*A Critical Analysis of Bringing Equity Back:*
*Research for a New Era in American*
*Educational Policy*
*Edited by Janice Petrovich and Amy Stuart Wells*

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Bringing Equity Back: Research for a New Era in American Educational Policy illustrates how the focus in education reform has changed from equity to excellence. Between the 1960s and the present, "the balance has shifted from concerns for group access to individual merit; from equity to quality; from entitlement to choice" (Petrovich, 2005, p.7). Each article isolates one reform strategy and examines it through one or more studies, many of them quantitative. The book is divided in half: four articles analyze to what extent "equity" reforms have persisted over the years, and consider how their current state does or does not contribute to excellence. Five others look at "excellence" strategies and interrogate their effects on educational equity. This book paints a gloomy picture of promising equity strategies traded for excellence reforms that not only fall short of their ambitious goals, but foster greater inequities among students. These authors aim to foment activism on problems of equity; they argue that change comes from top-down decisions and bottom-up advocacy.

After discussing how the authors conceptualize "equity" and "excellence," I will explore their arguments that (1) equity reforms need to be "brought back" to create the conditions for excellence, and (2) excellence reforms have largely undermined equity goals. Throughout, I also consider the book's agenda for action, discussing examples (from the book and beyond) for creating reforms that promote both equity and excellence.   Ultimately, I suggest that these examples all have limitations and that we need to re-conceptualize equity more than just "bring it back."

To begin, Bringing Equity Back uses the word "equity" in two distinct ways. First, equity describes a broad condition of justice and equal opportunity for all students in public education. Second, it characterizes a particular group of reform strategies, usually initiated in the 1960s and 1970s. At times, the book conflates the goal of equity with the kind of strategies or policies used to get there and this can be confusing. Here I begin with the broader concept and then dig into the specifics. Datnow and Hubbard (2005) provide a definition for gender equity that captures how these authors conceptualize equity for any group: "the removal of gender barriers, bias and stereotyping for females and males, and a conscious acknowledgement of gendered power relations in society" (p.195). Creating equity includes both removing barriers and explaining why those barriers existed. One article addresses gender differences, but the others focus on the educational attainment and experience of low-income, African-American or Latino children in public education. Several authors describe inequity as "longitudinal and additive" (Clarke, Madaeus & Shore, 2005, p.105) and this concept works on any level. For instance, as poor children age, "one disadvantage layers on to another, creating few opportunities for [them] to succeed" (Petrovich, 2005, p.12). As other articles illustrate, it is equally hard for a group or institutions such as schools to break the cycle of structural inequity. Seeing these complexities, "the authors of this book do not see equity as either static or ever completely achievable.

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Rather, equity has to be pursued consistently in the attempt to create a more just society" (p.12).

Since equity is a shifting target and a constant struggle, it is important to consider education reforms within their historical, political, social and economic contexts. The book's dominant narrative – framed by the editors and echoed within each article – is of a movement from the 1960s to 2005 and from "equity" to "excellence" as a guiding vision. This shift in discourse mirrors other changes in American political, economic and community culture. As Petrovich (2005) describes the progression:

> "Policies pursuing equity in education traditionally have favored a more fair distribution of educational access, opportunities and resources . . . . Such redistributive policies have been less important to those arguing for greater "excellence" in education. Instead they advocate a free-market approach to education that allows parents to choose schools for their children and forces schools to improve so they can effectively compete for students. Faith in the private sphere rather than in government and the confidence of market mechanisms to improve efficiency and quality are replacing values of social solidarity, trust in public institutions [and citizenship]" (p.4).

This means reforms like affirmative action, desegregation, bilingual education and special education have been reduced or cast aside in favor of charter schools, vouchers, school "report cards," and standardized tests. This narrative closely matches what

Oakes and Lipton (1999) call "the market metaphor" for education, which became dominant in the United States in the 1980s (p.23) and is also reflected in the standards movement, especially No Child Left Behind. This perspective assumes that choice and competition propels schools to new levels of quality. Then it is up to the student and family to take advantage of the opportunities theoretically available to them.  Again in the book's language, there is a conflation between the end goal of "excellence" (i.e., high-quality education) with the strategies used to accomplish it (i.e. choice, competition, individual agency).

