

# Chapter 1 | Introduction

THE AMERICAN DREAM—the idea that all children should be able to succeed regardless of the economic circumstances into which they were born—is widely shared by parents in the United States, as well as in many other countries. Parents want the best for their children, and society as a whole has an interest in seeing all children reach their fullest potential without being held back by the circumstances of their birth.

But is the American Dream a reality? Is it a reality for just some and not others? If the American Dream is not widely attainable, what can the United States do—if anything—to make opportunity a reality for all Americans? And what can this country learn from other countries in meeting this challenge?

We are writing this book to shed light on these crucial issues by tackling three central questions that motivate our story:

1. How large is the achievement gap between children from low-socioeconomic status families and those from high-socioeconomic status families?
2. When does this gap emerge? How much inequality is already present at school entry, and what happens to the gap as children move through school?
3. What can the United States learn from other countries to make success more common regardless of family background? More broadly put, does it have to be this way?

We answer these questions by focusing on the development and progress of children during the primary school years and in some cases beyond. We look at their starting point on the cusp of formal schooling at age four or five, describe their accomplishments in their early teen years, and chart the ups and downs of their development in between. Another

way we answer these questions is by making two types of comparisons: between children raised by families at different rungs on the ladder of socioeconomic success, and between children in the United States and children in three similar countries—Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. We very intentionally chose these three countries for this comparative analysis because culturally, historically, and institutionally they have a good deal in common, and also because there has long been a good deal of communication and borrowing of policy ideas between their governments. Is there as much inequality in the development of more- and less-advantaged children in these peer countries as there is in the United States? Or do the experiences of Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom suggest that the United States could do better?

### THE AMERICAN DREAM, LUCK, AND OPPORTUNITY

“Equality of opportunity” and “opportunity for all” are central themes of a compelling story that Americans tell themselves—a story about their children’s futures, but also a story about the country.

It is a story about hope—the hope that with hard work and perseverance, children will become all that they can be. But it is also a story about fairness—the rules of a game in which success is sometimes determined by circumstances beyond one’s control.

Sometimes luck, good or bad, sets people on a path in life that they did not anticipate and may certainly not have chosen. Opportunity is a matter of chance, and “down on your luck” is a phrase that, in many different ways, has real meaning. But at the same time, “good luck comes to those who work hard” is not just a hollow mantra: it can be a powerful explanation for one’s station in life.<sup>1</sup>

Americans do not believe that luck is the central ingredient of success. In a public opinion poll designed to explore attitudes toward the American Dream and how people can move up the income ladder, only about one-fifth of respondents said that luck is essential or very important, but about 90 percent said that hard work and ambition are important.<sup>2</sup> The same poll asked what the American Dream means and found that Americans feel that financial security is certainly a part of the definition, but not the most important part. For many, the American Dream is linked to equality of opportunity and means “being able to succeed regardless of the economic circumstances in which you were born” and, relatedly, “being free to accomplish anything you want with hard work.”

Whatever the case in reality, Americans believe that the pathway to success is not about good luck, but about hard work and ambition. Never-

theless, overwhelming proportions of Americans also feel that having a good education, and having access to quality schooling from kindergarten through high school, is essential, or at least very important, to getting ahead in life. In short, ambition, hard work, and the opportunity to get a good education are the ingredients of upward mobility and the chance to attain the American Dream.

Americans want their children to have these ingredients for success.

But hard work can't always overcome bad luck, and children in particular have no responsibility for the circumstances that ultimately determine their capacities and skills: the circumstances of their birth and the schools and communities in which they are raised. If Americans do not come to appreciate the details of how children develop the capacity to become all that they can be, the compelling story they tell themselves about equality of opportunity and the future of America's children will remain more of a dream than a reality.

## A TALE OF TWO CHILDREN

Three-year-old Johnny, the compelling subject of a story in the *New York Times* by Nicholas Kristof, learned to speak later than most children—because he had a hearing problem that was not diagnosed until he was eighteen months old. He was in the midst of an important transition, one that would play a big role in determining his station in life while revealing the shortcomings of today's American Dream. As Kristof reported, Johnny eventually received “medical treatment that restored most of his hearing, but after such a long period of deafness in infancy, it's unclear if he will fully recover his ability to communicate.”<sup>3</sup>

Johnny had the misfortune of encountering bad luck in early childhood. The years from infancy to preschool age are a crucial period in a child's life, offering preparation for the wider world, which most importantly includes formal schooling. Competencies associated with what developmental psychologists call “readiness to learn” require a stimulating and caring environment if they are to develop to their fullest extent. The development of these skills also requires attention and resources to address and compensate for unforeseen setbacks and unfortunate events. Bad luck at this stage in life can limit a child's sensory, cognitive, or behavioral development in ways that limit future possibilities. Language and behavioral skills are central ingredients for successfully starting primary schooling, and they shape a child's future success, reverberating all the way to high school graduation and college attendance and completion.

