There’s an old joke about a man on a street corner, down on his hands and knees searching for his lost wallet. A passerby stops to help, asking, “So you lost it right around here?” “Oh no,” the man replies, “I lost the wallet several blocks ago. I’m just looking on this street corner because this is where the lighting is good.”

It’s tempting to look for the source of a problem in places where the lighting is good even if we’re not in the right place. When we hear about high dropout rates; persistent black/white gaps in test scores; low American reading, math, and science scores; dramatic differences in resources among schools; and even growing childhood obesity, it’s sort of easy to ascribe these negative outcomes to schools. In fact, this is the “traditional” story we hear about American schools.

the traditional tale of schools
The tendency to view schools as the source of so many problems is especially true when we consider equality of opportunity, an important American value. There are many good reasons to believe that schools are the primary engines of inequality. First, children attending schools with lots of high-income children tend to perform better on standardized tests than kids at schools with lots of low-income children. Second, there are clear resource differences between these schools, rooted in the fact that, in most states, local tax revenues constitute a significant portion of the school’s budget. For example, Ohio’s local taxes constitute about half of a school’s budget (state taxes constitute 43% and federal taxes about 7%). As a result of the heavy emphasis on local taxes, some schools are able to spend substantially more money per student than others. This means schools located in areas with expensive houses and successful businesses can spend more on new textbooks, teacher pay, recreational facilities, extracurricular activities, and help for students with special needs. Third, in high-resource schools, teachers encounter fewer children with behavioral problems and more parents engaged in their children’s education, factors that can attract and retain better teachers. Based on these patterns, it seems obvious that if we want to improve the quality of life for the disadvantaged in the U.S., the best place to start is schools.
But this traditional story has developed largely without understanding the way in which children’s academic outcomes are shaped by many factors outside of schools. Simply look at the amount of time children spend outside of school. If we focus on the 9-month academic year only, the proportion of time children spend in school is about one-third. And if we include the non-school summer, children spend just one-quarter of their waking hours in school each year. Now if we also include the years before kindergarten—which certainly affect children—we find that the typical 18-year-old American has spent just 13% of his or her waking hours in school. For most of us, it’s surprising to learn that such a large percentage of children’s time is spent outside of school, but it’s important to keep in mind if we’re serious about understanding how schools really matter.

A contextual perspective reminds us to look at the rest of kids’ lives. For instance, not every student comes to school with the same economic, social, or cultural resources. Even with the same educational opportunities, some students benefit from home environments that prepare them for school work and so they are better able to take advantage of education.

Moving away from the traditional, narrow view of schools that forgets the importance of children’s time outside the classroom, we endorse adopting a contextualized (or impact) view of schools. This new emphasis can really change how we think about what schools can—and can’t—do for our kids.

**pianos and parents**

Imagine that we want to compare the effectiveness of two piano instructors who will both teach 10-week piano classes for beginners. We flip a coin and assign one instructor to place A and the other to place B. Our goal is complicated, however, by the fact that in place B, due to cost, almost no students come from a home with a piano, whereas in place A, whose parents have more disposable income, most students have a piano at home. As a result, place A’s students have already had some practice time on a piano, whereas place B’s students have had little to none. In addition, while both instructors teach a session once a week, place A’s students practice on their own several times a week, whereas in place B—where few have pianos at home—students have a much harder time finding a way to practice.

Obviously, if we just compared the piano students’ skills at the end of the 10-week program we couldn’t accurately assess the quality of the two instructors—the two groups’ skills differed before the lessons began. And if we compared how much the students’ skills improved during the instructional period, it would still be hard to know which instructor was more effective because place A’s students practiced more often than place B’s students did. Given that these two instructors face different challenges, is there a way to evaluate them fairly? Can we isolate how the piano teachers really mattered?

This is the quandary we have when trying to understand how schools (or teachers) matter for children’s lives; the same kinds of complicating factors are at work. First, children begin schooling with very different levels of academic skills. For example, the black/white gap in math and reading skills is roughly a standard deviation at the end of high school, but half of this gap is evident at the beginning of kindergarten, before schools have had a chance to matter. And the differences in skills between high- and low-socioeconomic status (SES) students at the start of kindergarten are even larger. Obviously, these variations aren’t a consequence of differences in school quality, but of the different kinds of students schools serve.

