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Introduction: Reframing the Inequality Debate Toward Opportunity and Mobility

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Introduction: Reframing the Inequality Debate Toward Opportunity and Mobility

Inequality has become the defining issue since the end of the Great Recession. In U.S. education, however, the discourse remains inadequate, because it focuses on programs and initiatives that primarily help disadvantaged students. While essential, compensatory reforms neglect the larger majority debilitated by the increasing income gap between the wealthy and the rest. This includes the working class as well as the often-overlooked middle class.¹

The post-recession economy highlights their plight. First, wages among the working and middle class in the U.S. have remained flat since the end of the recession, while wealthy households—the top twenty percent—have captured most of the income gains (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2014). In fact, the top *ten* percent of earners took home more than half of the country’s total income in 2012 (Saez & Piketty, 2013). Their share of the nation’s wealth has continued to grow, while it has decreased for individuals in the middle and bottom of the socioeconomic ladder (see Table 1).

Second, overall economic mobility, which refers to the ability to improve one’s economic status, has declined relative to other major countries (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, Saez, & Turner, 2014). This suggests that those born in the lower class stay in the lower class, which challenges the very notion of the American dream. Together, stagnant wages and declining mobility reflect the belief that the economic system increasingly favors the wealthy (Pew Research Center & USA Today survey, 2014), and that income inequality has reached a critical mass.

Parents’ spending patterns illustrate this gap. Wealthy parents are engaging their children in what sociologist Frank Furstenberg called “intensive cultivation” (Tavernise, 2012). In 2007, they spent *four* times more per child than middle class families and *seven* times more than those in the lower end of the income distribution, which has increased dramatically from 1972 (see

Figure 1). The more disturbing trend, however, is the growing gap in spending between the affluent and the middle class. Over the same time period, it has increased 300 percent, whereas the gap between the middle and lower class has increased only 150 percent (see Table 2). Such wealth, along with family and social capital, allows parents to secure the best private schools, tutors, and college prep consultants (among other advantages) over their middle class peers.

The difference in school achievement is striking. Over half of eighth grade students in the upper income were proficient in math and reading in 2013, compared with only *one-third* of middle-income students and *one-sixth* of poor students (see Figure 2). Once again, the gap between the upper- and the middle-income group is *wider* than the one between the middle- and the lower-income group, particularly in math achievement (see Figure 3). Such findings indicate the need to address middle and working class students more carefully, especially if they are to participate more fully in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) fields.

Upper class achievement in K-12 leads to more advantages at the post-secondary education level and beyond. Wealthy students enroll in highly selective colleges like Stanford and Yale at *three times* the rate of their middle-income peers and *seven times* that of poor students, which has actually increased from three decades ago (Reardon, 2013; Reardon, Baker, & Klasik, 2012). Out of Harvard's undergraduate population, for instance, about half come from households with incomes above \$200,000—essentially the top 4% (Lanning, 2012). Overall, 72 percent of students at the most competitive colleges come from the wealthiest 25 percent of families, compared with only 3 percent from the lowest 25 percent (Giancola & Kahlenberg, 2016). And since elite graduate schools and top firms in finance, consulting, law, and technology recruit almost exclusively at highly selective colleges, affluent students gain and maintain disproportionate advantages as professionals (Rivera, 2011). The achievement gap is less about

the black-white gap, and more about the income, or wealth, gap, which is tied deeply to students' family background (Bradbury, Corak, Waldfogel, & Washbrook, 2015).

Reframing the Inequality Debate

Reducing the income gap is difficult, however, because it conjures thoughts of class warfare, institutional discrimination, and wealth redistribution—all of which politicizes discussions. As such, leaders in the U.S. have begun to reframe the discourse in terms of *opportunity* and *mobility*. President Barack Obama's recent language reflects this evolution. He emphasized expanding "opportunity" ten times during his 2014 State of the Union Address, while mentioning income inequality only twice. Democrats have shifted their traditional focus of helping those in need to helping *all* Americans compete (Grunwald, 2014). Similarly, Republicans are emphasizing ways to help American workers, including those in poverty, move up the economic ladder through better paying jobs, wage subsidies, and expanded tax credits. The Economic Mobility Caucus, a 2012 initiative to better understand the drivers of economic mobility, is a product of bipartisan effort aimed to help all Americans.

The U.S. public has long supported a broader approach. 70 percent of those surveyed believe the government should increase opportunities for people to get ahead, and 83 percent think the government should boost mobility for the poor and the middle class (Gallup, 2011; Pew Charitable Trusts, 2011). In contrast, only 46 percent believe it is the government's job to reduce the wealth gap. Talk of opportunity and mobility appears to resonate more than that of income inequality.

