

## The Great Unequalizer: Education Inequality in America

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Few issues can bring together politicians—and ordinary citizens—from all backgrounds, faiths, and political parties, but education reform is outstandingly popular in nearly every group. From Barack Obama to Lyndon B. Johnson to Abraham Lincoln, American presidents across generations and political lines have made education reform key points of their policy agendas (Strauss). However, despite decades, if not centuries, of near-unanimous support, the United States government has not been successful in remedying the achievement gap between students from high-income and low-income backgrounds.

Alana Semuels, a journalist for *The Atlantic*, explains in “A Different Approach to Breaking the Cycle of Poverty” that the lack of “access to a high-quality education,” known as education inequality, leads to a cycle of poverty in which those who grow up in low-income families “remain there ... despite the promise of the American Dream.” While public education is hailed as the “great equalizer,” the reality is that it is anything but equal for poor students. This problem extends beyond just school funding: Paul Gorski, an assistant professor and founder of EdChange, wrote “The Myth of the Culture of Poverty,” in which he claims that the challenges low-income students face in their academic lives stem largely from societal biases against the poor, which develop a tendency to “ignor[e] systemic conditions ... that support the cycle of poverty” (34). Despite efforts to equalize education spending in the past few decades, students from lower socioeconomic-status (SES) families still face unique difficulties because of the

limited resources in their schools, home lives, and communities at large. The interplay of classism and education inequality in the United States demands that broader approaches be undertaken to preclude the root causes of poverty.

In order to address education inequality through intersectional methods, it is vital to understand what classism means and how its presence in the United States affects the poor. In “Class Differences,” American Psychological Association writer Tori DeAngelis defines class as a person’s perception of their ranking in society based on economic and socially constructed factors. She notes that social class often correlates to a sense of individuality versus collectivism; because “lower ranking people have fewer resources and opportunities ... they tend to believe that external, uncontrollable social forces and others’ power have correspondingly greater influence over their lives” (62). This lack of resources and self-determination for the poor, versus the relative entitlement of the rich, leads to a social immobility that contributes to a cycle of poverty. In the context of education, if poorer students believe they are inherently less likely to succeed than richer peers, they often will not achieve their full potentials. Gorski goes into detail about the nature of American classism, using common myths about the poor to demonstrate the idea that the poor as a whole have “monolithic and predictable beliefs, values, and behaviors” (32). He explains that these myths lead to a social system where people in power are reluctant to fix or are ignorant of social institutions (including public education) which perpetuate poverty. Without acknowledging the classism that these stereotypes promote, proposed remedies to education inequality will continue to be ineffective, band-aid solutions.

One notable barrier to the academic success of students from low-income households is the limited school resources in low-income areas. Because low-income students often are not

provided access to quality resources in school, many struggle with academics. Gorski considers that low-income schools are more likely to have “cockroach or rat infestation[s], dirty or inoperative student bathrooms, [unlicensed] teachers ... insufficient or outdated classroom materials, and inadequate or nonexistent learning facilities” (34). These conditions create distractions from learning; students cannot focus on their studies if they are worried about their health and well-being. While this study focused on the divide between high- and low-income schools, Gorski elaborates that children from low-income families are more likely to attend low-income schools in the first place. Beyond structural and health issues, low-income schools have fewer educational resources. In “The Impact of Socioeconomic Status on High Stakes Testing Reexamined,” Melissa Baker and Pattie Johnston, professors of education at the University of South Carolina and the University of Tampa, respectively, observe that low-SES students are over five times more likely to have speech impairments, as well as being at a higher risk for other developmental problems compared to those in higher classes (196). Despite often having more students with developmental difficulties, low-income schools may lack access to specialized resources, meaning that poor students often receive little to no assistance for the prevalent issues that affect them both inside and outside of the classroom. Because poor students are more likely to attend schools where safety concerns, inadequate staff, and poor resources hinder their school experience, it is challenging for them to keep up with their peers.