The human brain has a certain “plasticity,” particularly during the early years.<sup>4</sup> Neural development is extremely dynamic during the first weeks,

months, and years of life and proceeds through a series of stages that last at least until puberty, if not into the teen and early adult years. But the early years are very important. The scientific study of the human brain has found that people are born with many more neurons than they will ever need. Human development proceeds through stages as the brain responds to a stimulating environment, sculpting and pruning neural pathways to a fine level of efficiency. This permits the development of age-specific competencies, which in turn offer the capacity for even more interaction with an increasingly stimulating environment. These competencies are behavioral and include self-control, perseverance, and the social skills associated with empathy. These competencies are also cognitive, prime among them being language development. The University of Chicago economist and Nobel laureate James Heckman has emphasized that “skills beget skills,” by which he means that development involves a series of sequential steps that build on each other, with earlier steps influencing the length of the strides that can be taken later in life. Investments in children and teens during the school years prove to be much more productive if prior investments during the early years developed their capacities to the greatest extent possible.

These investments certainly include sufficient financial resources. Poverty limits the capabilities of children for a whole host of reasons ranging from inadequacies in nutrition, limited access to the goods and services that foster the kind of stimulating environment that is important for behavioral and cognitive development, and a limited ability to deal with the fallout from unexpected events such as accidents and sickness. The growing income inequalities in the labor market since the late 1970s have increasingly become shadowed in the resources available for children. Professors Greg Duncan and Richard Murnane have documented a growing and significant gap in what they refer to as “enrichment expenditures” made by families at the top and the bottom of the income distribution.<sup>5</sup> These include spending on books, computers, high-quality child care, summer camps, private schooling, and other resources that offer a motivating and nurturing environment for children. A generation or more ago, during the early 1970s, a typical family in the top fifth of the income distribution spent about \$3,850 per year on resources like these, four times as much as the typical family at the bottom of the income distribution, which spent about \$925. This is certainly a large gap, but by 2005 it had grown tremendously, to \$9,800 versus \$1,400. And while there is some debate in the academic literature about how much money really matters in the lives of young children, convincing studies have shown that in many poor households more money eases stress, enables better parenting, and is an important resource for dealing with the unexpected.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, money is not all that matters: good parenting and the quality of the time children spend with their parents, with significant others, and in the wider community are also important. Poverty of expectation, experience, and emotional support can negatively affect children regardless of how financially secure their families are.

The experiences of a child like Johnny have their roots in a family living in straitened circumstances, but the solutions seem more complicated than just giving such families more money, helpful as that might be. Johnny was still struggling with learning to speak because his deafness at birth had gone undiagnosed for so long. Although treatment had restored much of his hearing, the long period of deprivation might have permanently limited his speaking ability. This is how luck touched Johnny in a bad way—the bad luck of being born into a poor family. As Kristof chronicled, his mother was caring and loving but at the same time had many other worries and concerns, from bills to be paid to frozen pipes in their trailer home that needed fixing, to a broken car that limited access to work and other resources. If Johnny had been born into a better-off family to parents who were equally as loving but also had more time, more resources, and more connections to the wider community, his medical condition might have been addressed much sooner, or more effectively. Johnny had also had the bad luck of not having other social supports, like routine visits with a health practitioner who might have discovered the problem and started remedial treatment sooner. Johnny's mother had to reach out to a children's aid group for help in understanding and treating her son's affliction. If social programs had been easier to access and more of a help to his mother, perhaps Johnny's challenges would not have become so great. Kristof used his story in the *New York Times* as a call for more effective and active public policies, asking for a broadening of "the conversation about opportunity, to build not just safety nets for those who stumble but also to help all American kids achieve lift-off."<sup>7</sup>

Obviously, we have no way of knowing how Johnny's story will unfold, how lucky he will be, how much the early challenges he faced will matter. But we might quite reasonably imagine that his starting point in life could have been very different, and that the compelling narrative of equality of opportunity might not have taken such an unexpected and sharp turn for him had he been born into another family or into a different social and public policy environment.

A glimpse into what might have been for Johnny comes from the story of a second child, Alex, who was also born with a hearing problem and who also did not receive a diagnosis until he was a toddler. But unlike Johnny, he was born into a family with resources with which to tackle his problem. As *New York Times* writer Katherine Bouton details in her story

(which appeared just a few months after the story about Johnny), Alex's mother (a science writer) and father were able to ensure that he received excellent medical treatment and also were able to provide Alex with a "language-rich environment," which is a key factor predicting early vocabulary development and later success in school. Bouton describes how well Alex was doing as an early adolescent, at age eleven. He attended the same local private school as his two older siblings, enjoyed playing lots of sports, and—most impressively—scored 100 percent on a speech recognition test. As his mother commented, "Whatever Alex missed by the delay, he's made it up." She also noted: "It's partly that he's lucky."<sup>8</sup>

It might seem ironic that Alex's mother sees him as lucky. After all, he was born with a serious hearing problem. But she is right—he was lucky to have parents who could arrange first-rate medical treatment for him and also provide him with lots of language stimulation so that he could benefit to the fullest from that treatment. So, in this respect, he was indeed lucky.

## OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL?

The diverging paths and life chances of these two children—and many others like them—provided the motivation for our book. Probably every reader can bring to mind a similar case of contrasts—a story of a child from a family of lesser means who is held back by early challenges, in contrast with a child from a more-advantaged family who is given a helping hand to overcome adversity. We can also picture a talented child who never really reaches his or her full potential owing to lack of resources and opportunities, a story that contrasts with that of a similarly talented child who achieves great success because that talent was nurtured and given the chance to flourish. It's a story as old as Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, or perhaps even older. It is also a story that runs counter to our understanding of, and aspirations for, the American Dream.

Taking a step back from these two children, and others who come to mind, do we see a similar story in the larger landscape of American children? Unfortunately, the answer seems to be yes. Children's success in school, and in life, is very much tied to their family background, and more so in the United States than in other countries.

We draw this conclusion from a range of U.S. and international evidence that has accumulated over the last decade or so as increasing attention has been focused on how countries fare with regard to not only their average school achievement but also inequality in achievement. In the United States, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, the landmark federal education reform enacted in 2001, set the goal that states should not only raise their average levels of student proficiency but also close achievement

## Box 1.1 Overview of the Child Cohort Studies

	United States	United Kingdom	Australia	Canada
	Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Kindergarten Class of 1998–99 (ECLS-K)	Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)	Longitudinal Study of Australian Children: Kindergarten Cohort (LSAC-K)	National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY)
Cohort birth dates	1992–1993	2000–2002	1999–2000	1991–1994
Common ages when children are assessed	Five, nine, and eleven	Five, seven, and eleven	Five, nine, and eleven	Five, nine, and eleven

gaps—that is, gaps in test scores between less- and more-advantaged groups.<sup>9</sup> And across countries, international reports from comparative test series such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) generate headlines not just about how countries rank on average but also about how their lowest- and highest-performing students fare.<sup>10</sup>

Results from international test score data indicate that the United States has a problem with inequality of student achievement, and more so than peer countries, including the three we focus on here (Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom).<sup>11</sup> But because these results draw on tests administered to fifteen-year-olds (or adults), they cannot tell us about inequality in the all-important early childhood period, nor about how inequality develops between early childhood and adolescence. Do children from different backgrounds start school on relatively equal footing but then see their paths diverge as they move through school? Or are children starting school already unequal? If so, what happens to that inequality over time? And as children move through the school years, is inequality growing for children of all initial ability levels, or is it particularly the children who started out with the greatest challenges, or those who had the most potential, who feel the lack of socioeconomic resources most keenly?

To address these questions, we make use of large-scale and very detailed surveys that follow cohorts of children over time in each of our four countries (see box 1.1). In particular, we make use of assessments of the children when they are age four or five, at around the time of school entry, and then repeated assessments at later ages as they move through school. We can follow all our children to at least the age of eleven, at the time they

are finishing up primary school, and we can follow our U.S. children even further, to age fourteen, when they are about to enter secondary school.

Our focus is on the gaps in achievement between children of different family backgrounds, and how those gaps in the United States compare to those in our three other countries. We do not argue that societies should try to compensate for all the different sources of unequal opportunity. For many characteristics, this is neither politically nor even scientifically possible. But we do wish to explore the impact of some important and potentially modifiable social and economic resources. Cross-national comparisons provide a powerful tool for exploring the economic and social policies that are feasible in modern societies. Our four countries share a common culture and economic system, and a similarly wide distribution of parental and family personal capabilities. As we shall see, however, the gaps in outcomes between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds do vary significantly across these countries. Although it might not be possible to eliminate all of the inequality of opportunity associated with genes and families, our comparative cases illustrate that there are other countries similar in many respects to the United States where gaps between families of different socioeconomic backgrounds are significantly smaller.

## AN OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Our analysis begins in the next chapter by discussing the meaning of equality of opportunity. We look at how philosophers and economists have distinguished between circumstances beyond an individual's control, circumstances for which individuals should in some sense be compensated, and choices for which individuals should be held responsible. We also discuss the concept of bottlenecks, which impede opportunity and stunt children's life chances. We clarify how this conceptual framework can be used to concretely measure inequalities and bottlenecks in the development of young children, and we elaborate on what it offers as a plot line for telling a story based on the lives of thousands upon thousands of American children, as well as children from the other three countries we study.

