debate over inequity in education will continue while our socio-economically disadvantaged students continue to languish in a system that is set up to forget about them.

Reference