

NEPC REVIEW: THE OPPORTUNITY MYTH (TNTP, SEPTEMBER 2018)



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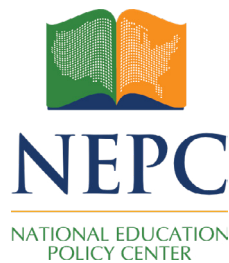
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Executive Summary

A report recently published by TNTP, formerly The New Teacher Project, aims to expose what it labels the “opportunity myth” in American education: that while schools purport to prepare students well, they don’t deliver. The report conveys a great sense of urgency, with descriptions of students spending significant time on below-grade-level assignments, lacking strong instruction and high expectations, and disengaged in school. It paints a dramatic picture of American students being misled by false promises of opportunity, when they could make significant learning gains if they experienced grade-level content, strong instruction, deep engagement, and high expectations. The report contends that these negative experiences are primarily the result of educators’ daily decisions and are magnified for students of color and low-income students. While the report presents an array of qualitative and quantitative data, some of its particular claims are not fully supported by evidence, and there are questions about how key constructs are measured. Importantly, in describing educators’ decisions, the report does not sufficiently account for larger systemic and societal impediments to opportunity that serve to establish and maintain many of the obstacles and problematic patterns the report observes.



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I. Introduction

*The Opportunity Myth*¹ aims to illuminate students' classroom experiences to explain why schools are falling short in meeting students' goals. Presented in a startling way, the data are intended to provoke educators and policymakers to take a hard look at day-to-day school decisions contributing to student outcomes. Examining how school practices shape students' opportunities is undoubtedly a useful endeavor. However, educators using this report should be mindful that some claims made in the report are not supported by clear evidence or anchored in prior research. Moreover, while focusing on teaching and learning is critical to understanding opportunity, we must also take a broader look at systemic conditions that contribute to students' experiences.

The organization that produced this report is TNTP, formerly The New Teacher Project. TNTP began by creating teacher fellows programs in partnership with numerous large urban districts. For the past 15 years, the organization has produced policy reports that examine student experiences, systemic change, school culture, and teacher training. In addition to receiving philanthropic support, TNTP provides consultancy services to districts across the nation.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

According to the report, American students are being misled by false promises: Students work hard, get good grades, and invest in their futures. This should put them on the path to success. Instead, the authors argue that students have been sold a bill of goods by schools that purport to prepare students well, but don't deliver. This is defined as the "opportunity

myth.” These promises are ubiquitous but are magnified for the most underserved students – low-income students and students of color – who experience less rigorous assignments, less engaging and weaker instruction, and lower expectations, even when controlling for prior achievement. The patterns the authors documented are worthy of note, and of course merit a deeper look into the analyses.

The authors argue that when students have access to four key resources – grade-level content, strong instruction, deep engagement, and high expectations – students gain at least two months of additional learning as compared to their peers. Students who begin the year below grade level are reportedly far more likely to close gaps with their peers when these resources are present. This is a striking conclusion; however, gaps and gains are measured quite narrowly. The authors:

estimated the amount of learning in a classroom by comparing its students’ actual state standardized test scores to the state standardized test scores that were expected of them given how they had scored historically, as well as other characteristics like their race/ethnicity and family income (p. 61).

Standardized test scores are just one way to assess student outcomes, and the limits of such measures in capturing student achievement, particularly for low-income students and students of color, have been well documented.²

Since much of the report revolves around measuring whether students are exposed to “grade-level standards,” it is also important to understand how this is defined. In the main body of the report, the authors argue that “college-ready standards” are the right bar, but they don’t explain what these are. In an endnote in the technical appendix, the authors reveal that the standards they use are the Common Core State Standards, the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies, and the Common Career Technical Core (in CTE). In the report, the authors do not delve into whether instructional changes alone are sufficient to help all students reach these standards. Moreover, what is a “grade-appropriate” assignment or assessment for a wide range of students in a particular classroom? Is grade level the best way to conceptualize what is challenging or appropriate for all students? These are important questions to address.