The effect of inequitable school funding also manifests itself through the teachers employed in low-income schools. Baker and Johnston examine the evidence that low-income schools tend to have “teachers with significantly fewer years at the school and lower levels of certification” (195). Because low-income schools cannot find and retain experienced teachers

within the restrictions of their budgets, poor students often learn from inexperienced, or even unequivocally unqualified, teachers. The under-trained teachers who often teach in these schools may lack the skills required to make the most of valuable instructional time. Low-income schools overcoming the difficulty of hiring experienced teachers will likely be a pivotal step in ending education inequality, as teachers play a prominent role in students' educations.

Some refute the idea that school funding is a major cause of education inequality because it is relatively equal and increasing funding does not fully ameliorate the achievement gap. A journalist for *The Economist* claims in "America's School Funding Is More Progressive than Many Assume" that "a reliance on property taxes does not automatically lead to horribly regressive allocations of money." While solely relying on property taxes would cheat many low-income students of the educational resources they need, the extra funding from state and federal sources means that "poor and minority pupils receive 1% or 2% more in funding than better-off and white ones." This statistic suggests that low-income students are indeed receiving equitable funding to their richer peers. President and founder of Pemberton Research Mark Dynarski notes in "It's Not Nothing: The Role of Money in Improving Education" that short-term funding does little to aid low-income students academically. Dynarski gives the example of a study of the \$7 billion School Improvement Grants (SIG), in which "[w]hat schools were doing to improve was not altered by SIG funding." He explains that while one group of schools was receiving the SIG funding and the other was not, both groups used similar strategies for improvement, such as replacing staff and changing curricula. "When improvements don't differ," Dynarski clarifies, "we should not expect outcomes to differ, and they did not." He also notes that finance reform efforts which helped equalize high- and low-income schools still "did

not have detectable effects on resource or achievement gaps between high- and low-income students.” If schools can make non-monetary efforts to increase student achievement and low-SES children do receive equitable funding, it may seem that education inequality has its roots in myth.

While the significance of school finance reform in terms of low-SES students is limited by the focus of school spending and the non-financial efforts of schools to improve, education funding should still be regarded as a vital starting point for ending classism in the public education system. While funding is mostly equitable in a legal sense, in “America’s Schools Are ‘Profoundly Unequal,’ Says US Civil Rights Commission,” National Public Radio writer Cory Turner says the commission found that funding varies too much among different schools, districts, and states, “especially when research shows that students living in poverty often show up to school needing extra help and extra resources.” Because low-income students often need this extra attention, numerically equal funding may not be enough to support these students’ academic endeavors. It is essential to note the difference between equality and fairness: Providing the same resources creates equality, but if not everyone can use these resources effectively, it is not fair. In “A Systemic Intervention Research Agenda for Reducing Inequality in School Outcomes,” Kirsten Kainz, a professor in the University of North Carolina’s School of Social Work, and her colleagues approach the topic similarly, using the limitations of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to explain why school funding is not a panacea for inequality; the researchers demonstrate that “the level of funding available to schools has not been sufficient to offset challenges in regions of concentrated disadvantage” (72). Low-SES students need more funding than their peers to succeed to offset external factors that restrict their

learning at school. For example, low-SES students often cannot afford nutritious meals; free and reduced-price lunch programs, while a good solution, are an added expenditure. Dynarski demonstrates that school funding can, in certain situations, help low-income children in the long run, as former students in states with recent finance reforms attend school more years and earn higher pay as adults. While funding schools is an imperfect solution on its own, it is a crucial start to halting education inequality.

In addition to school funding, another significant obstacle to the academic success of low-SES students is that parent and community contributions, which are instrumental to student success, tend to be lower in low-income areas, limiting the achievement of poor students. Outside of school, children pick up many learning skills from their communities and parents, but low-SES students often have access to fewer activities which develop these skills, as well as fewer role models for academic achievement. Before even entering the public education system, low-SES children are behind academically: Baker and Johnston observe that while family background does have some connection to the literacy skills of children, “[s]chools with poor conditions in the surrounding area had constrained reading growth during the kindergarten year. Community support for learning was related to higher school mean reading scores at the initial kindergarten assessment” (195). Without this initial support for reading as kindergarteners begin their educations, many students in low-income areas fall behind quickly and never catch up. This problem reaches beyond reading skills; Kainz continues that students in low-income families or neighborhoods have less early childhood preparation for school, less support from their families, and less diverse cultural experiences (194). Without family support and early-life experiences to

foster learning, many low-income students struggle academically from the very beginning of their lives.

