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Schools in American Cities

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Inequity in Urban Education

Inequity between urban schools, particularly those that primarily serve low income and minority students, and their suburban counterparts, which often draw from a richer, whiter population, is a core issue in urban education. The inequalities between these types of schools range from the obvious and massive to subtler and more nuanced issues, but they are closely intertwined and all ultimately contribute to the difference in the quality of education a student receives in a wealthy suburban district versus a struggling urban one. Inequity in funding, expectations of students, and the cultural relevance of the curriculum contribute to the overall inequity of urban and suburban schools and both reflect and perpetuate societal inequality.

Although urban education technically refers to education in an urban environment, the term often implies education of minority and low-income students. It is not altogether wrong to conflate urban education with the education of minority and poor students. Werkema and Case note that urban schools serve “high concentrations of poor families, students of color, immigrants, [and] nonnative speakers of English” whereas suburban school are more likely to serve “more affluent and middle class families and higher percentages of White students” (498). Therefore, issues that come up in educating poor students or African American and Latino students are not inherently issues of urban education, but because of the demographics of most urban schools, they may as well be. The inequality, on many different levels, of the populations served by urban and suburban schools is a significant contributor to the aspects of inequity in urban education and shows how inequity in education is reflective of deeply entrenched societal inequities. However, it is also important to note that not all urban schools serve a high proportion of minority or economically disadvantaged students, just as not all suburban schools serve whiter and more affluent populations, but in general there is a significant correlation.

Inequity in funding between urban and suburban schools is very closely tied to the inequality in the populations they serve. In its 1973 case, *San Antonio Independent School District vs. Rodriguez*, the Supreme Court ruled on the legality of funding schools with local property taxes. The court ruled that “the inequalities in funding did not deny equal protection” and therefore relying on local property taxes to fund school districts was completely legal (Chemerinsky 1611). This is problematic, though, because urban districts generally draw from a less affluent tax base and as a result they accrue significantly less money to spend on their students than wealthy suburban districts do, even if they tax at higher rates than suburban districts (1611). Since the quality of education a district is able to provide to its students is connected to how much money it has to spend per student, a system in which the wealth of a school district is proportional to the wealth of its constituents leads to inequity in the quality of education received by children in urban schools as opposed to suburban ones, inequity that is entirely based in the preexisting inequality of wealth distribution in society. When urban schools provide an education that does not adequately prepare students to be successful in the future, it leads to the perpetuation of current income inequality that created a funding inequity in the first place.

The inequity in school district funding translates to an inequity in other school resources including school facilities, materials such as books and technology, and perhaps most importantly, teachers, aides, counselors, librarians, nurses, and other staff. Even what seems like a small disparitie in the per student funding make a big difference when added up for the whole district. In its annual survey, an organization called Education Trust discusses a gap of $101 per child spending in Colorado in a high poverty district versus a low poverty one, and notes that for just one elementary school, this gap means over $40,000 less per year for the high poverty school, and for a high school, over $150,000 less per year for a high poverty school, money which could pay for more teachers, counselors, or other staff (Karp 224-225). Less money also means that urban districts are less likely to attract the very best teachers, since wealthier districts can pay their teachers better. Thus funding inequality creates inequity in both the quantity and quality of staff between urban and suburban schools. In the conversion of Burke High School in Boston from an unaccredited school to a functional, thriving one, changing the curriculum and the expectations of teacher and students were both important and necessary, but the turnaround would not have been possible without an increase in funding. The amount of money allotted to the school by the district was doubled after it lost its accreditation, which allowed Burke to hire additional staff and improve other aspects of the school (Werkema 515). While Burke was a special case and “in the political reality of urban school districts, a limited pool of resources must be allocated among a large number of schools with serious needs”, it shows the important role that funding can play in improving urban education (516). While increasing funding to urban schools is certainly not a cure-all, it significantly increases the ability of urban schools to provide their students with an adequate education that prepares them for future success.