Our book is motivated and structured around three important themes that Johnny's and Alex's stories led us to ponder. The first theme concerns the resources available to families with children. Poverty and wealth, in all their dimensions, are important drivers in forming children's capabilities and opportunities, for reversing bad luck, and for creating good luck. The second theme has to do with what is missing from the tale of these two children: What happens to children between early childhood and early adolescence? Just how does a child like Alex manage to do so well in



spite of his early challenges? Will a child like Johnny overcome his early setback, and will his years in primary school give him the liftoff he needs to succeed in high school and beyond? The third theme arises from wondering about how things could be different. What can families, schools, and other aspects of society do to lock in the advantages of capable four- and five-year-olds? What can they do to boost the chances of progress for those children whose starting line is way behind the starting line of other children so that we truly have opportunity for all, regardless of a child's family background?

Chapter 3 addresses the first theme, the issue of the resources available to children. Poverty and wealth, both monetary and nonmonetary, are important undercurrents of a child's experience. In this book, we see children as being supported, monetarily and nonmonetarily, by their families, by the jobs and wages available to their parents in the world of work, and by the public and other community supports designed to serve them. These three interacting webs of support—family, work, and the public sector—are for some children so threadbare as to offer only the most basic safety net, but at the same time so interwoven for other children as to offer a resilient springboard that allows them to bounce back lightly in times of bad luck and to reach even higher heights in times of good luck.

The education level of the most-educated parent is our marker of socioeconomic status, signaling differences in resources. For us, more education indicates—perhaps imperfectly—that parents have on average more money, but also more of the other resources that matter for their children, like the language-rich environment that was so crucial for Alex. In chapter 3, we document the differences in the family backgrounds and environments, financial resources, and time and care for children who are raised by parents from low-, medium-, and high-socioeconomic status (SES) groups, as defined by their parents' education levels.<sup>12</sup>

We are interested in learning whether the disparities in resources between children from more- and less-advantaged families in the United States are distinctive, or whether similar disparities are evident in the other countries we examine. Our analysis reveals three striking findings. First, we find that Canada stands out from the United States and the other two countries in having more family resources, on average, available to children. In particular, the typical Canadian parent has more education, a key marker of socioeconomic status and a key input into child development. Second, although family resources are skewed by socioeconomic status in all four countries, this inequality is starkest in the United States. U.S. children born to less-educated parents have parents who not only have less formal education but also, on average, are younger, are more likely to be single at the time of the child's birth, and are less likely to be in a stable couple during their child's early years. Less-educated parents in

the United States are also more likely to be foreign-born and to have health problems. And importantly, families with low levels of education also have lower incomes. But third, and ironically, we find that the U.S. social safety net and supports for working families do the least among the four countries to combat inequality. The meager public policy response in the United States leaves children from low-SES families doubly disadvantaged relative to their peers in the other three countries.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 form the heart of our story. Chapter 4 builds on these descriptions of resource disparities to show that socioeconomic status is already reflected in the starting line of skill levels for young children at the age of school entry, and that this pattern differs across countries with different economic, social, and policy contexts. The next two chapters then address our second theme: How do the gaps between children from different backgrounds grow or shrink during the school years? Just what happens between the starting line and the finish line—between the early years and the cusp of high school? We need to know more about the past of a child like Alex—about what got him to where he is—to know what can be done to improve the future of a child like Johnny.

In these chapters, we summarize the major lessons from a detailed study of more than eight thousand American children in order to trace out the experiences of children during a period in their lives when they interact with broader social influences, and particularly the education system. These children are chosen to be representative of the entire population of four- and five-year-olds during the late 1990s, and we follow each and every one of them through the course of their primary school years up to the eighth grade, when they are on the cusp of high school.

We use similar information on Australian, British, and Canadian children. Making comparisons between children high on the socioeconomic ladder and those lower on the ladder is one way to address our third theme: How could things be different? In other words, what are the potential policy options? Another complementary way to address this theme is to compare the SES gaps between children across these countries. Ultimately, we would like to know more about why patterns and inequalities in child development are different across these countries, and what impact it would have on American schools and children to borrow the design of particular aspects of education or other policies in other countries. But before we can even think about these questions, we need to know if in fact there are differences across the countries. That is the challenge addressed by our comparative analysis.

Looking at children at the start of school, in chapter 4 we find that inequalities in children's cognitive skills at school entry are significantly larger in the United States than they are in the other three countries. The

poor showing of the United States reflects not just a relatively large gap in skills between low- and middle-SES children but also a large skills gap between middle- and high-SES children. These skills gaps parallel the family resource gaps documented in chapter 3, which are also more pronounced in the United States than in the other three countries. At the same time, we find that enrollment in preschool, which could offset some of these inequalities, remains highly skewed by socioeconomic status in the United States and thus plays a less equalizing role than it otherwise might play.

