

Jeff Howard

You Can't Get There from Here: The Need for a New Logic in Education Reform

AMERICAN EDUCATORS ARE NOT IN THE BUSINESS of preparing all children for the twenty-first century. Instead, they are paid to decide who can learn at high levels, and who cannot. Norm-referenced intelligence tests declare half of our children below average by age seven. Ability grouping is the next logical step; we segregate those we believe to be smart and confer on them exclusive access to rich and challenging curricula. A large percentage of the others, especially in urban settings, are designated as “slow learners” or “learning disabled” at the beginning of their educational careers. They are sorted *out* of math, science, and other rigorous subjects because there is no expectation that they are up to the level of learning required. Children in different tracks are often sent to different buildings, with assignment to “exam,” vocational, or general high schools publicly labeling them as gifted, average, or below average. It is a strange brand of education by elimination.

These are not the actions of a few bad apples among the teacher corps, or even of a misguided fringe of educational ideologues. They are standard practices, taught at our schools of education, supported by school boards and parent groups, and considered appropriate even by the people whose children are harmed by them. The effects are predictable and widespread: indifference to learning, declining skills, falling test scores, an increasing mismatch between the requirements of gainful employment and the capabilities of typical young Americans. Many children face serious social and economic obstacles outside the classroom, too, but

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85 This article was published in *Dædalus*, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Fall 1995, Vol. 124, No. 4.

our schools, instead of offering haven and hope, exacerbate the problems with pervasive labeling and exclusion. The failures we deplore are directly attributable to the instructional practices we support.

The first challenge of education reform is to explain why. The answer is neither mysterious nor complicated: self-defeating practices in American schools are logically grounded in shared, erroneous beliefs about learning capacity that prevail in American culture.

THE LOGIC OF THE PRESENT SYSTEM

A simple belief has structured American education for most of this century: intelligence is an innate endowment, fixed at birth and unequally distributed, setting the upper limits on a child's prospects for learning. Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve*¹ is only the most recent exposition of this view; its primary contribution is to make explicit the underlying, taken-for-granted assumptions of our education program. These may be summarized as follows: 1) There is a distribution of intelligence within what is considered the "normal" human population. 2) We can specify how much intelligence is needed to learn particular skills and concepts in school, and to fulfill particular vocational or professional functions in adult life. 3) We can employ standardized tests to measure children's intelligence, and then predict who will be able to master which skills and assume which functions. Ability group placements, matching intellectual demands of curricula to the intelligence of individual children, are made on the basis of these assessments.

I have dubbed this "the innate ability paradigm." It was articulated in the early part of this century by Lewis M. Terman, H. H. Goddard, and Robert M. Yerkes in a campaign that successfully insinuated into the American psyche the idea that genetic intellectual inequality controlled destiny.² This idea took hold because it explained social ills like prostitution and criminality in a manner that absolved society from responsibility (the congenitally stupid are strongly inclined toward immorality), and it provided a workable rationale for economic inequality (the poor are poor because they are too dim for work of more than marginal value). The

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“science” of intelligence testing also justified racism and anti-immigrant sentiments; Goddard’s massive and methodologically shoddy study of World War I army recruits declared that blacks and Southern European immigrants were mentally defective, which legitimized calls for the scientific management of “defective” individuals and groups, including selective limits on immigration.

The greatest and most lasting impact of these ideas derived from their appeal to the more moderate impulses of practical management of industrial society. As one thinker put it in 1921:

We can picture the educational system as having a very important function as a selecting agency, a means of selecting the men of best intelligence from the deficient and mediocre. All are poured into the system at the bottom; the incapable are soon rejected or drop out after repeating various grades and pass into the ranks of unskilled labor. . . .The more intelligent who are to be clerical workers pass into the high school; the most intelligent enter the universities whence they are selected for the professions.³

It was now possible, through the objective assessment of intellect (made possible by the development of “reliable” intelligence tests), to build education systems that served industry’s requirements for both highly educated and low-skilled workers in the proper proportions. It was the role of the school to identify the intellectually able and to sort them from the clericals and laborers, and to train each group according to the requirements of their positions and the limits of their intellects. Tracking people by measures of intellectual potential was already well established before World War II, and has remained a staple of American institutional life since.⁴

