Class Dismissed:
Why we cannot teach or learn our way out of inequality

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Purpose and Scope

The book *Class Dismissed: Why we cannot teach or learn our way out of inequality* (Marsh 2011) opens with a personal anecdote from the author about his participation in a program designed to offer advanced education (college credit in humanities) to disadvantaged members of the Urbana-Champaign area. While engaged in the program, the author began to realize the fallacy of the common perception of education as the prescription to cure social ills such as “unemployment, crime, teenage pregnancy, single motherhood, and as an embodiment of all these, poverty” (Marsh, 2011, p.12). Marsh offers examples of this common and collective opinion by presenting quotes and examples from economists, politicians (past and present), academics, corporate executives, and from the general public including those currently living in poverty. Through quote after quote and example after example, March clearly supports his position that “a surprising consensus has grown up in the United states around the belief that what causes poverty and economic inequality is lack of education and that what will fix these ills is more and better education” (Marsh, 2011, p.13).

Once Marsh established the evidence of the prevailing opinion he then presents his thesis: that we, as a society, expect education to do that which it cannot; we cannot teach or learn our way out of inequality. Marsh explains that while education might be the solution for one student it is not the solution for all, nor can it be expected to be. He states that advising one bright student to go to college is great but that advising all students to go is futile. Marsh mentions a statement by an unnamed economist who compared going to college to standing up at a concert: selfishly advantageous but not to be encouraged for the entire audience. Put in another way, Marsh writes that “an *is* (education pays) is not an *ought* (everyone ought to go to college.)” (Marsh, 2011, p.19).
In this book Marsh seeks to respond to the questions of when we, as a society, began to believe that education was the solution to inequality and why. Why we believe this so fervently and why those with economic and political power encourage the belief. Marsh examines how this common belief has influenced teachers and students and finally, Marsh posits that if education is not the solution to poverty and economic inequality then something else might be and he seeks to discover such a solution.

**Arguments and perspectives**

After the opening anecdote, and establishing the pervasiveness of the opinion that education must be the solution to economic inequality, Marsh begins developing support for his position by documenting how economic inequality is a growing problem. He references and addresses common rebuttals through the use of economic data from the early 20th century to the present day. Marsh examines the difference between poverty and economic inequality and explicates the difficulties encountered when comparing economic data on a global scale. Marsh’s data supports his point that while poverty rates are perhaps not as troublesome as one would think (as they have remained fairly constant since the mid-1960’s), economic inequality is a growing problem.

Marsh expresses the opinion that we cannot expect education to be the solution to economic inequality since our society produces fewer jobs for college graduates than it does for workers without a degree. Those low-paying jobs, according to the book, are not going to be eliminated simply because workers have more education. As a friend of the author pointed out to him: a bartender with a PhD still makes a bartender’s income.

Once he presented the economic picture of where our society stands on comparative incomes, March presented how the picture of economic inequality is drastically different from
what it was 30 years ago, or 60 years ago. While the demographics of poverty have changed, the percentage of our population formally labeled as living in poverty is relatively stable; however the divide between the rich, the middle class, and the poor is getting wider. Interestingly, Marsh points out that the percentage of the population who lived in chronic and continual poverty in every month from 2004 to 2008 was very small (2.2%) but the percentage of low-income workers who had fallen below the poverty line at least once in the same four year period was actually higher that poverty statistics would indicate. Meaning a family who was not technically living in poverty at the time of assessment had lived in poverty in the recent past. The fluid movement between income percentiles was noted and data presented. It was also noted that while movement between economic percentiles was possible, the reality is that a majority of Americans move only one or two percentiles from the group into which they were born. Interestingly, this was true of movement in both directions. High achieving poor students might only move up two percentiles, but conversely, an excessively low achieving student whose family income is in the 90th percentile would probably never have his income drop to the lowest percentile. Statistically, the poor stay poor and rich stay rich and, according to Marsh, education is not the solution to rectifying such blatant inequality.

Marsh continues to find support for his position by examining the historical purposes of education in America in three stages: from the Puritans through the Great Depression; From the Depression Era to World War II; and from World War II to the present. In each stage, Marsh examines the place and value of education and education’s impact on the earning of citizen workers. He also investigates what the religious, political and academic leaders of the day wrote concerning the aims of education in each era. Marsh also investigated whether or how the aims of education connected to income opportunity, which is did not until after the Depression Era
and the establishment of such social-educational policies such as work-study, Pell grants, and the G.I. Bill.