These disparities in support do not fade when children enter public school, however. Kainz argues that the “concentrated disadvantage” of living in low-income communities—where conditions such as unhealthy air and water, overpopulated living arrangements, a lack of healthy food, and few play areas are common—contributes to the struggles of low-SES children. Further, Kainz explains, the community environment of a child is more closely linked to his or her academic success than is family social status (71). These community issues mean that children cannot focus on their education, as their health is at risk. Gorski notes that low-income parents tend to be less involved in their children’s schooling because they often work more jobs with more hours, as well as having less money to spend on transportation (33). If students do not see their parents involved in their schooling, they may undervalue its importance. Baker and Johnston suggest that the lower expectations which low-income parents have for their children lead to self-esteem issues that prevent children from achieving to their full abilities (194). If low-income students believe themselves less capable of success than their peers, they are less likely to achieve academically. Even outside resources, like “trips, tutors, and test preparation” can give higher-income peers advantages, the writer of “America’s School Funding Is More Progressive than Many Assume” explains. Without access to adequate resources and experiences in their home lives and communities, low-SES children cannot have equal educational opportunities to their peers.

While many of the measures put in place to help decrease the achievement gap have been effective, school testing has been unproductive and perhaps even harmful. Although it is

believed to be a judgment-free method of measuring academic ability, high-stakes school testing decreases the academic success of marginalized students and serves as a rationale for educational discrimination along class lines. Wayne Au, an assistant professor in the education program at the University of Washington Bothell, explains the history of high-stakes testing for students in “Hiding Behind High-Stakes Testing: Meritocracy, Objectivity and Inequality in US Education.” In the early twentieth century, he explains, Lewis Terman and other psychologists of the era altered the original IQ test, known as the Binet Scale, by creating tasks aligned with employment skills, which were highly connected to class. Under this model, IQ was portrayed as unchangeable and genetic, which provided a means to justify unequal treatment of marginalized groups (8). The history of IQ testing supplies key insight into the purpose and consequences of testing students; while testing certainly can be useful to measure ability, often it is imbued with the values of the society in which it is created. However, Au continues, many proponents of the use of Terman’s test in schools were unaware of how the test was unfair to marginalized students, noting the prevalent belief that these tests would “give everyone a fair and equal chance... according to their individual hard work and merit” despite the tendency of women, people of color, and the poor to earn consistently lower scores (10). In order to measure student ability rather than class markers, it is vital to avoid bias in such testing.

In addition to its eugenicist roots and the potential for bias, high-stakes testing is also ineffective in decreasing the achievement gap in the first place. According to Baker and Johnston, an analysis of the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that not only did better standardized test scores not correlate to increased learning, but also schools that use these tests “had a lower proportion of students reaching Proficient [reading levels]” than schools that

did not (193). This data suggests that teachers may feel compelled to “teach to the test” rather than consider students’ individual needs, leading to less effective teaching (and learning). Au agrees with this sentiment, maintaining that testing does “not significantly [narrow] national and state level achievement gaps between white students and non-white students or gaps between rich and poor students” and actually increases dropout rates, especially in Latino and black communities (11). Obviously, if these tests are counterproductive to marginalized students’ learning, they should not be used, but the drawbacks extend beyond student achievement. Because standardized testing does not account for external factors about students’ home lives or communities, Baker and Johnston argue, low test scores could cause poor schools to lose accreditation, decrease students’ self-confidence, and unfairly punish educators for circumstances outside of their classrooms (194, 198). Current testing measures only provide an impression of solving education inequality while actually penalizing poor students and the teachers who work to help them. Major revisions are necessary before standardized testing will be an objective and useful measure of students’ skills.

