Education: Not a Real Utopian Design

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A good deal of this essay is devoted to why the task we have been set seems to be impossible. The rest is devoted to attempting a related, but less ambitious task.

Real Utopias

What is a real utopian design? We take it to have the following features:

1. It specifies one mechanism, or several interrelated mechanisms, which, once adopted, will be capable of maintaining a steady state equilibrium: change that is feasible not (necessarily) in the sense that it can, right now or in the near future, be achieved, but in the sense that once implemented it will work, roughly, in the way intended over time.

2. The proposed change is designed by reference to a set of radically egalitarian normative principles. We find the variant of radical egalitarianism proposed in Envisioning Real Utopias – which is, to simplify considerably, a mild neo-Aristotelian perfectionism in which the interests of those who are least advantaged get very strong priority -- appealing, but other versions of radical egalitarianism are plausible, and this is reflected in the fact that existing Real Utopian proposals are variously animated.

3. The proposed change, if implemented, would make a substantial shift toward the realization of the principles that motivate it, and would, in doing so, prefigure in some way that institutions of a more ideal, more utopian, future. The design need not be transitional, but it should be prefigurative. Wright has (in conversation) suggested the following test of whether a design counts as real utopian: it is real utopian, as opposed to merely reformist, if it, or something very like it, would be a feature of a steady state equilibrium in a society which fully realized the egalitarian ideals that motivate the real utopias project. On this criterion, then, affirmative action for example would not count as a real utopian design; because even though it may be an urgently necessary mechanism for mitigating or eliminating racial inequality, it would not be present in a world without racial inequality.

4. Although there is no formal requirement to this effect, a nice feature of a real utopian design is that it directly informs variants that would be successful across a wide range of national and cultural contexts.

Our paradigm case of a real utopian proposal is John Roemer's voucher socialist proposal. The proposal is informed by a fairly stringent version of a principle of equal opportunity: everyone should have roughly equal opportunities, and inequalities of outcome should reflect choices they have made for which they can be held responsible.

Roemer then proposes that everyone be given (by the state) an equal value coupon, or voucher, which they can only spend on investing in capital markets. Being markets, the value of the investments will rise or fall over time, as will the income yielded. Some will invest well, others badly, and at they will live with the consequences. At the end of life the coupon, whatever its current size, is returned to the commons and its value distributed to the next generation.

In other words Roemer describes a single, far-reaching, mechanism which, if implemented, would improve things (he argues, pretty convincingly) with respect to equal opportunity. He argues, pretty effectively, that, if implemented, the mechanism would be stable, and not have self-defeating properties, and would not undermine other important principles/values sufficiently badly that we should not do it. And it addresses a problem of justice in many otherwise quite different societies: in fact at the time he was writing, several societies were in transition, such that, with the right kind of political will, it was not absurd to think of the mechanism being adopted in some form (South Africa, and the former Soviet bloc countries). Finally, Roemer's proposal is inserted into the entire economy; even if just some significant fraction of capital were converted into a coupon to be used as Roemer proposed, it is something that makes sense, (in our opinion) would improve things in a wide range of circumstances, and might prefigure larger changes.

Real Utopias for Education

Roemer's coupon socialism is an economy-wide proposal – one that could be expected to have far-reaching effects on the distribution of income and wealth, but also on the distribution of social power, and on other sectors of social and political life. Similarly the basic income grant proposal offered by Philippe Van Parijs and Robert Van Der Veen, the stakeholder proposal from Bruce Ackerman and Anne Alstott, and the cluster of egalitarian proposals made by Sam Bowles and Herbert Gintis. We have been charged with a rather different task: proposing a real utopian design for a specific sector of social and political life which, in our opinion, will be fairly limited in its effect on the overall structure of the economy and the balance of social power. There may be sectors of social life for which it is possible to design far-reaching proposals that have a real utopian flavor (see, eg, Rethinking Gender Equality). But we think it is especially difficult to make such proposals for the compulsory education sector, for several reasons.

1. Changing the economy is a way of changing the entire distribution of resources for the adult life course. The same is not true of changing the distribution of education, at least if education is understood as schooling roughly as we have traditionally done it. Certainly, shifting the distribution of educational achievement and increasing (or decreasing) the mean attainment would have some effects on the economy; but the effects are not easy to predict, and would vary a great deal from one economy to another, including across wealthy industrial and post-industrial economies.

2. There's a particular problem with compulsory education, which is that it involves adult treatment of children. Certainly educators should prepare students to be able to contribute

to social change (in the right direction) and certainly they should prepare them to be able to negotiate whatever changes occur. But they are also obliged to prepare children to flourish in the environment they have good reason to expect them to inhabit. This requires different curriculums and instruction for different children (in our social circumstances) and different curriculums and instruction in different societies depending on what changes one has reason to anticipate. To give a stark and depressing illustration of the first point, in the United States, currently, about 25% of children live below the poverty line at any given time, and a substantial proportion of those live in poverty throughout their childhoods, and within quite high concentrations of disadvantage. A large proportion of those are extremely likely to enter, and stay in, the part of the labor market in which employment is ill paid, insecure, and work is dull, repetitive, and stressful (and which will remain that way, pretty much, whatever realistic changes are made in the education system). Only a very small proportion will graduate from 4-year colleges. The curriculum and instruction that will help those children flourish in the strata of society they will inhabit may be quite different from those we would propose if we thought they had realistic chances of doing much better, and different also than those we would propose if we thought that there was some good prospect of radically reconfiguring the reward structure.

This matters, as do the next two points, because we take it as one of the rules of the game that, when proposing a real utopian design for education, we cannot assume a radically changed background social environment.

