

CHAPTER ONE

The Social Side of Opportunity Why Relationships Matter to Meritocracy

Meritocracy's Mythical Origins

The year is 2033, and Britain is witnessing an upheaval in the face of vast inequality. A fragmented underclass wages its final revolt against the meritocracy—an economic and political system that has, for nearly a century, purported to sort people into various schools and jobs according to their talents. The merit-based machinery was originally designed to combat class divides. But it has failed to account for the uneven playing field many face, and has ended up simply reproducing a society profoundly divided between haves and have-nots.¹

In 1958, then-fledgling sociologist Michael Young envisioned this bleak British future in his essay *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Young intended the piece to be both a satire and a warning. At the time, he was concerned that all sorts of worthy people might inadvertently find themselves *left out* of Britain's system committed to rewarding individual merit. He worried that without equal opportunity, this system would yield unfair outcomes and create a permanent underclass. He mocked the false tidiness of this commitment to merit and dubbed it with a new name, *meritocracy*.

Young meant this made-up term to be something of a joke. The word combines the Latin verb *merere* or “earn” with the Greek suffix *cracy*—“power” or “rule” (that’s bookish British humor for you!). But as use of the word spread through the second half of the twentieth century, it quite magically shed its ironic origins. Meritocracy morphed into something

altogether positive—and across the pond, the idea came to capture a distinctly American sentiment.

When our parents, school principals, and political leaders now talk about merit, the term is cast with a rosy hue. They celebrate a system that rewards some mix of raw talent and hard work. The vast majority of Americans subscribe to this notion. They are, in fact, one of the most likely populations in the world to favor meritocracy.² It has become virtually impossible to disentangle the concept of who gets what from the idea that individual capacity and effort ought to play a leading role.

As Young pointed out, however, the health of any meritocracy depends on ensuring equal access to opportunity. And in this regard, America has witnessed an ongoing struggle. If America's enthusiasm for meritocracy is alive and well, then so are Young's 1958 fears. The complexity, trade-offs, and messiness of what constitutes equal opportunity are more stark and confusing than ever.

Opportunity by the Numbers: A Tale of Two Childhoods

No institution sits more in the crossfire of meritocracy and opportunity than our schools. School is an institution responsible for providing the foundation of equal opportunity on top of which our meritocracy can stand proudly. Americans have long lauded school as society's "great equalizer."

But playing society's equalizer is no easy task. By many accounts, the contours of opportunity in America are shifting far beyond our school buildings. Our schools are being asked to level exceedingly complex—and unequal—terrain.

Drive across any US city and you'll be reminded of the vast income inequalities facing the country. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed relatively steady progress among low- and middle-wage earners. But income inequality has shot up since the 1970s. In the post-2008 Great Recession era, it has continued to grow at an astonishing clip.³ Further, these gaps hamper economic mobility. Only half of Americans born in 1980 are economically better off than their parents, compared to 90 percent of those born a generation earlier.⁴ These differences are appearing

not only on Americans' bank statements but also in their zip codes. Residential segregation by income has increased since the 1980s, including in twenty-seven of the nation's thirty largest major metropolitan areas.⁵

Children, of course, are not immune to the effects of these trends. As researchers have long pointed out, families' economic and geographic circumstances have lasting impacts on gaps in children's cognitive, educational, professional, and health outcomes. This reality has grown even starker as income inequality has gotten worse. For better or for worse, schools often function as the first line of defense—and the last hope—for addressing these shifts.

Many have attempted to trace the impact that economic shifts and family circumstances have on children. For example, the Opportunity Index (a joint effort of the national campaign Opportunity Nation and the nonprofit Child Trends) compiles American state and local data to create annual composite measures on Americans' access to opportunity. Explaining the index's purpose, the organization describes two children from disparate geographies and backgrounds, John and Jane. John hails from Nassau County, New York, where the median household income is \$90,634. Jane, by contrast, lives in Tarrant County, Texas, where prospects are not as bright. Tarrant County has a median income of \$53,170. Its violent crime rate is more than double that of Nassau County, and its rate of enrollment in pre-K is two thirds that of Nassau.⁶

These geographic and economic conditions spell greatly different educational prospects for John and Jane. Extending the hypothetical, John attends an award-winning high school in Garden City, Long Island, which is ranked 121st nationally by *US News & World Report*. Jane lives in inner-city Fort Worth. At her high school, only 11 percent of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch are proficient in math and English.⁷

Such disparate conditions are all too familiar to those of us steeped in education reform. Economically disadvantaged children like Jane have historically had fewer developmental and early education opportunities, received less reliable health care, and enrolled in disproportionately low-performing schools.