Not surprisingly, the study finds that students are engaged when classroom instruction is “stronger.” Students in schools serving larger numbers of white and higher income students reportedly spend twice as much time on grade-level content and are five times more likely to experience strong instruction, according to the report. Gaps widen for students who do not have access to these resources. While the claims sound plausible to the reader, constructs such as “strong instruction” and “high expectations” are not clearly defined in the report or grounded in prior research on these topics. Readers are referred to the technical appendix, which does provide additional information, but some questions remain unanswered. For example, researchers examined whether teachers “employ instructional practices that allow all students to learn the content of the lesson” (Technical Appendix p. 9).³ However, determining whether instruction allows all students to learn the content requires judgments that go well beyond what an observer can actually see.

The authors argue that materials that teachers select on their own tend to be below grade-level standards, whereas the resources provided by districts are more likely to meet grade-level standards, even though varying in quality. Quality seems to be measured at least in part based on whether the materials align with Common Core Standards, though this is unclear. The majority of teachers support the standards, but less than half of teachers included in the study perceive that their students can reach grade-level standards. The inference is that teachers have low expectations, rather than that the district materials are inappropriate or that they do not meet students' needs. An additional assertion is that the interim assessments that districts require teachers to use to inform instruction are themselves often not reflective of grade-level standards. Yet the report does not say which assessments were used. The report also exposes inconsistencies between students' relatively high grades and their lower performance on end-of-the-year state assessments and AP and SAT tests. However, the graphs presenting these data are overly simple, leaving them open to question. All students of color, regardless of ethnicity, are grouped together. Standardized test data across states for students grades 3-8 are aggregated, regardless of assessment, and grades are represented on an A-F scale, irrespective of the grading system used. SAT and ACT "college readiness benchmarks" aren't defined in the report, leaving the reader without knowledge of what scores on these tests constitute readiness.

With these shortcomings in mind, the report draws readers' attention to the teaching and learning that students may be experiencing. This is important. But the proposed solution (the four resources) cannot alone address the opportunity myth. It is essential to consider a host of other conditions in and outside schools.

A rigorous curriculum and qualified teachers are certainly critical conditions for college access. Students also need to experience safe and adequate school facilities, a college-going culture, intensive academic and social supports, family-neighborhood-school connections, and opportunities to develop a multicultural college-going identity.⁴ At the classroom level, the curriculum must support students' racial and cultural identities.⁵ This is not only necessary for making students' classroom learning experiences relevant and meaningful, it is also critical in shaping their knowledge of the opportunity myths that are promoted in American society. The report does not discuss these imperatives.

If we focus solely on what happens inside schools, we fail to fully understand how a very complex, interconnected system helps to maintain current practices.

Academic and social support systems outside the classroom are also important. A major claim in the report is that grade-level assignments will make a tremendous difference. But we learn comparatively little about how schools help students meet the standards. Although the authors acknowledge that this is

a challenge, they do not explain how schools can close learning gaps among a wide variety of students. Moreover, they do not explain how academic supports outside the classroom might help students meet standards. This would have been very useful information.

Furthermore, if we focus solely on what happens inside schools, we fail to fully understand how a very complex, interconnected system helps to maintain current practices. The authors state that the opportunity myth is the result of everyday decisions by educators. Certainly,

such daily decisions matter a great deal and can open or close doors for students. However, the tone and substance of the report appear to be crafted to critique educators about the ways in which they are underserving students in their schools. The authors state, “if you’re reading this and you work in education in any capacity, you bear some of the responsibility. That includes teachers, whose daily choices influence students’ outcomes in the most visible ways, but it includes others as well” (p. 55). The authors do acknowledge that teachers may be implementing poor choices made by others in the school system, often with inadequate support. However, the role of leadership receives little attention.

The authors do identify external institutions that are contributing to the problem. These institutions include policymakers, textbook publishers, and schools of education, among others. At various points in the report, there appears to be an unsettling bias against teacher education programs. Critiques of these programs are not supported by evidence in the report. The authors acknowledge that their own organization’s strategies of preparing teachers have fallen short, but they also explain that they are actively working to respond.

