



Book Review by Prema Raghunath

Giving Kids A Fair Chance edited by James J Heckman; Boston review Books; \$12.17 (hard cover)



This book which begins with an essay by the Nobel Prize winning economist brings out the point that the accident of birth is the greatest factor in social inequality. His essay is based on the premise that children who are born into socially, culturally or educationally disadvantaged families seem to exacerbate those disadvantages: by the time they begin school at the kindergarten level, the stage is already set for future problems such as dropping out, teenage pregnancy, crime and a lifetime of low wages and dead end jobs. Heckman points out that this is a serious setback for American society.

Heckman argues that current educational policies in the United States concentrate on improving cognitive abilities, but stresses the fact that success in life requires far more than that. Along with these abilities, children need opportunities to gain self-confidence and perseverance, qualities that bring out the best results in both professional and personal life. These qualities, according to Dr Heckman, are effortlessly imbibed by children lucky enough to be born in privileged families, who exhibit them at every step. Heckman therefore wants reforms and social policy changes for early childhood interventions which would ensure a more equitable distribution of opportunities to acquire these skills. He advocates a new focus on pre-school interventions which would result in improved environments for disadvantaged children, while at the same time bearing in mind the importance of family values and the cultural diversity of the US.

Heckman is primarily an economist and he looks at the situation through the lens of one who is as concerned with the cost it means to the US as with the other implication of it. He shows that the earlier affirmative action is taken, the greater is the beneficial social and economic impact right from reduced student-teacher ratios in early childhood schooling right up to adult literacy programmes. The financial crises following the 2008 debacle has resulted in cuts in educational spending: he argues that this is one area which should see a steady increase in investment for the best results for future society. Heckman issues a clear call for change in this short-sighted policy and offers some practical suggestions for designing and funding Early Childhood Education programmes.

Heckman's persuasive essay is followed by debate, in which other educationists examine one of the most fraught issues of our times - of inequality, of the role of schools, examining and closing social barriers, and investing public funds. The participants are Mike Ross, Geoffrey Canada, Charles Murray, Carol Dweck and Annette Lareau, whose essay is one of the most interesting and thought-provoking in the book. She disagrees with Professor Heckman and makes the point that too much privilege can be as harmful as too little or none at all. The role of social institutions, such as school, is to close the gaps that birth disadvantage and its sequelae bring about. Education, she argues, may shape a future but is not everything in life.

In their essay, Adam Swift and Harry Bridgehouse make the assertion that early childhood education favours majority behaviour while not taking seriously enough other cultures present in the mix, thereby leading to further disadvantage.

Other contributors' debates follow the trend of making diverse points: not everyone agrees with Dr Heckman in his assertions. They are diverse and balanced in their approach, indeed, at times much more so than Dr Heckman, whose arguments sometimes sound very simplistic. While it may be true to say that an advantaged birth almost always leads on to more advantaged positions, it is not equally true to assume that a disadvantaged start automatically relegates a child to an impoverished present and future. Today's society is replete with examples of children rising above their initial circumstances, braving the odds and ending up in positions of great respectability and honour and financial upward mobility.

More than Dr Heckman's initial essay, it is the contributors' rebuttal that makes this slim book interesting. Highly recommended for every library for the thoughtful opinions expressed, especially when we have so many inequalities in our own society which need to be addressed.