“Sort children by judgments of learning capacity; separate the bright from the dull.” *This* is the fundamental operating principle of our education program, the imperative that drives norm-referenced testing, tracking, ability grouping, gifted and talented programs, and all the rest. Practices explicitly designed to exclude millions from rigorous education seem entirely reasonable if you believe the requisite abilities to be unequally distributed. By now five generations have received this treatment; we have come to accept it as a fundamental aspect of “the way things are.” Most Americans are so well indoctrinated that we meekly acquiesce in

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the practices of judging and sorting, even when negative judgments and inferior group assignments are delivered on our own children. Our teachers were socialized in our institutions too, and learned to regard the traditional practices as *logical*—perfectly aligned with culturally validated beliefs about intelligence. Reform efforts that attempt to replace these practices without first challenging the beliefs that underlie them are regarded as illogical and impractical. In a recent staff development workshop a veteran teacher offered this advice to the frustrated seminar facilitator: “Your ‘best practices’ are all very interesting, but if you want better output from the schools in this town. . .send us better kids.”

Disbelief in the intelligence of our people, rooted in the innate ability paradigm, has effectively blocked education reform in the United States. Here is the paralyzing contradiction at the heart of the failure of our schools: teachers understand the futility of using fancy new pedagogy on children already certified as too dull to grasp challenging material. Thus, the would-be reformer, lost in this bell-curved land, confronts the reply dreaded by hapless travelers everywhere: “You can’t get there from here.”

A NEW LOGIC FOR A NEW SYSTEM

The discouraging message is logically correct—too many dumb children nullify better instructional practices—but it is ultimately false because the premise is wrong. There is, in fact, nothing wrong with our children. They can learn at advanced levels as well as any children in the world. The mind of a normal child can be developed through practice; learning capacity is a function of will and effort, endowments available to nearly all of us. *High level learning capacity is broadly distributed in the population.* I will ask, for the moment, that skeptical readers suspend disbelief in this assertion as we briefly explore the texture of an approach to education built on confidence—the belief that normal American children, in all their diversity, have the innate capacity to learn at very high levels.

Confidence in the learning capacity of our children is the psychological foundation for an entirely different approach to education, built around a new operating principle: *set aggressive, twenty-first-century standards as high school exit criteria, then align all*

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curricula, policies, and instructional practices to the demands of accelerating the development of all children to meet these standards. Appropriate standards might include mastery of calculus or probability statistics, fluency in a second language, and production of a literate, cogent twenty-five page essay on a topic of literature or social studies. Once exit standards are established, all the operations of school systems will be organized to achieve them. At every grade level, educators will monitor student mastery against clearly defined “benchmark” skills, stepping-stones toward the ultimate standards. Appropriate standards will apply to all children, not just those few designated as “gifted and talented.”

In the context of American education as we have known it in this century, the idea of entire school systems committed to achieving high standards with all students is revolutionary; it will require a reorganization of thinking, and policies and practices will have to be driven by a fundamentally different logic. The shift cannot happen in school cultures still dominated by the ideology of innate, fixed intelligence; universal high standards make no sense to educators convinced that only a few can meet them.

We need a dynamic conception of learning capacity to anchor a constructive new logic: think of “intellectual development”—instead of fixed intelligence—as the process of building analytic and operational capability. It is the gradual accretion of skills, knowledge, and learning capacity. Development is fueled by effective effort, that is, a committed, focused, and strategic approach to work. The capacity to commit effort of this kind is a function of children’s psychological states, especially their confidence that they have what it takes to learn. In our work with educators we have represented these relationships simply:

Confidence —→ Effective Effort —→ Development

Effective teachers have always understood this. But in twentieth-century America it represents a new paradigm about learning capacity, and offers a new way of looking at children and the practices we use to school them. Teachers who understand that development is a process take for granted that all the children in their classrooms can learn at high levels if they can be induced to work hard enough. They know that confidence is highly dependent on the character of the learning environment. That is the

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effective teacher's leverage, and the secret weapon of effective reform: build confidence as a basis for committed effort and learning.⁵ Normal children operating in environments pervaded by belief, discipline, and structured effort experience achievement, and with it the profound satisfactions of high level learning. This is intrinsic motivation, the basis of personal commitments to development.

Practices that sort and eliminate will make no sense to educators who operate in the new logic of intellectual development, dedicated to the mission of achieving twenty-first-century standards. Now cooperative learning, direct instruction, criterion-referenced testing, portfolio assessments, and a host of other proven strategies will seem reasonable and pedagogically sound. Teachers will begin to fully exploit what Jon Saphier calls the "knowledge base of teaching"⁶ and invent new techniques of their own to get all children to targeted standards.