But measuring opportunity in terms of household income or school quality doesn't paint the whole picture. John and Jane, it turns out, are competing on an even more complex playing field, one that's often masked

by statistics on income and achievement. John's well-resourced childhood introduces a whole new set of inequities between him and Jane: social gaps. John and Jane possess vastly different webs of relationships that each can rely on and tap into. And if diverging income levels remain the starkest drivers of unequal childhoods, then relationships are becoming the best-hidden asset in the modern opportunity equation.⁸

Relationship Gaps: Hidden Disparity

Schools deal in the intricate webs of students' relationships every day. They interface with parents and guardians. They watch social groups form and dissolve. They forge connections between teachers and students. But because relationships are not an overt metric of school quality or educational excellence, social connections are rarely measured or talked about in their own right.

Still, data on the state of students' networks does exist—and reveals some alarming realities. In recent years, a few key statistics have emerged that paint a startling picture of divergent childhood experiences that reflect not only financial gaps but social ones.

First, neighborhood segregation is worsening as families from different income brackets are living further apart. (See Figure 1.1.) For example, Texas, where Jane lives, has seen some of the worst rates of income-based residential segregation in the country over the past thirty years. Her family's low-income status renders it disproportionately likely to live among other poor families. In fact, in the Dallas–Fort Worth–Arlington metropolitan area, residential segregation by income has gotten worse by a whopping 54 percent.⁹

These growing neighborhood gaps—by entire cities or even just block by block—inevitably change school demographics too. For example, from 2000 to 2014, the percentage of all K–12 public schools that had high proportions of poor and black or Hispanic students grew from 9 to 16 percent.¹⁰

Highly segregated schools leave poor minority students at both an academic disadvantage (as seen in well-known measures such as advanced coursework) and a social one. Access to college guidance provides one of the starkest cases of this divide: abysmal national guidance counselor

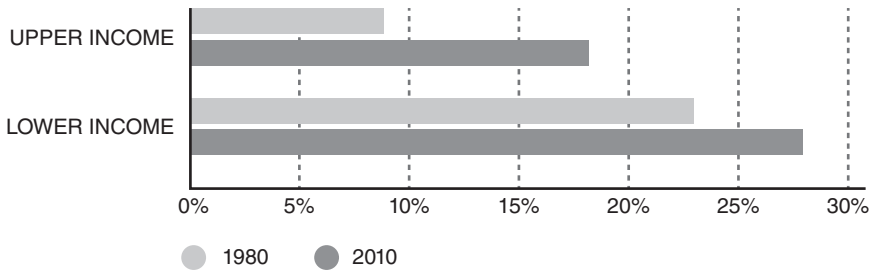


Figure 1.1 Growing Neighborhood Segregation: Percentage of Households Living among Others at Similar Income Levels

Source: Data from Pew Research Center, 2006–2010 American Community Survey and Geolytics 1980 Census data in 2000 boundaries. “The Rise of Residential Segregation by Income,” Pew Research Center, Washington, DC (August 1, 2012), <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/08/01/the-rise-of-residential-segregation-by-income/>

ratios mean that students at many public schools spend only thirty-eight minutes per year with a counselor.¹¹ Those students who would stand to benefit most from high-quality, high-touch counseling end up being the least likely to receive it.¹² These gaps are even more troubling if we look at the other sorts of adult personnel cropping up on high-poverty, high-minority campuses. For example, minorities are between roughly 20 and 40 percent more likely to be one of the 1.6 million students who attend a school where there is a school law enforcement officer but no guidance counselor.¹³

School segregation is one of the most visible social gaps that education reformers have witnessed since compulsory schooling began. Gaps in access to networks, however, are cropping up well beyond school buildings. And that brings us to two more troubling data points with which schools must grapple.