3. To make things more complicated, we are not confident that the theory of justice that should guide the distribution of educational opportunities or experiences is invariant with respect to the distribution of other goods in the society. Think of a more or less egalitarian society, in which the stakes and in which the increased social productivity made available by enlarging the stock of human capital through education is really going to be turned largely to the benefit of the whole of society, prioritizing those who are worse off, because highly redistributive policies are in place, and an egalitarian ethos informs the choices of highly skilled and educated people. Then we might think that inequalities of educational opportunity that reflect, for example, the education level and social status of parents, are largely unobjectionable: everyone will benefit from the resulting productivity growth, not just those who make the gains in human capital. But in a society (like ours) in which those who get the best educational opportunities and experiences are able to capture much or all of the pay-off to the enhancement of their personal human capital, and are inclined to do so, and in which pecuniary and other rewards are distributed unjustly unequally, then we might think that equalizing the quality of educational opportunities and experiences is much more important than in the other circumstances – because it matters that the competition for unfairly unequally distributed goods be fair. To put it a different way: if the fruits of social cooperation were distributed to the benefit of the least advantaged then our concern would simply be with the development of human capital tout court, and perhaps not at all concerned with the distribution of the development of human capital; but the more unjustly distributed the fruits of social cooperation are, the more reason we have to be concerned with the distribution of its development.

4. There are limits to what reforming the structure of the education system and the internal life of school can do (absent other kinds of reform) both for the distribution and amount of educational achievement, and even for the character of school life. We shall elaborate on this later, but for the moment we make a simple observation that what a child learns from school depends on the interaction between the child and the school, and how that interaction goes depends in turn on the interaction between the child and the external (out-of-school) environment, and between the school and the external environment. If the rules of the game forbid us from assuming a radically changed social environment, then the contribution of schools and school systems to changing the distribution of educational opportunities may be modest; and what we should propose may vary considerably depending on the background environment. To give a simple example; whereas in countries with free or inexpensive and well-run health care systems, schools with large numbers of relatively disadvantaged children might sensibly restrict themselves to having a nurse on hand for immediate care and emergencies, in countries without the same (the US), the job of school principle might include being CEO of a small primary care clinic attached to the school.

The causal relationship between school system, child, and background environment, and variations in achievement, is represented in the following chart (drawn from the work of Richard Rothstein – thanks to Gina Schouten for compiling the chart)

FIG 1 Here .....→

5. Even when it comes to school systems, for any given substantial reform, whether it would make a substantial improvement with respect to justice may vary quite a bit depending on the circumstances. So, think of formal school choice mechanisms in which the funding directly follows the child, either explicitly in the form of vouchers, or which mimic vouchers (as in the UK). Suppose that the only purpose is to improve the quality of the educational opportunities for low-income children. Whether they will do so depends, of course, partly on the design of the scheme (eg, in our opinion it is plausible that the original design of the Milwaukee voucher scheme benefitted many low income children, whereas the recent revisions to the scheme has eviscerated those features that made that plausible); but also on the quality of the alternatives; what the real baseline of comparison is. One key relationship is between how well civil servants run a system absent choice, and the capacity of low-income parents to make good choices for their children. If civil servants run the system sufficiently badly, low-income parents can be poor choosers and still their children may be better off; if the civil servants run it well, then low income parents have to be much better choosers for a choice scheme to benefit their children.

To describe a "really utopian" education system we have to say something what sort of society it is for. But if we describe a real utopian *society*, while education would be an important feature of that society, we can imagine that it would be institutionalized in any of many different ways. If we describe a society that is not, itself, really utopian then, we

believe, the education system will, largely, reflect that society; it is not realistic to propose educational institutions whose character varies considerably from that of the society in which they are nested. We can say some fairly abstract things about what any good education system would be like (whatever the background, and however it is institutionalized). But not offer much in the way of mechanisms for making it like that.

So we are not exactly going to make a real utopian proposal. Instead we are going to survey four kinds of reform that between them, we believe, hold promise for making the American school system more egalitarian and more humane. In fact, as we shall observe, three of these kinds of reform probably do meet one standard for counting as real utopian – they would be desirable features of any steady state schooling system in a just, or more or less just, society. Maybe it would be better to call our proposals "real moderately bettertarian". We are really proposing reforms that would, we think, improve the performance of schools with respect to some important principles at the margins. Even the reforms we suggest are really developed in the context of a single schooling system, the US. Some of what we propose is already done elsewhere. But more fundamentally, we believe that what reforms a decision-maker should adopt will be highly context-dependent; the decision will depend on what is feasible and cost-effective in her particular circumstances.

Some assumptions and principles

So, we have taken our starting point as the US education system, under the following assumptions.

1. The economy is capitalist
2. The reward schedule is distributively unjust and very unequal (something like that in the US)
3. The level of relative child poverty will not change radically
4. Formal education is important for successful participation in the economy

Under those assumptions, the following principles of justice, fairly roughly specified, seem to be important for education.

1. The extent to which social and economic class determines the quality of a child's educational experience, and her subsequent prospects for success in labour markets, should be smaller than it currently is (equal opportunity principle)

2. The educational experience and subsequent prospects for success in labour markets of those whose experience and prospects are worst (30%) are more urgent than those of other children (and of the next 10% than the 10% above that, etc). (Priority to the worse off principle)

3. The experience of all children while in school should be a humane one (Childhood prison principle)

Notice that these principles do not include any principles concerning participatory democratic control of schools, or participatory democratic life within schools, either for parents and community members on the one hand, or for employees and students on the other. This is not because we view participatory democratic institutions and practices as unimportant parts of a radically improved society, nor because we view participation in decision-making in the life of schools unimportant even in our unimproved society. But however important they are as part of a radically improved society, we do not see significant improvement in schools as directly bringing those about. And however important they are in schools is a matter of how well they help to realize the principles that we have stated above. We shall, later, identify a tension between the proposals we make and participatory democratic decision-making especially within schools.

