Pipeline to Failure: Social Inequality and the False Promises of American Public Schooling

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The Graduate Center, City University of New York
PIPECLINE TO FAILURE
SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND THE FALSE PROMISES OF AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLING

by

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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My experience as a New York City public school student was absolutely electrifying, though filled with many trials. While my mother would have preferred to put me in private school, having access to some of the world’s greatest institutions and resources offered unique opportunities and exposures. The performing arts provided me with an outlet to express myself and build skills and confidence. In particular, dance education kept me occupied and disciplined in a large city full of danger. Every so often, I witnessed hostile, or even violent exchanges between students, or students and staff. While some of my schoolmates became doctors and Olympic medalists, others were parents at the age of fifteen. Unfortunately, too many teachers lacked the passion or desire needed to ignite their students’ true potential.
My long-time compassion for youth led me to a career as an educator and administrator. Through my work with several non-profit and educational organizations, I honed invaluable instructional and managerial skills; I learned to write and deliver engaging arts and academic curricula and manage contracts, programs and budgets. Over time, I began to discover the multifaceted issues that plague the urban education system. Despite my commitment to changing the American educational landscape, I often felt hopeless as I encountered endless obstacles.

My desire to gain a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, political and economic factors that affect one’s educational pursuit led me on a journey to study at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. The research I have conducted has provided me with mounting evidence that public-schooling fails to ameliorate social inequalities; instead they play a major role in reproducing them. Race and class are undeniably intertwined and serve as the backdrop, while a record-breaking number of lower-class students continue to be set on a trajectory of failure. When we begin to understand the world in which we live and how it has come to be, it is only then that we can make it a better place. I dedicate this research to our nation’s young and the marginalized communities that continue to be intentionally left out of the rat race.
Growing up, my late grandmother would often share vivid stories of her upbringing in Jim Crow South Carolina. Passionately, she would state, “When you don’t have an education, it’s hard to make a decent living!” Just two generations out of slavery, my grandmother and her ten siblings viewed education as invaluable. Given the flagrant culture of discrimination and segregation at the time, education was seen as a tool that could increase their opportunities to thrive. Despite African-American’s efforts to obtain an education throughout history, my grandmother’s stories described a clear educational apartheid that I believe still exists.

I was fortunate enough to attend gifted and talented programs as an elementary school student in New York City’s public-school system. In high school, I was in a medical program and had earned a perfect score on my very first math regents exam. I took Advanced Placement biology and Spanish and even one college course before graduating. These programs made it obvious that every student did not receive the same level of education and it appeared the school environment was not a good fit for everyone. There were typically over 25 students per class, with hardly enough chairs or textbooks to suffice at times. Teachers, security guards and other school staff were controlling and belittling, often overwhelmed by the large number of students they were left to manage. In my view, this led them to abuse their authority.

As I grew older, public school began to feel more and more suppressive. New York City’s school system was full of Black and Hispanic children, yet I hardly saw any people of color in the front of the classroom, or in the content of textbooks. An increasing police presence meant that although we were children, we could easily face big consequences for
small mischiefs. Aside from tutoring, school seemed to provide little support to students and families who desperately needed to build better lives. Sadly, many of my peers who could have benefited from having more support continue to exist in a cycle of ignorance, poverty, and incarceration.

At Howard University, my educational experience differed drastically from what I had previously encountered. An exclusively African-American institution, Howard had a legacy of producing highly-successful students. It granted me the opportunity to learn among a diverse body of black students from across the globe, who were ambitious, diligent, confident, refined and talented. A significant number of students were from middle-class families and like myself, were the second generation to pursue higher education. Completely inspired by this phenomenal journey, I began to ponder, “What opportunities were provided to us that may not have been provided to others? Did our families value education more? Were we given better support and guidance?”

Upon graduating in 2007, I began the arduous journey to find work. I eventually landed a part-time job as a tutor and teaching artist at the Harlem’s Children’s Zone, one of the nation’s leading organizations in educational reform at the time. My passion for youth development was evident and by age of 23, I was promoted to Assistant Education Coordinator. I led academic case management meetings to address students’ personal, academic and social needs to improve their academic performance. Through this experience, I had become aware of just how many students were educationally speaking, in deep trouble.