Given this shift, it may be wise to frame our approach to education the same way. An emphasis on *opportunity* and *mobility* allows us to think beyond the achievement gap, high-stakes testing, and accountability, which the public finds limiting (PDK/Gallup, 2013; ABC

News/Washington Post, 2014; Gallup, 2012, 2013). Polls suggest they want better services and resources for their children, such as high-tech classrooms, internship experience at the secondary level, STEM opportunities, and early childhood programs (PDK/Gallup, 2013; 2014; Afterschool Alliance, 2015). In nationwide focus groups on education, participants complained that wealthy school districts had access to high quality educational environments, resources, courses, and qualified teachers, yet the government could not seem to provide such opportunities across the board (FrameWorks Institute, 2009). The public also believe that the existing curriculum do not cultivate modern skills, like the ability to communicate, think critically, solve problems, and regulate oneself (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007; The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2013). Without such “twenty-first century skills,” students will not move ahead. This lack of opportunity and mobility frustrates the masses, perhaps even more than testing and accountability. This issue is devoted to their concerns.

At the same time, a broader focus will not necessarily threaten existing support for marginalized groups like ethnic minorities, English language learners, and the poor. Opportunity is not only about creating the right circumstances for success, but also about allocating resources appropriately. For instance, overhauling the current way we finance schools—normally through local property taxes—will allow high-poverty school districts to receive proportionate resources while minimizing the advantages inherent in wealthy districts. Enhancing secondary and post-secondary education to include career skills development and internships will particularly benefit disadvantaged students while also serving the general public. These solutions are designed to give each student an equal chance to succeed (a public interest), as opposed to compensatory initiatives, which are designed to help certain groups close a gap (a special interest). While labels like middle and working class are repeatedly used in this article, they merely serve as a proxy for

the majority of Americans who increasingly feel the deck is stacked against them.

Structural Framework and Research Topics

This special issue, entitled “Education Inequality: Opportunity and Mobility,” is divided into two sections—“Opportunity” and “Mobility.” The first section focuses on creating the right conditions for success (i.e., opportunity). It seeks to answer the question: *How can we set up the system to give all students a chance to thrive?* One aforementioned approach is to reform school finance, so that students receive services and resources aligned with their needs. Since public schools rely primarily on local property tax revenues, the ones in wealthier districts typically receive more funding than those in low-income neighborhoods, a problem exacerbated by the 2007 housing crisis and national recession. Bruce Baker (in press) tackles this issue by examining the effectiveness of existing school finance reform and addressing recent developments that compare state school finance systems. He then evaluates the distribution of school funding and key resources across states through indicators from his national report, *Is School Funding Fair?*

Another solution that focuses on creating the right conditions is early childhood programs, an increasingly popular approach. Not only do they cultivate social and mental habits, early childhood interventions (e.g., the Perry Preschool Project) also have been associated with broad, long-term social improvements—such as higher rates of graduation and employment, lower rates of incarceration, and less time spent on welfare (Heckman et al., 2010; Campbell et al., 2012). Yet, their long gestation period, imprecise effects, and significant upfront investment make early intervention efforts difficult to scale and support. Gregory Acs, Steven Martin, Isabel Sawhill, and Jonathan Schwabish (in press) sought to help policymakers envision the impact of an intervention from an empirical perspective. They developed the *Social Genome Model* (SGM)

to extend information from randomized controlled trials—the gold standard in research—and estimate how the benefits of an intervention on one outcome can affect other outcomes throughout the life course. For instance, the SGM can illustrate how higher reading scores in early childhood can influence reading and math in middle school, adolescent behavior, high school graduation, college graduation, and ultimately family income at age 40. By conducting such “virtual policy experiments,” researchers can help leaders make important policy decisions without waiting thirty years to see results. Acs et al. details their Social Genome Model and its promise in their article.

Perhaps a fundamental step in creating the right conditions for success is to corral public and political support toward meaningful, broad-based solutions. Without it, reforms remain narrow and isolated. Co-editor Norman Eng (this issue) argues that education scholars—not politicians and the media—are responsible for broadening public attitudes toward education and inequality, which typically involve individualist and local patterns of thinking. The idea that scholars merely conduct research and present findings is a narrow and outdated conception that must change, particularly during times of widening income inequality and political polarization. This conceptual article offers specific ways education experts can frame the inequality issue to lead public opinion toward the scientific consensus.

High-performing education systems in other countries appear to understand what it takes. Nations like Canada, Finland, and Japan consider broad socioeconomic factors that affect students’ station in life and develop policies that align with education goals. Andreas Schleicher and Pablo Zoido (in press) uses research from their work on PISA (an international student assessment that measures 15-year-olds’ reading, math, and science literacy) to analyze what these nations do within and outside of education to ensure the right conditions for their students.

