

Nika Kondzhariya

Professor Esther Gabay

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### Educational Inequality

“Poverty is not just a lack of money; it is not having the capability to realize one's full potential as a human being” – as Amartya Kumar Sen, an Indian economist and philosopher, once said. It means that people who are considered poor have not only financial difficulties but also a lack of opportunities to make their dreams come true. That is the case in the United States, where students from poor families can not fully enjoy the benefits of education as a driving force for achieving their goals. People who come from impoverished backgrounds, compared to those from prosperity, simply lack the educational options to fully develop themselves and climb the social ladder, while it can be done it is much more difficult if the person is a member of the lower class. The amount of money your parents have should not be the main predictor of your future wealth. There are many examples of talented people, who although poor, somehow managed to overcome the lack of options and due to their diligence contributed positively to society and some have even become the pride of the USA. Nevertheless, the majority of poor children give up and do not follow their dreams, and accept their situation as being innate-something in stone that cannot be changed because the government does not provide them with same opportunities as wealthy people have. Therefore, income inequality prevents poor children from getting a quality education and, thus, denies the country talented humans.

Liz Murray, a motivational speaker and the author of International Bestseller *Breaking Night*, for example, was born in a very poor family but managed to achieve her goals. In her book she describes her life including all of the challenges that she had to face on her path to success. Born to drug addicted parents in the South Bronx, Liz Murray, had a more arduous path to success

than most people. From early childhood, she and her sister were not well taken care of. They lacked basic necessities such as food and clothes. Their mother and father always spent all of their money on getting high. Therefore, Murray was metaphorically abandoned, as her parents chose drugs and alcohol over their children. Obviously, being depressed because of her situation and ridicule from her classmates at school about her “messed up clothing, the pocket sewn onto the back of a shirt or a short pants leg on her too-large jeans” (Murray 111), Liz skipped classes and as a result was kicked out of a high school. Some years later, her mom was diagnosed with AIDS and died. The indignity and sadness of her mother’s demise shook Liz to her core. She did not want to follow in her parent’s footsteps and decided to change her life, as she stated “I was inspired by a question that kept repeating itself in my mind: Could I really change my life?” (Murray 280). Being a sixteen-year-old girl, Liz decided to continue her education, but she had to face the fact that not much depended on her. No high schools wanted to accept her. They, possibly, did not want to deal with a student who was not only very poor but also was an academic disaster. As she says, she was “tired of getting rejected, tired of hearing no” (Murray 251). Obviously, after so many failures many people would like to abandon the idea of getting education.

But, fortunately, Murray did not give up and decided to take her last chance and was successful on an interview at Humanities Preparatory Academy, a school designed by Perry Weiner, the chairman of the board of School Based Management, and Vince Brevetti, the chairman of the teacher’s union, to help struggling students take and pass required classes, in order to successfully finish high school and consequently being able to be accepted to college. Murray’s persistence coupled with high quality classes, which “were meant to cultivate an environment of authenticity and encourage depth of thought” allowed her to become a top student (Murray 253). This means, that Murray, when was given educational opportunities,

proved that she was able to gain knowledge and study diligently. Later she became one of the six students who won the New York Times scholarship out of three thousand participants. Due to that fact people saw an article about her life story, strangers started helping her by sending money and necessities. Then, she decided to apply for Harvard. Undoubtedly, Liz was not an ordinary applicant. She had to fight with poverty and other difficulties, so she had to take much more effort to get an education rather than other pupils. Fortunately, based on the strength of her character, she was admitted to Harvard in 2000. Later, Liz Murray became a motivational speaker to inspire others to change their lives, study more and never give up. She is “travelling to various countries, working with thousands of people to deliver workshops and speeches to inspire others” (Murray 324). Obviously, a person with such great experience of overcoming a variety of obstacles can motivate others to always follow their dreams. Everybody has his/her own problems that in some way make his/her path to success very complicated, that is why this kind of motivation provided by Murray is very valuable for people. Liz helps our society to become stronger and empowers people to achieve their goals. If she were not given a chance to study, the USA would have lost a person who could have had a beneficiary influence on its own citizens. Thus, the government should do its best to provide more opportunities for economically disadvantaged children, as can be seen by Murray, the more success stories we have the better our society will be.