Second, over the last three decades, the amount of time that college-educated parents spend with their children has dramatically increased, relative to that of their less-educated peers. John’s college-educated parents have arranged their schedules around his elaborate after-school and summer commitments. They make it to every basketball game and host team dinners after big wins. His dad has even set aside Wednesday nights to do extra math prep with John for his weekly geometry quizzes.

Jane’s mom does everything she can to spend high-quality time with her daughter. In fact, she’s spending more time with Jane than her own

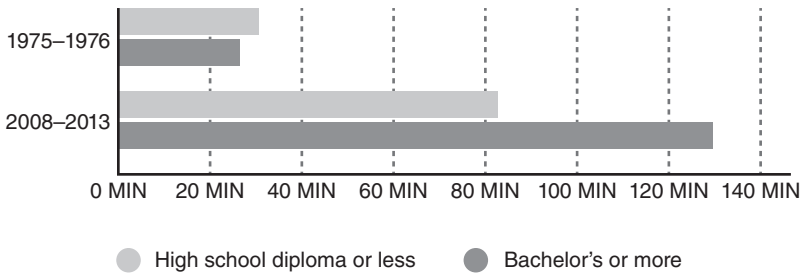


Figure 1.2 Growing Gaps in Amount of Developmental Time Children Spend with Parents Daily

Source: Data from “The Widening Education Gap in Developmental Child Care Activities in the United States, 1965–2013,” by Evrim Altintas, 2016, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78(1), 38. doi:10.1111/jomf.12254.

mom managed to spend with her. But with competing work and family obligations, she can’t hope to keep up with John’s parents’ level of involvement. On average, college-educated parents are spending more than four times as much developmental time with their offspring as they did three decades ago. Today, they spend more than one-and-a-half times as many developmental minutes with their children as their less-educated parent peers (see Figure 1.2).¹⁴

As if this difference were not enough, John’s parents are able to offer him an additional social asset besides their own time: a disproportionately professionalized social network of their own. More educated parents are more likely to know more people working in the knowledge economy: on average, their social networks include at least twice as many politicians, CEOs, and professors than their peers who received a high school education or less (see Figure 1.3).¹⁵

If more educated parents are increasingly sharing their own time and connections with their children, they are also effectively purchasing a wider array of relationships through a bevy of out-of-school activities. This brings us to the third emerging statistic that suggests troubling relationship gaps.

Third, as income inequality has grown, children from wealthy families are enjoying a boom in enrichment spending relative to their low-income peers. John has a packed schedule of math tutoring, club basketball, and volunteering at the local YMCA. His basketball schedule involves both his high school coach and outside trainers who work with

