Education Inequality: Root Cause and Policy Suggestions

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Abstract. Today, the ill effects of educational inequality are increasing as it grows. And perhaps nowhere is it more apparent than in the United States. This paper will try to identify the nature of income inequality and consider its history in the modern world. The goal of this study is to find policy suggestions to improve the situation by addressing the root causes. First, the research analyzes historical sources to understand the context of the issue. Then it turns to online research and analysis of recent data and readings to gain more modern applications. In conclusion, this paper suggests effective approaches and policy suggestions to moderate the problem of income inequality in the United States.

Keywords: Education Inequality; Social Justice; Policy Suggestions.

1. Introduction

Educational inequality is often portrayed as an unequal distribution of educational resources, such as teacher quality, facilities, and school climate. Compared to income and gender inequality, education inequality often seems to raise more concern and attention. Because equal access to education plays a key role in helping disadvantaged people change their lives. However, the stark reality before us is that educational inequities make it equally difficult for the disadvantaged to receive a quality education. There are two layers of inequality within education that needs to be addressed: economic and racial. For the most part, this applies to the United States and is still valid today. Is education funding important for social mobility and solving structural issues? How do we use education to improve social mobility? Do we need more or less spending to allow students from poor families to attend college?

2. Education Inequality and income inequity

The first issue in education is economic inequality. There are two factors, which are the income level of the district and the individual family. In an environment where educational resources are marketed, educational inequity is a byproduct of income inequity. Most teacher layoffs happen within lower-income school districts, which also pay the least. In 2017, when the San Diego School District started cost-cutting measures, teacher layoffs increased. Out of 20 schools, 16 of them facing layoffs are schools with high poverty levels. This is the case as 75% of students in these schools have eligibility for free school lunch, a high indicator of poverty. The data signals that when cost-cutting measures are in place and layoffs are happening, lower-income schools are first. The income level of the school district also determines the quality of education. Salary is not the only determinant of the quality of teachers; many factors like school resources and classroom size also play a role. Interestingly, these factors are also related to the quality of the school district. The phenomenon can be seen in a US government program that offered a 20,000-dollar bonus for teachers to apply to an open job at a high-poverty school. Only 25% of the 1500 teachers applied for the job, which shows they are unwilling to work for lower-income districts despite cash incentives. The second factor can be seen by the individual family incomes of the students. From a Southern Educational Foundation study, the data shows that over the last decade, the students who have government approval for reduced prices or free lunch have significantly lower math proficiency rates than the students who do not qualify. The same trend continues from fourth to 12th grade.

Modern awareness of income inequality inevitably leads us back to Marx. In his Communist Manifesto, he links income inequality to educational inequality, arguing that the existing educational system in Europe and capitalist countries reinforces inequalities. Middle and upper-class families

with wealthy backgrounds can use their capital to help their children get into good schools, which gives them an advantage. The best schools serve as conduits for the highest paying jobs, especially in finance. Moreover, friendships formed in these schools prove invaluable as future contacts in the business sector. In this way, educational stratification becomes an accomplice to income inequality.

In the previous two hundred years, the world went through a period of intense industrialization fueled by emergent technology as well as capitalism. As a result, inequality was transformed into a struggle between capitalists and workers. In Thomas Picketty's book Capital in the 21st century, he argues that as countries develop, the percentage of capital owned by people of high social classes increases. While commenting about workers during industrialization, Marx makes it fairly clear. Inequality is created when the workers who make the products get paid just enough to survive while the owners of the company sell it for high profits. To counter the inequalities brought by capitalism, Marx suggested that workers achieve three central goals. First, free education for all children in public schools, second, the abolition of children's factory labor in its present form, and finally, a combination of education with industrial production.

Solutions can come from many sources, including government action and private organizations. A very radical change would be to match the spending for all public schools in order to provide the same educational quality and opportunity. Through government spending, the standard amount of educational spending for all school districts should be the same as they are in many European countries, notably Norway. A more focused plan would increase spending for the districts with the majority of students below standard national English and math proficiencies. These could include more technology, better teachers, and improved school facilities. A less conventional approach would be to consider social entrepreneurship from non-profit organizations to solve the issues. An organization with college student volunteers currently studying education can be created to provide free tutoring services on various subjects. An online platform where schools can sign each student up for different courses based on individual needs is one way to improve education. This can be especially useful for lower-income school districts, where the teachers are not as motivated, and students might need personalized help.

3. Education Inequality and racial inequality

The sociology Barbara Fields argues that because of the creation of race and the history of the United States, there is also structural racial inequality. Her term racecraft refers to racist politicians using race as a means to deflect attention from inequalities and therefore avoid finding solutions based on poverty rather than skin pigmentation. The second issue to resolve is racial inequality. Similar to income levels, minority students also receive a poorer education. A National Commission on Teaching and America's Future presented that one-fourth of teachers who do not satisfy certification standards are assigned to teach at schools with high numbers of minority students. Students in schools with the highest minority rates have less than a 50% chance of getting a STEM teacher with a degree in that field. Based on standardized test scores going back to the 1970s, some analysis from scholars in Sandford illustrates the difference in standardized test scores between Black and white students. And the gap between white and Hispanic students is almost as big (Figure 1).

It is also important to note that racial inequality is often intertwined and symbiotic with economic inequality. As we have seen, the impact of racial discrimination often makes it more difficult for minorities to access opportunities for upward social mobility. For example, they rarely have equal access to employment opportunities and are easily sidelined by the dominant culture. This makes it difficult for them to break through the economic disadvantage to obtain a better education.