However, Liz Murray is a Cinderella story. This means that, although Liz is a very goal-oriented and diligent person, she could not have achieved her goals and become who is she now without luck. She luckily became a winner of scholarship out of three thousand participants and was accepted to Harvard, the university with a very low acceptance rate and which can, mostly, be afforded only by wealthy people. Of course, the strength of Liz Murray's character that allowed her to be accepted to Humanities Preparatory Academy should be appreciated as she had

to overcome a variety of difficulties, however it is not an indicator of her special talent and potential to study that other children who were born under dire circumstances do not have. Not every poor child can be so fortunate in his/her way to success, but it does not mean that he/she does not deserve to be provided with opportunities to get an education. Nevertheless, children from low-income families who are already at school and do not need to worry about where to study, like Liz Murray, face a variety of difficulties in order to get an education that can help them make their dreams come true.

According to the article "Still Separate, Still Unequal" by Jonathan Kozol, an American writer and activist, today's US school system is highly separated and unequal according to economic status. Children from poor families have a lot of obstacles to overcome in order to get a quality education. Public schools, where children from poor families are dominant, simply fail to create the environment that encourages their students to study. Main reason for this tendency is that these schools lack government funds. Based on the article, "the present per-pupil spending level in the New York City schools is \$11,700, which may be compared with a per-pupil spending level in excess of \$22,000 in well-to-do suburban district of Manhasset, Long Island" (Kozol 45). That difference in about \$10,000 of government funds results in a substandard physical condition of the public school buildings which are full of cracks and leaks. There is an insufficient number of bathrooms and air-conditioning in classrooms. Moreover, these schools can not provide their students with libraries and places to relax like sports grounds or gardens. However, it is not only that poor-looking buildings and inappropriate facilities ruin children's desire to study. The true reason is that these children can not fully concentrate on education because of these problems. When a person studies in a room "in which a plastic garbage bag had been attached somehow to cover part of the collapsing ceiling" (Kozol 44) or in a room with nothing to breathe because of broken ventilation system, education becomes less important and

the only one desire that a pupil has is to leave that place and never come back. That is why these children in letters of complaint ask Kozol for a help because they need to have the same necessities as children from wealthy families have to make their path to education more appropriate. Pupils from poor families like everybody else dream of going to college and understand that they need a good school education to achieve this goal. Obviously, most of them have heard about the examples of how college degree help people, like Liz Murray, to go beyond their background and climb the social ladder.

Unfortunately, according to the Kozol's article, studying in a school where children from poor families are dominant, weakens their chances to prepare for college. Unlike Liz Murray who could take all required classes at Humanities Preparatory Academy, pupils in such schools sometimes do not have access to useful classes which they want to take because the government financing is not enough to cover the salary of teachers and necessary equipment. Kozol comes up with examples of public high school students who wanted to go to college but could not take necessary classes. One of the students dreamed of becoming "a social worker or a doctor, but was programmed into "Sewing Class" (Kozol 52). Another student, Mirea, wanted to take an AP class in order to go to college, but had to take hairdressing, as it was the only one available option at school. These children can be compared with a patient who is given inappropriate medicine by his/her doctor. Obviously, that medicine can not make that person feel better and it can even worsen the negative influence on his/her health. The same thing happens with these students because they are denied the purpose of their life, and thus, are harmed, like the patient because of inappropriate medicine. Those stories become even more dramatic if we also take into account that these pupils, possibly, could have become fantastic social workers, doctors or scientists and, like Liz Murray, could have been very beneficial to our society. That boy, who was scheduled into a sewing class, could possibly have saved a lot of lives, or Mirea could have

invented something great that would have made people's lives easier. Therefore, the government, when it denies poor students educational opportunities, harms not only them but also itself because it possibly loses talented people.