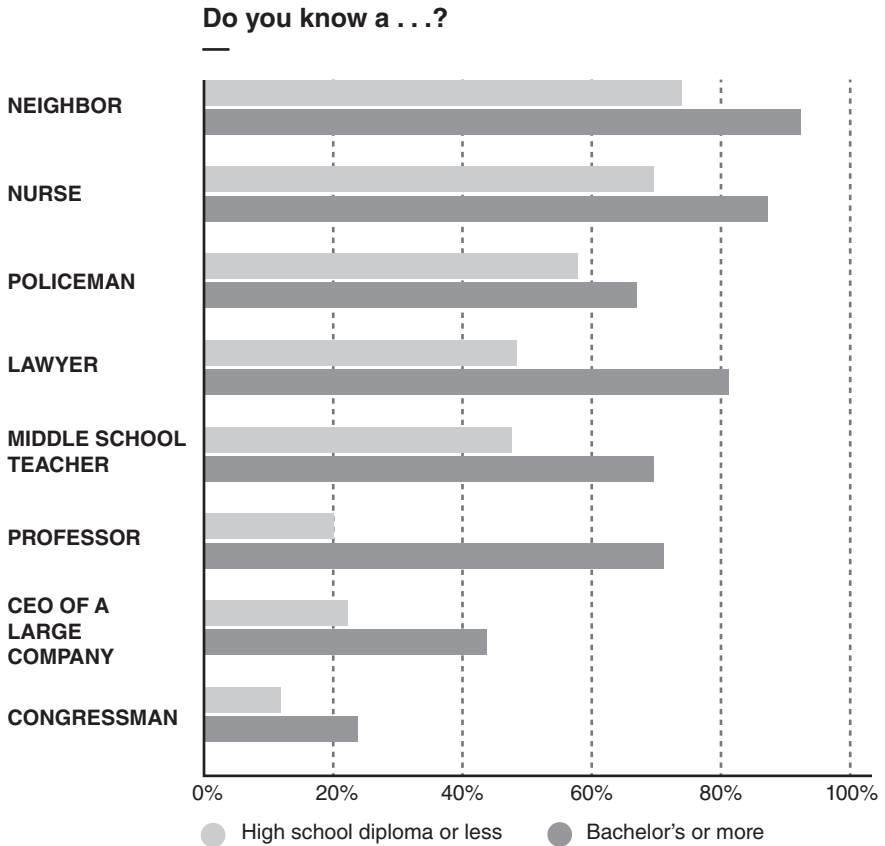


Figure 1.3 Parents’ Networks in the Knowledge Economy Vary by Education Level

Source: Data from Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, 2015.

him on particular drills and fitness regimens. During the summer, John and his family traveled to Europe, and he went on an extra two-week detour to take a Spanish immersion class in Madrid. This year, his mom is insisting that he work with both a private SAT tutor and a private college counselor who helped his brother get into college. Jane participates in extracurriculars, too—she’s part of a local soccer league in Fort Worth that combines afterschool homework help with team sports. Her mom managed to pay the uniform fee, but the team had to fundraise separately to cover the cost of transportation to and from games.

Access to out-of-school opportunities paves two very different paths for children. Enrichment spending has more than doubled among wealthy

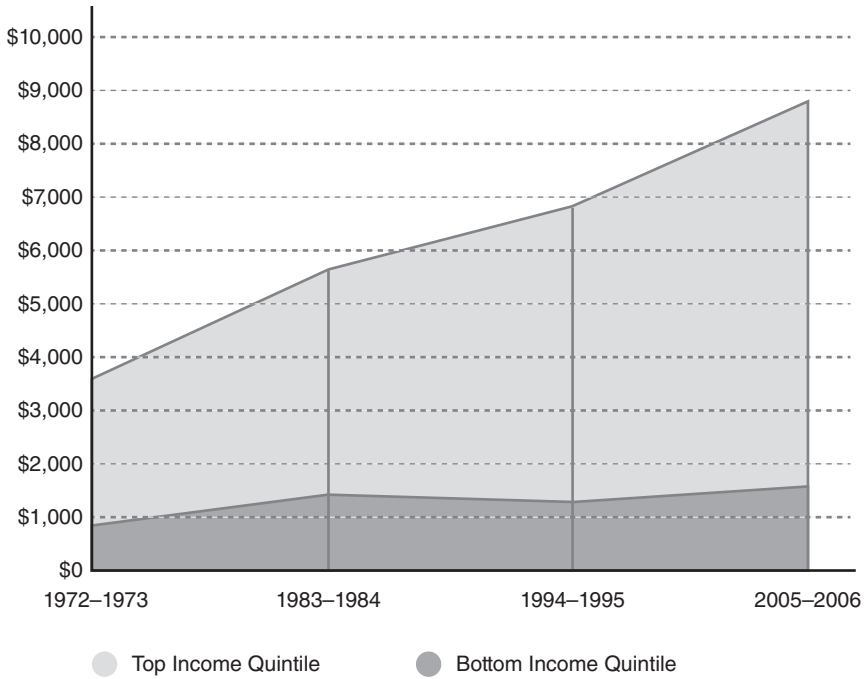


Figure 1.4 Growing Gaps in Enrichment Spending by Income Level

Source: Data from “Introduction: The American Dream, Then and Now,” by Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane, 2011, in G. J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane (Eds.), *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children’s Life Chances*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

parents since the 1970s, whereas spending among poor parents has increased at a far slower clip.¹⁶ As a result, the gap between what rich and poor parents spend has nearly tripled over the last three decades (see Figure 1.4).

