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FEATURE

**Signed and Sealed, but Not Delivered:
A Socio-Political View of the Promises
and Trials of Universal Education**

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***Abstract.** The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has prioritized the issue of equal access to education. That priority includes the empowerment of women through girls’ education and gender equality, education in emergencies and post-crisis education, early childhood development and school readiness, and enhancing quality in primary and secondary education. This paper addresses the enduring worldwide need for increased access to education and examines the proverbial barriers to education and the axiomatic policies and practices that contribute to such barriers. It includes a cursory review of how human capital, social capital, and cultural capital translate into intellectual capital. It focuses on current international and national trends and challenges for educating the world’s children and sets the United Nations Millennium Development Goals for education in the context of the global dialogue on economics and development, viewing these through a broad base of socio-political literature on educational access and learning outcome challenges.*

On May 17, 1954 the United States Supreme Court ruled in the *Brown versus Board of Education* case that made segregation in public schools illegal and declared laws allowing segregation unconstitutional. The unanimous 9-0 decision confirmed that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483, 1954). This case is still one of the most significant court cases in the evolution of public education in the United States, and is credited with essentially serving as precursor to the civil rights movement.

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My personal recollection of the implementation of that significant piece of legislation was changing schools in my third grade year, leaving my all-black elementary school that was located in a neighboring community to attend the previously all-white school in my racially integrated neighborhood. That first day I marched over to and into the school where I joined my neighborhood friends for a new phase in my grade school education. I had access to a different educational situation. My initial experiences were good due to an assignment to an understanding and supportive teacher. Many other African-American children did not fare quite so well. Even my own experience differed over time and by teacher as I matriculated through school.

The Brown case decision was designed to equalize education, and with it, learning outcomes for all children in the United States. However, although it contributed to notable gains in this regard, it fell short of its original aims. It did not take long for those who would see the truth to realize that there is more to access to education than entry into a building (cf. Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Miller & Lynes, 2011; Murphy & Hallinger, 1989; P. R. Portes, 2005). The pursuit of equal education, access, quality, and learning outcomes across racial, ethnic, class, and cultural parameters continues even to this day.

Overview of the Challenge

Indeed, there remains a universal persistent challenge to provide access to basic education for all children. “More than 20 years ago, the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) was adopted to guarantee equal access to basic education for all children, young people and adults everywhere” (Zukang, Lake, Bokova, Rich, & Moore, 2011, p. 1). Although considerable progress has been made, there remains a monumental task for the achievement of that goal. With one effort after another to endow the world with a fully literate and basically educated population, there also have been recurring barriers to achieving this goal that have proven formidable. Today this quest is one of the greatest challenges facing the world’s leadership, and driven by pressing needs, contemporary research and policy development have converged here once again (cf. Jencks & Phillips, 1998; P. R. Portes, 2005).

Most recently, the determination to provide universal access to education has been formalized in international policy through the United Nations Millennium Development Goals for 2000-2015 (see Appendix B), specifically Goals 2 and 3 that focus on education. Goal 2 is to “achieve universal primary education” with a target to “ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling” (United Nations, 2010, p. 16). It is fitting that Goal 3 is to “promote gender equality and empower women” (United Nations, 2010, p. 20), since of the approximately 800 million adults who lack basic literacy skills, two-thirds are women (Ki-moon, 2011). The target is to

“eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015” (United Nations, 2010, p. 20). It is clear already, however, according to the United Nations’ own report, that while access to education has increased over the past 10 years, the rate of increase is not sufficient to achieve the goal of universal education for all by 2015 (United Nations, 2010).

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) crystallized the growing consensus that emerged in the 1990s by acknowledging that “poverty reduction and the provision of basic social services need to be at the center of development policy” (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2010, p. 4). “Ten years through the 15-year perspective set for the attainment of the MDGs there are two significant and alarming trends for education development” (UNESCO, 2010, p. 4):

- Government resources are shifting away from primary education towards secondary and tertiary levels.
- For all MDGs the relative importance given to education by donors is declining (UNESCO, 2010).