Thinking contextually, some home environments complement what occurs at school as parents help with homework, communicate with teachers, reinforce school concepts, provide a safe and stable environment for study, and attend to children’s medical needs (by, for instance, providing consistent visits to doctors and dentists). In her book *Home Advantage*, sociologist Annette Lareau gives a poignant description of just how important parents can be, getting involved in their child’s coursework and with their teachers in ways that promote academic success and instilling in their children a kind of academic entitlement. She wrote that these parents “made an effort to integrate edu-
cational goals into family life including teaching children new words when driving by billboards, having children practice penmanship and vocabulary by writing out shopping lists, practicing mathematics during baking projects, and practicing vocabulary during breakfast time.” Interacting with instructors, the upper-middle class parents Lareau observed requested specific classroom teachers or asked that their child be placed in school programs for the gifted, for speech therapy, or with the learning resource center. In contrast, low-SES parents tended to have less time for involvement with their children’s schoolwork, leaving educational experiences in the hands of the “experts.” Much like having a piano at home, these contexts of advantage and disadvantage play a critical role in shaping how children gain academic skills during their school years.

**bringing in context**

By using a contextual perspective, sociologists have contributed considerably to our understanding of how schools matter. One of the most influential studies was the 1966 Coleman Report, a massive analysis of American schools that was commissioned by the Federal Department of Education. James Coleman, the lead author of the report, directed the collection of data from 4,000 schools and more than 645,000 American school children in the early 1960s. The researchers were interested in why some children had high math and reading skills and schools in terms of quality played only a small role in understanding the variation in students’ academic skills while home life (parents’ SES showed the strongest relationship) mattered much more. Skeptics of this conclusion, such as sociologist Christopher Jencks, re-evaluated Coleman’s conclusion with new data, but ended up finding similar patterns.

Of course, one limitation of this approach is that it depends heavily on whether Coleman and Jencks were measuring the right things about schools. Maybe they were missing what really mattered. While they were measuring per pupil expenditures, teacher/student ratios, and racial composition, they missed critical factors like teacher quality. If they failed to measure a lot of important things about schools, then their conclusions that schools play only a minor role in explaining inequality of skills might be wrong.

**seasonal comparison research**

What researchers need is a way to untangle the role of school and non-school influences. Observing student learning during the school year tells us little about how schools matter because students are exposed to both school and non-school environments. When we compare annually-collected test scores, for example, it becomes very difficult to know why some students fall behind and some get ahead. Sociologist Barbara Heyns pointed out that during the summer children are influenced by non-school factors only. The best way to understand how schools matter, she reasoned, was to observe how things change between the non-school period (summer) and the school period. This strategy works like a natural experiment, separating the “treatment” from the treated. Knowing what happens to group-level differences in achievement by race, class, or gender when school is in session (the treatment) compared to when it is not (the control) is a good way to know if schools make educational gaps bigger or smaller.

This important insight led Heyns to collect a different kind of data. She evaluated fifth, sixth, and seventh grade students at the beginning and end of the academic years in Atlanta. By
testing them both in the fall and spring, she was able to tell how much they learned during the summer, when school was out. This study design allowed her to uncover a provocative pattern—high- and low-SES students gained academic skills at about the same rate during the nine-month academic year. Gaps in skills developed during the summers. Although schools did not close achievement gaps between groups, these results bolstered Coleman and Jencks’s initial conclusions that schools were not the primary reason for group-level inequalities. Heyns’s provocative findings were replicated by sociologists Doris Entwisle and Karl Alexander in Baltimore and, more recently, by myself with colleagues at Ohio State. With nationally representative data, we found that low- and high-SES children learned math and reading at similar rates during the 9-month kindergarten and first grade periods, but that gaps in skills grew quickly during the summer in between, when school was out.

Taken together, the overall pattern from this seasonal research supports Coleman’s conclusion: schools are not the source of inequality. The seasonal approach to understanding schools gives us a much more accurate understanding of how schools influence inequality. This research consistently produces an unconventional conclusion—if we lived in a world with no schools at all, inequality would be much worse. In other words, when it comes to inequality, schools are more part of the solution than the problem.