What happens to the gaps as children move through school? In chapter 5, making use of the repeated assessments of children in our four countries to describe inequalities in their achievement by family socioeconomic status at three common time points from ages five to eleven, we find that children in the United States not only start primary school more unequal but also finish primary school more unequal than children in the other countries. As we discuss throughout the book, social scientists have long debated the sources of inequality in school achievement and how much might be due to schools themselves versus factors outside of schools. We find evidence that both out-of-school and school factors are likely to play a role in the greater inequality in the United States. Inequalities in family backgrounds and resources for school-age children—as indicated by measures such as access to a computer or books and participation in extracurricular and summer activities—are substantial, particularly in the United States. These disparities in out-of-school resources coexist with considerable inequalities in schools as measured by factors such as private school enrollment, exposure to high-SES peers, teacher experience, and ability grouping—again, particularly in the United States. So the fact that in the United States gaps are high—and do not narrow—during the school years is likely due to both out-of-school and school factors.

In chapter 6, we continue our analysis of children during the school years, taking advantage of the very detailed data we have for the United States, which uniquely measure outcomes in a comparable metric for a large sample of children on six occasions between kindergarten and eighth grade. Using these detailed data on individual children's trajectories, we find that the majority—60 to 70 percent—of the SES gap in achievement at age fourteen in the United States can be attributed to differences already present at school entry. However, a substantial portion—30 to 40 percent—emerges during the school years. So there is a role for policy interventions in both periods.

In the final chapter, we relate our findings to a very well-developed academic literature on what families, schools, and other sectors of society can do to improve the skills and competencies of children and narrow the gap

between the achievements of children from the highest and lowest rungs on the socioeconomic ladder. What reforms would promote equality of opportunity? Researchers who adopt methods allowing for cause and effect to be clearly delineated are much better placed to make specific suggestions. Some of this research is based on experimental methods comparing control and treatment groups, much in the way that pharmaceutical companies demonstrate the effectiveness of a new drug through randomized controlled trials.<sup>13</sup> We hope that our portrait of the progress of American children during their school years, highlighted by and contrasted with the experiences of children in other countries, can add to this discussion.

In their powerful recent book, *Restoring Opportunity*, professors Greg Duncan and Richard Murnane describe a whole host of school policies that formal evaluations have shown to be effective in improving achievement for disadvantaged children.<sup>14</sup> Part of their agenda for the reform of American schooling is based on particular cases and examples, be they particular preschools in the Boston public school system or elementary schools like those in the University of Chicago Charter School Network. The value of the international comparisons we make might lie in helping us appreciate the extent to which the effective qualities of these schools can—or for that matter, cannot—be scaled up to a national level. It is one thing to demonstrate the effectiveness of model school reforms that may require more resources or significant institutional and managerial changes, but it is another to demonstrate that they can be brought to scale and implemented across an entire country. The case for such school reforms is stronger if they are already part of the national system in other countries.

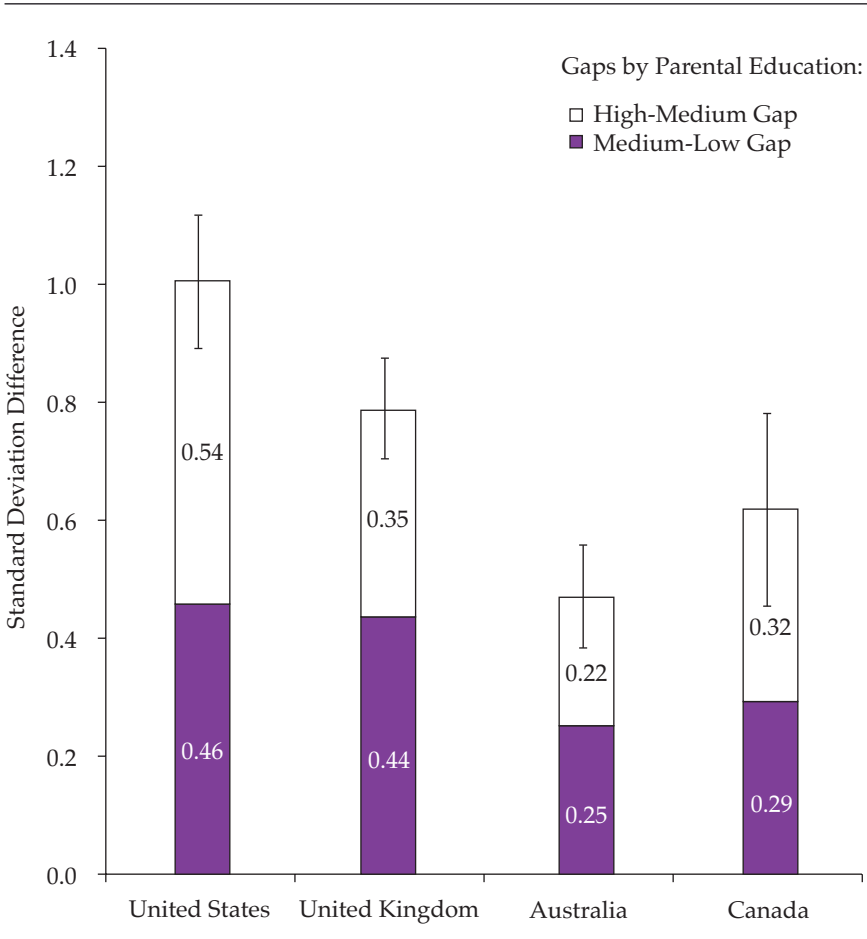
## OUR MAJOR QUESTIONS

It is our intention in this book to answer three sets of questions about the U.S. achievement gap.

