

A Key Breathtakingly Heroic Assumption

John Merrifield
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“A successful leader must develop reasonable assumptions and base a plan of action on them.”
Donald Rumsfeld

A sensible corollary to Secretary Rumsfeld’s point is that you cannot build a plan of action on unreasonable assumptions. I [already](#) briefly described the unreasonable assumption that I will further discuss below. The widespread implicit assumption that school, educator, and student differences are one-dimensional supports a lot of foolish policies and poorly conceived research questions. Here is a detailed rendition of the truly silly, but devastatingly debilitating assumption:

Student ability and public school educator talent is seen as one dimensional. That is, no one has strengths and weaknesses; student ability is either great, good, mediocre, or poor, not a mixture that depends on pedagogy or subject matter. The implicit perception of teacher strength is limited to a subject field. Otherwise, teachers are seen as great, good, average, and others. In fact, a competent teacher is often great for some students, but not helpful for others. Most of us know from looking in the mirror that humans are only rarely one-dimensional. We recognize our own strengths and weaknesses, but do not take into account that students and teachers have them, at least not through our governance and funding policies. A school system that truly recognizes the fundamental fact of multi-dimensional student ability and teacher talent cannot resemble the one we have.

What I call the ‘one dimension fallacy’ may be the most devastating fallacy, in part because so many people, including eminent schooling and school system scholars, suffer its effects.

For example, there are beliefs that large, unrestricted school choice programs will create ‘[white flight](#)’, which Coulson’s *Market Education* (1999) showed was more accurately seen as income-based (white collar) flight out of central cities, not race/ethnicity-based flight. The supporting ‘evidence’ comes from studies of our current school system wherein the most readily observed difference between nearby schools is student body composition, not the academic factors that families consistently say is their top school choice criterion. Some scholars, including me, say

the appearance of race/class-based choice exists largely because families use student body composition as a proxy for the likely academic effects of differences in peer pressures. Other potential differences of likely greater importance to families are largely absent, especially for public school choice; choice among [comprehensively uniform](#) alternatives. The ‘one-dimension’ fallacy is often seen in the implicit assumption that the most able students will dominate the set of children that opts for an alternative to their assigned school.

You may have heard the widespread ‘creaming’ claim; that expansion of choice skims the cream from public schools leaving behind in their assigned traditional public schools the least able; an assertion that contains two whopper assertions of the one dimension fallacy. First, it asserts that greater ease in opting out of the assigned public school will sort children by ability. But it actually sorts in terms of good/bad fit with the assigned public school’s environment. Parents of children doing well in their assigned school have little or no reason to seek an alternative. The exception arises from families that place a high value on religious content in schooling; something that is not correlated with general ability, or a specific significant ability amongst significant weaknesses.

Second, it asserts that there are a lot of across-the-board brilliant kids that will respond strongly to the public school pedagogy, or any established pedagogy, and regardless of subject theme, or lack thereof. And the statement asserts that the same thing, in reverse, is true at the low end of the ability spectrum; dunce in anything means dunce at everything. From my scant reading of the ability measurement literature and my experience as a professor, I don’t buy it. And the creaming claim is not only refuted by the evidence from our few, small, restriction-laden school choice programs, but it is absurd on its face. Many independent schools, perhaps the vast majority, target special needs, and academically unexceptional children.

The creaming claim asserts that all of the schooling providers will specialize in serving that one, mostly imaginary market niche. That’s like saying builders will produce only luxury

apartments, or only the easiest to build apartments. Price control forces targeting the easiest to educate, but that is not necessarily the children with noteworthy intellectual abilities, in one dimension, or several. With price decontrol – ending pricelessness – we know that education entrepreneurs will fill every niche, including [schooling for the least able](#).

We need choice expansion with price decontrol precisely, primarily, because educators and students are multi-dimensional. Starting from a one dimensional perspective largely assumes away the main challenge to be addressed; that students differ in how they learn and in which factors, like subject themes, will achieve the highest level of engagement in high value academic content. And to the extent that some multi-dimensional children are generally higher functioning than others, the one-dimension fallacy implies that the higher ability children are cheaper to educate. That's true if we have a uniform absolute level of achievement target (mistake!). But it is not necessarily true if our policy objective is to maximize skill/knowledge acquisition, which I would advocate as the proper policy goal. It's the goal parents of intellectually gifted have as their goal.