**Strengths and weaknesses**

One of the strengths of this book is the wide variety of positions from which Marsh gathers opinions and data. He does not rely exclusively on one viewpoint but brings in a collection of examples from all areas of our society. He references and quotes economists, politicians, educators, students, the wealthy, the poor, and the middle class. He uses personal opinions, professional insight, empirical research findings, and charts and graphs to support his thesis. There is no way for the reader to surmise that this is the opinion of one-and-only-one. The variety of persons and institutions recognized that have supported the original premise of education as a solution to inequality goes a long way toward establishing the credibility of this author. When an author establishes the opposing opinion so effectively, the reader gains some confidence that the author will deal with addition data and opinions fairly.

In addition to the breadth and depth of his data, another strength of Marsh’s argument is his attention to the historical perspective without demanding a return to the good-ole-days. Marsh makes no attempt to suggest that many of the changes in educational policy have not been beneficial to society. He simply engages us in a review of the historical perspective to demonstrate that education had historically been established as an important factor in the betterment of the citizenry, but only recently has it become the only factor. Education used to be one of the ways a worker could move up in economic earning power; now it is labeled the exclusive way.

An additional strength is the author’s disarming voice. He includes his personal and familial experience as anecdotal information while being charmingly self-deprecating about his
educational credentials. Marsh gains the audience’s affinity by writing with confidence but not stuffiness. In this way I am particularly appreciative that I chose this work to review.

If there is a weakness in this book, it might be in this reader. I would suggest, though, that positioning the section on economics at the beginning of the book might be detrimental to the general population navigating through the entire work. I would have established the historical perspective first and then continued with the statistical data after. As I mentioned, my own preference for history over math may color my opinion on that. I did find that statistical data hard to follow and the graphical data too small to read easily. One other weakness was that Marsh often quoted experts without any description of who they were and what their position was. This reader did not have enough knowledge of significant economists or political analysts to recognize their names and flipping to the notes at the back became wearisome.

Personal and professional reflections

When my husband and I had our first child, we lived below the poverty line. On paper we would have looked like a million other poor, young families. We only had high school diplomas; we both held hourly wage, part-time jobs in the service sector, we had no health care, and we both drove cars that were unreliable at best. We were one accident or one job-loss away from destitution. What would not have been documented, though, was what we did have, which was goals, ambition, and academic opportunity. Fast forward 22 years (on Saturday, June 30, exactly) and we now have four college degrees between us not counting the one I am pursuing right now and we live above twice the national median income level as documented by the U.S. Census Bureau. As Marsh points out, a family in poverty today is not necessarily (or even likely) to be the same family counted in what looks to be a barely changed statistic ten- or twenty-years later. For us, as is the case for many, the road out of poverty led through the
military for my husband and then through higher education for both of us. Education may not solve economic inequality but it certainly moved us from one side to the other.

As an educator I found Marsh’s work to be thought and discussion provoking. In the course of the last month I have had discussions with the senior budget analyst at a major university (who happens to be my best friend from high school,) my husband who grew up economically and academically disadvantaged but is now an electronic engineer with an MBA, my mother, an inner-city Akron educator from 1961-2011 (yes, that is fifty years) and many other professional educators about Marsh’s position that while education may be the solution for any individual student it is not the solution for society. Most had a similar response: if education is the answer for the student in front of them, then education is the answer that matters. Each of us believes that what is best for each, individual student is what matters and society will just have to figure out its own ills.

I do not mean to say that finding an answer to poverty or economic inequality is not important, only that it is not, perhaps, the work of educators in the classroom. Like Marsh, I see us attempting to turn a screw with a hammer. If the screw is loose, the hammer isn’t going to help. Pushing a college agenda for every student isn’t going to be the solution to the lack of jobs that pay a living wage and provide economic security for workers and families. Regardless of education level, service sector jobs like home health care and child care are necessary and worthy of a living wage. Education isn’t the right tool to address that issue.

Regardless, I do believe that every student should be offered the opportunity for a high quality education. Poverty or economic inequality should be no reason for deplorable standards and resources in our low-income districts. I do believe that this issue must be addressed, and soon. As professionals, we must get involved in political and economic movements that support
an equitable education agenda. Education might not be the answer but it is one answer, and at least in that sense it becomes our responsibility to participate in dialog regarding education, economics, and equity.

**Recommendation**

I recommend this book to any individual interested in the topic of education, economics, and equity. The sections on historical perspectives are fascinating and a good review of the position and purposes for education as set out in earlier times. The statistical data is also compelling and deserves attention as well. As apologetics are concerned, this book is fodder for either side of the debates concerning “college for all.” On one side you have the support for the position that encouraging college for all is not going to effectively change economic inequality in America, but on the other side, there is support for the argument that for any specific student, education is their best and possible only opportunity into a higher earning percentile. In either case, the author’s extensive documentation and engaging writing style are cause for me to recommend this book to my colleagues.
References


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