For example, “between 2000 and 2007, across sub-Saharan Africa, the share of total government education expenditure devoted to primary education fell from 49% to 44%” (Rawle, as cited in UNESCO, 2010, p. 6) and for the first time in the past decade, total aid disbursements for education declined while aid to basic education stagnated in 2008 compared to the previous year. “Apparently, the economic slowdown has had negative effects on education financing in the poorest countries and is jeopardizing the strong advances made over the past decade” (UNESCO, 2010, p. 5). Estimates indicate that resources available for education in sub-Saharan Africa may have decreased on average by US\$4.6 billion per year in 2009 and 2010 (UNESCO, 2010).

To achieve the education goals by the target date, all children of primary school age would have had to be in school by 2009 or just after (United Nations, 2010). To accomplish the goals, countries will also need to ensure sufficient numbers of teachers and classrooms to meet the demand. Between now and 2015, “the number of new teachers needed in sub-Saharan Africa alone equals the current teaching force in the region” (United Nations, 2010). “Hope dims for universal education by 2015” (DESA News, 2011).

Context

How can this lack of progress exist when there is universal agreement on the need for education, for making education a priority (The United Nations Children’s Fund, 2000)? Many point to “poverty, war, misrule and discrimination that continues to flourish in many countries of the world with prejudice against women and girls preventing their attending school” (Zukang et al., 2011, p. 1).

From its worldwide assessment of progress toward MDG 2, the United Nations has identified “unmet commitments, inadequate resources, lack of focus and accountability, and insufficient dedication to sustainable development as contributors to shortfalls in many areas, noting that some of these shortfalls were aggravated by the global food and economic and financial crises” (United Nations, 2010, p. 4). UN studies have found that old and new challenges threaten even to undo successes already achieved:

In addition, the most severe impact of climate change is being felt by vulnerable populations—who have contributed least to these problems. The risk of death or disability and economic loss due to natural disasters is increasing globally and is concentrated in poorer countries. Armed conflict remains a major threat to human security and the hard-won MDG gains. Large populations of refugees remain in camps with limited opportunities to improve their lives. In 2009, 42 million people had been displaced by conflict or persecution, four fifths—80%—of them in developing countries. Further, the number of people who are undernourished has continued to grow in some regions. (United Nations, 2010, p. 4)

From July 4-8, 2011 world leaders gathered at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland to review reports and articulate a future of recommitment to the MDGs considering progress, policies, practices, and perspectives (see Appendix A for a roster of the expert panel that contributed to the main report). Their reports, speeches, and demonstrations made it clear that education is central to meeting all of the MDGs; that it is the hinge upon which the tide will turn. “Education provides knowledge and skills, encourages new behavior and increases individual and collective empowerment; education is at the center of social and economic development” (UNESCO, *The Central Role of Education in the Millennium Development Goals*, 2010, p. 11).

According to Erik Solheim, Minister of Environment and Development in Norway, with support from other leading experts on the topic, achievement of the goals for education will make possible all other development attainments from health advances and agricultural innovation to infrastructure construction and private sector growth (Alipui, 2011; Burnett, 2011; ECOSOC, 2006; Kopp, 2011; Onger, 2011; Solheim, 2011). For developing countries to reap these benefits fully—“both by learning from the stock of global ideas and through innovation”—they need to unleash the potential of the human mind. “There is no better tool for doing so than education” (The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, 2011, p. 1).

Cursory Analysis

Ban Ki-moon, United Nations Secretary-General, reflects on the foundational and universal nature of the Millennium Development Goals. He declares that

The Millennium Declaration in 2000 was a milestone in international cooperation, inspiring development efforts that have improved the lives of hundreds of millions of people around the world. The Goals represent human needs and basic rights that every individual around the world should be able to enjoy—freedom from extreme poverty and hunger; quality education, productive and decent employment, good health and shelter; the right of women to give birth without risking their lives; and a world where environmental sustainability is a priority, and women and men live in equality. (2010, p. 3)

World leaders have further pledged to forge and maintain wide-ranging global partnerships for development to achieve the universal objectives of the MDGs. Why? Why seek universal education? Why education for all—what is the fundamental reason that underpins this effort?

For some it simply means ensuring that all children and youth—not just the most privileged or the smartest get a good education (The World Bank, 2011). Some view education from the egalitarian perspective (Ravitch, 2000) with its main purpose to equalize social status through access to knowledge (Ogbu, 1978, 1994). Others focus on better lives for individuals with education as the “most basic insurance against poverty” (UNESCO, 2011, p. 20), indeed as the solution for the eradication of poverty and hunger.