As well as unfair testing and inequitable access to resources inside and outside of schools, American cultural attitudes are inherently hostile to and harmful for low-SES people, including students. Stereotypes of the poor lead to a general ignorance about classism and a reluctance to fix social institutions which harm low-income people. Gorski analyzes the most pervasive myths about the poor and how these misconceptions harm them; while many believe that the poor are less hardworking, morally flawed, and more likely to abuse alcohol and other substances, the reality is that poor people are as diverse as any other group (33-34). These stereotypes, he asserts, contribute to the rationale known as “deficit theory,” a sociopolitical

mindset arguing that people are “poor because of their own moral and intellectual deficiencies” rather than systemic classism (34). He explains that deficit theory is a useful tool for the middle and upper class to absolve their guilt and complicity in classist institutions, as they can “convince [them]selves that poverty results not from gross inequities... but from poor people’s own deficiencies” (34). According to this thought process, because poor people are poor by their own failings, societal institutions are at least justifiable if not fair. In addition to the education system, Ready and Wright propose that discrimination by employers, courts, and other institutions “exacerbate[s] inequality and reinforce[s] socioeconomic reproduction across generations” (336). Because poor people are subject to institutions that reinforce the current social order, it is difficult for them to escape the cycle of poverty.

A more concrete example of deficit theory manifests in the misconceptions that teachers have about their low-income students. Gorski warns that the nature of American classism often causes well-intentioned teachers to stereotype poor students. In “Accuracy and Inaccuracy in Teachers’ Perceptions of Young Children’s Cognitive Abilities,” Columbia University professors Douglas D. Ready and David L. Wright explain their study of teacher biases, which indicated that “students’ skills come to reflect teachers’ initial perceptions” (356). Ready and Wright confirm Gorski’s theory, mentioning that teachers often mistakenly use indicators of social class (such as tendency to use standard English, mannerisms, cleanliness, and clothing) to estimate students’ academic preparedness (337). In their own study as well, the pair found striking results: Only around half of the perceived academic gap between high- and low-SES students by teachers is caused by actual differences in ability, with the other half attributed to personal bias (354). In other words, teachers tend to drastically underestimate the skills of their low-income students.

The combination of teachers underestimating low SES students and students' skills adapting to fit teachers' expectations may hinder student achievement. These misjudgments can have life-altering repercussions on students: While some aspects of schooling are objective and test-based, Ready and Wright emphasize the fact that teachers make “[d]ecisions regarding grade retention, ability grouping, curricula, and assignment to special education and English as a Second Language programs” largely based on their personal evaluations of students skills (336). Taking less challenging courses or being pressured into less rigorous career paths can lead to lower earnings. Consequently, the ramifications of these decisions can haunt students well into the future, even as they look past public schooling to higher education and employment.

While low-income students undoubtedly face great adversity in the United States public education system, in many places, hope is on the horizon. Intersectional approaches involving parents and the community in students' learning, which are becoming more common, “holistically support children's development” and benefit students academically, Kainz maintains (74). Programs across the country are being created with low-income families in mind, and with great success. These programs offer the most promising path forward in ending education inequality because they focus on external factors that affect low-income students in addition to the schools themselves. Kainz offers City Connects, a program founded in Boston Public Schools, as a model for combatting class-based inequality in schools. In schools involved with the program, a counselor finds the necessary resources for a student—such as nutrition services, healthcare, and tutoring—with input from family, and tracks student achievement. City Connects has improved both the grades and test scores of low-SES children considerably (74). Semuels discusses another program, the Dunbar Learning Complex, located in a poor

neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia. This organization relies on a “two-generation approach” in which low-income parents who undergo career training receive free pre-K education for their children. Semuels reports that the Dunbar program, too, has been effective, with “55 percent of [the school’s] incoming kindergarten students... reading at or above grade level, up from 6 percent in 2010.”

These organizations are doing massive amounts of good for impoverished families, who are all too often trapped by their circumstances. Their successes, however, should not lull those with privilege into complacency. Millions of American children live in poverty without access to these kinds of resources. These programs need to be implemented on a wider scale to counter the cycle of poverty in every neighborhood, not just those fortunate enough to have one. Educators, government officials, teachers, parents—all Americans—must advocate for programs like these to be implemented and expanded. Rather than temporary fixes, quality education must be provided for low-SES students. It is imperative to allow every child a chance to succeed, and truly that is the least those in power owe to the very future of the world.

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