What are we going to focus on:
1. School size
2. National standards and assessments
3. Extended school (which includes external–to-school reforms
4. Charter schools
5. Some skeptical comments about choice (Forget this, no room).

Gaps in Valuable Achievement

A final preliminary. Contemporary debate on education in the US focuses heavily on the achievement gap between white children on the one hand and black and Latino children on the other. The evidence of gaps uses the following 3 measures, especially the third:

- Attainment—the number of years a child attends school
- Graduation—whether or not they graduate from high school
- Achievement—how well they perform on tests of narrowly defined achievement, usually reading and mathematics

Attainment is a rough grained measure; the difference between the number of years that two children attended school tells us only probabilistically some quite limited information about the gap in the quality of educational opportunities and experiences they have enjoyed. Similarly, if one child graduates and another doesn't, we have some evidence of a gap, but within each group (graduates and non-graduates) there is massive variance. And while achievement tests generally give more fine-grained results, they tend to be reported in a rough grained way in the US: the Federal No Child Left Behind Law mandated reporting of the percentage within each of several demographic groups reaching proficiency, which is an arbitrary cut-off point that varies between States and, oddly, over time.

Up to now we have talked about redistributing and enhancing the quality of "educational opportunities and experiences". But ultimately, for reasons we are not going to explain here, what we are ultimately interested in (mostly) is the distribution of valuable educational achievement; we want students to have high quality educational opportunities because those are what lead to valuable achievements. None of the above measures tells us directly about valuable educational achievement: not even achievement scores. What counts as valuable achievement depends on what account one adopts of what the aims of education should be. This is something that we can confidently say something about that is context-independent. Broadly speaking, the aims of education should be to equip children to flourish in the society they will inhabit, and to equip and incline them to treat other people well, both in personal and in impersonal interactions. Unfortunately this, in itself, is not especially helpful either in guiding either measurement or practice. This is not just because what is needed varies between contexts: in a preliterate society reading and writing are not crucial for personal flourishing, or for good treatment of others; in postindustrial economies it is more or less necessary for both. It is also because, unfortunately, we have limited knowledge of what learning children need to negotiate the world effectively, or what learning inclines them to treat other people well.

Realistic Moderatelybettertopian proposals.

1.School size

In the first half of the 2000s the Gates Foundation devoted some unspecified but large amount of money to breaking up large high school and supporting new small ones. The absence of high quality research findings demonstrating significant improvements in the quality of educational experience and academic outcomes seems, to us, to have triggered a skepticism in parts of the educational community about the significance of school size. We think that this skepticism is misplaced. Indeed, the Gates Foundation efforts and similar reforms supported by Department of Education funds may have been an inefficient use of funds (see Elizabeth City's remarkable book Resourceful Leadership for a detailed account of two Gates-funded small schools, and for an account of the various errors that were common on the ground). We offer reasons here, though, for thinking that small size facilitates, even if it does not make inevitable, various improvements that are much harder to achieve in large schools. We shall argue, that large schools have specific inefficiencies that, we think, lead to suboptimal outcomes for many children, especially more disadvantaged children. School size seems like a technical issue, and in fact some of our argument has a technical feel to it. But our conjectures are rooted in concern with emotional and moral development, the quality of daily experience in childhood, and the distribution of cognitive development and we elaborate them because we want to open them up to scrutiny.

Urban and suburban school districts in the U.S. run spectacularly large schools by international standards: 2000 to 3000 is typical. If you think of school size in terms of cohort size (which we think you should, for reasons we shall give), these schools are even larger than the numbers make them look: US compulsory schooling is typically organized in three, rather than two, stages, so the US high school typically has only 4 year groups,

rather than the typical 5, 6 or 7 in many European countries This large size emerged because of two distinct phenomena -- unwillingness to build new schools as de facto school leaving ages rose in the 40's and 50's, and a self-conscious movement for large high schools in particular on economies-of-scale grounds in the 1950's, as part of the scare that Russia was ahead in the space race.

The reason we have to depend on conjecture in advocating smaller school size is that the existing literature on small schools is not empirically convincing. Most articles and books focus on individual schools, highlighting the good aspects of that particular school. But they do not make convincing comparisons with relevantly similar large schools. Here are some representative claims:

* Teachers are more enthusiastic in, and work harder in, small schools.
* Completion rates are higher in small schools.
* Small schools expel a smaller proportion of students.
* A higher proportion of students in small schools reach college.
* Parents are more involved in the school life of the students of small schools.
* Small schools experience less violence than large schools.

However, none of these claims are well sustained. First, the studies do not, and do not even attempt to, control for the fact that typically children (and their putatively more involved parents) select into the schools in question. Nor do they control for the fact that teachers, too, select into the schools. In Debbie Meier's Richman school complex, for example, Meier secured the cooperation of the AFT to allow widespread early retirements before the schools were established: she was able to start anew with a largely staff handpicked from an applicant pool that was no doubt enlarged by the excitement of participating in such an experiment to be overseen by a renowned and charismatic leader (Toch 35-37). This is symptomatic of a general problem with claiming from the success of some discrete educational reform that widespread adoption of the reform would yield similar benefits; the possibility that such reforms depend for their apparent discrete success on acting as magnets for particularly good teachers and administrators, of whom there is fixed supply at any given funding level. The studies do not control for the quality of leadership that small schools in the US are able to attract as long as they are the exception rather than the rule. Nor do they control for the intervention effect -- the effect on the performance of teachers and students of knowing that they are participating in an exciting departure from normal practice. The violence study does not control for the student population; it includes rural small schools in the figures.

