

FROM THE TRENCHES

From School to Work: What Is the School's Moral Responsibility?

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by Edward G. Rozycki

—[I]f . . . achievement gaps were closed, the yearly gross domestic product of the United States would be trillions of dollars higher, or three billion to five billion dollars more per day.¹

If Wishes Were Horses . . .

In the midst of the current recession, school reform is still an expanding economic enterprise. Novel programs, but seldom their long-term success, return the surest profits.² Most recently, educational entrepreneurs have managed to flood the media with a misconception: overhauling public school classrooms will increase the GDP (gross domestic product) by upgrading the cognitive skills of the lowest-performing students.³

But although some economists argue strongly that cognitive and economic development are linked, they recognize that the public school classroom is not the only, or even the most important, influence on this relationship. For example, Hanushek and Woessmann write,

Overall economic institutions . . . can be viewed as pre-conditions to economic development. And, without them, education and skills may not have the desired impact on economic outcomes.⁴

For example, the so-called “overeducated” often find themselves misfits in a nation’s economy, so that even high levels of their particular cognitive skills fail to provide “human capital,” i.e., skills that translate into economic payoffs.

Strangely enough, in much of the public media classroom teachers bear the brunt of the blame for the disconnect between school and work. But practices and structures outside the classroom can

stultify student cognitive development or render it useless. However, if the problems with economic development are consequences of economic structures, it is moot whether an improved GDP requires school improvement.

Moral Responsibility and School Reform Models

To what extent are a K–12 school and its staff responsible for its students’ economic success? Let’s begin with a general moral principle: one who can’t prevent something from happening, or cause it to happen, is not morally (and often not legally) responsible for whether it happens.⁵

Very young kids love to press buttons. So do adults. When something occurs not too long after a button is pressed, people are inclined to perceive it as cause and effect. Roughly put, “cause” indicates control through correlation. The would-be intervenor looks for a correlation that can be controlled, that provides the ability to produce, stultify, or prevent something. But with control comes moral responsibility.

Are a person’s school experiences responsible, causally effective, for that person’s life outcomes? Many schools’ mission statements claim such an effect: “developing students who are life-long learners” or “preparing the student for the workplace of the twenty-first century.” Is that more than hyperbole?

All school reform is based on a relatively simple model: an intervenor (the reform agent) produces change(s) in certain school variables to cause a change in certain student-outcome variables—in the case discussed here, a student’s occupational fitness. We can diagram the model as figure 1 (“+” indicates a positive correlation): (intervention) + → (school characteristic) + → (student occupational fitness), or,



Figure 1

A causal arrow, →, can be read ambiguously to produce a colloquial rendering, e.g., “An intervention controls (impacts, affects) a school characteristic that controls (impacts, affects) student occupational fitness.”⁶

Unfortunately, figure 1 is too clean, too simple. It serves primarily promotional purposes by disregarding alternative influences affecting school change other than the intervention being promoted. Also disregarded are alternative effects—“spinoffs”—hidden costs and benefits, other than the promised change in school characteristics.

The basic practical rules for causation and moral responsibility are these:

The Alternative Cause Rule: for every effect, there are (disregarded, overlooked) alternative causes.

Alternative causes not only may reduce intervenor responsibility; they also draw attention away from the proposed intervention and thus reduce its necessity. That is why entrepreneurial educational interventionists find it most convenient to avoid detailed analyses of their proposals.

The Alternative Effect (Spinoff) Rule: for every cause, there are (disregarded, overlooked) alternative effects.

By creating collateral costs or benefits, spinoffs may create undesired intervenor responsibilities.⁷ Again, entrepreneurial wisdom dictates avoiding discussion of such factors.

Seldom do school board members, state departments of education, or legislators, for example, acknowledge responsibility for school characteristics that they can directly, if inadvertently, influence. Yet such matters as governance, teacher skill levels required for hiring, school size, and funding are, for public schools, beyond the control of teachers, principals, superintendents, or supervisors. School characteristics not controlled by school staff but possibly impacting student occupational fitness are not the moral responsibility of school staff.