Although they all agree on the historical trajectory from "equity" to "excellence," these authors frame the relationship between these concepts somewhat differently. Clarke et al. (2005) portray them as held in a fragile balance, as does Petrovich (2005): "achieving an excellent education for all children requires policies and practices that address both quality and equity" (p.12-13).  Considering economic resources and political capital, Gittell (2005) takes a different stance: "although advocates for excellence and equity declare their support for both goals, when translated into public policy the two concepts are often competitive" (p.24). Puriefoy (2005) expresses a clear vote for which is more important: "equity is the necessary precondition for academic excellence, for systemic school improvement and for the nation's democratic way of life" (p.325). To the extent they emphasize equity over excellence; these authors aim to adjust the country's current obsession with excellence and to raise serious concerns about it. They provide evidence that (1)

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eliminating or scaling back "equity" reforms compromises educational quality, and (2) "excellence" reforms fail on their own goals and also widen educational disparities and hurt equity. Next, I will illustrate and raise questions about each part of this argument.

When traditional equity reforms end, or our commitment to them falters, structural inequities dominate and threaten educational excellence for all students. The 1996 passage of Proposition 209, which repealed affirmative action in California, provides a striking "natural experiment." When race and ethnicity could not be factored into university admissions, diversity suffered. University of California acceptance rates for African-Americans and Hispanics fell from 64% to 47% and from 56% to 36% respectively over a five year period 1997-2002 (Federman & Pachon, 2005, p.139). Structural inequities created this yawning gap. As seen in the Bill Moyers film, *Children in America's Schools*, school facilities and programs vary wildly according to a community's advantage, with some students swimming in Olympic-sized pools and others being rained on in class. Opportunities for rigor are just as disparate, as Federman & Pachon's (2005) study of Advanced Placement (AP) in California demonstrates. They discovered a negative correlation between the number of AP courses offered and the percentage of African-American or Hispanic students in a school, and a weaker but still negative correlation between AP courses and the percentage of poor students (p.143-4). An African-American student is likely to have the least enriching curriculum and instruction up to high school.

Even if she persists through that and would be prepared for and accepted into Advanced Placement courses, none might be available at her school. In a race-blind admissions process, proving academic rigor in standard terms – i.e. through APs – becomes paramount. As Clarke et al. (2005) illustrate, inequities also affect group performance on the SATs, with the average African-American ranking at the 16th percentile among Whites (p.106). This is another barrier to educational and economic opportunity. In the qualitative part of this study, the researchers observed admissions directors using a "richer and more complicated" decision process, involving more definitions of excellence than just test scores (p.120). Still, there is limited cause for optimism since such a process is more feasible at private institutions, which also come with a hefty price tag and are out of reach for many.

Although these researchers are discouraged by public education in California, Rosen and Mehan (2003) show how the same situation engendered a creative response. To an extent, this is an example of what the editors in *Bringing Equity Back* recommend: a top-down and bottom-up decision resulting in greater equity. Concerned about diversity after Proposition 209, leaders at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) proposed launching an on-campus charter high school to give African-American and Hispanic students the preparation they would need to be eligible for admission. Rosen and Mehan tell the story of how the proposal was initially denied, a huge controversy broke out, and then the project was reframed, passed and made a reality. The situation was framed by top-down

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decisions from the Chancellor and the Faculty Senate, as well as pressure from the Regents (Rosen & Mehan, 2003, p.675). There was also widespread bottom-up activism from students, professors, School Board members and a coalition from the African-American community (p. 669). This story is not presented as a victory but it illustrates one way to "sell" equity, re-writing it in language acceptable in the current climate. The charter school embraces "excellence" values like meritocracy and choice and redefines "under-representation [of groups of students] as under-preparation" (p.676). In this way, UCSD does not illustrate what *Bringing Equity Back* recommends. Yet it did concretely build a school that would increase opportunities for many students. Thus the authors conclude that this process had "contradictory effects… affirming a narrower understanding of inequality while promoting a more progressive definition of the university" (p.660). I return to this idea in my conclusion.