1. How large is the achievement gap between children from low-SES families and those from high-SES families?

We estimate that the degree of inequality of opportunity is significant in the United States. Family background is significantly related to the competencies of young children, both at school entry and in eighth grade. Children from low-SES families lag behind their counterparts from high-SES families, in both reading and math, by a full standard deviation at school entry (see figure 1.1). Elsewhere, the situation is different. Succeeding regardless of the economic circumstances into which one is born is

Figure 1.1 Inequality in language/reading skills at ages four and five is greater in the United States than in other comparable countries.



Source: Authors' calculations using data from the ECLS-K, MCS, LSAC-K, and NLSCY.

Notes: The figure shows the gaps in average language and reading test scores between children from families with different levels of parental education. The "high-medium gap" is the difference between children with a college-educated parent and those whose parents have only some college. The "medium-low gap" is the difference between children with a parent with some college and children whose parents have no more than a high school degree. The total length of each bar is the "high-low gap"—the difference between children with a college-educated parent and those whose parents have no more than a high school degree. Test scores are standardized in all countries to have mean zero and unit variance. Black lines are 95 percent confidence intervals for the high-low gap (the total length of the bar). See chapter 4 for further details.

more likely in Australia and, particularly, Canada than in the United States or the United Kingdom.

In some of these countries, inequality is a more serious problem for boys than for girls. This is not the case in the United States or Australia, but does hold with regard to some outcomes we examine in the United Kingdom and Canada.

2. When does this gap emerge? How much inequality is already present at school entry? What happens to the gap as children move through school?

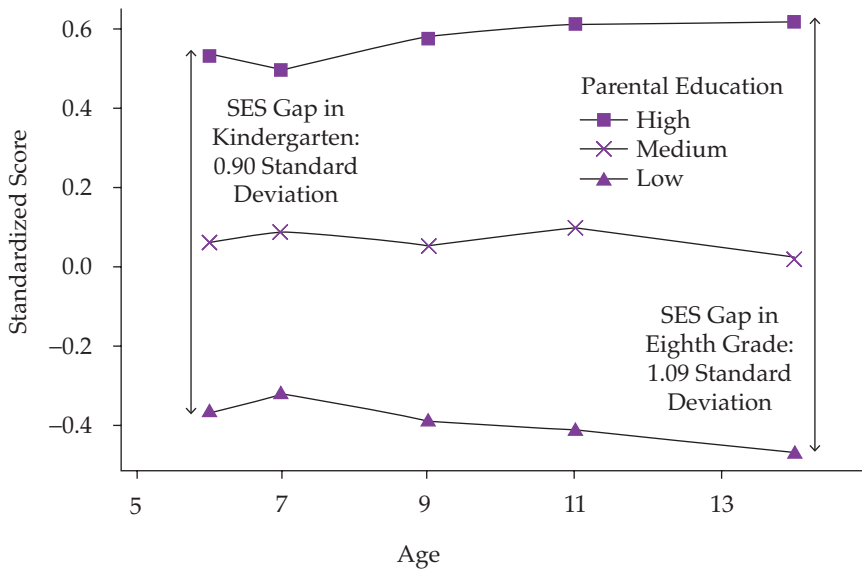
The gap between the achievement of the average child from a family in which one parent has a college degree or more and that of the average child from a family with at most a high school diploma is already significant before these children start kindergarten. During the school years the gap between them never narrows, but on average it also does not widen by very much (see figure 1.2).

These average patterns, however, conceal another fact: the children of families lower on the socioeconomic ladder actually do not make as much progress as those who start out with the same ability at school entry but whose parents are more educated (see figure 1.3). The potential displayed by high-achieving low-SES children in kindergarten tends to wither away over time, while high-SES children who started off below average seem able to make up ground on other children during the school years.

Children's positions in the achievement distribution actually move around a lot during the school years, with many either surging ahead or dropping behind for short periods. We would expect this fluidity to weaken the association between family background and children's achievement over time. The fact that it does not—that the gaps do not narrow—implies a cumulative effect of socioeconomic status that continues well beyond the preschool period into adolescence. We estimate that some 30 to 40 percent of the gaps we observe at the start of high school can be attributed to factors that only come into play *after* children enter school.