So why do we think that small schools promise to improve the quality of educational experiences and in such a way that particularly benefits disadvantaged children?

Up to a certain size larger schools yield economies of scale, both transparent and hidden. Larger schools can offer a greater variety of courses, and have more market power in a range of purchasing activities. Below a certain size it is not worth maintaining its own kitchen; administration is disproportionately expensive; it is hard to allocate

teaching staff efficiently, etc. Larger schools can provide larger playing fields more efficiently, drama studios, science labs, etc. The political impetus behind large schools was driven by concern especially for science education and a worry that without access to the science facilities only large schools could efficiently provide American students would fall behind in international comparisons, with consequences for the competitiveness of the US economy and, especially, the military applications of science and technology. Less obvious benefits include the fact that once schools are above a certain size they are more susceptible to management efforts to change existing practices by increasing the costs to teachers of forming oppositional blocks (there are more of them, and they have less solidarity) and by allowing management to hire more frequently. In larger schools teacher turnover is more likely to be gradual, and teachers come and go more frequently, again allowing managers to shape the faculty to fit their own designs.

Some of these economies of scale are undeniable. But small schools should also yield economies that are much less visible but liable to be equally important. While the empirical literature on small schools is, in our opinion, inconclusive, we believe that small schools offer potential gains in humanizing the experience, and gaining learning time, that are much harder to achieve in large schools.

Let's start with a stylized example. Consider two schools, each with a 20:1 pupil:teacher ratio, and 4 cohorts. School A has 100 pupils per cohort (so 20 teachers); school B has 500 pupils per cohort (so 100 teachers). First consider life in the corridor. In school A, within about 6 months, every student recognizes every teacher in the corridor, and every teacher recognizes every student. So whenever one of the students misbehaves in front of a teacher, the student knows that her name is known by the teacher, and she is liable to be held to account. Assuming that the number of students a teacher can really get to know well is about 100, and assuming that students and teachers move around the corridors at the same rate in each school, during any given encounter a student is many times more likely to be interacting with someone with whom they have a relationship in a small than in a large school.

Now think about the classroom experience. There is considerable variability among children in the kinds of experience that triggers successful learning; instruction has to be individualized to a considerable extent. But individualizing instruction requires a great deal of knowledge about the student, much of which is uncodifiable, and even the other parts of which it would be inefficient to codify. When a teacher knows a student well, whatever her skill level as an instructor, she is much better placed to individualize instruction to the student.

A great deal of time and emotional energy that could otherwise go to instruction is absorbed by the establishment of the teacher-student relationship necessary for learning. In order for students to learn they have to be ready and willing to put considerable effort into the enterprise. Depending on their independent level of engagement with school, students need more or less attention from, and a sense of trust in, the teacher. Knowing the teacher, and that the teacher knows and cares about you makes it easier to learn other things equal, and for many students it is a precondition of learning.

Finally, time and energy are expended by teachers and students in developing and managing the relationships among students. Students who are eager to learn are focused on the teacher, but students who are not are focused on each other. For almost all students, furthermore, school is to s significant extent a social as well as socializing

experience; this is where they make and maintain the key friendships of their childhood and adolescence. They take time in class getting to know each other, and class is the main location for this process (especially in American high schools which often have short lunch breaks and little or no recess). In short, the relationships required for successful learning require high transaction costs.

This is true as long as we assume that students are randomly assigned to teachers across the four years. But this is not realistic, and recognizing this indicates how some of the conjectured benefits of small schools could be achieved within large schools through re-organisation. Large schools could deliberately manage children so that they repeatedly interacted with the same teachers over the years, by effectively establishing 'schools within schools'. Students would not get a choice to exit from a relationship (as they commonly do in large US high schools) and nor would teachers. This would not help relationships outside the classroom but it would help learning inside the classroom. Large schools could simultaneously act to reduce the number of students with whom a given student would share classes over the years, again helping with in-class, but not outside-the-classroom, relationships.

We are concerned not just with justice (the distribution of the quality of educational experiences) but also another value; ensuring that the compulsory attendance of school be a humane and pleasant experience for each child. It should be obvious how small schools (or mimicry of small schools) make the experience of school more humane and pleasant for many students. But why should we think that the benefits we have identify would alter the distribution of the quality of educational experiences: i.e. why think that they would redound to the benefit of the lowest achieving students?

Consider the following comment, co-written by one of the pioneers of the literature on school effectiveness and school improvement:

> A large scale longitudinal study of primary schools carried out by one of us [Mortimore] found that no school reversed the usual 'in school' pattern of advantaged pupils performing better than the disadvantaged. However, some of the disadvantaged pupils in the most effective schools made more progress than their advantaged peers in the least effective schools and did even better in absolute terms. Yet…it would appear that, if all primary schools were to improve so that they performed at the level of the most effective, the difference between the overall achievement of the most advantaged social groups and that of the disadvantaged might increase. (Whitty and Mortimore, 2000)

The message is that for some school improvement measures at least, while they will benefit the least achieving students if they are restricted to schools where those students are concentrated, will not benefit them relative to more advantaged students if they are pursued across the board. Would small schools be like this?

We already indicated that many of the advantages claimed by advocates of small schools, even if they are present at all, might well evaporate if small schools were widespread. We have focused our attention on those advantages that should not evaporate. But even if they do not evaporate it is possible that, while benefiting all, they

benefit those who are already advantaged more, thus widening the gap. Here are some reasons for optimism about this:

* For each child there must be some saturation point, at which the extra resources spent on educating the child are not producing better educational outcomes. My conjecture is that advantaged children in large schools are much closer to this saturation point than disadvantaged children. The additional resources 'freed up' by the efficiency benefits of small schools, if directed across the board, should benefit those further from the saturation point more.