Importantly, there are aspects of the opportunity myth that are driven by factors not addressed in the report. These include state and national accountability systems, school funding policies, the lack of social supports in the US, the increasingly competitive nature of university admissions, and efforts to privatize schooling. The authors do briefly note that systemic racism is a broader issue that plays a role in opportunity. However, they do not acknowledge in sufficient detail the complexity of this challenge. The point here is not to discount the role that teachers play in fostering or limiting opportunity, but to more fully nest their decision-making within a wider educational, social, and political context. Providing opportunity is not just about ensuring access to the four resources identified in this report. It is a much larger systemic and societal issue.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

A key rationale for this report is to create a sense of urgency about the “opportunity myth.” The report also admonishes educators for failing to provide grade-level content, hold students to high expectations, and provide engaging, strong instruction. Another rationale for the report is to pave the way for different ways of preparing teachers. The authors repeatedly note that a lack of proper teacher training is likely a contributing factor to the “opportunity myth.” However, their data does not support this contention, as teacher training was not examined empirically in this study.

IV. The Report’s Use of Research Literature

There is limited research referenced in this report. The research that is referenced primarily describes national trends in student achievement. The endnotes focus primarily on how

constructs were defined (often referring the reader to the technical appendix), with comparatively little emphasis on peer-reviewed research. This is especially notable given the abundance of available research on instructional quality, teacher expectations, and educational opportunity. The authors reference numerous think tank reports, including the organization's own. The report would be strengthened by a robust grounding in relevant, rigorous research and theory.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The authors studied five school systems (four districts and one charter management organization) with varying demographics and geographic locations. They gathered data in 24 schools across these systems. The authors quantify the extensiveness of their data collection, and indeed the volume appears impressive. They observed 1,000 lessons, reviewed 5,000 assignments, analyzed 20,000 student work samples, and conducted real-time, in-class surveys of approximately 30,000 students in grades 3-12. They also conducted focus groups with 100 teachers and 24 school leaders. The authors selected focal students achieving at different levels within each school in order to develop vignettes of their school experiences. In relation to the amount of data collected, the contributions of the report to the research base are limited because of weaknesses in the study design and analysis

The strengths of the study include the mixed-methods approach and the triangulation of data from multiple sources. The report itself provides some information on data collection techniques, but there is little information in the actual report about study design or data analysis. The research team made subjective decisions about which standards to measure, how to capture and judge instructional quality, how to measure end-of-course achievement, and how to measure college readiness, all of which may provoke questions for researchers who work in these specific sub-fields. The 53-page technical appendix discusses the data collection and analytic methods, but few readers will choose to read such documents. The appendix may also be challenging for the average reader to decipher, given the complicated yet incomplete descriptions of statistical procedures. Deep in the endnotes are important elements such as definitions of constructs and approaches to data analysis.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

In general, the findings are reported in a way that seems to be aimed at creating a sense of crisis around broad claims rather than reporting rigorous, in-depth research findings. The lengthy technical appendix does provide more information on the data collection and analysis, and the extensive time spent in schools and the multiple data sources help make the conclusions sound compelling. However, various methodological decisions and incomplete descriptions will raise questions for researchers reading this report. It is also important to note that school system selection process may have impacted the results. The authors aimed

for a varied sample based on geography and demographics, but they also note in a disclosure statement at the end of the report (not in the methodology section) that TNTP is currently working as a consultant or service provider with some of the districts included in the study.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report is written in accessible language. At 68 pages, it is a bit long; however, quite a few pages contain pictures accompanied by little or no text. The statistics, figures, and graphs could stimulate critical conversations about opportunity, and that's the intent. The report is also accompanied by an action guide that can be used by a variety of stakeholders. However, it is important that readers understand the limitations of the report that are described herein. Moreover, the practical implications of this study relate only to the aspects of the opportunity myth that the authors chose to focus on. There is far more that needs to be considered to truly understand opportunity for students in US schools.

Notes and References

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