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Facilitation of Socio-Economic Mobility: Required in Schools?

The American and indeed British political spectrums have recently been consumed with debate regarding "affirmative action" and other similar policies to increase diversity in schools. One extreme argues that socio-economic and cultural mobility will not happen without being forced by strict government intervention. The other is adamant that if students of a low socio-economic status work hard enough, they will be afforded the same opportunity as those who are more monetarily prosperous and that they should not be treated any differently. Policies intended to increase diversity through promotion of a minority, like racial or ethnic quotas, can sometimes cause "positive discrimination" against the majority and create or inflame tensions. While every country's educational systems and cultures are different, both schools and universities should be penalized for any discrimination of socio-economic status, either "positive" or negative, in order to promote socio-economic mobility.

It is vital to prevent "positive discrimination" of minorities because to do otherwise would be unfair to all involved (Bibbings 2006, p. 74). One cannot and should not justify substituting one form of discrimination for another, which is reason enough why positive discrimination should be avoided. A student's socio-economic status is based almost solely on aspects of life outside their control, like "parental finances and employment histories as well as their experience of (higher) education," a community's overall wealth and political and religious attitudes, and the "existence of schools" (Bibbings 2006, p. 76; Kravdal 2004, p. 180). If a student works hard, they should be afforded the opportunities which accompany their efforts. Forcing schools into

academic "dumbing down" or any lowering of admissions standards is also unacceptable as it "unfairly discriminates against applicants from good schools" and those who work hard and come from less privileged backgrounds (Bibbings 2006, p. 74). The culture of the United States ensures one can improve one's life with hard work and perseverance. Therefore, any policies regarding increasing diversity in American (or indeed in any) schools should not remove incentives for hard work. "Positive discrimination" of any kind is unacceptable in promoting socio-economic mobility of students as it essentially promotes vengeful discrimination and leads to the "dumbing down" of academic and acceptance standards for all students, removing incentives for hard work.

Colleges and universities should avoid positive discrimination at all costs as there are other ways in which they can facilitate socio-economic mobility. Florencia Torche (2005, p. 316) determined that "inequality of educational opportunity (IEO)" is widespread and leads to "persistent inequality," requiring "massive educational expansion and a varied set of policy interventions to reduce." Many of the "'widening participation' policies" of which Lois Bibbings (2006, p. 74) speaks are diverse and would be acceptable for use as most do not cause positive discrimination. She splits these policies into two groups: "hard" options, which include "quotas or preferential selection methods," and "soft" options, also termed "assistance measures" (Bibbings 2006, p. 83). While hard options can cause positive discrimination and for reasons stated previously should be avoided, soft options provide widely applicable and effective alternatives to discrimination of any kind. First, universities should change admissions procedures to provide a "contextual approach" to all applications, therefore focusing on the whole student. If they find it necessary to examine grades and standardized test scores, they should be considered in the context of each school (Bibbings 2006, p. 81). It is also crucial that

non-academic achievements are put into perspective; many wealthier applicants may be able to afford to complete "relevant unpaid work experience," while poorer students may have to work "for fast food companies or in the family business" in order to provide for their families (Bibbings 2006, p. 81). Universities should require "written work, additional testing, or interviews" in order to "identify merit and aptitude regardless of background" and select candidates who can perform and have "the ability to succeed" (Bibbings 2006, 82). These selection methods would continue to emphasize hard work while removing the barrier that economic or social backgrounds may provide an applicant. Second, offering more financial aid opportunities, both merit- and need-based, is important and can lead to a much more diverse school population. An even simpler solution to providing financial aid in America is lowering the obscene costs of attending higher education, which has tripled and in some cases almost quadrupled in the past 40 years (CollegeBoard 2013, p. 15). Third, universities and colleges should offer more support, both academic and emotional, to all students, regardless of economic background or ability (Bibbings 2006, p. 80-1). This would "raise confidence, aspirations, and attainment" of students, particularly those who may not be comfortable in the new setting (Bibbings 2006, p. 81). If universities change their selection criteria (while still rewarding hard work) and provide more merit- and need-based financial aid, they can prevent *any* discrimination towards student backgrounds in their selection process.

Primary and secondary schools can also take steps to improve and promote socio-economic mobility in both their student body and their community at large. One big problem among students of low socio-economic status is that there is a certain level of mystery about higher education: they tend to think they are not "good enough" nor is it "for the likes of them," and regarding it as "highly risky and/or impossible" (Bibbings 2006, p. 77). This is more of a social

problem than anything else, one which starts with the community and the students' parents. Therefore the key is to demystify higher education by pairing universities with schools, encouraging community outreach activities ("visits to universities, student-pupil mentoring") and creating a school-wide culture that values education (Bibbings 2006, p. 80-1). While it is important to remove the mystery from post-secondary education, it is equally as vital to inform the student (and the parents) of the many options he or she has available, including two- and four-year vocationally- and academically-oriented schools (Alon 2009). Schools should also provide students the information necessary to make the decision to attend no post-compulsory education at all, which is also an option for students. No student, regardless of socio-economic background, should be forced or persuaded to attend post-compulsory education against their will. The student should be informed of all of his or hers options and helped to choose one that suits their ideal career path. Primary and secondary schools should also provide the tools required to enhance socio-economic mobility, especially helping to develop skills using "information and communication technology (ICT)" which are essential to the use of "social services" and crucial "to be competitive in labor markets and secure higher earnings" (Mo 2012, p. 3). Programs like One Laptop per Child help to narrow the "digital divide" between students with and without access to technology, but simply exposing students to the use of computers can at least slightly improve skills (Mo 2012, p. 20). Unfortunately, giving students computers also requires better trained teachers and a well-tailored classroom structure in order to make a sizeable impact on computer skills, all of which can be expensive. Schools can improve the socio-economic mobility of their pupils (and their communities) by providing opportunities to interact with and learn about colleges and universities, assisting in decisions regarding all post-secondary education possibilities, and enhancing ICT skills with proper equipment and support.

The practicality of such measures to increase socio-economic mobility can be questionable, as they can be costly in time and resources, and may be deemed unnecessary by certain cultures. For example, if a country were to mandate that universities remove all economic and social discrimination from their selection processes, they would have to give the institutions time to implement these systems, and then develop some way to test them. "ICT adoption is costly," so many schools would need a budget surplus or large government grants in order to implement the curriculum effectively (Mo 2012, p. 3). Different countries also have different views on socio-economic mobility. For example, in the United States, social class is determined by the amount one is worth monetarily, so providing students with a way to work hard and achieve their dream job is important to the culture. However, in many other nations, social status is determined at birth and therefore social or economic mobility may not be culturally as important (or one may be more important than the other). While each country must determine the amount of money, time, and emphasis they place on socio-economic mobility, it is important for people to be able to achieve their own personal goals, regardless of social or economic class.

While all countries and cultures are different, it is important to prevent all types of discrimination in order to promote all-around socio-economic mobility. Discrimination, positive or negative, does not promote hard work or personal betterment. Universities should adopt admissions procedures that emphasize these abilities and a student's potential, while also taking into account each applicant's individual situation, lowering costs, and providing both merit- and need-based financial aid for students. Primary and secondary schools can also be doing their part by demystifying higher education, providing students with personalized options for post-compulsory education opportunities, and enhancing ICT skills with equipment and support from well-trained staff and parents. While practicality may be an issue (what with high costs in both

money and time), schools and universities should be penalized for not eliminating socio-economic discrimination, therefore promoting socio-economic mobility.

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