* Relatedly, we conjecture that most of the benefits of enhanced relationships flow directly to disadvantaged children, because they are the children whose outcomes are most compromised by poor relationships.

* Finally, we should not ignore the losses in the move from large to small schools. There will be less scope for electives, less scope for specialization, fewer languages, less impressive drama facilities, and worse sports facilities. We suspect that these losses impact the most advantaged most -- it is the college bound children, and especially the elite college bound children, who benefit most form these advantages of large schools. The possible exception, of course, concerns sports facilities. Our conjecture concerning those is that there is no real loss (academically) because good sports facilities and coaching do not confer academic benefits on those who participate, relative to less expensive sports and coaching facilities. If we are wrong about this (and we am not aware of a stable consensus among scholars of these issues), it is worth noting that collegiate arrangements could recapture some of the benefits to scale concerning sports facilities and coaching (and, for that matter, Drama, etc).

Our claims here are highly conjectural: they point to directions for experimentation and research, and should not be regarded as categorical.

How might school size be relevant to social and emotional development? Advocates tend to focus, naturally enough, on the feasibility of building a distinctive community in a small school: a community within which every child personally knows several adults, and in which some adults know all the children. But small schools may also make more feasible an otherwise hard-to-open route to social and emotional development. We want citizens to have some understanding of the different ways in which other citizens live, and we value the capacity to make judgments about the values and practices that one lives by. One of the central mechanisms for achieving these two goals is ensuring that schools contain a sufficiently diverse mix of children that they can learn about alternative ways of living by interacting intimately with other children who live those alternative 'from the inside' as it were. One can learn more about Christian or Muslim beliefs and practices, or English or Argentinian traditions, by discussing them with, and closely observing someone who adheres to them in their own homes with whom one has in common a school experience and whom one can genuinely regard as a peer than by reading about them or even learning about them from a teacher. Children visit each other's homes, interact with each other's families, and explore ideas and

practices together. The view of an alternative way of life they can get form this is in some ways more accurate and in many ways more realistic, than they can get any other feasible way.

But surely, a larger school allows, other things being equal, for a better mix of different kinds of student, and so enhances the opportunities for children to become autonomous? Certainly, it allows for a better mix. But it simultaneously increases the opportunity for children to sort themselves into internally homogenous sub-groups.

To see how this works suppose that a child approaches friend-making with the following considerations, in order of priority:

1) I want to make at least 10 friends
2) I want to make friends with people whose personality traits are congruent with mine
3) I want to make friends with people whose background is relevantly like mine.

The larger the school, the more likely it is that there will be at least 10 people who meet the two main desired criteria, and will be willing to make friends with her. The smaller the school, the more restricted her pool of potential friends will be, and the more likely she is to be forced to dip into the pool of people with relevantly different kinds of background.

The mechanism only works, of course, if the child prioritizes criterion 2 over criterion 3. If she does the reverse she will end up with an unfortunate group of friends and no-one from a relevantly different background. Similarly, she may care so much about avoiding the 'Other' that she will simply restrict her number of friends in the circumstances. The conjecture that small school can enhance interactions in this way depends on a gamble.

Further, given neighbourhood segregation, the mechanism is less liable to work if small schools are neighbourhood schools, since the desired mix of backgrounds are less likely to be achieved. A large school will do better at achieving mix than a small school if both draw exclusively on their local neighbourhoods for children, because the big school's neighbourhood is larger (and hence, other things being equal, more diverse). So this putative advantage of small schools depends on not having neighbourhood schooling (assuming segregated neighbourhoods). However, another advantage of small schools is that they allow for a greater diversity of kinds of school within a fixed geographic location. There is no loss of connection between school and locale if several small schools serve a give geographical location which was previously served by one large school. The key is to ensure that each of those smaller schools contains children with an appropriate mix of backgrounds.

2. Cross-school standards and assessments

In their remarkable history of Title One, a Federal program designed in the 60s to bring increased funding to schools with low-income children, David Cohen and Susan Moffitt provide a powerful explanation of why the program has had so little effect on the learning of low-income children. Several factors interact to produce this result, but we want to focus on just one: the absence of an infrastructure for learning what low-income students

are learning and from whom, so that others can learn better how to prompt them to learn.

Schools are complex, socially constructed, resources. It takes time and expertise to train teachers and school managers: both teaching and managing are crafts, success in which involves getting numerous micro-decisions per hour right, which in turn requires training, observation, reflection and experience. A successful school is one in which the skills of the many individual teachers are effectively harnessed together by skillful managers and leaders who facilitate continuous professional development and instructional improvement. But such improvements cannot occur in a vacuum; they require a supporting infrastructure.

Think about how you generally learn a new skill, or sharpen an existing one. We'll take learning to play the guitar as our example, for no particular reason. The first stages of learning to play the guitar are straightforward; you learn some basic skills, and develop some suppleness in your hand and fingers. But if you wants to play at all well – not well enough to make a career of it, but well enough to play in front of strangers without embarrassment – you find somebody who already plays well. You watch, and listen, reflecting on what they are doing, noting that they do some things you can mimic, and others that you cannot (or cannot at this stage). You then mimic them; usually you will try to find many good guitarists, with different styles, mimicking several as you try to learn how to do specific things, such like very rapid chord changes, changes between chords that require you to move speedily up and down the neck, stretching your fingers for a particularly wide chords, different percussive habits, etc. You monitor your own performance, of course, but typically you also get some one or several other people to monitor your performance too, giving you suggestions, telling you that something you think is working isn't, etc. For most people – not, perhaps, for the tiny handful of stunningly talented players, but for most, including most who become successful professionals – this process is iterative, and takes many hours of watching, listening, reflection, and practice. Eventually the guitarist develops his or her own style, which will probably resemble another's style or be identifiably composed of several existing styles or, maybe, will be noticeably original. But even the highly original player – think of Jimi Hendrix, or Bert Jansch – has a large set of skills in common with other, lesser, players, which have been developed in much the same way.

