Whatever It Takes?

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Original link

The big book right now in liberal education circles is Paul Tough's *Whatever It Takes* — and with good reason. The book is touching and delightful; it deftly mixes an intellectual history of the academic debates around poverty with an on the ground look at programs to alleviate it, all in the best magazine feature style. But I found the book disturbing in what it left out: the topics it failed to discuss and the questions it failed to ask. For a book about education, there sure wasn't much in the way of critical thinking.

The book's practical hero is Geoffrey Canada, an African-American who graduated from the Harlem ghettos to running local programs to help others do the same. But he quickly became frustrated at the small scale at which he worked, "saving lives" one and two at a time, when thousands of others were all around him. So he decides to adopt a multiblock area of Harlem, which he calls the Harlem Children's Zone, and do "whatever it takes" to make sure the kids in it get to and graduate from college: parent training, afterschool programs, entirely new schools. And, the story goes, there are fits and starts along the way, but he's really hit on something big: the schools are a success, the press loves the story, Barack Obama vows to expand the program to a dozen more cities.

And yet. The schools are considered a success because they pass New York State's standardized tests. And they do that because their principals—under pressure from Canada to raise scores—turn the schools into 24-hour test prep centers. Kids start taking practice tests in the middle of 3rd grade and repeat them every six months so that they've near-memorized them by the time they have to take them for real. The school day is lengthened and summer break is skipped so that there's more time for test prep. There are even test prep sessions on weekends to make sure every kid gets the right grade.

A couple characters—including the middle school principal—object, spouting lines about "teaching the whole child" and insisting it's a bad idea to replace music and art with more test prep. But they're given little quarter by the book and Canada eventually fires them because they're not "getting results" (i.e. high test scores). Most of the remaining teachers leave *en masse* after that.

It's weird. When it comes to their own kids, safely enrolled at suburban private schools, liberals don't seem to have much trouble seeing the problems with high-stakes testing and the importance of music and art, but when it comes to the urban poor such concerns suddenly become expendable, mere niceties that distract from the real business of "tougher standards". (For those who don't know the problems with standardized tests, here's a few: Most of them are

norm-referened, designed to ensure half the kids fail. You do better at them by thinking worse — skipping hard parts, guessing answers, skimming instead of understanding. And I have yet to see evidence that raising test scores leads to any good for kids.)

But there's a more serious problem with the whole theory that underlies the book. The story's intellectual hero is James Heckman, a conservative University of Chicago economist. Heckman has done a great deal of research on "human capital" — his argument is that investing in early childhood education pays off in the long run by making future workers much more productive, and thus wealthy. To prove this, he cites a number of studies, the most famous of which was on Perry Preschool. In that study, researchers followed a bunch of black kids in Ypsilanti, Michigan and gave half of them free preschool. Tracking them down again at age 27 and age 40, they found the kids who went to preschool stayed in school longer, graduated from high school more, had fewer teen pregnancies and arrests, and made more money. Clearly we should give everyone free preschool!

I have nothing against more free preschool, but this argument is flawed. What makes people stay in school, not get arrested, and make more money isn't preschool but a good job. A long line of research has shown that when kids have the prospect of a good job in front of them, they tend to buckle down and work harder. Conversely, when jobs disappear, kids turn to drugs and crime and ditching school—after all, why not?

But the Perry Preschool Program didn't create any new good jobs for those kids. It just redistributed the ones that already existed, giving them to the kids who went to preschool instead of those who didn't. If everyone in Ypsilanti had gone to preschool, things would be right back where they were before. (More technically, assume that an increase in human capital increases a worker's productivity. Universal preschool increases the productivity of workers while leaving their supply at the same level. If supply outstrips demand (i.e. there's unemployment), wages will be unchanged.)

If we truly want every kid to succeed, we need to create jobs for all of them. And that will take fiscal and monetary stimulus, not just better schools.