

A caring society?

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Failing to support all children carries a societal cost.

Earlier this year, a new report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine came across my desk. *The Promise of Adolescence: Realizing Opportunity for All Youth* is based on the work of an expert committee convened by the National Academies to look at how the science of adolescent development can inform efforts to improve adolescent well-being and overcome structural barriers to opportunity and equality. (Pro tip: The report summary is remarkably readable for an academic study.) In the preface, the report's authors state that "the challenge for a caring society is to take maximum advantage of the developmental opportunities afforded by adolescence to forge positive trajectories into adulthood." That particular

sentence stopped me cold. Before I read any further, I immediately wondered, would most people consider the United States a caring society?

If your daily news feed is the barometer you use to answer this question, the answer would, of course, be a resounding “No.” Every day, it seems, the media report tragic and terrifying stories about young people. But the answer goes beyond the headlines. In a grim portrayal of childhood in the United States, *Atlantic* writer Annie Lowery last year wrote a piece that details the nation’s awful record on infant mortality, poverty, health, incarceration, and a host of other childhood indicators. The “savage inequalities” that Jonathan Kozol wrote about almost 30 years ago are as potent as ever. Gaps of all kinds continue to widen in the United States, and while we all may face the same unpredictable slings and arrows, the most disadvantaged among us are bearing the brunt. This is especially true for children as they grow and develop.

Counting the costs

The National Academies’ report points out that there are real costs associated with the disadvantages some young people face. The authors describe the onset of puberty as a time “rich with opportunity to learn and grow.” During puberty, the adolescent brain is at its most malleable. It can and will adapt to environments both positive and negative. Just as a positive environment feeds and nurtures the biology of an adolescent, an unhealthy environment quite literally “gets under the skin” of a young person and can continue to have negative effects on their biology and development. The authors propose that if society can do more to mitigate inequities and support positive environments for disadvantaged youth, these young people will develop greater cognitive abilities that will benefit them as individuals and society as a whole.

While the report reinforces a lot of what we already know about the nation’s stubborn achievement gap, its depiction of the impacts of social and economic disadvantages on adolescent neurobiology and behavior is sobering. All of the developmental promise and potential that goes along with adolescence can be completely derailed by poverty, racism, and discrimination. The ways these “potent societal determinants” can alter adolescent development is like a sucker punch that hits a kid on physical, social, and emotional levels. Unfortunately, as residential segregation and income disparity continue to rise, more young people are likely to experience the pain of that punch every day of their lives.

Recommendations

The report makes some fairly predictable recommendations in the areas of education, health, child welfare, and juvenile justice. The recommendations for educators include flexible academic pathways that serve a wide range of students, a focus on health, well-being, and social and emotional learning; more resources for the most disadvantaged students; and family and community engagement. These recommendations may not be new, but it’s still useful to see scientific experts who operate outside traditional education systems reinforcing research from within the field.

In 2018, the Schott Foundation for Public Education made a similar case in its *Loving Cities Index* report (Brown, 2018). In the report’s foreword, the Rev. Dr. William Barber writes that the

U.S. is facing a moral crisis “where the poor are undermined and our children face the most uncertain future.” He emphasizes the growing body of research that shows the impact racial and economic inequity has on children, families, and communities. The *Loving Cities Index* was developed to serve as a framework to better understand how some communities are supporting and caring for the growth and development of young people. Its 24 indicators fall into four categories: care, commitment, stability, and capacity. It compares how 10 cities are managing these indicators and putting in place supports to address long-standing concerns. Not surprisingly, the information in the report aligns closely with the conditions and suggestions highlighted by the National Academies.

What this says about us

So, what is it about American society that fosters such a non-caring climate for young people? The recent release of the *1619 Project*, produced by *The New York Times*, offers an interesting perspective on why we suffer from a care deficit when it comes to our young people. The *1619 Project* provides an unvarnished look at the political and economic systems that supported slavery and how the legacy of those systems still haunt us today. One of the project’s many stories focuses on how slavery laid the foundation for America’s unique form of “low road capitalism” (Desmond, 2019). This term, coined by University of Wisconsin-Madison sociologist Joel Rogers, describes a form of capitalism characterized by a winner-take-all economy with wide income disparities and a host of social and political inequities. Within this kind of system, plenty of people, most of whom are poor and disadvantaged, feel far more pain than profit. In fact, pain is an essential part of the system’s success.

If you apply this idea to education, it is easy to see why our current public education system is meeting the needs of some while failing others. Those communities that enjoy all the gifts that go along with economic success are simply better able to care for their young people. They have all the resources, and the young people in their midst reap the benefits. For the communities on the other side of the equation — the ones that “low road capitalism” preys on — the potential and promise of adolescence is often shortchanged by low expectations and a lack of resources. When it comes to education, the American form of capitalism is far more Darwin than Dewey.

If Americans really want to live in a society where *all* of our children are treated like a precious resource, then it’s time for us to think bigger and broader about just who will carry our country into the future. Statistically speaking, counting on the children of the wealthiest families is not a good plan. We need everyone involved, and we need to start developing the young people who will manage our futures right now. We know what these young people need in order to grow and develop into productive citizens. The challenge is harnessing our collective will to ensure more than a select group get access. We may never be able to change the fact that capitalism is not fair, but education should be.

References

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