We can modify figure 1 to account for alternative causes and effects to obtain figure 2: let's add a few other factors, as either causes or effects: a budget; a dance club; sports participation; and extracurricular activities. (The hyphens [-] indicate a negative correlation.)

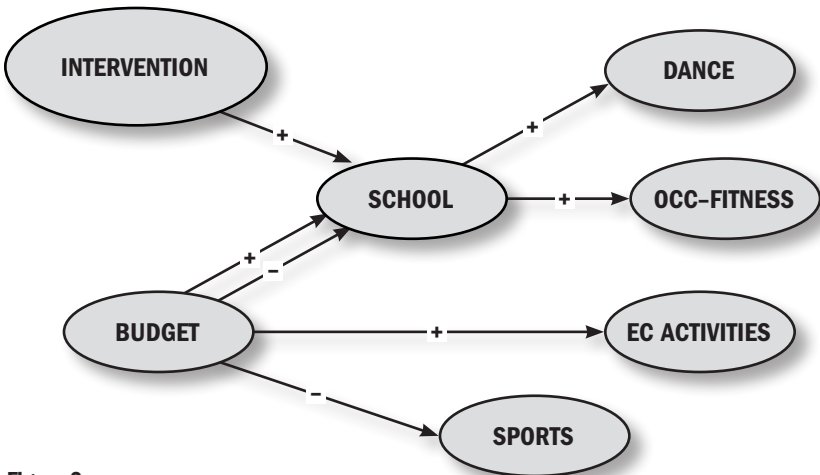


Figure 2

What figure 2 shows is that a (change in a) school characteristic may be the effect of both a (reform) intervention and a budgeting change. The intervention may increase the school characteristic that increases dance-club activities but reduces the budget. The budgeting change may increase the budget and increase the school characteristic, but it reduces sports participation even though it increases other EC activities.

Who is responsible for such spinoffs, especially if they are unintended or unforeseen? That becomes particularly cogent when the spinoffs are undesirable. In law, lack of intention or foresight is often a mitigating factor when damage occurs. In any case, the basic rule holds: only controllers are morally responsible.

A Multiplicity of Influences and Spinoffs

One way to address such concerns systematically would be to consider characteristics of students, schools, and occupations—along with other “external” factors—and ask, “Who controls what?” Table 1 lists characteristics (variables) that could be used to profile each environment of influence the student passes through on the road to occupational success.

For example, a student might begin with any of the following (or more) characteristics: attitudes, tastes, skills, dispositions, knowledge, or memories. He or she might possess certificates, diplomas, degrees, or memberships. In addition, various social characteristics might describe him or her: family status, peer status, friendships, or in general, “connections.” From those characteristics (treated as variables) we might construct a profile that would be unique to each individual student.

Note that the school cannot influence all the variables mentioned above, no matter how important an effect those variables may have on the student’s adult occupational life. Even if, ideally, schooling treatments could modify a variable, e.g., math skills, other influences might be stronger, e.g., forgetting material over summer vacation. Consequently, the school may not be morally responsible for them or even more-distant environmental or hereditary characteristics: family status, peer status, or connections.

To the extent that the school cannot control a characteristic important to the learner’s post-K–12 life, its moral responsibility for that life is diminished. Even for the school-controllable variables, other external influences may diminish their effects, thus vitiating the rationales for much governmental school-to-work policy.

School, Occupation, “External,” and Job Market Factors

Similarly, schools and occupations, external influences, and job markets can be profiled in terms of the variables provided in table 1. But so far as the school’s responsibility is concerned, even within the school only a few, if any, of the characteristics (variables) may fall under the control of individuals who work there: teachers, principals, superintendents, supervisors.

Private employers, corporations, federal and state government departments, and to some extent unions and professional organizations are the most direct controllers of many of the occupation-profile variables.

