

# How Schools Really Matter: Why Our Assumption About Schools and Inequality is Mostly Wrong

Ruth Tate

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## Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

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### **How Schools Really Matter: Why Our Assumption About Schools and Inequality is Mostly Wrong**

by Douglas B. Downey

University of Chicago Press, 2020, 176 pages.

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#### **Reviewed by:**

Ruth Tate

University of Toronto

*How Schools Really Matter: Why Our Assumption About Schools and Inequality is Mostly Wrong* is a plea for United States policy makers to re-examine 'The Assumption' that higher-income students get a better education than lower-income students, and that schools are responsible for inequitable gaps in achievement. Downey argues that reforms should look beyond schools, to address the socio-economic inequalities that cause gaps to be present when children begin kindergarten. Using seasonal data sets as evidence, he contends that schools have a compensatory effect on learning growth, and that only realistic and effective governmental policy choices can break the cycle of intergenerational poverty in the USA. If gaps are greatest when children start school aged 5, and narrow by Grade 8, how can schools be to blame?

In the introduction, Downey discusses the inspiration for his book – the 1966 Coleman report, which he views as a widely discredited attempt to present mostly accurate findings. Throughout the first four chapters, Downey delineates the methodology. Unlike Coleman, who observed children at a single point in time and was “unable to parse out within- versus between- school factors at stake” (p.66), Downey seeks to determine causality. Improving on the research designs of the 60s, he uses a seasonal crossover design in which the school year acts as a “treatment period”, and the summer as a “control period”, providing a statistically measurable comparison. When measuring impact as the rate of growth in learning during the school year, 74% of schools classified in the lowest quintile for achievement moved out, and 17% of schools that originally scored highly moved into the bottom quintile. While some schools highly impact on learning and others do not, this variability is distributed equally across social groups (p.52).

Downey comprehensively explains how national seasonal data sets can account for both in- and out-of-school factors that increase or decrease inequality, by providing a cumulative impact score of the role of school within the wider social context (p.36). To effectively gauge school impact, it is crucial to acknowledge inequalities present in the home and the gaps that form before kindergarten. Seeking to convince us of the validity of his methods and reasoning, Downey rebuts common objections to his impact model. He refutes the claim that high-SES schools have better teachers, arguing that teacher quality is distributed equally and does not contribute significantly to achievement gaps (p.59). He also illustrates how increasing spending on educational reforms does not raise achievement, reduce societal inequalities, or improve early childhood experiences, using as examples the high-profile school programs initiated by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Mark Zuckerberg, whose reforms failed despite billions of dollars invested.

A noteworthy finding is the persistence of racial inequalities in education. While making clear that early childhood is still the biggest source of disadvantage, Downey discusses how schools' compensatory effect is less conclusive for black students (p.41) and the importance of developing cognitive skills when considering how to reduce racial inequalities. Earning differences between black/ white men achieving similar test results are minor, and amongst individuals with similar cognitive skills, "black individuals are more likely than white men to complete college" (p.55). There is evidence that teacher diversity should be included as a measure of quality in reducing inequalities in achievement and increasing student motivation, consistent with the finding that black students assigned a black teacher between kindergarten and 3rd grade "were 7 percent more likely to graduate and 13 percent more likely to enroll in college" (p.69).

A weakness of the book is that at times, Downey's accessible tone veers into simplistic assertions. In Chapter 2, he cites that brain differences account for 15-20% of the achievement gap in children living in extreme poverty. While the detrimental effect of poverty-induced stressors on brain development is widely accepted, Downey states that "even a child with a strong desire to perform well will struggle due to an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex, oversized amygdala, and a brain flooded with too many glucocorticoids" (p.24). Multiple environmental factors, including socioeconomic resources, interact to affect a child's environment and development and this over-simplification could lead to families being unnecessarily stigmatized.

A second area I found lacking is that school-based compensatory and exacerbatory mechanisms presented are unequally upheld by evidence. In Chapter 6, Downey writes that teachers "reward children who exhibit certain cultural characteristics, but many of these are not arbitrary. For example, teachers prefer students who pay attention and follow directions. Is that unfair?" (p.90). To present a proportionate thesis regarding the role schools have in combating inequality, Downey must go beyond opinions and "plausible mechanisms" (p.91), to examine how students are rewarded for cultural and social capital they acquire in their home environment. While it is reasonable to assume educators have good intentions when designing curriculums, assigning ability groupings, or selecting course

offerings, it is also important to consider impact. Teachers are, as Lipsky (1980) would call them, ‘street-level bureaucrats’, implementing educational policy and directly shaping student experiences in schools. Ensuring diversity and awareness in the teaching force, understanding how educators affect students, and how exacerbatory/compensatory forces affect learning can provide evidence to “guide school reforms aimed at reducing inequality” (p.101) and ensure schools cater to their student populations by considering the aspects of knowledge, behaviour, and achievement that are influenced by social advantage.

Downey leaves the reader with much to consider in his concluding chapters, arguing that in the USA, less contentious school reforms are privileged at the expense of “other government decisions that have shaped inequality outside of schools” (p.103). What is necessary, according to Downey, is strengthening the role of the central government to “expand the welfare state” (p.123) and reduce family poverty. Downey suggests learning from how “other rich countries treat their citizens” (p.125) and moving towards a less individualistic American society that is based on shared risk, “equal opportunity and fair treatment” (p.125).

*How Schools Really Matter* is an important read for scholars and policy makers believing that differences in educational quality are responsible for achievement gaps. The achievement gaps highlighted in the 1966 Coleman report are still present, despite a plethora of school-focused research, reforms, and policies aimed at redressing this imbalance over the last fifty years. Educational policy embedded within a wider social context, in which the burden of reforms is on creating a society which minimizes individual risk, will give children from the most marginalized communities a chance at starting school on a more even footing. As I reflect on the book in its entirety, I am drawn to one of Downey’s central arguments: until American society is one where we’d happily “be randomly assigned any gender, race, set of skills, or amount of wealth” (p.118), reforms must target the societal sources of inequality that lead to poor children starting school at a significant disadvantage.

### Reference

Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Russell Sage Foundation.