Characterized by dry syntactical puns, flat humor, and a bested Socrates, the *Euthydemus* is not one of Plato’s better-known works. Yet it is here that, for the first time in the history of the West, one of the great education debates of the subsequent 24 centuries is laid out in print. On the one side are the Sophists: their teaching aims at mastery of grammar, fluency of expression, agility of vocabulary use, and the ability to manipulate facts. Locked in combat with them (the dialogue is replete with images of force) is Socrates, demonstrating the techniques of dialectical reasoning and ultimately of metaphysical and ontological questioning.

The debate is about the fundamental purpose of education: for the Sophists, the goal is power—economic, political, and social. They are paid for demonstrable results, and their techniques of drilling, testing, and redrilling give ancient proof that assessment indeed drives instruction. Their nemesis is Plato’s Socrates, offering not the seduction of power, but that of truth, beckoning to the student’s soul, appealing to the hidden thirst for the transcendent and the beautiful, for the “kingly art” that is the philosopher’s alone. Socrates takes no payment, for the education he offers has no utilitarian payoff in the here and now, a teaching immortalized by the nature of his own demise.

Intertwined in this foundational struggle over educational ends is a second, scarcely less bitter struggle over the relationship between teacher and pupil. For the Sophists, there is nothing very mysterious going on: they know, whereas the student does not; the student needs to be encouraged, cajoled, and entertained to learn. For Socrates, the core of the relationship is erotic, and tragic. The master and the pupil lay bare their souls; together, they risk all for knowledge and truth. Ultimately, Socrates imagines a student with deeper, better answers than he possesses; always, he will find only disappointment.

While Alan Bennett’s Oxford education may not have led him to the *Euthydemus*, his highly successful play *The History Boys* embodies a reprise of that ancient text. Two teachers—Irwin and Hector—dominate the play. Irwin teaches the students how to manipulate, dazzle, and succeed. They will learn to divest themselves of such lines as “The loss of liberty is the price we pay for freedom” while defending Stalinism, for to criticize Stalin would be just boring, while defending him without the tools of rhetorical paradox would risk ridicule. Hector is Irwin’s nemesis: hopelessly un Fashionable, he exhibits what the headmaster acknowledges is passion and commitment “but not curriculum.” Hector instructs his pupils that they cannot look at a Rembrandt and then say “in other words”; an encounter with genius is non-negotiable. Predictably, Hector “counts examinations as…the enemy of education.”

The boys—Oxford- and Cambridge-bound—are no fools. Less in anger than in tolerance for Irwin’s limitations and necessary pedagogic mission, they inform him that Hector’s idiosyncratic teaching is “higher than your stuff…nobler.” In the same breath, they reassure Irwin that Hector’s lessons are “Not useful, sir, not like your lessons.” In the defining denouement of the play, Hector dies and Irwin becomes a chairbound TV peddler of cultural kitsch.

Marx famously wrote that everything in history happens twice, first as tragedy then as farce. In the United States, the ancient debate that Bennett revisits has reinvented itself as a struggle between the standardized assessors, anxious to inject knowledge into students, most especially those most in need of social and economic advancement, and the constructivists, eager to coach, to discuss, to explore the “natural” learning instincts of every child. Both sides in this debate have betrayed their forefathers: the Sophists knew that what they taught was *techne*, not knowledge, and Plato knew that the instincts of the soul require the most rigorous teaching of all.

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Schools and the Equal Opportunity Problem

edited by Ludger Woessmann and Paul E. Peterson

Much educational research today is focused on assessing reforms that are intended to create equal opportunity for all students. Many current policies aim at concentrating extra resources on the disadvantaged. The state-of-the-art research in *Schools and the Equal Opportunity Problem* suggests, however, that even sizeable differential spending on the disadvantaged will not yield an equality of results. In this CESifo volume, leading scholars from the United States and Europe use the tools of economics to assess the outcome of efforts to solve education’s equal opportunity problem in a range of countries, including the United States, Britain, Germany, Sweden, and Italy.

The evidence shows some routes for advancement—testing with high performance standards, for example, and well-designed school choice—but also raises considerable doubts about whether many current school policies are effective in dramatically altering the opportunity structure. The evidence presented also calls into question the idea that causal peer effects are very strong. The contributors examine such topics as the link between education and parental income, the problematic past research on peer effects, tracking, the distribution of educational outcomes, human capital policy aimed at disadvantaged students, and private/public school choice.

Contributors: Kenn Ariga, Julian R. Betts, John H. Bishop, Giorgio Brunello, Simon Burgess, Daniele Checchi, Fernando Galindo-Rueda, Massimo Giannini, Eric Hanushek, Tullio Jappelli, Edwin Leuven, Stephen Machin, Ferran Mane, Brendon McConnell, Thomas Nechyba, Hessel Oosterbeek, Paul E. Peterson, Carol Propper, John E. Roemer, Sofia Sandgren, Jacob Vigdor, Anna Vignoles, Deborah Wilson, Ludger Woessmann

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