

Modern Myths about Poverty and Education

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The Riddle of the Sphinx

The power of myths to bind people's loyalty to a country is undeniable. "The mythology of the nation-state is a body of stories which vests this abstraction in the figurative flesh of representative heroes, embodying and exalting the character of 'the People.'"¹ While myths about national histories usually contain an element of truth, they can distort the past in order to promote nationalism or to create a "feel-good" narrative about complex events. National myths are typically promoted in textbooks that "portray history as a simple-minded morality play... 'Be a good citizen... you have a proud heritage ... After all, look at what the United States has done.'"² The act of debunking mythology can be quite controversial, as childhood stories told as fact can become, in the mind of an unquestioning adult, revealed truth. For example, Charles Beard described the Framers of the U.S. Constitution as being motivated by economic interests more than democratic idealism. Many historians in 1913 considered this interpretation "blasphemous", although now it is a commonly accepted reading of the Constitutional Era.³

What is a myth? We define a myth as an unsubstantiated narrative with strong moral overtones. For example, the ancient myth of the Sphinx conveys the moral that one must be careful of assumptions and strictly literal readings of the information at hand. The Sphinx would lie waiting in the desert, pose a riddle to the hapless traveler,

"What creature walks on four legs at morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?"

then devour him if he was unable to answer it. Most travelers could not get beyond a literal interpretation of the riddle, and thus

met their end.⁴ Contemporary readers of this myth do not believe that a Sphinx crouches in the desert, but the moral of the story about avoiding simplistic assumptions is not lost to the wise.

Myths have great power because of their assumed truth. Unless explicitly taught as folklore or fiction, these myths can easily be mistaken for what actually happened or what actually is the state of the world. We can explore myths that are commonly held today. An obvious place to begin this conversation is around the myths of poverty and education. Let's explore four of these myths.

Myth 1: "The Poor are Lazy"

A modern myth is that of the "lazy poor," a widely held belief that the sole difference between economically advantaged and disadvantaged people is their work ethic. The Protestant work ethic, so fundamental to our society, might be stated thus: "God rewards the hard-working and righteous. Those who lack money are not hard working, and therefore, morally flawed."⁵ While it is true that laziness can lead to poverty, the vast reality is that most hard-working Americans only have enough financial cushion to keep their families off the public welfare about two weeks, should their employment come to an end for any reason.⁶

Horatio Alger's fictional character "Ragged Dick," who works his way smoothly up the ladder from pauper to rich businessman, illustrates the qualities of diligence, industriousness, and perseverance.⁷ While these virtues enhance one's likelihood of well-being, they alone are insufficient to produce wealth. Consider, for example, the diligent, industrious, and persevering fast-food employee who spends a lifetime toiling behind a counter, who in her later years, is faced with fast-rising

rents, a debilitating accident, or sudden unemployment. In contrast, imagine the child born to wealthy parents who chooses not to work, but to live luxuriously on a trust fund. Clearly, both of these characters, not quite so fictional as Alger's *Ragged Dick*, exist in our society, and yet we continue to ascribe to the myth that "hard work is always economically and fairly rewarded."

Myth 2: "U.S. Public Schools are Failures"

Today, the United States federal government exercises more control over the public school system than at any other point in our history, tightly controlling what is taught, how it is assessed, and what programs will be funded. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, for example, requires that schools improve test scores (overall annual standardized assessment scores) in order to receive federal money. Why has the public school system become the target of such tightly controlled spending? The most frequent response from policymakers is that our nation allegedly lags in math, reading, and science test scores in comparison with those of other industrialized nations. These are mythological comparisons, however.

If we aggregate test scores by socio-economic status (SES) and race, a very different picture emerges. When the math, reading, and science scores of white, suburban students are compared internationally, the United States' scores ranks in the top seven in all categories (7th, 2nd, and 4th, respectively).⁸ Our public schools are not failing our suburban white children, but the achievement gap for Hispanic and Black youth is well documented.⁹ What could be the reasons for this notorious "gap," which everyone purports to wish to close? Shall we blame students, teachers, and/or administrators for this gap?

Are there other explanations that should be considered?