It is important to note that the factors driving the gaps during the school years might have to do with schools, they might reflect the influence of factors outside of schools, or they might stem from a combination of the two. So the fact that gaps do not narrow during the school years does not mean that schools are not playing an equalizing role. It might be that gaps would grow even wider in the absence of schooling, and in fact there is evidence to support this interpretation in the phenomenon of "summer learning loss": low-SES children often lose ground relative to their more-advantaged peers during the summer, when they are not in

Figure 1.2 Average reading scores of U.S. children from different SES groups—and the gaps between them—change relatively little between kindergarten and eighth grade.



Source: Authors' calculations using the ECLS-K.

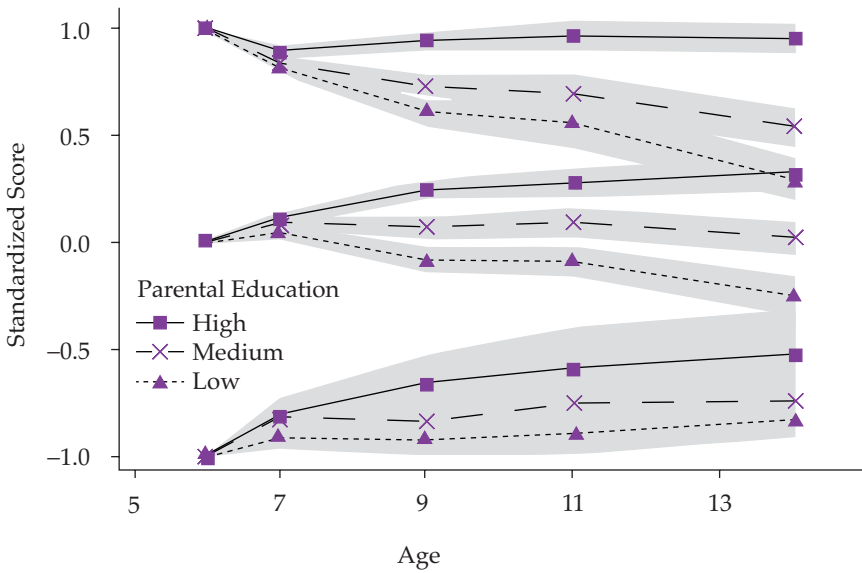
Notes: The chart plots the average standardized reading scores of children from the three SES groups, defined by their parents' level of education, at spring kindergarten (age six), first grade (age seven), third grade (age nine), fifth grade (age eleven), and eighth grade (age fourteen). The "SES gap" is the difference in average scores of children in the low-SES group (parents have only a high school degree or less) and the high-SES group (at least one parent has a college degree). See chapter 6 for further details.

school. Gaps during the school years might also reflect the increasing importance of early differences in vocabulary and background knowledge to children's test scores in the later elementary school years and beyond as they make the transition from learning to read to reading to learn.

3. What can the United States learn from other countries about making children more successful regardless of family background? More broadly put, does it have to be this way?

Our three country examples provide interesting points of comparison. Although we cannot say precisely which factors account for their greater

Figure 1.3 Over time, achievement gaps emerge between low- and high-SES children who start school with the same level of reading ability—high-SES children always develop an advantage, whether they start with high, average, or low ability in kindergarten.



Source: Authors' calculations using the ECLS-K.  
 Notes: The lines depict the predicted scores in grades 1 through 8 (at ages seven through fourteen) of children with three specific reading test scores in kindergarten (+1, 0, and -1 standard deviations above the mean). We allowed the predicted scores associated with a given initial score to differ with SES. We calculated a quadratic relationship between spring kindergarten score and later test score separately for each group (with fall kindergarten scores used as instruments to correct for measurement error) and generated predictions from these models. Shaded areas are 95 percent confidence intervals that indicate the precision with which we can predict later outcomes. See chapter 6 for details.

equality of opportunity, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom do provide proof that the outcomes of children from different backgrounds can be more equal than they are in the United States today.

Canada and, to a lesser extent, Australia have more equality among children than the United States does. Their smaller SES gaps are present already in early childhood and persist through the school years. Compared to the United States, low-SES families in Canada and Australia have



more resources for children—the parents are older, are more likely to be married or residing together, and have higher incomes. In Canada, parents are also more likely to read to the children. Low-SES children in both Canada and Australia also receive more supports from the public sector. Both countries provide universal health insurance as well as child benefit programs that provide income support to families with children. Both now provide substantial paid parental leave to allow new parents to stay home with their infants. Australia provides free universal preschool; Canada does as well in some provinces.

The U.K. example is also informative. Like the United States, the United Kingdom has a lot of inequality between families, and this is reflected in a fairly large SES gap in achievement before school entry. The fact that the SES gap in children's achievement in the United Kingdom is not as large as it is in the United States may be due to more universal supports for low-SES families, such as universal health insurance, universal preschool, child benefits, and so on. The United Kingdom also appears to be a country where the SES gap may narrow during the primary school years, unlike the situation in the United States. This may be due to the United Kingdom's more uniform national curriculum as well as recent school reforms that emphasize raising the achievement of low-SES children and provide extra funds to schools to help them accomplish this goal.

