
Sociologist Douglas Downey wants to overturn the conventional wisdom about schooling, what he calls The Assumption: “children learn more in schools serving high-income and white children than in schools serving low-income and minority children,” and thus schools exacerbate inequality in American society. This assumption is not only prevalent across media and society, it is also taught as gospel in texts and handbooks in the sociology of education. But Downey presents compelling evidence that this view is, as he says, “mostly wrong.” Understanding why raises fundamental issues about schooling and human learning.

Downey’s study is based on data from two *Early Childhood Longitudinal Studies*, K through 8th grade, for students entering kindergarten in 1998 and 2010. These huge studies were conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics and had high reliability, since the second study reproduced the findings of the first. Comparing quintiles of students from the highest SES with those from the lowest SES, Downey found both groups learned at about the same rate through the eighth grade. The gap in learning (reading and math) was considerable—about one school year—but the difference between the two quintiles actually decreased slightly: in other words, high and low SES students became somewhat less unequal over nine years of schooling. A second kind of evidence comes from seasonal effects. Over summer vacations, the student knowledge gaps tended to become more unequal, but then were restored to the previous differences during the school year. Here too, schools decreased inequality occurring in the non-school environment.

These effects have been documented in previous research, but they have failed to disturb The Assumption. For one thing, they are highly counterintuitive. Sociologists focus on social stratification, where schooling appears to be one of many contributing factors. “High-flying schools” that obtain remarkable results with low SES and minority children are glorified in the press, and “failing” schools widely castigated. Downey regards the former accounts as exaggerated and sometimes fraudulent although, he acknowledges, a few such schools exist. His own examination of failing schools (those with low achievement levels) found that many had significant “impact,” that is, relative increases in learning. Moreover, he found no difference in impacts among schools teaching advantaged and disadvantaged students. Funding has become less of an issue in school quality, given equalization formulae in most states. Nor is teacher quality a factor, since research has found good teachers to be randomly distributed. Of course, there are good schools and terrible ones—the data would seem to show this. But in practice, Downey admits, it is difficult to know if any school’s performance is above or below average. The scorecards that systems employ to evaluate schools reflect inputs—the social backgrounds of students—more than school treatment effects. The significant finding of Downey’s research is that, on average, learning advances at the same rate in schools serving advantaged students as in schools serving disadvantaged students.
One stark fact looms over this entire subject: by age 18 a person has spent 87 percent of their waking hours outside of school. Thus, family, friends, and environment shape individuals as well as school learning. And during summer vacations, social influences apparently predominate, causing some regression of learning. Hence, Downey argues that schools reflect existing inequality in society rather than making it worse. The fact that lower SES students learn at the same rate as advantaged ones suggests that schools play a compensatory role. Curricula tend to be similar across schools; disadvantaged students receive extra support; and teachers on balance have egalitarian values. Still, the best evidence that schools compensate for disadvantages of low SES students is the identical learning rates. In other respects, the case is less strong. Learning gaps attenuate somewhat for reading but not for math skills. The black/white learning gap increases somewhat over nine years of schooling, producing greater inequality. And his school impact findings are suggestive—based on a single year—rather than conclusive. But if schooling does not generate inequality, what does?

Here the central fact is that the learning gap between low and high SES students is already present when they start kindergarten. Its origins must lie in early childhood. Downey—a sociologist—naturally seeks an explanation in social conditions. He enumerates the pathologies of poverty and social disorganization that can diminish learning ability and intellectual development. These unfortunate conditions certainly exist, but it seems unlikely that they would characterize the entire lowest quintile of the population. Nonetheless, he finds the root of the problem to be “the inequalities that have grown outside of schools for the last few decades,” and the simplest remedy would be to “expand the welfare state.” (123) A War on Poverty, perhaps? But we tried that in the 1960s, and it didn’t work. What is needed is a redefinition of the problem.

For someone outside the field (like me), the most startling revelations in How Schools Really Matter are the large SES-based learning gap among five-year-old children beginning kindergarten, and its persistence through 8th grade. The first phenomenon has been well known to developmental psychologists and the subject of ongoing research. A seminal 2004 paper (cited by Downey) found that SES differences in vocabulary learning were formed before age 36 months and that social differentials were stable from then on.2 The variables used to account for these differentials were mother’s education or linguistic ability and HOME variables associated with nurturing. These variables accounted for one-half of the differentials. These are cultural variables, not economic, although there is a likely relationship with SES. But an explanation for the early formation of the SES learning differentials, and its permanence, should be sought in the workings of human culture, especially language.