A three-fold challenge surrounds the myth of failing public schools: extreme socioeconomic stratification in American society, a large proportion of poor children in the student population, and a legacy of underfunded schools in urban and rural communities. “This means the vast number of poor, ill-clothed, undernourished children from distressed homes with few educational resources now flood our ill-equipped inner-city and poor rural schools.”¹⁰ In short, perpetuating the myth of failed public education in the United States masks a history of negligence that has plagued poor children in our society. It’s easier to blame the poor than to pick up the social challenges before us.

We are not suggesting that problems in public education be whitewashed or portrayed through rose-colored glasses. Rather, we contend that reformers must recognize the complexity of social institutions like schools. There is real danger in making unsubstantiated generalizations that are based on entertainment or electioneering. By relying on shallow myths and social analyses, we could end up lowering test scores and making things worse for our children.

Myth 3: “Racial Segregation in Schools is a Thing of the Past”

A 1999 study by the Civil Rights Project of Harvard University found that schools are once again becoming more racially segregated, especially in the South.¹¹ It is ironic, half a century after the Supreme Court upheld the fundamental equality of persons under the law, that public education still does not provide equal access to high quality education for all children. In a 2002 report, the Economic Policy Institute stated that “children from impoverished families start kindergarten at a tremendous disadvantage.”¹² These insights are not really new; Jonathan Kozol wrote about them in the 1960s.¹³ What may be new is how little progress we’ve made in effectively addressing this issue over the past three decades, which suggests that political rhetoric outweighs policy that would really help students and their schools.

How can we continue to accept the severe inequity in education while propagating a myth that public education is the “great equalizer?” Could it be that many of those in power benefit from the disempowerment of millions of Americans living in poverty? Could it be that they rely on citizens being complacent rather than politically active? The myth of educational equity certainly helps to maintain the status quo of haves and have-nots, perhaps to a degree that threatens the stability of our society. As educational consultant and former mayor of Albuquerque David Rusk said, “We are becoming two Americas—one rich, one poor—and we will pay a steep price if we do nothing to address this crisis.”¹⁴

Myth 4: “Student Test Scores Measure School Quality”

The onus of the new age of accountability in public education is increasingly placed on children—and young children at that. One of the results of NCLB high-stakes testing has been that children assume responsibility for their school’s performance.¹⁵ In Florida, for example, school evaluations (on a graded scale, A through F) are based solely on aggregate high-stakes assessment. This policy is driving qualified, committed teachers away from D and F schools in droves, only to be replaced by uncertified, inexperienced teachers.¹⁶ Districts are further punished with reduced financial support and face school closure if they receive an grade of F for two consecutive years. These policies serve to widen the existing gap in public educational quality, victimizing those students in greatest need of support, and demoralizing teachers who work in the most challenging environments.

Children in poorer schools are shouldering an emotional and psychological burden that should not be theirs. The impact of these burdens on young children should not be overlooked.¹⁷ The result of this policy is a sense of failure and hopelessness among students, parents, teachers, and administrators—not better schools or better teaching.

Standardized test scores should be used as diagnostic tools—“What can we provide

to these students, teachers, and schools to improve their learning?” Standardized test scores should not be used as instruments of punishment—“See the low test scores at this school? Withhold funding and threaten to close it!”¹⁸

Conclusion

We have outlined only a small sample of modern myths associated with poverty, testing, and public education. We believe that current trends—high-stakes standardized testing, scaled reward systems, parent voucher plans, increased emphasis on “teaching to the test,” and pre-packaged curriculum—move teachers and students away from critical thinking and meaningful learning and towards fear and conformity. Whether they come from successful or failing schools, students emerge from such an environment unprepared, unrewarded, uninspired and, therefore, unlikely to participate actively in a democratic society. Compliant and complacent citizens only benefit the status quo.

Education has been and can be a great equalizer in our society, a path for every child, rich or poor, toward greater opportunity. If standardized assessments point to any possible weaknesses in our educational system, then let’s diagnose the problems and provide resources (whether it be smaller class sizes, better teacher training, or morning nutrition programs) to correct them. If a “testing gap” correlates with larger social inequities, then let’s take a critical look at ourselves. Educational policy that is based on modern myths, high-stakes testing, and punishment of the poor should not be a part of the picture. 📖

Notes

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