Taken together, parental time and enrichment spending are not just testaments to income inequality: they manifest as fundamentally *social* measures. John’s parents are not just providing their child with more exotic opportunities that money can buy. They are investing in activities that tend to expand John’s access to relationships. For many poor students like Jane, these relationships—with college-educated family members and family friends, tutors, coaches, and the like—remain further out of reach.

This investment gap helps explain startling disparities in access to informal mentors, a fancy term for coaches, teachers, or parents’ friends

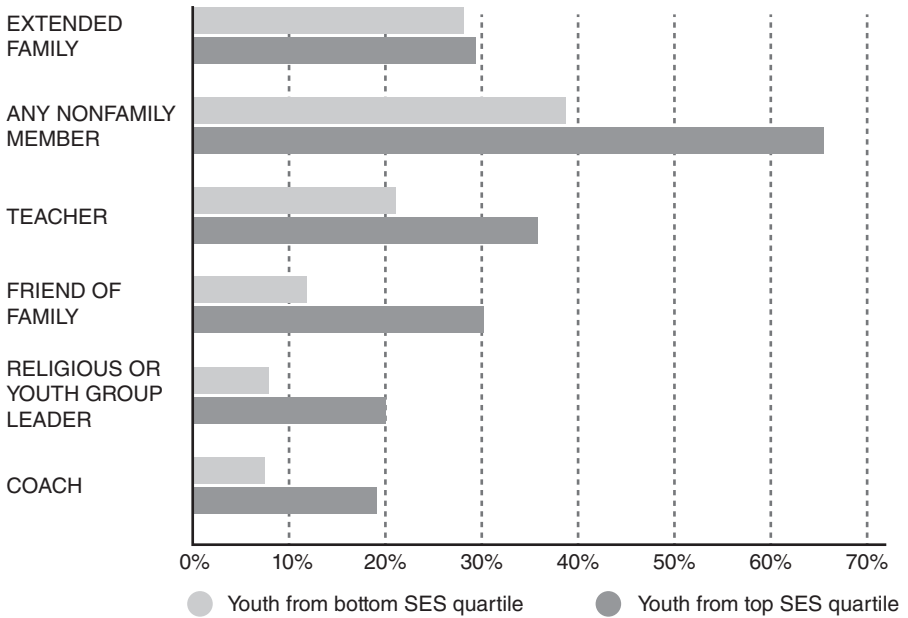


Figure 1.5 Gaps in Young People’s Access to Informal Mentors by Income

Source: Data from Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, 2015.

gained through a student’s everyday life. Low-income young people report significantly fewer informal mentors—particularly beyond their family and neighborhood—than their wealthier peers. In fact, young people from the top socioeconomic quartile report nearly *double* the rate of nonfamily adults in their lives (see Figure 1.5).

John’s suite of outside-of-school activities bring the point home: his numerous basketball coaches; Spanish, math, and SAT tutors; private college counselor; and volunteer work supervisors are not just glorified babysitters—they are all part of a web of relationships surrounding John as he grows up, buoying him toward an adulthood rich with social resources. And his parents’ friends in Garden City—old college friends, work colleagues, and fellow high school parents—are yet another layer of social connections at John’s disposal as he looks to find his professional footing. Even with a close-knit, loving family and mentoring programs cropping up in urban centers like her hometown Fort Worth, students like Jane simply don’t have access to this wide range of connections. As much love as her family and immediate community provide, Jane’s web of connections is

decidedly narrower, less well resourced, and less networked into the knowledge economy.

How Schools Can Address Relationship Gaps

Collectively, statistics like these paint a troubling picture. John and Jane are navigating vastly divergent constellations of social connections and interactions before, during, and after school.