Student (Home Environment)	School	Occupation	Other Factors (“externals”)	Job Market
Attitudes	Level	Income (salary, wage)	Government Policies	Job Offers
Tastes	Curriculum	Self-governance	Weather	Skill Requirements
Skills	Governance	Tenure	Local Tax Structure	Social Requirements
Dispositions	Funding	Career	Community Health	Location
Knowledge	Teacher Skill	Interest	Mythos	Certification Requirements
Memories	Certificates Issued	Risk	External Markets	Permanence
Certificates	School “Climate”	Status	Geography	
Diplomas	Teacher Knowledge	Perks	Technology	
Degrees	Status	Health Benefits		
Memberships	Size	On-the-Job Learning		
Family Status	Entrance Requirements			
Peer Status				
Friendships				
“Connections”				

Table 1

The K–12 school has no control over most of those variables by the time a person reaches adulthood. Even among the few school and learner variables that educators control on-site, there are many interactions, but they tend to be inconsistent over large populations, or across economic, ethnic, or geographical divisions. There is no scientific consensus on why that is so.

That is why, for example, standardizing the curriculum or upgrading teacher licensing requirements does not guarantee increased student achievement.

The Job Market: Generally Ignored

The job market is a major influence on student occupational outcomes. Some job-market characteristics that can develop a profile are provided in table 1. Notice that none of them can normally be influenced by K–12 education. That breaks the causal chain from school to work.

It is an economic system's job market that defines the purposes for which schooling outcomes count as "human capital." Consider a highly literate person who has a Ph.D. in history. From a retail-store manager's point of view, that person's basic skills in reading, writing, or arithmetic constitute greater human capital than does a doctor of philosophy degree. In other words, more or better K–12 education may or may not affect the development of a person's human capital, i.e., it may have no economic effect.

Given this model, the perplexing question is not only why educators, schoolteachers in particular, are supposed to have major responsibility for student occupational outcomes, but also why many educators themselves are so eager to accept blame for failures beyond their control. Perhaps willingness to suffer unmerited blame for student failure is the quid pro quo for accepting unmerited praise for student success.

Notes

1. Javier C. Hernandez, "Study Cites Dire Economic Impact of Poor Schools," available at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/23/nyregion/23klein.html>>.

2. This discussion has gone on for a long time. See Gary K. Clabaugh and Edward G. Rozycki, "Politics, Consensus, and Educational Reform," available at <<http://www.newfoundations.com/PolEdReform/PolEdRef.html>>.

3. See, for example, Thomas L. Friedman, "Swimming without a Suit," available at <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/22/opinion/22friedman.html>>.

Both Friedman and Hernandez rely on the 2009 PowerPoint presentation by McKinsey and colleagues, *Detailed Findings on the Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's School*, 119 slides, available at <<http://www.mckinsey.com/client/service/socialsector/achievementgap.asp>>. The crucial item, buried in slide eighty-eight of McKinsey's one hundred nineteen (!) slide presentation, is this: the difference between the actual GDP and the hypothesized GDP is "determined by assumptions about the ability to make use of higher-skilled people and the quality of economic institutions."

4. Eric A. Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann, "The Role of Cognitive Skills in Economic Development," *Journal of Economic Literature* 46 (3) (2008): 609. McKinsey and colleagues base their publication on Hanushek and Woessmann's article. Hanushek and Woessmann are much more forthcoming with their crucial assumptions.

5. This expands the precept: "The law cannot hope to deter involuntary movement or stimulate action that cannot physically be performed." Quoted from *The Model Penal Code* (Philadelphia: American Law Institute, 1956),

in *Freedom and Responsibility*, ed. Herbert Morris, 112 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961).

Sometimes laws are passed that are morally obnoxious: for example, fining parents for the misbehavior of their children in school. The only rational sense such laws make is if we take them to be surreptitious suggestions that there are no limits to the methods parents might use to coerce the desirable behavior from their children.

6. For expansion on the notion of intervention, see Edward G. Rozycki, "Rationales for Intervention," available at <<http://www.newfoundations.com/EGR/Rationales.html>>.

7. Empirical procedure, by itself, cannot identify *all possible* influencing or influenced variables. No *empirical* scientist can claim that there is *no* alternative cause for a particular effect—or that there is *no* alternative effect for a particular cause—since those claims are not rationally bounded. See Gigerenzer on bounded rationality in chapter 3 of *Bounded Rationality: The Adaptive Toolbox*, ed. G. Gigerenzer and R. Selten (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

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