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In his book, *Giving Kids a Fair Chance*, Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman argues that the accident of one's birth is the primary source of inequality in America. He is right. For example, if you are born into poverty, research shows that the future of your education is in great jeopardy. Statistics on reading trends from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) - which measures reading achievement in public schools - show that significant gaps between students of higher and lower socioeconomic statuses are irrefutable (as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2010). Furthermore, Heckman (2013) writes, "Kids born into disadvantaged environments are at much greater risk of being unskilled, having low lifetime earnings, and facing a range of personal and social troubles" (p.3). Otherwise stated, "birth is becoming fate" (Heckman, 2013, p.3), a fate cemented by unjust fiscal policies that create great inequality within the American school system.

To be specific, the amount of money spent on education in America - as well as the manner in which it is spent - demonstrates the correlative relationship between policy and inequality. Those with less money have fewer tax dollars spent on their public education than those with more money. Darling-Hammond (2010) has made note of this, citing that in certain circumstances, the spending on students at predominantly white, wealthy schools is sometimes two times that of schools attended primarily by students of color from low income families. To make matters worse, the schools attended by the latter of the two aforementioned groups "are so severely overcrowded that they run a multi-track schedule offering a shortened school day and school year, lack basic textbooks and materials, and do not offer the courses students need to be eligible for college" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p.22). From this data, it is easy to conclude that the opportunity gap precedes the achievement gap. And inequitable policies for funding education are at the heart of it all.

Recent court cases support this conclusion. In *Skeen vs. State of Minnesota* (1993), the Minnesota Supreme Court held that while there is a “fundamental right to a basic level of funding,” for schools, that right does not require equality of spending among districts. Therefore, wealthier districts with significant amounts of money (much of it derived from property taxes) have better schools because they are free to do so. As unbelievable as it may be, some states have made inequality an acceptable component of their education policy. Yet this begs one very important question: How is this possible in a country that takes pride in being a land of equal opportunity?

The answer lies in an examination of our history. Public schools were virtually non-existent in the United States prior to the nineteenth century. At the time of the crafting of the Constitution, education was taking place in the home, not in school buildings (Kennedy, Cohen & Bailey, 2002). It was seen as the mother's job to teach her children. Therefore, funding education was simply not necessary - which is why there is no mention of doing so in the Constitution. As such, the power of education regulation and funding became a reserved power left to the states. Nevertheless, thirty-one states have now seen lawsuits filed to challenge the Constitutionality of their educational funding schemes (as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2010). Each of these suits argues that state-directed funding mechanisms favor white and wealthy students over low-income students of color, all of which constitutes a denial of the equal protection clause of the United States Constitution (as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2010).

It is this variety of unjust policy (manifest in inequitable funding of education for students of color from low income families) that lies at the heart of the opportunity gap. It is this variety of unjust policy that validates Heckman’s claim that the accident of one’s birth is, indeed, the primary source of inequality in America.

## References

Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Heckman, J. (2013). *Giving kids a fair chance: A strategy that works*. Cambridge, MA: Boston Review.

Kennedy, D. M., Cohen, L., & Bailey, T. A. (2002). *The American pageant: A history of the republic* (12th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

**Part 1: From 6 Traits of Writing**

5 - Strong shows control and skill; many strengths present

4 - Maturing strengths outweigh weakness; small amount of revision needed

3 - Developing strengths and weaknesses are about equal; first-draft stage

2 - Emerging isolated moments show what writer intends; revision needs outweigh strengths

1 - Not Yet getting started, but the result is unclear, struggling, tentative; writer is searching and exploring

Criterion	Scoring Guide	Comments
Ideas and Content: -Writer grounds espoused theory(ies) about the interconnections between an education policy and one social justice and/or equity issue by citing specific authors/theorists and includes details (paraphrased or verbatim) from their works or ideas. -Writer provides brief concrete examples and details from current practice or what hopes to do	5 4 3 2 1  5 4 3 2 1	
Organization: Writer composes a platform that is well organized so that the readers may move through text easily.	5 4 3 2 1	
Voice: Writer is engaged, imparts personal tone, individuality	5 4 3 2 1	
Conventions: Writer demonstrates standard spelling, punctuation, grammar and attribution of sources.	5 4 3 2 1	