How might society start to address these gaps? Staring down the barrel of widening income inequality in general, researchers, policymakers, and commentators from all political walks have proposed a wide range of solutions. They suggest everything from rethinking tax policy to dismantling housing and zoning regulations, both to address the underlying causes of these gaps and to mitigate their effects on young people's prospects. We agree that structural solutions will be critical to curing underlying drivers of inequality.¹⁷

This book will not delve into those many ideas, compelling as they may be. We'll leave those debates to Congress, board rooms, and local town halls. Instead, we will consider a much narrower but crucial question: *How might schools address the social gaps facing American children?*

This question, of course, raises another: Why should schools care about students' networks? As the next chapter discusses in greater detail, the power of relationships is well studied in psychology, political science, and economic research alike. The research points to a single, overwhelming conclusion: social connectedness is vital to getting by and getting ahead. And research consistently underscores the particularly important role that relationships play in helping young people thrive personally, academically, and professionally.

Some of the seminal findings on this topic come from the Search Institute, a Minnesota-based social science research and public policy think tank. The late Peter Benson, former president of Search, summarized the core of the Institute's work: "After decades of forming hypotheses, conducting and publishing studies, crafting and rewriting definitions, and analyzing data, Search Institute researchers and practitioners have arrived

at a surprisingly simple conclusion: nothing—*nothing*—has more impact in the life of a child than positive relationships.”¹⁸

According to the Search Institute’s comprehensive body of research, young people’s connections drive their healthy development, academic success, and access to opportunity. Connections with caring adults and peers correlate with higher levels of student engagement and improved rates of academic motivation. The Search Institute’s research has also shown that with greater access to developmental relationships, students tend to attain better grades, report higher aspirations, and participate more frequently in college-preparatory activities.¹⁹ Beyond these well-studied childhood factors, being well-connected takes on a whole new meaning as young people enter adulthood. A supportive and diverse network predicts higher levels of college completion, not to mention more professional opportunity once students hit the job market.

Relationships, in other words, are at once buffers against risk and conduits to opportunity. And relationships—not just individual effort or ability—continue to play a crucial role in the sorts of activities that our meritocracy rewards. They are an inextricable variable shaping the playing field schools are asked to level.

Even more striking, however, is how much the opposite proves true. Students with weaker or smaller networks are falling behind their better-connected peers academically and professionally.

A Glimpse at the Consequences of Relationship Gaps

Students who report a lack of supportive, caring relationships are more likely to drop out and stay out of school. For example, a study by Jonathan Zaff of the nonprofit America’s Promise Alliance found that young people who dropped out were far more likely to report that they had not reached out to *anyone* for help when they had trouble in school.²⁰ For those who reenrolled, caring adults proved to be a key driver in students’ lives. In some cases, these caring adults were students’ parents. But according to Zaff’s surveys, teachers, mentors, coaches, siblings, or family friends could also

fill the crucial role of caring for young people and motivating them to persist.

Recent research has also begun to suggest that bearing witness to harsh income inequality among adults around them is discouraging some low-income students from investing in school in the first place. In their attempt to identify what might cause students to drop out of high school, Melissa Kearney and Phillip Levine found a startling pattern: in cities or states with wide disparities between the wealth levels of the low- and middle-income brackets, high school students, particularly boys, appear more likely to drop out of school.²¹

Controlling for other factors, Kearney and Levine found that students' acute sense of hopelessness—what the researchers dubbed “economic despair”—was discouraging them from staying in school. Because those around them seemed to be lacking professional and personal opportunities, students saw little value in a high school diploma. As these authors summarized, this finding bucks how researchers typically construe opportunity and inequality: “The conventional thinking among economists is that income inequality provides incentives for individuals to invest *more* in order to achieve the higher-income position in society. But if low-income youth view middle-class life as out of reach, they might decide to invest *less* in their own economic future.”²²

