Published in final edited form as:

Ann Am Acad Pol Soc Sci. 2017 November ; 674(1): 281–285. doi:10.1177/0002716217734148.

The State of Unequal Educational Opportunity: Conclusion to the Special Issue on the Coleman Report 50 Years Later

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The findings in the Coleman report were unusually expansive in their attention to factors beyond school as inputs to academic inequality, challenging prevailing understandings of educational inequality and igniting fierce debates that have endured (and continue in this special issue). This special issue affords at least two opportunities. First, it provides a benchmark from which to examine largely separate strands of research together, in order to assess the current state of the field and the debates within it. The papers in this volume have focused on ideas that connect closely with the Coleman report (school, family, and community effects), as well as issues that are increasingly relevant to our understanding of educational inequality (e.g., immigration, cross-national variation). Second, the Coleman report anniversary provides an opportunity to consider how contemporary researchers and policymakers can incorporate the insights and findings of the last fifty years of scholarship into the design of future studies and programs. This thought exercise raises several themes:

The “school vs. family background” debate is not useful

Much academic scholarship in the last several decades has justifiably worked to identify the independent effects of families, schools and communities on children’s skills and achievement. This body of research is essential for gaining a clear understanding of the social processes through which each institution affects children’s achievement, and for providing sound evidence to inform the design of public policies and programs. An unfortunate result of the academic debate about the effects of each context, however, has been a tendency to debate the relative impact of schools *versus* families or other contexts. This debate creates an artificial distinction between contexts that overlap closely and continually affect one other. Families create communities and schools through processes of neighborhood selection and school choice (e.g., Hill et al. this volume; Keels, Burdick-Will and Keene 2013; Sampson and Sharkey 2008). At the same time, the resources and communities within schools influence not only students’ achievement, but also the future composition of surrounding families and communities.

Because each context has both independent and overlapping effects on student achievement, an important task for future research is to more closely examine the joint effects of families, schools and other settings on students. For example, a burgeoning literature examines the costs and benefits of integrating students from low-income families and communities into higher-resource schools, motivated by the idea that the richer resources of that school

context can better offset disadvantage at the family level (Crosnoe 2009; Kahlenberg 2001). Considering family, school and community resources in concert will offer a richer approach to the reduction of academic inequality.

Neither achievement nor its inputs are static

Several of the papers in this issue, and in the broader literature, highlight the importance of measuring children's environments and their achievement dynamically. While the Coleman report and much subsequent research offered a cross-sectional perspective on the scope of academic inequality, more recent research has offered great insight into the dynamics of academic inequality and its inputs. A dynamic approach has afforded both conceptual and methodological insights. First, examining children over time demonstrates the persistence of academic inequality, and in some cases the accumulation of disadvantage with age. Children living in disadvantaged environments are less likely to enter formal schooling adequately prepared (Heckman 2004), and these students then remain less likely to demonstrate strong performance throughout their schooling or attain key educational credentials (Heckman 2008; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Second, a longitudinal perspective has revealed how the degree and persistence of academic inequality depends on the developmental stage being considered, the duration and stability of children's environments, and the resources available to children across age and contexts. Researchers are increasingly focusing on how circumstances during critical and sensitive periods of development in early childhood contribute meaningfully to skill development and to the development of academic inequality (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000), and on how compensatory investments in families and schools may offset or reinforce previously existing inequalities (e.g., Gratz and Torche 2016).

Finally, the collection of longitudinal data has expanded the methodological toolkit available to researchers studying academic inequality. It is now possible to model stability and change in student achievement and to use temporal variation to identify stronger causal models of contextual effects on student achievement. Just in this volume, several papers model variation in children's family environment with age (Jackson, Kiernan and McLanahan) and use statistical approaches appropriate for longitudinal data to better control for unmeasured sources of variation between children and schools (e.g., Mizala and Torche). In the broader literature, researchers are increasingly using longitudinal data to isolate the effect of an educational policy by comparing the progress of similar children who have different exposures to the policy (e.g., Rauscher 2016).

Skills are multidimensional

The papers in this volume focus on academic achievement as a marker of educational inequality. A focus on achievement is justifiable given the strong and lasting effects of students' cognitive skills and achievement on students' eventual social and economic outcomes (Heckman 2006). At the same time, a growing body of research links children's "non-cognitive" or "soft" characteristics, including health, temperament, and behavior, to stratification processes over the life course, including family structure, children's academic achievement, and eventual labor market outcomes (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Diprete and Jennings 2012; Hall and Farkas 2011; Jackson 2010; Palloni 2006; Reichman, Corman, and

Noonan 2004). Future efforts to document the scope of educational inequality should examine the full set of skills implicated in patterns of educational inequality. An important feature of contemporary scholarship is its increasingly transdisciplinary perspective, as scholars in the social sciences incorporate insights from neuroscience, psychology and other fields into their conceptualization and measurement of early life environments and their effects on the development of skills necessary for educational progression (Heckman 2006; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000).

Institutional context matters

The last 50 years have brought enormous changes in the educational landscapes of children in their families, schools and communities. First, historic increases in income inequality in the United States in the last 40 years (e.g., Atkinson, Pikkety and Saez 2011) have dramatically altered the environments of children and families, with an increasingly differentiated opportunity structure for accessing high-quality housing, neighborhoods and schools, and goods and services related to children's skill development (Duncan and Murnane 2011; Kornrich and Furstenberg 2013). A growing body of scholarship examines the implications of changes in the degree of economic inequality for the degree of inequality in children's skill development and academic progress (Kalil et al. 2016; Reardon 2011). What is clear, though, is that the underlying structural determinants of children's environments persist in their impact, even as social and economic policies work to offset the effects of poverty and economic inequality. The need for research approaches that can connect to policy and practice remain as important as ever.

Second, the educational sector itself has changed in striking ways in the last 50 years, with an increasingly diversified school choice landscape that includes charter schools alongside public, private and religious schools. These changes introduce major challenges to providing a comprehensive assessment of the state of educational inequality in the future, given the ways in which the diversity of the educational sector selectively alters the student composition of schools. A related challenge to studying the educational sector in its entirety is the substantial variation across states and districts in the provision of educational funding and the oversight of instructional designs. However, better teachers matter to students' long-term outcomes (Chetty et al. 2014). Research has come a long way since Coleman in revealing ways to improve teachers' instruction. Promising evidence suggests that providing teachers with new curriculum *and* professional development opportunities to learn how to use that curriculum in meaningful ways can improve student outcomes (Roschelle et al. 2010; Saxe et al. 2001). Yet, how to take instructional improvement interventions to scale remains an open and uncertain terrain for both research and applied public policy.

Finally, it is important to inform the study of educational inequality with insights from other countries, where differences in educational systems alongside differences in demographic composition, cultural norms, and social service provision provide an opportunity to understand the generalizability of patterns observed in a particular country. It is important to understand whether findings observed in the United States can be generalized to other settings with more rigid educational tracking systems or more homogenous populations, as well as what the experiences of children in the educational systems of other countries (e.g.,

those undergoing rapid economic transition or engaging in large-scale national reforms) imply for conceptual models of the inputs to student skills and achievement.

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