A 2011 report from the World Bank acknowledges and emphasizes another factor for the dynamics that are affecting world conditions and thereby impacting the achievement of the MDGs. It is that “we are living through a period of extraordinary change” (The World Bank, 2011, Foreword). A report by the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (2011) discloses similar conclusions. It asserts, “the structure of the global economy is undergoing significant changes” (p. 9), and lists as causative factors (a) major demographic changes around the world; (b) disproportionate sovereign debt; (c) a shift from North America, Western Europe, and Japan to emerging economies as centers of growth; and (d) unprecedented levels of market risk and volatility.

The World Bank Group Education Strategy 2020 team concluded from their study of world conditions that “the stunning rise of middle-income countries, led by China, India, and Brazil, has intensified the desire of many nations to increase their competitiveness by building more highly skilled workforces” (The World Bank, 2011, Foreword). They further conclude that expanding and improving education are essential to adapting to change and confronting these challenges. “Simply put,” they say, “investments in quality education lead to more rapid and

sustainable economic growth and development” (The World Bank, 2011, Foreword). They acknowledge wisdom in the quest for the creation of intellectual capital.

Competitive Capital

To achieve sustainable development in today’s world there must be significant increases in intellectual capital in all places in the world, including in developing countries. Intellectual capital for this cursory treatment is the composite of the knowledge base and skill sets possessed by a populace that makes it possible for a nation to accomplish its goals and compete in the world culturally, technologically, scholastically, militarily, economically, and so forth. It is different from the academic definition that relates to intellectual property. It comprises social capital, human capital, and for some cultural capital.

Social capital. Social capital is that phenomenon of formal structures of social networks and their concomitant relationships among and between individuals. It includes actions that are motivated by normative commitments between individuals and groups and is said to have two sources, opportunity and motivation (Adler & Kwon, 2003). Coleman (1988) distinguishes normative structures and trustworthiness of others as keys to the potency of social capital. Community stability is a primary consideration in trustworthiness of the environment (A. Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; P. R. Portes, 1999). As with race and such factors, community matters.

Adler and Kwon (2003) emphasize motivation as the determining factor for creating and developing social capital. Motivation is defined by some as behaviors that prompt individuals to action (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Lynes, 2008; A. Portes, 2000). Motivation can be based on relationships that share internalized norms from childhood (A. Portes, 2000), socialization, and shared experiences from a common lot in life; or can be comprised of obligations created in a dyadic exchange. This view of social capital is grounded in broad social stratification theory—class theory. It recognizes the various interrelated effects of social stratification, culture, and human movement (Adler & Kwon, 2002; P. R. Portes, 1999). This is an imperative because “the underlying causes of marginalization are diverse and interconnected” (UNESCO, 2010, p. 9).

Consider that “household poverty is the strongest and most persistent factor and the direct effects of poverty tend to be reinforced by group-based identities such as gender, race, language and culture” (UNESCO, 2010, p. 9). For example, it is common to find that clinics are built, but healthcare professionals ignore or service certain patients at a lesser level. Wells may be dug to provide safe drinking water but placed in locations where certain groups are forbidden access. Schools may be provided but teachers teach to their low expectations for the children or curricula are offensive to students. Marginalized individuals and

groups receive fewer years of education and often a lower quality of learning experiences through less qualified or inexperienced teachers, inferior infrastructure and fewer learning materials (UNESCO, 2010, p. 9).

Human capital. Human capital is the accumulation of cognitive factors, attitudes, norms, and drive that make learning possible. It is an individual's cache of capabilities for creating, employing, or leveraging social networks. It includes one's competencies, ability sets, cognitive processing and social skills. It is internal to the individual and is regarded as individual uniqueness (Miller, 1995), while social capital is set in relationships—both explicit in the form of friendships, kin, or business networks and tacit in the form of trust, obligations, reciprocal expectations, and so forth, that facilitate these interactive patterns.

Coleman (1988) notes that social capital, by building relationships of trust within the community and adopting the norms of the dominant society, facilitates achievement regardless of the strengths of human capital. To attain intellectual capital individuals must have both human and social capital. For example, most have known "brilliant individuals who never realized their potential because they lacked social awareness, networking skills, organizational competencies" (Lynes, 2008, p. 56) necessary for development.