One common—and surprising—finding across countries is that the majority of the SES achievement gap is already present at school entry. When we set out to write this book, we expected to find that at least half the gap in achievement would emerge during the school years. But to our surprise, most of the gap in skills between low- and high-SES children, and most of the difference in the magnitude of that gap across countries, was already present at school entry. This has important implications for the timing and nature of policy remedies.

Because the majority of the achievement gap between low- and high-SES children has its origins prior to school entry, addressing the gap clearly will require interventions in early childhood. In particular, there is an important role for evidence-based parenting programs and preschool programs, as well as income support programs to reduce poverty and financial strain among families with preschool-age children. Such programs would go a long way toward evening out the disparities in resources available to young children in the United States and, in turn, the disparities in their early development. And reducing those early gaps would make it easier to combat inequality during the school years, since children would come to school on a more even footing and with a greater likelihood of being among peers who, like them, are better prepared.

But there is also a role for policies to address inequality during the

school years. Both within and beyond our four countries, what is now a considerable body of evidence on school policies that help promote equity suggests that the following school reform policies would be most effective in helping to reduce SES achievement gaps: recruiting, supporting, and adequately compensating more effective teachers; implementing more rigorous curricula; and raising expectations and providing more support for low-achieving children. There may also be a role for extending the school day or school year.

Inequality during the school years may also reflect the influence of out-of-school factors. The family, community, and public-sector factors that are important in early achievement are also likely to play a role in achievement during the school years. So there is also a role for policies that provide support for student learning outside of school, from after-school and summer programs to help address out-of-school learning differentials to income support programs to help ease financial pressures and stresses on families.

## CONCLUSION

Children from low-SES families face considerable challenges, and more so in the United States than in other countries. Their parents not only lack education but also tend to be younger, to live in less stable families, and to have lower incomes. These initial inequalities are augmented by a less active social safety net than is provided by peer countries. Unlike their counterparts in other countries, less-advantaged families in the United States do not have paid parental leave, universal preschool, reliable income supports, or (until recently) access to universal health insurance. It is little wonder that their children come to school less ready than higher-SES children, and further behind than their peers in Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Once they are in school, children from low-SES families face school systems that struggle with widely disparate readiness among their students and with many other children with similar family backgrounds. Low-SES children also attend schools that, reflecting residential segregation, are segregated by income and have fewer school resources, including important inputs like teacher quality. So again, it is little wonder that gaps across social groupings are not closing during the school years and, if anything, are widening instead.

But the challenge to equal opportunity in the United States is not just driven by the situation of low-SES families. Something is going on at the middle and the top as well.

For children from high-SES families, it is in many ways the best of times. Not only are their parents highly educated, they also are more likely

than parents in other families to be married, and they have much higher incomes than such families had in the past or than such families have in other countries. Sociologist Sara McLanahan calls this a pattern of “diverging destinies”: family and other resources have been increasingly concentrated in the high-SES families, while the low-SES families have become increasingly disadvantaged. In addition to having more resources, high-SES families are also investing a larger share of their resources in their children in a phenomenon that we have likened to an arms race. The result is high-SES children pulling away from others—pulling away not just from the low-SES children but also from those in the middle.

Meanwhile, the families in the middle are experiencing what we call a “middle-class squeeze.” Parents are working long hours but not seeing income gains. Nor do they receive much support from government policies relative to their counterparts in other countries. They do not receive universal paid parental leave or universal preschool, and until recently they did not have access to universal health insurance. They fear that the schools their children attend are just mediocre, but they do not have the resources available to the more affluent to supplement school with out-of-school enrichment activities and summer programs or move their children to private school. Parents in the middle worry about whether their children will do well enough to get into a good college, and they worry about how they will manage to pay for it. Thus, to close the unacceptably large achievement gap in the United States will require doing something about achievement not only for children from low-SES families but also those from middle-SES families. Both groups are struggling, and not doing as well as their peers in other countries. That is why we favor policies that will help a broad range of families rather than ones narrowly targeted at the most disadvantaged. To this end, we emphasize three key policy directions for the United States:

1. Provide more support for early learning through more widespread availability of evidence-based parenting programs for families with infants and toddlers and through universal preschool for three- and four-year-olds
2. Raise family incomes for the poor and near-poor through measures such as increasing the minimum wage and expanding the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit
3. Improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools by recruiting, supporting, and adequately compensating more effective teachers, implementing more rigorous curricula, and setting higher expectations and providing more support for low-achieving students

The challenge involved in achieving the American Dream of equal opportunity—for children like Johnny as well as children like Alex—is not a simple one. The SES gap in achievement is large, and it has many causes. But it is not intractable. The evidence from our peer countries indicates clearly that the United States can do better, and that we need not leave so many children behind. We hope this book will help in making that dream a reality.