Economic despair appears in geographies suffering the highest, most extreme degrees of inequality, where low-income students can't see a middle-class future based on the adults living and working (or *not* working) around them. But network gaps can also affect those low-income students who continue to invest in their education, graduate, and try to make their way to and through college. In a postrecession world, this investment in their human capital is not just prudent but necessary: nearly 75 percent of the 11.6 million jobs created during the recovery have gone to college-educated workers.²³ This new reality has grave implications for low-income students' prospects in the economy. As of 2017, according to the US Department of Education, by age twenty-five half of Americans from high-income families held a bachelor's degree compared to just one in ten from low-income families.²⁴

Gaps in access to guidance counselors and in exposure to parents or informal mentors who have attended college can in part explain disparities

in college matriculation between rich and poor students. But even those low-income students who defy the odds and make it to college still remain far less likely to graduate down the line. Students hailing from low-income families where neither parent earned a bachelor's degree are significantly more likely than those with a college-educated parent to leave before their second year of college.²⁵ And this gap is growing, not subsiding: the college completion rate among children from high-income families has grown sharply in the last few decades, far outpacing that of students from low-income families.²⁶

A range of factors—including academic performance and access to financial aid—contributes to these startling attrition rates. But research suggests that lack of information and advice, lack of social supports, and a tenuous sense of belonging on college campuses appear to play a big role. Once students make it out of poor neighborhoods to college, some struggle to find their place.²⁷ Regardless of whether students are prepared academically—even, that is, if their talent and effort make them competitive on paper—social barriers can remain potent drivers of attrition. The inverse is also true—if a student feels a sense of social belonging and support, he's far more likely to persist. And at college, relationships with mentors are not the only powerful ties to keep students in school. Some researchers even suggest that, at this stage, peer groups (or lack thereof) wield the greatest impact on students' academic and personal development.²⁸

Unsurprisingly, the benefits of stronger networks continue from there. Take hiring patterns for entry-level jobs at elite firms: specifically at law, consulting, and investment banking firms, social ties remain a key sorting mechanism among managers. In her sweeping look at how top-tier managers filter job applications, Princeton sociologist Lauren Rivera found that, by and large, to even have their resume *considered*, students needed either to attend a university with preexisting ties to a firm or have a *personal connection* to someone at the company. Both of these, of course, are strongly associated with parental socioeconomic status, and the latter with the network to which students have access. Resumes that didn't fit into one or both categories were not reviewed seriously, if at all.

As one of Rivera's interview subjects said, "There are plenty of smart people out there, we just refuse to look at them."²⁹ Michael Young, suffice it to say, is probably turning in his grave.

Investing in Students' Social Capital

In short, relationships function as a key driver behind schools' core priorities, such as graduation and academic outcomes. They are also a driver of education systems' bigger aspirations for their students: successful postsecondary education, access to an array of professional opportunities, and long-term health.

Taken together, emerging statistics on relationship gaps should serve as a loud wake-up call. Access to relationships will need to become a key element of school design for any school hoping to meaningfully level the playing field of opportunity.

Of course, investing in relationships cannot cure all the effects of income inequality—other policies will need to address income gaps and the hardships that poverty inflicts on childhood. But relationships do offer *real value*. As it turns out, social connections actually function as a form of capital much in the way that human and financial capital does. That value, however, is routinely underestimated in the current education system, which focuses so much on what students know (their human capital) that it risks forgetting about whom students know (their social capital).

In the next chapter, we'll unpack the concept of social capital. We will explore exactly how networks form, why they contain value, and how students—especially those on the wrong side of relationship gaps—stand to benefit from that value in the long run.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Belief in meritocracy is alive and well in the US. We rely heavily on our schools to play the role of “great equalizer” to ensure the health of our meritocracy. But schools are confronting a complex set of opportunity gaps emerging across students' lives.
- By many accounts, economic inequality and mobility are getting worse in America. These realities are yielding disparate childhoods, as neighborhood demographics, parental time spent with children, and enrichment spending all diverge across economic class and parental education level.

- These disparities signal that academic gaps aren't the only factor threatening equality of opportunity. Yet children's relationship and network gaps often go unaddressed. If schools hope to level the playing field, they can no longer afford to ignore these additional inequities.

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