Analogous to California Proposition 209 are the many recent court decisions ending desegregation by declaring school districts – such as those in Charlotte-Mecklenberg, North Carolina and New Castle County, Delaware – "unitary." Here too the elimination of an "equity reform" reveals structural inequities and segregation in sharp before-and-after contrasts. In Delaware before the Neighborhood Schools Act, 1.8% of Black students attended majority-Black schools in 1995; by 2004, just four years after the Act, 16% did (Fuetsch & Chalmers, 2004, p.1). Mickelson (2005) points out that although Charlotte-Mecklenberg was

considered a model of desegregation, 25% of its schools were still racially imbalanced in 1999 (p.58). This shows that equity reforms are not magic; they have to be carefully implemented to achieve their intended results. Still, without any plan in place, the situation is much worse today. Among many reasons why school segregation matters, it harms achievement for all students, especially but not only, low-income and minority students. Schools with concentrated poverty or minority populations have fewer resources, weaker curricula, less experienced teachers, higher turnover, less parental advocacy etc., and all these factors compromise "excellence." In Charlotte-Mecklenberg, 82% of low-income students attending integrated schools were at grade level, but this was true for only 64% of low-income students in high-poverty schools. Even more striking, 81% of middle class students in poor schools were at grade level. In other words, the demographics of the school appear to matter even more than the individual demographics (Chambers, Boger, Earls & High 2005, p.3). As Mickelson and Welner & Oakes (2005) demonstrate, the structural problems of school segregation are replicated in the practice of tracking or "second-generation segregation" (Mickelson, 2005, p.61).

Often school desegregation is framed as a trade-off – "my kids versus those kids" – but the educational research suggests otherwise. In fact, I find it surprising that *Bringing Equity Back* does not do more with this research since it so thoroughly supports the book's agenda. A large body of literature finds that diverse schools promote achievement for low-income students

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and students of color, at no educational cost to others (Mikelson, 2005, Chambers et al. 2005, Braddock & Eitle, 2004). The middle-class parents resisting detracking in San Jose, California, Rockford, Illinois, and East Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania must not have read this research. One theme in *Bringing Equity Back* is that parents react viscerally and emotionally, not rationally, to their children's educations. Race and class prejudice surely also played a part in the resistance to detracking. According to Welner and Oakes (2005), middle and upper class parents "scream[ed]" when they perceived weaker teaching in heterogeneous classes, but "they remained willing to foist that same (or worse) instruction on other children" (p.82-3). Welner and Oakes argue that detracking – an anachronistic "equity" reform – can result in more educational "excellence" but it is a politically unpopular change requiring momentum from the top down (via court mandates) and the bottom up (via "reform minded teachers, administrators, and community members" (p.80).

Cultivating "bottom-up" pressure for educational equity requires educating and mobilizing the public and providing professional development and critical inquiry for educators. Welner and Oakes (2005) emphasize self-questioning, public outreach, democratic dialogue and other "strategies used in social and political movements, such as local organizing" (p.98). In Delaware, the Brandywine School District used these strategies to powerful effect in resisting the Neighborhood Schools Act (NSA) and creating an alternative assignment plan to preserve school diversity. Although it was not as clearly "top-down" as the mandates discussed above, this process did include important decisions from the School Board and "bottom-up" activism from the citizens of the district. As Board Chair Nancy Doorey and Superintendent Bruce Harter recall (2003), they decided to "take the questions straight to the public… [giving them] the opportunity and the responsibility to review the larger implications" of the NSA (p.23). Public outreach included presentations on the negative effects of high-poverty schools, a 16-page voters' guide and a public service announcement on TV (p.24). A formal coalition formed, over 200 people appeared at Brandywine's hearing before the State Board, and citizens passed a referendum to fund the alternative plan – by the highest margin in Delaware's history (p.24-25). This was a stunning achievement for equity. Doorey and Harter (2003) conclude:

> "What, then, will prevent our communities from dividing (or continuing to divide) into schools for the 'haves' and schools for the 'have nots'? Perhaps our district's experience points to the possibility of turning to ourselves, within our own communities, to grapple face-to-face with what we want for our children" (p. 25).

The authors in *Bringing Equity Back* would cheer for Brandywine; they advocate using targeted equity strategies like maintaining diversity in school assignments, and they argue that "equitable educational practices are unlikely to come about as an artifact of policies specifically promoting only excellence or choice" (Mickelson, 2005, p.85). The book's second section argues that policies like vouchers, charter schools and whole-school reforms have worsened

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inequities and failed to achieve their own ambitious quality goals.