In that access to power is linked to position in social strata, social capital functions to increase the likelihood that individuals can maximize their human capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Social capital, reflected in the home environment, helps produce the human capital by which the children negotiate the given social order (Coleman, 1988; Dika & Singh, 2002). This system involves the interaction of economic, cultural, and social factors (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Dika & Singh, 2002).

Cultural capital. Cultural capital for some has become a catch-all phrase. It is based on social privilege that contributes to academic success. DiMaggio and Mohr's (1985) study found that cultural capital has a significant impact on the years of schooling completed (DiMaggio, 1982). Then successful years of schooling contribute to enhanced cultural capital. Cultural capital constitutes behaviors and ways of thinking that have value in mastering the codes that underlie dominant society literacy and dominant society ideology. It results from home practices that stimulate particular language and cognitive patterns. Parents who lack social privilege but serve in the homes of the affluent can approximate this phenomenon by observing and learning certain patterns of expression and interaction and then teach these to their children to prepare them for a better position in society.

Understanding micro-cultural phenomena helps explain human interaction and the construction of meaning in human dynamics (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1979; Brookover & Erickson, 1975). Micro-cultural behaviors have been linked to the way past oppression impacts traditional forms

of interaction and thinking (Wilson, 1987)—including education and its resultant growth and change.

Recommendations

Having considered all, social class continues to be a mitigating factor in education and practically all else in life. Policy initiatives that discount the differences in students, and people in general, “due to social background are flawed and efforts to educate the masses without more resources to counter poverty and other at-risk factors are limited at best” (cf. Mintrop, 2003; Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005). What is needed is a comprehensive “cultural developmental approach” (P. R. Portes, 2005, p. 87) in which the contexts of the home and school are harmonized with goals for eliminating gaps between the disadvantaged and mainstream society.

Achieving the MDGs will require increased attention to those most vulnerable. Policies and interventions will be needed to eliminate the persistent or even increasing inequalities between the rich and the poor, between those living in rural or remote areas or in slums versus better-off urban populations. They must address the special needs of those disadvantaged by geographic location, gender, age, disability, language, or ethnicity. To achieve the MDGs there must be greater understanding of the barriers to educational access as historically, economically, and socio-culturally based (Acker & Gasperini, 2008; P. R. Portes, 2005). “Societal inequalities, school structures, and socio-cultural socialization processes that are related to societal stratification must all change” (Lynes, 2008, p. 41).

The gaps between haves and have-nots are growing, larger now than at any point in recent history (Phillips, 1969; The World Bank, 2011; UNESCO, 2010). Understanding the stratification of economic inequality is fundamental to understanding life and how societies operate (cf. Bowles & Ginitis, 1976; Persell, 1977), and cognizance of the fact that its effects are ongoing and pervasive is an absolute (cf. Huston, McLoyd & Coll, 1994a, 1994b; Rothstein, 2004).

Although social phenomena, particularly social status, are crucial to educational access and outcomes, many, perhaps even most reform efforts do not allow for their impact on goal achievement (Carnoy & Loeb, 2002; Marchant, Paulson, & Shunk, 2006). While it has long been recognized that “poverty, gender, ethnicity, and certain other characteristics interact to create overlapping and self-reinforcing layers of disadvantage that limit opportunity and hamper social mobility” (UNESCO, 2010, p. 9), schools are simply expected to level the playing fields in combating illiteracy and educating all (Linn, 2005; McDermott, 2007; Weglinsky, 2004).

This way of thinking is detrimental to fundamental educational endeavors such as the EFA priorities and the MDGs because it assumes that pedagogical

adjustments and supplementary resources, including financial resources, are not needed to accomplish the goals. Policy decisions must provide for these special needs with a focus on teaching. These provisions must include an ample supply of specially prepared teachers who are supported and well cared for. Studies have shown “that effective teaching is the most important factor in academic success—more than class size, more than length of school day, more than age at which schooling starts” (Ki-moon, 2011, p. 5).

Research has shown that “input equity is a necessary but a woefully inadequate condition to ensure student success” (Murphy, 1988, 9). The sole pursuit of input equity ignores both what happens to children in school—the conversion and distribution of resources—and the differences with which students leave school—the outcomes (Murphy, 1988; Oakes, 1985). There must be a commitment to assuring that policymakers, decision-makers, and practitioners at all levels have and act upon an understanding of how communities and schools distribute the “favored conditions of learning” (Murphy, 1988; Murphy & Hallinger, 1989). Neither the intuitive nor the trickle-down theory works in education for the poorest and most disadvantaged children and youth. There must be intentionality in the pursuit of quality in education for all. Policy with follow through is necessary. “The overarching goal, [even the MDGs,] is not just schooling, but learning” (The World Bank, 2011, p. 1).