Teaching really is not different, except in one important way. Good teaching is composed of a very large set of complex skills that are developed through observation, mimicry, reflection, and practice; you do not (usually, even if you are a highly successful professional) learn to be a good teacher without watching others who are successful, mimicking them in various ways, reflecting, altering your practice to suit you better, and practicing in the presence of observers who can provide feedback. The difference, though, is this: finding the good guitarist to mimic is simply a matter of watching and listening to the performance, whereas when looking for the good teacher, however well you listen to or watch the performance you cannot evaluate it without knowledge that is not readily available; namely whether, what, and how much the students learn.

But how do we know whether, what, and how much students learn? And, given that one

of our central concerns here is improving the quality of the experience and learning of disadvantaged students, how do we know specifically what they are learning, and from whom? What you need are measurements of what they have learned. Until 2001 Federal law in the US required no measurement of student achievement at all: Title One funds targeted high concentrations of disadvantaged students, but were not conditional on their learning.

Now it is important at this stage to distinguish two quite different purposes that measuring the progress of student could have. The rhetoric around the 2001 iteration of ESEA, and of more recent discussions of "value-added" achievement data, has emphasized just one of these purposes: holding schools (and even teachers) accountable for student learning as a condition of the Federal funding. Lets call this the *Accountability* purpose. We are not ill-disposed to this as an instrument of policymaking, for reasons we shall explain when discussing the tensions between our approach and participatory democratic approaches to school governance. But there is a quite different purpose for measuring the progress of the student: to enable teachers to find out whether the strategies they are using are successful, and, if not, to identify other teachers from whom they could be learning to be more successful. Let's call this the *Professional Improvement* purpose.

If student achievement is difficult and expensive to measure, student progress is more so. The approach taken in the 2001 iteration of ESEA was rife with problems (including….). But one core problem was that it required measurement of at best a very small portion of valuable achievement. Reading and mathematics are both valuable skills, but there are many others, not all of which correlate with these, and, in particular, improvement in which does not correlate with school-level improvement in existing tests. And what teachers do does not just get children to learn valuable knowledge and skills, it may also help develop (or impede the development of) valuable habits and traits, such as enjoyment of reading or the disposition to concentrate for long periods even when no progress is being made. So we want to emphasize that the professional improvement purpose requires a wealth of data on a wide range of learning outcomes.

Accountability requires standards and assessments. But so does professional improvement. Standards help to align what you are teaching with what others are teaching. Common assessments enable the production of lower per-unit cost valid tests, and increase the sample size for any conclusions about who is learning what. If you are struggling with teaching a particular subgroup in your class quadratic equations then you want to know what strategies others have used to better effect with that subgroup; if you have common standards and assessments you will find that out more easily, so that you can observe and learn from the strategies.

Some commonality of standards and assessments is required for the development of an infrastructure of professional improvement. They do not make improvement happen, of course; teachers need the time to observe one another and reflect, and the managerial support that enables them to use that time well; the infrastructure requires much more than just standards and assessments.

Why might this infrastructure work to the advantage of disadvantaged students? The first thing to say is just that, in the US today, most students would gain from some of this infrastructure. But there are several reasons to think that it would work especially to the advantage of disadvantaged students in our context.

First, advantaged students in the US already enjoy the benefits of this infrastructure to some extent: because College Board has developed it to a considerable extent around the AP exams, which are primarily for children bound for selective colleges.

Second, more disadvantaged students have, on average, less well qualified and lower skilled teachers than more advantaged students have; their teachers have more room to improve, and they therefore stand to gain more.

Third, the information provided by cross-school common standards and assessments enables policymakers to make more vivid, and thus hold schools more accountable for the learning of subgroups. When in-school standards are the only benchmarks for measuring student progress there is very little transparency: it is easy for schools to fudge the numbers and, by giving less demanding offerings to some students than others, to give the appearance of similar achievement. But when cross-school common standards and assessment are used, exactly which students are falling behind is more transparent to the outside world, and political pressure to improve the quality of their experience is more likely to be applied.

Why is such transparency so important? We think it is particularly important when school policy and the management of resources are done locally, because it can help, a little, to offset the power imbalances that are inevitable when the background conditions are highly unequal. Local control favours the educated, the wealthy, and the articulate; not only because they can segregated themselves into separate districts and get better funding for their children's schools, but because when they are in the same district as less wealthy, educated, and articulate parents, they can deploy their schools to get advantages for their kids. Consider the following rather stylized example: a district has two schools, Carter Elementary, with a 25% poverty rate, and Reagan Elementary, with a 90% poverty rate. The (very good) principals of both schools retire and the Superintendent has only one very good, and one mediocre, principal to replace them with. What are his incentives? Assigning the very good principal to Carter Elementary keeps the Carter parents satisfied; they are the parents who will lobby hard if their school is assigned a sloppy principal, whereas the Reagan parents will spend much less time talking to the principal and monitoring her performance, and a significant proportion of them lack both the confidence to make complaints and the skills to articulate their complaints effectively if they do. When achievement data is readily available, transparent, and easy to compare across schools, this imposes some pressure to improve the achievement of the lowest achievers, and one factor in that is likely to be the assignment of an excellent principal to the school with high proportions of low-income children.