Inequity in the expectations that schools and teachers have of their students contributes to the general inequity between urban and suburban schools. Because of their socioeconomic or racial background or family or disciplinary history, less is expected of urban students and this affects how they are taught and treated by teachers and administrators. Casella writes about the screening committee at Brandon High School in which administrators determine what type of school the student will attend, and by extension, what quality of education they will receive. In some cases brought before the committee, a student “was not known personally; rather her type was known”, or in the case of another student, “for [the administrator] it was another screwed up black guy” (61,65). The members of the screening committee set their expectations of what each student was capable of and what school they should be placed in based on their “type”, as determined by their race, socioeconomic situation, and behavior. By forming expectations about students’ potential based on prejudiced judgments and placing students in schools according to those expectations, the screening committee ensured that their low expectations for the students were met. In this way, low expectations for poor, minority children are a self fulfilling prophecy; because adults and society do not believe that that they can amount to anything greater, they are not challenged nor encouraged to do better, and so they do not. Pedro Noguera writes about a principal who forms expectations of a student based on his family history, saying, “Well, his father is in prison; he’s got a brother and an uncle there too. In fact the whole family is nothing, but trouble. I can see from how he behaves already that it’s only a matter of time before he ends up there too” (128). Noguera notes that the principal was flustered by the suggestion that the school should work to change the boy’s trajectory, suggesting that he did not see it as his responsibility to do so. In both cases, setting low expectations for students and then acting based on those expectations, as these administrators did, provides a way for school staff to absolve themselves of responsibility for the child’s future. When teachers and administrators don’t feel responsible to their students, they are not motivated to provide a high quality education and push the students to reach their potential, thus perpetuating inequity.

Inequity in expectations of urban students is more subtly manifested in the curriculum offered and how it is taught. At the most basic level, there is inequity in curriculum taught at urban schools versus their suburban counterparts because of unequal access to advanced courses. According to Rachel Werkema and Robert Case, “Curricular standards have tended to differentiate along familiar, often overlapping, categories of income, race, and ethnicity, leading to substantial discrepancies between the academic offerings of urban schools…and suburban schools” (498). Since success in advanced curriculum is a gateway to higher education, inequity in the course offerings in urban schools disadvantages students and hurts their chances at being upwardly mobile, thus perpetuating current societal inequality. Even when more advanced courses are offered in urban schools, helping to reduce some inequity, “the type of preparation that they offer their students is far from equal” to the same course in more affluent, suburban schools because of the manner and attitude with which students are taught (Werkema 499). In the case of Burke High School, the improvement in the school’s academic achievement resulted in part from curricular reform and the addition of higher-level classes, but those changes were coupled with shifting expectations of what the students were capable of. The school’s headmaster commented, “The first thing we tackled [was] attitude. That involved the teachers’ expectations of themselves and of their students. At the same time, students’ expectations of themselves” (510). Changing the expectations teachers have for their students changes the way they teach, and changing students’ expectations of themselves changes the way they approach school and learning. Introducing higher-level math classes, particularly calculus, showed that the school had raised its expectations of students; adding advanced courses made a statement that it believed in its students’ abilities to succeed in those classes, which is a markedly different message than was being sent previously. Because the school’s and teachers’ expectations of students influence the curriculum offered and how it is taught, inequity in expectations in urban and suburban schools translates to a difference in the quality of education provided.

The cultural relevance of the curriculum to the students is yet another inequity between urban and suburban education. The cultural relevance of curriculum refers to how much it reflects and relates to students cultural heritage as well as the environment they live in. Gloria Ladson-Billings writes, “…curriculum is a cultural artifact and as such it is not an ideologically neutral document... For example, the history curriculum reflects ethnocentric and sometimes xenophobic attitudes and regularly minimizes the faults of the United States and some European nations” (Ladson-Billings, “Yes, but how?” 166). Curriculum mainly promotes values, perspectives, and narratives of the dominant culture. In the United States, this means that our curriculum tends to privilege European, white, and male historical figures and achievements over those of other cultures and ethnicities and women while minimizing the less savory aspects of the dominant culture. As a result, this curriculum is much more culturally relevant to students who belong to the dominant cultural group than to minority groups, who may experience the “the alienating effects of education where school based learning detaches students from their home culture” (Ladson-Billings, “I ain’t writin’” 111). This poses a problem because when students are forced to learn material that is not relevant to their lives or not framed in terms they can easily relate to, they can lose their motivation and excitement to learn. The biases within curriculum disadvantage poor and minority students, whose cultures and beliefs are not represented.

Inequity is a significant issue facing urban education. Education is key to social mobility at the individual level and societal change at an institutional level, but creating equity in education is challenging because educational inequity is so closely linked to inequity already existing in society. Since “Educational excellence can only be built on a foundation of educational equity”, it is imperative that we work to correct the inequity that is built into the system in order to provide educational excellence for all students, not just those who are white and affluent (Karp 225).

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