This contextual way of thinking about schools and inequality is difficult to reconcile, however, with the “traditional” story—that wide variations in school quality are the engine of inequality. By adopting a more contextual perspective on schools, we can understand this counterintuitive claim: despite the fact that some schools have more resources than others, schools end up being an equalizing force. The key is that the inequalities that exist outside of school are considerably larger than the ones students experience in school.

schools, context, and policy

At the beginning of this article, we pointed out that it’s natural to look to schools for the source of many of our kids’ problems—they’re the corner with the best “lighting.” The often-unexplored terrain outside of schools, though, remains shadowy and seemingly inaccessible. This doesn’t need to be the case. And, though extending the light beyond schools reveals that group-level inequality would be much worse if not for schools, it doesn’t mean that schools are off the hook. In fact, using school impact as a guide, many “successful” schools in the traditional view are revealed as low-impact—good students don’t always signal good instructors. In these schools, children pass proficiency exams, but since they started off in a better position, it’s arguable that the schools didn’t actually serve their students.

Clearly, when we employ a contextual perspective, we think about school policy, child development, and social problems in a new light. A contextual approach to schools promotes sensible policy, efficiently targeted resources, and reasonable assessment tools that recognize that some schools and teachers face very different challenges than others.

For example, a tremendous amount of energy and money is directed toward developing accountability systems for schools. But recall the analogy of the two piano instructors. It’s difficult to determine which instructor is best, given that place A has students that start with more skills and practice more outside of instruction. Now suppose that we knew one more piece of information: how fast each group of piano players gained skills when not taking lessons. Suddenly, we could compare the rate of improvement outside of instruction with the rate observed during the instructional period. We could see how much instruction mattered.

This “impact” view has recently been applied to schools. In 2008, with fellow sociologists Paul T. von Hippel and Melanie Hughes, I constructed impact measures by taking a school’s average difference between its students’ first-grade learning rate and the learning rate observed in the summer prior to first grade. The key finding was that not all the schools deemed as “failing” under traditional criteria were really failing. Indeed,
three out of four schools had been incorrectly evaluated. That’s not to say that there were no variations in school quality, but many schools did much better than expected when we took a contextual approach to measurement. And some did much worse. If impact evaluations are more accurate, then teachers serving disadvantaged children are doing a better job than previously thought and current methods of school evaluation are producing substantial errors.

With its contextual orientation, seasonal research has also provided insights into other ways that schools matter. For example, researchers have considered whether “summer setback” can be avoided by modifying the school year so that there is no long gap in school exposure. Von Hippel has compared math and reading learning in schools with year-long calendars versus those with traditional school-year/summer break calendars. In both conditions, children attended school for about 180 days a year, but the timing of those days was spread more evenly in year-round schools. It turned out that, once a calendar year was up, both groups had learned about the same. The policy lesson is that increasing school exposure is probably more important than fiddling with how school days are distributed across the year.

Given that school exposure appears critical, many have viewed summer school (restricted to academically struggling children) as an attractive option for reducing inequality. It turns out, though, that children attending summer school gain fewer academic skills than we would expect. This may be because the academic programs in the summer are of lower quality, but it may also be because the kinds of students who typically attend summer school are also the kind who would typically suffer a “summer setback” without it. Viewed in this light, just treading water or maintaining the same academic skills during the summer could be viewed as a positive outcome.

And in other research employing seasonal comparisons, researchers have shown that children gain body mass index (BMI) three times faster during the summer than during the school year. Obviously, schools shouldn’t abandon attempts to improve the quality of lunches or the schooling environment, but research suggests that attention should be paid to non-school factors as the primary sources of childhood obesity.

In the end, looking at schools through a contextual lens provides exciting insights. When we forget how other aspects of children’s lives figure into their development, we create a distorted view of schools. The contextual perspective corrects this error and produces a more accurate understanding of how schools really matter. It suggests that if we are serious about improving American children’s school performance, we will need to take a broader view of education policy. In addition to school reform, we must also aim to improve children’s lives where they spend the vast majority of their time—with their families and in their neighborhoods.

**recommended resources**


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