BUILDING A NEW SYSTEM

The commitment to restructure the policies and practices of our schools on the "set aggressive standards/accelerate development" operating principle is the appropriate mission for education reform. Following is a sequence for building such a new system.

First, we must break the hold of the peculiar ideology that declares that the great majority of American children are too dull to learn challenging material. We need a national campaign to transform the public's belief about our children's learning capacities—galvanized by the understanding that belief is the basis of effective teaching and learning and that the lack of it will continue to undermine systematic reform. An effective campaign will harmonize national and local political leadership, local education leaders, and school reformers, all singing from the same hymnal, promoting a constructive belief system with conviction and in language all Americans can embrace. "Getting Smart" is the theme we have used with great effect with children and adults: Smart is not something you just are; smart is something you can *get*.

Second, using this constructive belief system as a foundation, we must win broad acceptance of the "set high standards/accelerate" operating principle; together they establish the logic for effective

instructional practice. Operating from the new logic, educators will align school policies and classroom practices to the mission of achieving targeted standards.

Third, teachers, principals, central office administrators, and school board members—indeed, all those with authority over schools—will evaluate their effectiveness solely on the basis of improvements in student outcomes. All reform initiatives, including those from sources external to school districts, will be evaluated in terms of their measurable contributions to improve the percentage of children who hit the target.

Fourth, we will use our schools of education and in-service staff development programs to expose educators to the new belief system and instructional strategies consistent with the new operating principle.

Above all, education reform efforts must quickly achieve measurable improvements in student outcomes. The public will no longer accept complicated excuses for continued failure and vague promises about future progress. They have been frustrated with public education for too long, and they are actively exploring other options.

We can take our cues from people like Jaime Escalante, who has taught calculus to some of the poorest children in California, and J. Jerome Harris, who, as Community Superintendent in Brooklyn, presided over significant improvements in the academic performance of some of the worst schools in New York (in 1973, 21 percent of his students were reading at or above grade level; by 1986, this figure had increased to 65.2 percent). Harris achieved similar results in sixteen of Atlanta's lowest performing schools in his first year as superintendent there. Teachers in Tacoma and Detroit, using the Efficacy approach and rejecting ability grouping, have achieved dramatic gains in their students' reading and math performance. These educators, and the small band of others operating anonymously across America, actually teach children from blighted neighborhoods and disorganized families; they set high standards, expose students to challenging curricula, and achieve striking results. Not many teachers do this, perhaps a few dozen in a typical school system, but enough to demonstrate what is possible. Their work proves that learning capacity is not a fixed

characteristic or the exclusive domain of the gifted and talented, and that committed educators can get results.

In light of this evidence, the raging debate about whether our children are intelligent enough to learn at high levels says more about us than it does about them. We come by our disbelief naturally; all but a small minority of American adults were taught by *their* parents and teachers to regard themselves as less than gifted and talented. Lack of confidence runs very deep in our culture, and shapes our thinking about our children and ourselves. But there is nothing wrong with us. Effective teachers prove it every day. Effective school reform must prove it on a district-wide scale, perhaps in several cities simultaneously. We already have the tools to do it. Some of us must make the commitment, declare our intentions, get the results, and demand that the country pay attention. We will do historic national service if we change the public mind about our children's intelligence. We are smart enough to pull it off.

ENDNOTES

¹Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

²This history has been thoroughly documented by Stephen Jay Gould in *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981).

³W. B. Pillsbury, from a 1921 article entitled "Selection, An Unnoticed Function of Education," as quoted in Jeannie Oakes, *Keeping Track* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 35.

⁴It does not end with formal education. The human resource practices of most American corporations and many other adult institutions include "potentials ratings"—assessments of intelligence and capacity for success beyond one's present station—used as a basis for tracking individual careers and for managing succession to senior ranks.

⁵The relationship between confidence and effort can work in reverse, too; this is the poor teacher's undoing. Confidence is easily bruised by abusive behavior or by a simple lack of belief. Teachers (and for that matter, parents and communities) who communicate low expectations cripple children's motivation to commit effort. The lack of development that results "confirms" the assessment of limited ability.

⁶Jon Saphier and Robert Gower, *The Skillful Teacher*, 4th ed. (Carlisle, Mass.: Research for Better Teaching, Inc., 1987).

This article was published in *Dædalus*, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Fall 1995, Vol. 124, No. 4.