The example above, though drawn from an actual experience, is stylized. Without a detailed exploration of the actual decision-making of Superintendents we cannot be sure how they actually respond to the incentives. But Stacy Lee, in her ethnography on the ways that Hmong children negotiate their experience of a mainly white High School in the US Midwest, reports the following:

> Educators who express concern for students of color suggest that the inequality among students is related to the inequality among UHS parents. These educators point to the power of elite parents to control and reproduce elite school culture. Mr. Burns, for example, maintained the UHS is most responsive to students from highly educated families because their parents pressure the school to serve their interests. UHS educators explained that the highly educated parents exert a great deal of influence over the school because they understand and know how to manipulate the unwritten rules that govern schools. These parents know which courses and activities will impress college admissions officers, and they make every effort to ensure their children have advantages. They know about various scholarships and awards and they are invested in helping their children win them. In short, the highly educated parents possess the entitlement and the type of cultural capital recognized by UHS and by institutions of higher education. Other researchers have identified similar patterns of responding to the demand of powerful parents. Gitlin et al. found "A concern for white parents quickly becomes a concern for the school because those parents had the economic and social power to make strong demands on teachers and administrator".[i]

3. Extending school

How well and how much a student learns turn partly on the quality of the teaching and the school environment. But it also turns on two other things: the amount of instruction the student receives, and how well equipped the student is to interact effectively with that instruction. How well equipped the student is to interact effectively with the instruction is, perhaps obviously, a matter of fit. Think of the limiting case in which the student is instructed in a language she does not know: that is a poor fit however good the instruction might be for someone with the right language. But the student must also be in the right state to take up the instruction provided. Numerous conditions associated with being on the wrong end of inequalities in general, and with poverty in particular, inhibit learning. Hunger, lack of sleep, illness, visual impairment, hearing difficulties, stress at home: other things being equal, a child with any of these conditions will learn less well than a child with none of them. Think of a simple example: a severe asthma attack. Nobody who has a severe asthma attack in the night is in a good state to learn (or do much else) the next day. But severe asthma is much more prevalent in poor and working class children than in middle and upper-middle class children. Or consider Richard Rothstein's example of visual impairment. Rothstein observes that many disadvantaged children enter kindergarten with undiagnosed (and hence untreated) visual and hearing impairments:

> Children with vision problems have difficulty reading and seeing what teachers write on the board. Trying to read their eyes may wander or have difficulty tracking print or focusing. . . . Poor children have severe vision impairment at twice the normal rate. . . . Lower-class children are more likely to suffer from vision problems because of their less adequate prenatal development. . . . [V]isual deficits also arise because poor children are more likely to watch more television, activity that does not train the eye to develop hand-eye coordination and depth perception. (Rothstein 2004, 37–38)

Similar conditions are diagnosed prior to school in more advantaged children because their parents teach them to read and therefore are more likely to discover an impairment if there is one. These conditions sometimes underlie unruly behavior, which is punished, leading to further alienation. Poor children also suffer much higher rates of hearing problems, poor dental health, lead exposure, exposure to smoke, fetal alcohol syndrome, low birth weight, poor nutrition, and asthma, all of which affect their interactions with school. As a partial corrective, Rothstein proposes the following:

> Establishment in lower-class neighborhoods of school clinics that serve children through their high school years and their parents as well. To narrow the achievement gap, a school-community clinic should include services that middle-class families take for granted and that ensure children can thrive in school . . . includ[ing] obstetric and gynecological services . . . pediatric services . . . dentists and hygienists . . . optometrists and vision therapists . . . social workers to refer families to other services, community health educators and psychologists or therapists to assist families and children who are experiencing excessive stress and other emotional differences. (138–39)

Other background conditions affect a child's ability to learn. School transitions, especially during the school year, are associated with learning loss; partly because children are moved between non-congruent curriculums, but also because of the social and emotional costs of the transitions. But mid-year school transitions are associated with non-stable parental employment as well as with non-stable residence: someone who is at the mercy of the low end of the labor market, and subject to the decisions of a landlord is much more likely to be forced to move than someone occupied at the higher end of the labour market and who owns their home.

So reforms aimed at reducing inequalities of achievement cannot focus solely on school policy. Rothstein is the most prominent advocate of what we might call an external-to-schools agenda; the agenda of the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education (BBA) coalition reflect his arguments. The "Main BBA Statement" says:

> Education policy in this nation has typically been crafted around the expectation that schools alone can offset the full impact of low socioeconomic status on learning. Schools can—and have—ameliorated some of the impact of social and economic

> disadvantage on achievement. Improving our schools, therefore, continues to be a vitally important strategy for promoting upward mobility and for working toward equal opportunity and overall educational excellence.
>
> Evidence demonstrates, however, that achievement gaps based on socioeconomic status are present before children even begin formal schooling. Despite the impressive academic gains registered by some schools serving disadvantaged students, there is no evidence that school improvement strategies by *themselves* can close these gaps in a substantial, consistent, and sustainable manner.
>
> Nevertheless, there is solid evidence that policies aimed directly at education-related social and economic disadvantages can improve school performance and student achievement. The persistent failure of policy-makers to act on that evidence—in tandem with a school-improvement agenda—is a major reason why the association between social and economic disadvantage and low student achievement remains so strong. (BBA 2010)

The external-to-schools agenda is informed, but not determined, by the observations that background institutions rather than schools are the key causes of educational disadvantage. It is useful to distinguish two main strands:

Background institutions. These include such measures as reducing income inequality by, for example, increasing the minimum wage, using collective bargaining, expanding the earned-income tax credit, and establishing a commitment to full employment as a central part of economic policy; stabilizing low-income housing by mechanisms that make it easier for low-income renters to stay in their homes; integrating housing by socioeconomic class through inclusionary zoning ordinances; and improving public health measures affecting disadvantaged neighborhoods and health-care access for low-income families.