The primacy of culture in human development has been forcefully argued by Joseph Henrich in The Secret of Our Success.3 He does not address the specific questions raised here, but his comprehensive account of cultural evolution provides material for a plausible picture. For Henrich, the human species is defined by culture, and our brains have evolved to acquire and assimilate it. This process begins almost at birth and continues through maturation.
Toddlers exhibit great sensitivity to learning cues, which are affected by the prestige, competence, and reliability of the sources. Henrich describes babies and toddlers (“otherwise nearly helpless”) as “sophisticated cultural learning machines.” (65) Language is one of the first cultural acquisitions, learned in a manner inherently affected by those socially conditioned cues. The amount of vocabulary learned is a form of intelligence (in fact, a component of IQ tests); and “words are useful for thinking, so possessing a large vocabulary likely improves some kinds of problem solving.” (243) Vocabulary also affects reading (Downey’s data), as is well known; but reading is a different skill. Learning to read causes culturally constructed biological changes in the wiring of the brain, first by creating what Henrich calls a “letterbox” and then thickening “the information highway that connects the left and right sides of the brain.” This rewiring continues to develop in highly literate people, who thereby “improve some cognitive abilities that bear no direct relationship to reading or writing.” (261). This understanding of culture provides a general validation of the early-life origins of language-related cognitive differences and their basis in social learning. The linkage to SES might be inferred, but seems less certain.

One problem is that SES is too narrow a measure. For example, SAT scores correlate closely with family income, but they also correlate with parental education and IQ. Smart people tend to go to college, make more money, and have smart kids. It is a package, and it is misleading to isolate one component, like income or SES. Psychologists have consistently shown that parental intelligence, or IQ, accounts for approximately 50 percent of intelligence in children. In all likelihood this would explain some proportion of the learning differences that occur from infancy to 36 months. Psychologists are less certain about the other half. Parental influence is surprisingly small and recedes after the infant and toddler stage. Rather, a law of behavioral genetics holds that “a substantial portion of the variation in complex human behavior traits is not accounted for by the effects of genes or families.” Most likely, “socialization—acquiring the norms and skills necessary to function in society—takes place in peer groups.”? These “norms and skills” are exactly what Henrich calls cultural learning—the acquisition of mental tools for functioning in society. To return to the original issue, it seems reasonable to suppose that the intense socialization that occurs during school years, in and out of school, might be a factor in the persistence of parallel rates of learning for low and high SES students. There is no reason to think that rates of socialization would vary by social class, and these processes might operate in conjunction with rates of learning reading or math. This is speculative, but the findings of Downey’s study call for explanations grounded in culture and psychology.

*How Schools Really Matter* is a welcome contribution to our understanding of schooling. Probing the cultural foundations of schooling differences, as hypothesized here, in no way clash with his principal thesis—the exoneration of schools for causing inequality. Downey’s findings that schools do not cause or exacerbate inequality reinforce the famous conclusion of James Coleman’s 1966 Report, reinforced by Christopher Jencks in 1972.9 But apparently this truth needs to be periodically relearned, and Downey has done this with more complete data.
Nonetheless, schools continue to be buffeted by recurrent waves of reforms intended to counteract inequality, and public schools are being undermined by campaigns to introduce choice, despite uncertainty about determining school quality. Hence, Downey’s timely call for a new appreciation of the role of schools and a focus on how they might enhance learning. But Downey’s reliance on family nurture and poverty to account for the deficiencies of disadvantaged students is misdirected. Giving money to poor people, as he recommends (80), may have some benefits, as Democrats currently believe, but it would be an indirect, long-term, and problematic approach to improving school learning. A realistic understanding of this phenomenon will require greater understanding of its cultural and psychological foundations.

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1. Considering the learning lost during summer vacations, the loss of virtually one year of schooling caused by the pandemic is likely to produce learning deficits that cannot be restored. See, Harms of School Closures: https://www.teachers4openschools.com/.


4. Technically, the letterbox is centered in the left ventral occipital region of the brain; the information highway is the corpus callosum: Ibid., 260-1.


6. Steven Pinker, The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature, (New York: Penguin, 2002), 373. Pinker’s first two laws of behavioral genetics are: First: all human behavioral traits are heritable; and Second: the effect of being raised in the same family is less than genes.

7. Ibid., 390.

8. Another hypothesis, purely conjectural, would be that the rates of development of the neurological processes that occur in learning reading (and my implication math) could modulate or determine rates of progress regardless of SES. This might be a testable hypothesis.