One of my very first students at the Harlem Children’s Zone was an illiterate high school sophomore who had an Individualized Education Plan, mandated by the New York City Department of Education. I was perplexed by the fact that he had never been given
adequate support to develop his literacy skills. This student was just one of several students with special needs, yet the Harlem Children’s Zone offered no specialists. For this and numerous other reasons, I began to search for answers. I was completely convinced that schooling does not improve everyone’s lives.

My academic journey at the Graduate Center, City University of New York has allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the endless social, cultural, political and economic factors that constitute the stratification of every sector of society. I have discovered mounting evidence that substantiates the failure of American public schooling to ameliorate social inequalities. Rather than occupy traditional disciplinary measures, such as counseling or detention, schools are increasingly utilizing suspensions, expulsions, and law enforcement to punish students when they misbehave. Moreover, the socioeconomic inequalities that children face, are present before they enter school and are exacerbated once inside. Pipeline to Failure: Social Inequality and the False Promises of American Public Schooling reveals just some of the sources of these disparities.
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Chapter I: Unequal from the Start

How Poverty Impacts Education
Introduction

The main objective of education is to ensure that every student has a chance to excel both in school and life, yet there are many factors that prevent schools from closing the black-white achievement gap. Poor, black children face vast inequalities before they even enter school, which is precisely why high-quality public education is needed to even out the socioeconomic field. This becomes challenging when schools are under-funded, have a hard time attracting and keeping quality teachers and face great difficulties in addressing students’ needs. Disadvantaged children are typically placed in low-resource schools as early as kindergarten, and social stratification in education outcomes increases as these children move through school. While we should expect schools to increase achievement for all students, regardless of race or class, it is impossible to expect schools to eliminate all major pre-existing inequalities once children enter the educational system.

Cognitive Skills Gaps and the Pre-school Years

Educational, occupational, and financial resources vary drastically among families. Numerous studies have explored the social differences in academic achievement among young children at the point of school entry. Many conclude that, “For all children to achieve the same goals, the less advantaged would have to enter school with verbal fluency that is similar to the fluency of middle-class children” (Sadonvik, Cookson and Semel, p. 381). From 1969-1978, Heath (1983) worked and lived among two small communities to identify the effects of home life and community environment, on the style of language used among inhabitants. Her aim was to see how these language styles transfer into school settings and beyond.
Located six miles apart in the central region of North Carolina, Trackton is predominantly African-American, while Roadville is a white community. Both however, are working-class textile mill communities with similar demographics in terms of size and average salaries. By performing a cross-cultural, ethnographical comparison of language practices between the two communities, Heath is able to demonstrate the relationship between patterns of language socialization and school performance. Her discussion of questioning practices at home and at school for example, illustrate that students responded to test items incorrectly because their logic, though consistent, did not match that of the test designers.

Heath’s description of the discontinuities between practices of home and school that exist between Trackton and Roadville help elucidate the dilemma non-mainstream parents face across the country: While teaching their kids that success in school translates into success in later life, these parents often resent school, viewing it as a threat to the values of the community and believe themselves powerless to help their children succeed in academic tasks and schooling. Heath states that, “unless the boundaries between classrooms and communities can be broken, and the flow of cultural patterns between them encouraged, the schools will continue to legitimate and reproduce communities of townspeople who control and limit the potential progress of other communities and who themselves remain untouched by other values and ways of life. The story of this book gives a single example of how such changes can come about” (p. 369).

Heath finds that teachers from mainstream communities use language in classrooms very much the way they do at home. Her linking of the linguistic practices of mainstream teachers and the frustration they encounter daily and the problems experienced by children from non-mainstream communities, reminds readers that a child from a
community like Trackton or Roadville is not a disadvantaged child, but a misunderstood child whose resilience exemplifies their ability to learn in spite of what they encounter at school.

Lee and Burkam (2004) observe that there are substantial differences by race and class in children’s cognitive skills performance that exist before they arrive to kindergarten. More specifically, their data indicate that how parents read and converse with their children create these stark differences. These conclusions are based on an analysis of the U.S. Department of Education’s Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K)-a recent, comprehensive data collection effort that provides a nationally representative picture of kindergarten students.