Support to and extension of schools. These include such measures as school integration by socioeconomic status; establishing school-community clinics that would serve both parents and children; improving prenatal and postnatal care through visiting nurse programs and improved health-care access; expanding high-quality early childhood education for low-income and minority children that emphasizes social skills as well as literacy, mirroring middle-class early childhood experiences; lengthening the school day and establishing stable and high-quality after-school and summer programs

Under the terms of the exercise we have set ourselves, the first strand of the agenda may be cheating: we have assumed, for example, that income inequality and child poverty will not change a great deal, and that large changes in the economy are ruled out-of-court. Notice, though, that Rothstein's proposal to establish school-community clinics does not deal with the fundamental causes of poor vision and other health issues outside the school—which is that low-income children inhabit conditions that tend to promote

worse health, and that their parents have less access to health care—it simply treats the symptom so that the child can function better in school. As such it resembles much of what is usually included in the second strand – not changing the child or her environment, but taking it as unchanged and intervening to limit its effect on student outcomes. These measures do come within the scope of our exercise. Exactly which measures a decision-maker should implement depends on a cost-benefit analysis in the light of their own context.

We have refrained from claiming that our reform proposals count as real utopian. But the previous proposals have in common that they would, indeed, be part of any recognizable high-quality schooling system in a just, or more or less just, society. This is not, or may not be, true of all of the items on the 'extended schooling" menu. Take the most obvious example: having primary care health facilities connected with school. There are good reasons for supposing that in the American context establishing school-community clinics would improve the quality of educational experience for disadvantaged students, improve quality of life in low-income neighbourhoods, and they might even be a very efficient way of generating improvements. In our opinion, what we have called the "extended school" agenda is an urgent one. But there is no reason to suppose that in a better, more just or utopian society, health care of any form (other than emergency on-site treatment) would be connected to schools. It is like affirmative action, perhaps: affirmative action may be an essential, and even urgent, mechanism for achieving improvements here and now, but it would not be a feature of a fully just society.

4 Some comments about Charter Schools

We shall keep this discussion brief, but feel compelled to include it, because charter schools, or something like them, have become a central part of the reform efforts in many democracies, and while they have tended to be embraced by opponents of public schooling, and anti-egalitarian forces, they constitute a complex phenomenon, and have certain real utopian features.

Charter schools interrupt the standard mechanism of allocation of children to schools, which is by residence; and also free schools (to varying extents) from local district control. While allocation by residence is appealing in various ways – principally because it connects schools and neighbourhoods, allowing them to act as stabilizers in some neighbourhoods and community enhancers in others – it has the drawback that, in a world of socio-economic residential segregation, it reinforces concentrations of advantage and disadvantage. And district control is not, intrinsically, desirable; there is no real reason for preferring schools to be run by government employees and bureaucrats rather than by non-profit companies (as most charter schools – and, indeed, most private schools – are).

Charter schools have, in the American context, no doubt been a sort of Trojan horse for privatization in American education, and equivalents, such as Academies and Free Schools in the UK have been (less successful) Trojan horses. Most charters allow the schools to avoid some of the details of collective bargaining agreements that bind districts, and some allow for for-profit companies to run schools. Given the period in

which charter schools emerged this is no surprise. But charters have also given rise to innovation and experimentation with curriculum, instruction, and disciplinary practices: non-profits can take risks that governmental organizations find it much more difficult to take, and the fact that charter schools are (almost always) schools of choice diminishes the pressure against innovation that standard government schools face. Even as things stand some charter school management organizations (such as the Knowledge is Power Program) target disadvantaged and minority populations; others specialize in special education provision; and others still specialize in certain immigrant languages or cultures. Government schools *could* do these things: but it is easier for charters to do so, and easier for them to change in the light of circumstances.

We are, in other words, sympathetic to the conjecture that mechanisms allowing the development of charter schools, or something very like them, would be part of a sensible real utopian design, because they would allow better for innovation, experimentation, and the development and diffusion of new knowledge about discipline and instruction.

5 Three caveats.

We should finish this part of the essay with three observations. First, we should reiterate that we do not believe that the reforms we have identified would radically transform either the quality or the distribution of educational experiences. They would, we believe, make some difference -- they would make the experiences more human, improve the quality of the experiences of the least advantaged, and increase the efficiency of schools – but they would not be transformative. Second, we should say that whereas we have focused on relatively concrete reforms, there are problems within the structure of schooling that they do not address, and we do not know how to address. One example: we suspect that US public schools have a management culture that is somewhat suboptimal, in which managers see their job as Richard Elmore argues, not as instructional leadership and the management of the actual educational resources in the building, but as a buffer between teachers and the local district office on the one hand, and parents on the other. Changing that culture, and ensuring that managers have more appropriate skills (and that more appropriate people are selected), would make schools more educationally effective and no less humane. But we have no neat suggestions how to do that. Finally, we should reiterate that background reforms – reducing inequality and poverty, tackling residential segregation by social class, improved public health measures and the quality of the accessible healthcare for the disadvantaged – are essential for making substantial progress in the distribution of high quality educational experiences and, ultimately, achievement. The key real utopian educational design is a much more egalitarian society.

<u>Section on tension with deliberative ideals.</u>
Incomplete. Coming soon

Endnotes.

[i] Stacey Lee – Up Against Whiteness, p.38