They also provide policy options that have been shown to improve performance and equity in education.

The second group of articles, assembled under the title “Mobility,” focuses on the capacity to improve one’s position in society. Here, contributors explore solutions that can significantly help students move ahead. Yong Zhao (in press), for one, believes it requires changing the current “deficit-driven,” accountability paradigm aimed to equip students with a particular set of skills and knowledge through rigorous standards and testing. He argues that this kind of system effectively undermines student agency, including their strengths, interests, curiosity, and self-esteem—one that centers on a deficit mindset. He examines an alternate mindset that aims to enhance individual strengths and change how we teach and how students learn in the twenty-first century, which will particularly benefit those marginalized by the current system.

Another promising approach targets the high school level. Despite the broad push for higher education, only a small portion of high school students—one-third, by some estimates—attends four-year institutions. As such, alternatives like career and technical education (CTE) have begun to gain political and education support. In his article, Robert Schwartz (in press), Director of the Pathways to Prosperity Project at Harvard University, examines how a systemic, career pathways movement can help a broad majority of high school students thrive in school, gain the technical skills that are increasingly vital to a technology- and knowledge-based economy, and, at the same time, earn a respectable middle-class wage. Unlike the vocational training programs of the 1970s and 1980s, CTEs have several economic, cultural, and educational factors that enhance its promise. Schwartz analyzes its potential.

One perspective often left out of public discussion is that of young people. Rashmita

Mistry, Lindsey Nenadal, Katherine Griffin, Frederick Zimmerman, Hasmik Cochran, Carla-Anne Thomas, and Christopher Wilson (in press) examine poverty and inequality from the perspective of middle and upper class children. Their research is premised on the idea that class bias begins at a young age, and that we need to take steps to understand how children see this important issue if we want to shift the American public's attitudes about the poor. Mistry et al. provide some solutions that can help improve students' position in society.

Any education solution to improve economic and social mobility must include a nuanced understanding of urban life in local communities, particularly those who have been economically and educationally disenfranchised and thus abandoned, as well as an effort to involve them (Stukas & Dunlap, 2002). Yasser Payne and Tara Brown (in press) investigate the attitudes and experiences of young, street-identified Black men and women, using a Street Participatory Action Research (Street PAR) methodological framework to involve community residents to act as community research-activists. This study aims to provide an alternate conceptualization of street life that can help leaders better reach this target. Payne and Brown's perspective is critical, because it addresses an area often neglected in education (i.e., those at the fringes of educational institutions or outside their reach), and it reinforces the need to integrate economic and social policy with that of education—a recurring theme in this issue.

The final article, written by Helen Ladd (in press), wraps up the opportunity and mobility theme by consolidating the contributors' findings and providing a broad framework for action for policymakers and education leaders. Overall, these articles draw upon a variety of methodologies, a balance of qualitative and quantitative data, and broad interdisciplinary perspectives that have the potential to alter the current discourse on inequality. While there are many ways to legitimately address this long-standing issue, we believe that approaching

inequality through the lens of opportunity and mobility will help leaders find common ground solutions that benefit the larger public.

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Table 1.

Share of U.S. wealth, by class

	2011 (%)	2014 (%)
Top 10%	72.8	74.6
Middle 40%	9.2	7.3
Bottom 50%	2.5	1.3

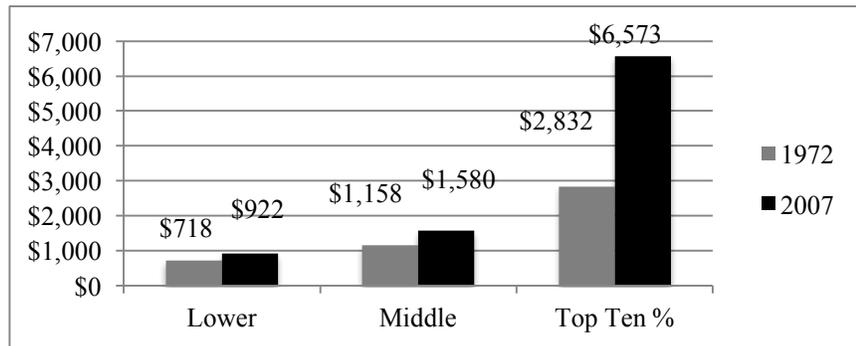
Source: Based on data from Credit Suisse Research Institute (2011, 2014)

Table 2.