Even with equal access to education, minorities are often at risk of being treated unfairly due to inherent stereotypes and prejudices. Department of Education’s national civil rights data shows that minorities were disproportionately disciplined (e.g., expelled or suspended), even in public schools. To some extent, it also affects their motivation and attitude towards learning. Some studies indicate

that teachers in elementary schools are biased, depending on the religion and race of the students. Teachers' discrimination also affects students behave around one another.

The solution lies not with local school boards but rather with the federal government. Further anti-discriminatory acts should be passed to make sure that less qualified teachers are not sent to minority dominant schools. Since not everyone has the same opportunity, affirmative action policies should be strengthened to make sure that students do not face discrimination in admissions because of their minority status. Government spending can also alleviate racial inequality in education. Social justice educational programs should be implemented in schools to reduce racism.

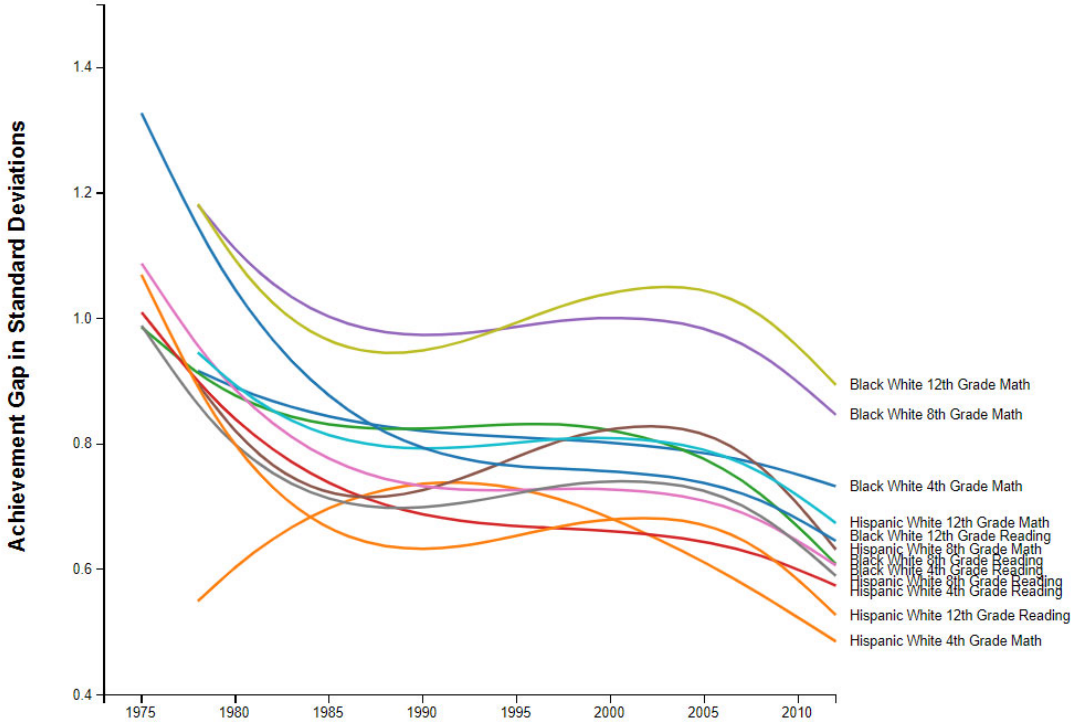


Figure 1. Racial educational equality in the US. (Image: Stanford University)

4. Summary and discussion

Before presenting policy suggestions, let's examine some policy precedents. The No-Child Left Behind Act enforced in 2002 by President Bush was a direct economic stimulus focused on educational funding. The act provided extra educational funding for lower-income children to encourage educational improvement. The act worked as there was increased pressure for schools to improve the test scores and proficiency rates of all students. However, the nuance is that it made education more test-centered and created a panic to raise test scores. A supreme court decision that promoted racial equality in education is Regents of the University of California v. Bakke. The supreme court decision upheld the use of affirmative action in college admissions. The only nuance is that race could not be mentioned explicitly.

The United States educational system also has some major differences from other countries. In a research by The Economist, the United States ranks seventeenth in world education systems. At the top is Finland, with South Korea following in second place.

Nevertheless, the two countries have drastically different approaches to education. In Finland, homework is very minimal, and students start school at a very late age. Meanwhile, South Korea is known for high student stress levels and rigorous competition. The supporters of the Finland approach believe that this promotes equality because schools are funded equally, and having a higher income will not be a difference maker in a student's academic performance. Criticisms include how the education system decreases educational performance. Overall, both systems satisfy the wants of their

own citizens. In the United States, higher-income families want less homework as they want their children to focus on extracurricular activities because they can afford it, while lower-income families want more homework to help their kids stay away from bad influences. A compromise between Finland and South Korea should be approached where the school decreases academic pressure while supplying schools with free extracurricular activities like sports and music programs can help advance educational equality and improve the education system.

There are pros and cons to each solution. Large-scale federal spending on education can be effective, but because of special interest groups and the nature of the political process, it might be hard to accomplish and take a long period of time to put into practice. On the other hand, having a platform run by a non-profit will take less time to set up and require less political struggle. Since the teachers signing up are often college students, they are both qualified and have the motivation to help. A government program to ensure that school districts with a large number of minority students are not discriminated against during the teacher assignment addresses a root cause of the inequality. To conclude, the paper suggests social entrepreneurship organizations help to provide free education in order to level the playing field, as well as government regulations and policies to counter racism and racial inequality in the education system.

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