Tom Hanks, great American actor and filmmaker, is another example of a person who was born in a poor family and who would not become who is he now if he was not given chances to get appropriate education. In The New York Times article "I Owe It All to Community College" Tom Hanks describes his path to success. Being poor, his family "could not afford tuition for college" for him, so the only one option was going to free Chabot community college which accepted every applicant and was located in his state of residence, California. (Hanks 1). Like Liz Murray at Humanities Preparatory Academy and unlike the pupils whom Jonathan Kozol met in public schools, Tom Hanks was able to take classes whichever he wanted. As he says, "name the art or science, the subject or trade, and it was probably in the catalog", in the catalog of classes offered by that community college to its students (Hanks 1). He was able to get general education that allowed him to enter affordable Sacramento State University and study his major, theater arts. Also, taking classes that he loved like oral interpretation, film as art, public speaking and literature classes, he earned the recognition of the Chabot's Dean's list proving that financial culpability has nothing to do with one's ability to gain knowledge, study diligently and achieve educational goals. Moreover, these classes coupled with great library placed in that college allowed him to develop his thinking and imagination. Therefore, Tom Hanks was given a chance to realize his educational potential and he took it. He, as a fantastic actor and director, has presented to the U.S. and World audience great films that it somehow can be very informative for our society. For example, his great performance in "Forrest Gump", teaches people the importance of kindness, generosity and nobility. In today's World, which is full of violence, people need to see examples of bright behavior that can oppose the horrible things happening

everyday, like acts of terrorism or murders. Therefore, society would have lost such a great source of moral behavior, if Tom Hanks had not been given opportunities to become educated. His talent and possible bright future could easily have been ruined, like it was in Kozol's example of public school pupils who were denied the option to study whatever they wanted. Nothing can justify this situation because these children were denied the opportunity to change their lives and, maybe, the lives of millions of Americans for the better. Born in poor families, these pupils are just unlucky to be educated in such public schools which do not provide them with necessary and desired classes. However, it is not appropriate that the only one thing that predicts one's future is luck. Tom Hanks, maybe, would not have even gone to Chabot community college if it has not located in his state of residence or if it were not free. Liz Murray could easily have lost the New York Times competition and had not gotten the scholarship. Therefore, all students, despite their financial culpability and place of residence, must have equal access to education.

One of the ways to ameliorate this problem of inequality is getting an education like the one described in her essay "Teaching Language in Open Admissions" by American poet, Adrienne Rich. That solution is the "Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge" (SEEK) program, a New York program designed to provide struggling students, both financially and academically, with opportunities to get a higher education. Under the program, these students are accepted to colleges, no matter how successfully or not they have studied at school, and are given financial support in order to make their path to education easier. When Adrienne Rich describes her experience of working as a teacher in City College of New York under that program, she claims that "none of those students would have come near a higher education under the regular admissions programs of the City University" and that "most could not survive economically in college without the stipends which the SEEK program provides" (Rich 55). This means, that

under the SEEK program all people get chances to realize their potential, and the lack of money does not become an obstacle for them in achieving their goals. That brings very bright results, as Adrien Rich claims that in 1972 40 percent of these students were able to graduate from college and thus improve their academic level. For example, once the president of the college and faculty members had to negotiate with these students about admissions policy, they were positively surprised by their “articulateness, reasoning power and skill in handling statistics” (Rich 58). The effectiveness of programs, like SEEK one, can also be seen in the examples of Tom Hanks and Liz Murray, who both had academic and financial problems, but were given educational opportunities. Hanks was accepted to community college that was a start of his journey in becoming a great actor. Liz Murray was accepted to Humanities Preparatory Academy that enabled her to enter Harvard and become a motivational speaker. Both went on to do great things and inspire other economically disadvantaged children to go after their dreams, and also shed a light on the issue that poor children need to have more opportunities to succeed. Nevertheless, pupils from Kozol’s examples were denied any possibility to achieve their educational goals, and, possibly a program, similar to SEEK would have helped them to get educated and realize their potential.

Therefore, it is clear that we need more programs that can help people with financial problems to get an education. There is a huge pool of talented people who may not be able to reach their potential due to obstacles caused by their impecuniousness. This shows that it is in the best interests of society to create equal access to education, as programs like SEEK do not only help one person at a time, but rather have a ripple effect, where one successful person motivates and helps a number of other disadvantaged people. It is important for a society to take full advantage of its resources, and people may be a society’s greatest reinforce, and so poorer humans must be given chances to study.



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