Comparing the spending gap and percent change between class, over time (in 2008 US\$)

	1972 (\$)	2007 (\$)	Approximate Change (%)
Between Middle and Lower Class	440	659	150
Between Middle and Top 10%	1,674	4,993	300

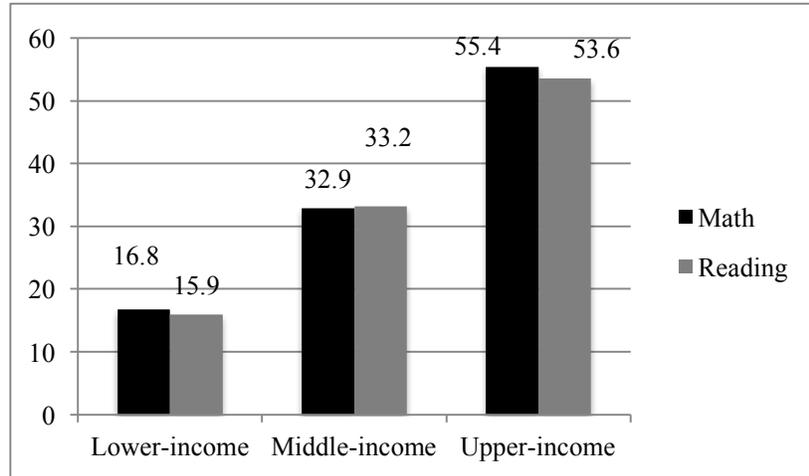
Source: Based on data from Kornreich & Furstenberg (2013). Note: Again, lower income group refers to bottom three deciles and middle income group refers to the middle four deciles (4th – 7th).

Figure 1. *Spending per child, by class (in 2008 US\$)*

Source: Based on data from Kornreich & Furstenberg (2013). Note: Here, lower income group refers to bottom three deciles and middle income group refers to the middle four deciles (4th – 7th).

Figure 2.

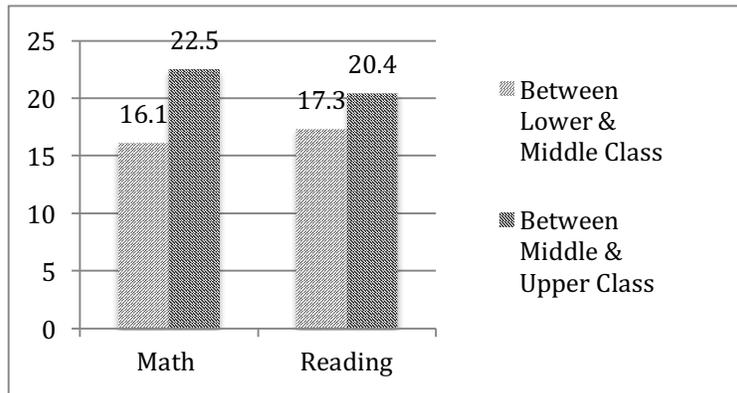
Percent Proficient in 8th Grade Math and Reading in 2013, by SES



Source: Based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2013). Note: Middle-income status is based on schools where 26 and 75 percent of the students are eligible for the National School Lunch program (Third Way, 2011).

Figure 3.

Achievement Gap between SES groups in 2013, in percentage points



Source: Based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2013). Note: Middle-income status is based on schools where 26 and 75 percent of the students are eligible for the National School Lunch program (Third Way, 2011).

BIO:

Norman Eng is an adjunct assistant professor of childhood education at the City University of New York, City College of New York and Brooklyn College. His research focuses on 21st century education, including publication in *Society* journal and as a chapter in the book, *Contemporary Issues in Curriculum*, published by Pearson in 2014. Most recently, he co-edited a symposium on *21st Century Excellence in Education* with Allan Ornstein and published articles for the *National School Board Journal* and *Education Week*.

Allan Ornstein is a professor of education at St. John's University, New York. He is a former Fulbright-Hayes Scholar and Screening Committee Member of the Commission and author of more than four hundred articles and 60 books on education and social issues. His *Foundations of Education* book is in its 13th edition (since 1976) and his new book *Excellence vs. Equality*, from which this article is based on, was recently published in 2015. Readers can check his website, allanornsteinbooks.com, for more information.

¹ There is little consensus over the definition of *middle class*. According to U.S. Census Bureau (2015) data, median household income—what people in the exact middle of the American spectrum earn—was \$53,657 in 2014. However, the U.S. Department of Commerce (2010) indicates middle class is more about aspiration (e.g., home ownership, college education for children) than income (Ostrove and Cole (2003) also offer a useful explanation of the psychological meanings of social class in the context of education). As such, economists tend to divide class into *quintiles* (groups of 20) or even *deciles* (groups of 10). Middle class may then

be broadly considered the middle 60 percent (20th–80th percentile), which would include those making between \$20,000 and \$100,000 (using 2010 census data). For this article, however, we generally exclude the upper-middle class and focus more on either the middle-working class (i.e., those in the second and third quintiles, or 20th–60th percentile) or the middle four deciles (40th–70th percentile). Where necessary, we specify the definition used within the article.