Then finally, there must be just a word on capacity development and partnerships:

Capacity development strategies, building upon a country’s own resource base, emerging from multi-stakeholder dialogue, are keys to modernizing the way international development assistance is planned and governments receive and coordinate support. Such strategies bolster national leadership and ownership of development processes but most importantly, move away from a fragmented, project-based approach to development cooperation wherein external assistance is tied to one single actor, or assumes a fixed set of outcomes or results. (UNESCO, 2011, p. 1)

For more than six decades, UNESCO has engaged in capacity-building for education and has amassed a wealth of lessons learned from its experiences. It asserts that “the capacity development approach undergoes a constant refinement and adjustment in response to contextual changes . . . [and] trends in development cooperation” (UNESCO, 2011, p. 1). This is another imperative.

Summary

“In the current global context, it is crucial to revitalize the profile of basic education on political agendas, by emphasizing the strong linkages between primary education and other components of basic education—and the other MDGs” (UNESCO, 2010, p. 9). The central messages are that

- Progress towards the MDGs will be slowed if the universalization of primary education, and the expansion of other areas of basic education, are not accelerated (UNESCO, 2010, p. 6); that
- A stronger focus on equity in education can generate a virtuous cycle to redress inequalities in other MDGs (UNESCO, 2010, p. 4); and that
- All countries, rich and poor, have marginalized groups in their populations who have significantly lower incomes, lower rates of life expectancy, a higher incidence of health problems, including high maternal mortality rates, and who are more poorly nourished than the rest of the population. These are precisely the groups of people who could gain most from efforts to improve their literacy and to gain other skills, and whose children could benefit most from being enrolled in schools. These population groups, however, are often the ones who lose out most in terms of accessing basic education programs, even in countries where overall access has improved. (UNESCO, 2010, p. 9)

Commitment

The Millennium Development Goals are achievable. The world has the wherewithal to educate its people and in so doing make the world a better place to live for all people. To accomplish this task there will need to be cooperation and mutual engagement on the part of nations and international development partners bringing together national strategies, policies and programs and the support of international entities of various types.

The world possesses the resources and knowledge to ensure that even the poorest countries, and others held back by disease, geographic isolation or civil strife can be empowered to achieve the MDGs. Meeting the goals is everyone’s business. Falling short would multiply the dangers of our world—from instability to epidemic diseases to environmental degradation. But achieving the goals will put us on a fast track to a world that is more stable, more just, and more secure. Billions of people are looking to the international

community to realize the great vision embodied in the Millennium Declaration. Let us keep that promise. (United Nations, 2010)

The signing and sealing have been achieved in policy and strategic commitments. We must now deliver the outcomes.

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APPENDIX A

United Nations Expert Study Group

International Labor Organization
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
United Nations Industrial Development Organization
World Health Organization
The World Bank
International Monetary Fund
International Telecommunication Union
Economic Commission for Africa
Economic Commission for Europe
Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS
United Nations Children's Fund
United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
United Nations Development Fund for Women
United Nations Development Program
United Nations Environment Program
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
United Nations Human Settlements Program
United Nations Population Fund
International Trade Centre
Inter-Parliamentary Union
Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development
World Trade Organization

APPENDIX B

The Eight Millennium Development Goals

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
 - Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day.
 - Achieve, full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people.
 - Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.
2. Achieve universal primary education.
 - Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.
3. Promote gender equality and empower women.
 - Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.
4. Reduce child mortality.
 - Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.
5. Improve maternal health.
 - Reduce by three quarters, between 1990 and 2015, the maternal mortality ratio.
 - Achieve, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health.
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.
 - Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS.
 - Achieve, by 2010, universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it.
 - Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.
7. Ensure environmental sustainability.
 - Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources.
 - Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss.
 - Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.
 - By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers
8. Develop a global partnership for development.
 - Address the special needs of the least developed countries, landlocked countries and small island developing states.

- Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, nondiscriminatory trading and financial system.
- Deal comprehensively with developing countries' debt.
- In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications (Millennium Development Goals Report. New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)).

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