One reason for this failure is because so many excellence reforms involve parental choice and these are based on strong feelings rather than carefully considered educational rationales. As Shapiro and Johnson (2005) show, the power to choose is highly differential. They examine a form of choice, moving into "desirable" school zones, which is obviously more possible for those with wealth. Other forms can be inequitable too; many charter schools provide no transportation, so families have to drive their children to school or live nearby (Wells, Scott, Lopez & Holme 2005, p.237). Filling out applications and choice forms takes time and language ability that many families lack. When families can exert choice, they reinscribe race and class divisions. Shapiro and Johnson (2005) noted that families base their choices not on educational quality but on school reputation, for which "Whiteness" and wealth are markers (p.251, 253). In their study of vouchers in Chile, Carnoy and McEwan (2005) find that families choose the best education their money can buy: wealthy families pay tuition and middle class families use vouchers at private schools (p.278-9). These choices result in persistent cycles of inequity. What Wells et al. (2005) notice in California is also true in Delaware: "charter schools are more segregated by race and social class than the already segregated public schools" (p.237). Because choice is construed as so problematic, the book suggests that there is no "free market" for education.

The authors also demonstrate that ignoring the equity implications of an "excellence" reform is pernicious. They suggest that reforms need to be scrutinized for potential undermining consequences. For example, charter school laws – intended to promote local control and community voice – do not provide capital funding. As a result, schools often operate on (or close because of) inadequate budgets, or they seek private funding, compromising their community control and creating inequities between schools with greater and lesser resources to leverage (Wells et al., 2005, p.233). Although charter schools may hold the promise of culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy, financial troubles can threaten their excellence. Despite the explosion of charter schools and the high-profile successes of some charters in reducing achievement gaps, these researchers are not optimistic: "to the extent that charter schools offer yet another layer in a highly unequal education system, they have not solved the problems faced by the students on the 'bottom' in terms of access to better-quality education" (p.238).

*Bringing Equity Back* also tells two other stories of excellence reforms that failed – almost naively – to consider the equity landscape they had chosen to enter. Both New American Schools (NAS) and single-sex academies in California were framed as sparking innovation and adding choices to the educational menu; they were about excellence, not equity. Yet in both cases the decision was made to direct the reform at "at-risk" students and failing schools. According to Berends, Bodilly & Kirby (2005), many of the hurdles NAS faced in implementing its school designs can be

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attributed to structural inequities in these schools: teacher morale or bias, teacher or leader turnover, exhaustion from "reform *du jour*" (p.182). Some schools received poor district support – either they were given no voice in choosing a design or not enough resources for professional development to take advantage of those designs (p.174 – 179). The authors imply that each of these complicating factors is more prevalent in poor schools. Overall, NAS failed in its ambitious goals of excellence: only 50% of schools made progress than the district/state average in math and only 47% made more progress in reading (p.183).

The story of single-sex academies in California is somewhat more complicated for it shows a policy focused on one surface conception of equity instead of deeply probing another form of equity. Datnow and Hubbard (2005) "found many administrators sought the $500,000 [grant to open academies] because of the resources and opportunities that it would provide for students who were not successful in their school system," usually low-income students of color, rather than out of concern about gender disparities (p.203). They focused on acquiring resources to help low-achieving students (e.g. full-time counselors) rather than developing a "strong theory of single-gender education" (p.211). Far from increasing equity, the schools promoted gender stereotypes through their curriculum (*Pride and Prejudice* for girls, *All Quiet on the Western Front* for boys) and discipline. In the words of teachers, boys needed "military-style" classrooms while girls misbehaving were just being "catty" (p.207, 211). This article raises a question: did single-sex

academies fail because they focused on ability instead of gender issues? This is too simplistic and indeed, these administrators are not portrayed as thinking deeply about any facet of equity. Instead they seem to be chasing the money or looking for a quick fix. However, in this book actions are never individual, they are always structural. So, for instance, an administrator's decision to close the academy when the grant ends says as much about inadequate school budgets or the political sense that the "gender 'problem' in schools is essentially solved" (p.215) as it does about individual beliefs. Since inequities are structurally embedded, as Berends et al. (2005) put it, "easy fixes to the equity issues in our schools are not possible. Rather, equity can be achieved only through systematic, sustained reform of the educational infrastructure" (p.188).

The book ends with the one truly optimistic article, and I want to explore to the extent it offers a model for "bringing equity back" or updating it to fit within the current climate. Rebell (2005) analyzes cases where states have been sued for failing to provide adequate education to some students. Such lawsuits are not new; Rebell, Gittell (2005), Karp (2003) and Grubb, Goe & Huerta (2004) all discuss them. Yet Rebell sees three trends that make adequacy litigation a powerful tool and a path forward for equity. He illustrates them with the case of *Coalition for Fiscal Equity (CFE) vs. State of New York*. However, each of these trends can be questioned.

