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Recommended Citation

J. Yinger, 2008. "A Review of Real Education by Charles Murray," *It's Elementary*, October.

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It's Elementary

A Monthly Column by EFAP Director John Yinger
October 2008

A Review of *Real Education* by Charles Murray

In *Real Education*, Charles Murray declares that the American education system is failing largely because too many people are going to college and because the system does not do enough for the academically gifted.¹ His vision is to change the system so that colleges teach his version of a liberal education to a smaller number of students and vocational education options are expanded for students who are unlikely to be able to handle the college education he prefers.

Murray presents his policy recommendations in the last chapter of his book. This column reviews the recommendations that apply to elementary and secondary education. Overall, Murray wants the reader to think that he is designing an education system based entirely on merit. “The goal of education,” he says at the end of the book, “is to bring children into adulthood having discovered things they enjoy doing and doing them at the outermost limits of their potential. The goal applies equally to every child, across the entire range of every ability.” In fact, however, his recommendations would make the education system even more class-based than it already is.

The most dramatic recommendation in the book is to give ability tests to all students in the first grade and then to design an education program for each student based on his or her abilities. This recommendation is accompanied by recommendations to stop focusing so much on low-ability children and to allow high-ability students to move through school as fast as they can.

¹ Charles Murray, *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality* (Crown Forum, 2008). Dr. Murray gave a lecture on his book at The Maxwell School on December 5, 2008; this column is based on my invited response to his lecture.

Although Murray presents virtually no evidence to support these recommendations, he does not hesitate to present them with strikingly strong language.² “Over the past forty years,” he says, educational romantics “have obsessed about how to make large gains in reading and math at the bottom end of the funnel [that is, for low-ability kids], where only marginal gains are possible. Ending that obsession is the first step toward better K-12 education.” But Murray does not provide any evidence about the nature or consequences of this obsession, and he certainly does not explain how ending it would lead to better K-12 education.

Murray also says “The value of obtaining a first-rate assessment of every child upon entering elementary school is worth far more than anything it will cost. The purpose is not to put students in categories etched in stone, but to give teachers a better chance to respond to their students’ individual abilities and needs as they enter school and as they develop during school. Not doing such assessments now, despite the availability of the tools to do them, amounts to educational malpractice.” But he does not even indicate what the benefits of this proposal might be, let alone provide any evidence that these benefits would be greater than the costs.

A move to first-grade testing and tracking also would add a profound new class-based bias to the education system. Because testing provides an imperfect measure of ability and because ability provides an imperfect prediction of performance, many parents would not be happy with their child’s placement and would not want it to be “etched in stone.” On average, the parents most effective at moving their child to a higher track would be well-educated, high-income parents. These parents would, of course, also be relatively effective at providing test preparation and post-test tutoring and private school alternatives and so on.

Ability tests and tracking starting in the first grade also would, in my judgment, undermine the principle of equal opportunity, which is one of the core principles of American democracy. Instead of starting all students out on an equal footing with the same set of opportunities in front of them, this approach would

² Murray also resorts to insults. In fact, at the end of the book, he systematically insults all the people who participate in America’s decentralized education system, including parents, teachers, employers, and school administrators, but especially politicians and college professors. I guess that includes me. The problem, he says, is that all these participants in the education system have lost touch with reality. A return to reality, he says, “will come through a resumption of responsibility by the grown-ups.” Insults and strong language may sell books, but they are a poor substitute for evidence.

shut off opportunities from the very beginning, before students and parents had a chance to gather experience and information and to make choices of their own—and it would do this on the basis of highly imperfect information, often overruled by well-connected parents. This system would be the antithesis of fair treatment and equal opportunity.

Another Murray proposal is to expand school choice programs in K-12 education. In support of school choice, he says that “The school-choice movement is the most important source for good in American K-12 education,” but he makes no effort to convince the reader that this is true.³ He does provide some information on the number of charter schools, the number of home-schooled children, and the number of school voucher programs. However, attendance figures are a far cry from evidence about program effectiveness.

Moreover, a careful study of North Carolina by one of my colleagues, Bob Bifulco, finds that schools “are more segregated by race and class as a result of school choice programs than they would be if all students attended their geographically assigned schools” and that “the effects of choice on segregation by class are larger than the effects on segregation by race.”⁴ In short, expanding choice is likely, based on this evidence, to increase class segregation and thereby to increase the advantages already received by high-income kids.

Murray also advocates a zero-tolerance policy for disruptive students. I certainly agree with Murray that classrooms need to be safe and orderly, but his exclusive emphasis on punishment would, as he recognizes, have the most impact in high-poverty schools. Disruptive behavior is not perfectly correlated with a lack of ability, so his proposal would add another class-based element to the education system by removing from school some students, most of them from poor families, who have the ability to succeed. Surely a better program would combine punishment and needed services, such as anger management. I am not an expert on this topic, but a quick look on the internet reveals that many such balanced programs exist, some with evidence supporting their effectiveness.

³ Murray also does not explain the profound contradiction between his support for choice in elementary and secondary education with his call for a move toward his preferred uniform curriculum and restrictions on choice in college education.

⁴ Robert Bifulco, Helen F. Ladd, and Stephen L. Ross, “Public School Choice and Integration,” *Social Science Research*, Forthcoming.

Even letting gifted students go as fast as they can might have a class element. Students out of synch with their cohort would have more complicated schedules, for example, which higher-income families might be better able to accommodate.

In short, the recommendations at the end of *Real Education*, which are offered under the banner of meritocracy, are actually a recipe for making the American education system even more class-based than it already is. Instead of following Murray's misguided recommendations, we should be looking for ways to expand opportunities for all students, regardless of income or ability.