Opportunity versus Ability: A Literature Review of how these are managed and defined.

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This paper was completed and submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master Teacher Program, a 2-year faculty professional development program conducted by the Center for Teaching Excellence, United States Military Academy, West Point, NY, 2013.

Author Information

I applied to return to West Point in 2007 to serve in the Admissions Department as a Regional Commander. To my utter dismay I was selected to be an alternate and temporarily put the idea of returning to my “Rockbound Highland Home” aside. I reapplied in 2008 and was once again selected as an alternate; however, as I continued to push with the Officers I had become acquainted with here at West Point, I was offered a “direct fill” position in the Department of Military Instruction (DMI) to serve as the Aviation Branch Proponent and Trainer. I had no idea just how difficult and wonderful this opportunity would turn out to be for me. I arrived to West Point on the 28th of December 2009, and upon arriving I immediately began doing everything I could to represent Aviation as best as I knew how to the United States Corps of Cadets. Little did I know that just 18 months later I would leave the Aviation Proponent job behind and be teaching full time as an MS 300, Platoon Operations, instructor to second class cadets! This was an even more difficult/challenging task for me because teaching Infantry tactics to extremely intelligent and motivated West Point cadets required me to (1) develop as a teacher, (2) become the subject matter expert in FM 3-21.8 (Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad), and (3) literally figure out how to always stay one step ahead of my cadets (not easy).

I have been extremely blessed in my life. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would teach at West Point. What is mind blowing to me now is that I not only teach MS300, but direct the course for 13 other highly skilled and competent instructors and guide DMI’s capstone military science course for nearly 1000 young future Army leaders. Last year, when I was offered the Course Director position, I immediately realized the magnitude of responsibility I now had and sought out the Master Teacher Program (which I had seen other colleagues in DMI volunteer for in previous years).

BLUF: I wish I had enrolled in the Master Teacher Program when I was a first year instructor in MS200! While participating in the Master Teacher Program I was introduced to methodologies of questioning, class dynamics, academic integrity, and various other teaching pedagogy topics. I read articles about “How to Raise Smart Children” which was so enlightening and challenging that it caused me to change the way I encouraged my own children each day before bedtime.
**Topic Overview**

I was introduced to intriguing and new concepts regarding aptitude, intelligence, and opportunities after reading Mr. Charles Murray’s “Intelligence in the Classroom” commentary in the Wall Street Journal. I found this and other commentaries written on these subjects extremely thought provoking. This concept that low intelligence, independent of social, economic, or ethnic backgrounds, lies at the root of many of America’s social problems, as opposed to the more popular notion that our problems stem from America’s education system (Murray, 2007). Is it that young people don’t have the necessary and unique opportunities to increase their intelligence or rather the simple and unpopular reality that many students frankly do not possess the ability to increase their intelligence and therefore are limited to what they will ever be able to accomplish in life. Murray exposes overriding and inconsistent truths (he feels) about intellectual ability being endowed unequally. I chose to examine these ideas further for two reasons, (1) because both my parents have faithfully served in the Polk County Public Education System for over 40 years and I have had to listen to them my whole life, and (2) as an Instructor at the United States Military Academy (USMA) these concepts began to force me to rethink my biases and prejudices about the role that individual differences in intelligence plays here at West Point and in the Army.

**Intellectual equality benefits**

Most every West Point New Cadet enters the Academy with the same qualifications: extremely high Grade Point Averages (GPA), honors backgrounds, diverse and well rounded in their talents, high IQ’s, and athletic, which is evenly distributed between men and women of all ethnic backgrounds. The benefit of these types of intellectual equalities goes far beyond the academic classroom (Gender and your classroom, 2001). We expect every cadet to excel in all three pillars (academic, military, and physical) which pushes every cadet to achieve their maximum potential. West Point has been doing this for over two hundred years so that its graduates can lead American Soldiers with confidence as well educated well rounded leaders of character. The authors (Herrnstein and Murray, 1996) stress the overriding bottom line that IQ is very important in American Society and present data that supports the idea that high intelligence correlates with a large number of ‘successes’ in life and low intelligence correlates with a great deal of dysfunctionalities. The high number of successes of West Point graduates seems to positively correspond to their claims.

**A discussion on IQ**

I understand that IQ is a result of both genetics and environment and the specific levels of influence continue to elude researchers. The notion that genetics are very important and that mankind is far less malleable than we would like would prefer it to be leads to a
particularly flammable conclusion, since it runs counter to public policy, to specific political ideologies and, ultimately, to specific conceptions of the nature of man (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Herrnstein and Murray do not push this view, because they do not assert the 'balance' between heredity and environment.

Authors such as H.J Eysenck, who I find extremely rational and fair, argues in his book (The IQ argument: race, intelligence, and education, 1971) that much of the social science research that has been done is quite straightforward, quite established, and largely above challenge. Other writers on IQ are often reticent individuals, because they undergo constant attack. Hence, we have a situation in which the science is more or less settled, but not talked about very much with general audiences because of the heat which is generated. Thus, Herrnstein and Murray are, in a sense, performing a public service by discussing, at length, the results of modern studies of human intelligence.

The devil, of course, resides within the details, which is to say, the implications seen upon examination of the science and the sorts of public policies that might be developed to both ameliorate society and the conditions of the individuals who constitute it. These arguments are less 'settled' than the science, though it is very important to raise the issues so that they might be discussed dispassionately and solutions to problems be sought and found.

**Cultural bias and the cultural mainstream**

Thomas Sowell (Ethnicity and IQ,1995) analyzes how the `cultural bias' of tests has been overstressed in some respects. The 'bias', if you will, does not come so much in experiential and linguistic items as it does in more abstract questions. Individuals outside of the cultural mainstream tend to do poorly on the more abstract sections of standardized tests. This is not just true of individuals of African descent, but also of a whole host of individuals of European descent. Even more important is the fact that as individuals become part of the cultural mainstream their test scores can rise dramatically. The example Sowell uses is that of the Russian Jews during the First World War. Their IQ scores were extremely low, so low as to make individuals doubt the validity of the tests. Now, Jews tend to score in the upper reaches of intelligence tests. He does not see the Jews' low scores as oddities to be dismissed. He sees them as authentic results, results which, eventually, became subject to dramatic change. Thus, he argues for the possibility of radical improvement in IQ, over time, something of which Herrnstein and Murray are more skeptical.
**Conclusion**

I found the concept and research which supports the notion that low intelligence, independent of social, economic, or ethnic backgrounds, lies at the root of many of America’s social problems to be extremely interesting and at the center of various debates. Clearly there is a strong debate on both sides of this issue. Americans, in particular, love to blame teachers and the education system for a whole list of societal problems! Higher IQ’s definitely help individuals achieve more in life as opposed to those with lower IQ’s. This is not to say that those with lower IQ scores should look down upon themselves or are in danger of being failures in life. The reality seems to be that people with traditionally lower intelligence levels blame education for their shortcomings and refuse to come to terms with that reality.

**Annotated Bibliography**

Gender and your classroom. 2001. In Teaching for inclusion. Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, [http://cfe.unc.edu/pdfs/TeachforInclusion.pdf](http://cfe.unc.edu/pdfs/TeachforInclusion.pdf). This book’s purpose included describing the characteristics that different genders of students tend to exhibit. The book presented a thorough discussion of interesting topics which include: communication, classroom participation, and group dynamics. It went on to explain different learning styles and provided some ideas regarding how factors outside the classroom can affect performance.


Sowell, T. (1995). Ethnicity and IQ, 1-13, 55. A leading scholarly article on the interplay of race and culture and how both can be related to IQ and various cultural biases.

**References:**