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First, Rebell's argument rests on an optimistic foundation that some would challenge. He sees our country as guided by a "democratic imperative" which he defines

> "as a period eruption of moral fervor that presses to eliminate the gap between the real and the ideal by implementing extensive political reforms that put into practice America's historical egalitarian ideals" (p.292).

Considering that the power dynamic has turned in adequacy litigation, with 18 of the past 29 cases won by plaintiffs, Rebell sees this as one of those periods of moral reform (p.297). Other authors are explicitly skeptical of this narrative of progress.

Second, Rebell sees at least some benefits in the current focus on accountability because it shines a light on funding and other inequities. He embeds equity within excellence:

> "inherent in the standards movement is also a powerful equity element, namely its philosophical premise that all students can learn at high cognitive levels and that society has an obligation to provide them the opportunity to do so" (p.302).

Other authors, notably Lipman (2002), view accountability very differently; they pierce through the rhetoric of No Child Left Behind and argue "current policies exacerbate existing inequalities and create new dynamics of inequity" (p. 380). Rebell would respond that political pressure for equity requires test scores that everyone can understand.

Finally, Rebell again describes a "top-down" and "bottom-up" movement for change. Of all the strategies that CFE used to engage the public, the key was requesting to "'level-up' the resources in New York City and other under-funded districts by expanding the pool of educational resources, rather than seeking a 'Robin Hood' remedy" of redistributing funds (Rebell, 2005, p.312). Thus. rich citizens from Great Neck have nothing to lose by joining this coalition. Although pragmatic, this strategy raises questions. How often can policy decisions be framed in this win-win manner? (Rebell leaves it ambiguous where these extra resources will come from.). Does this coalition truly represent citizens rallying around the cause of equity and grasping its educational benefits for all children, including theirs? Unlike the citizens of Brandywine, these people did not vote or pay, so their commitment is harder to gauge. The solution proposed by CFE does not directly address all the structural inequities discussed in *Bringing Equity Back*, such as resegregation. Thus it does not necessarily "bring equity back" in the way other authors envision. The Court of Appeals' ruling was a victory for equity, but Karp (2003) sounds a note of caution about the same case, anticipating an "extended political (and perhaps additional legal) struggle, in the midst of perpetual budget crises, to turn the court's decision into real educational equity" (p.283). As this book demonstrates clearly, implementation issues can undermine the best intentions.

CFE's story shows remarkable strategizing on one level, but it cannot be used as "the answer" for re-

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introducing equity into our current educational climate. Nor, I would argue, can the story of Brandywine School District or the lawsuits in San Jose, Rockford and East Pittsburgh, since they employ strategies (desegregation and detracking) that may be unacceptable in our current climate. *Bringing Equity Back* expresses nostalgia for "equity reforms" as they existed in the 1960s and 1970s, even as the book clearly illustrates that those times have passed. Moreover, other researchers interpret the efficacy of those original reforms differently than this book does. For example, Grubb et al. (2004) state that "earlier efforts to undo inequity… have evidently not been enough to overcome these inequities and so, a more complex approach is necessary in the unending search for equity." One example of a complex solution comes from UCSD's charter school controversy and process, discussed above as a contradiction, but it is also a compromise.

On the one hand, UCSD did succeed in increasing equity by launching a new school and re-conceiving the university's responsibility to equity. To make this possible, UCSD had to "re-write" equity concerns in the language of excellence. I imagine overall the authors of *Bringing Equity Back* would be troubled by this kind of rewriting. Taking a more utilitarian perspective though, I would argue that the UCSD story is the closest thing to a model for the future, for how to re-assert equity in a time that is enthusiastically, irretrievably committed to excellence.

**Author Biography**

Hilary Mead earned a Masters of Public Administration from School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Delaware in 2008, concentrating in Educational Leadership. She wrote her Analytical Paper (thesis equivalent) on Delaware school leaders' use and perceptions of time. She won the United Alumni of Urban Affairs Student Award and the Pauline E. Loessner Memorial Scholarship and was elected to Pi Alpha Alpha. A former teacher and non-profit manager, Ms. Mead now works at the Delaware Academy for School Leadership where she coordinates several professional development and education policy projects. She lives with her husband and two young daughters in Middletown, Delaware.

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