While family structure and educational expectations play a significant role, of the many factors Lee and Burkam considered - reading at home, hours of television watched, family educational expectations, race and ethnicity, access to quality child care, and computer use- by far, socioeconomic status accounts for more of the distinct variation in scores. Soon after middle-class children become verbal, their parents tend to draw them into adult conversation so their children can practice expressing their own opinions.

Race and ethnicity are closely tied to socioeconomic status. Therefore, African-American and Hispanic children score at the lowest levels on cognitive skills tests when they arrive to kindergarten. “The average cognitive score of children in the highest SES group are 60% above the scores of the lowest SES group” (Lee and Burkam, p. 2). Because black children score lower on cognitive skills tests, when they enter kindergarten, they are subsequently placed into lower ability groups than whites. This placement is a major contributor to the white-black achievement gap that widens as they continue through school.
Hart and Risley (1999) discuss these disparities in detail. Using data from their previous in-depth analysis Meaningful Differences (1995), they observe the average amount of language experience young American children receive per hour from their parents. These data reveal great contrasts in the amount of interaction between parents and children:

In thirteen professional families, the parents addressed an average of 2,100 words per hour to their children. In the 23 working-class families, the parents addressed an average of 1,200 words per hour to their children. In the 6 welfare families, the parents addressed an average of 600 words per hour to their children. (Hart and Risley, p. 169)

In closely examining these data, it means that in a typical hour, welfare children received half as much language experience as the children in the working-class families and less than a third than that of the children in professional families. Moreover, the parents in the 13 professional families spent almost twice as much time interacting with their children than the welfare parents. This reveals similar results to Lee and Burkam’s study regarding children’s cognitive development; “The amount that the parents talked to their 1- to 2-year-old children was generally correlated with the parents’ SES, with the welfare parents being taciturn and those in professional families quite talkative” (Hart and Risley, p. 170).

In both Meaningful Differences (1995) and Learning to Talk (1999) Hart and Risley emphasize how crucial the amount of language experience is to a child’s cognitive development. In particular, they highlight the notion of ‘extra talk’ as a major contributor to the vast differences between social groups. While all parents used comparable numbers of initiation, imperatives, and prohibitions per hour to control their children, interactions within welfare families involved little more. The ‘extra talk’ exhibited by professional and
even most talkative working-class parents contained more diverse vocabulary, complex ideas, subtle guidance, and affirmative feedback. Hart and Risley explain:

When parents talk to their children just to be sociable, letting immediate circumstances determine the words they use, their children hear vocabulary in reference to the many different objects, places, and events of daily activities. When parents talk casually with their children, they naturally adapt what they say to the immediate responses of the children so that what the children say determines much of what the parents say. (p. 173)

As professional and working-class parents engage their maturing children in more complex activities, they increase the complexity of what is said without planning.

In addition to increasing a child's vocabulary by expanding the number of topics through ‘extra talk’, the amount of time parents spent conversing with their children made a great difference. During their observations, all of the families Hart and Risley observed talked mostly about whatever they happened to be doing at the moment, yet only some parents spent twice as much time interacting with their children. "Practice and exposure often occurred outside of interaction. Children talked to their toys while their parents talked on the telephone...however data suggests it was primarily through conversation, that children and parents came to talk similar amounts about similar things, as indicated by their shared vocabulary (Hart and Risley, p. 180).

The longitudinal data on the relationship between children’s early experience and their cognitive abilities at age three, lead us to the conclusion that the amount of language experience parents provide their children before age three is essential. “The trajectory of accumulating language experience may be seen to be determined largely by the amount of experience parents provide before children are 2 years old. The amount of language experience accumulated from the first 2 years of exposure is added into cumulative
experience forever and so serves to maintain relative inequalities in children’s amounts of cumulative language experience” (Hart and Risley, p. 180). The amount of talk that occurs within a family not only sets the initial trajectory of accumulating language experience; it has a great influence on years to follow. Elaborating talk beyond an exchange of necessary instruction, by sharing ideas, prepares children to solidify social relationships outside the home.

Farkas and Beron (2004) expanded on Hart and Risley’s well-respected analyses by examining the vocabulary growth trajectory at a deeper level. By using the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79) sample of white and African-American youth, a data set was created with a remarkably large number of oral vocabulary test scores. This sample involved children at single months of age from 36 to 156 months, and combined data collected every two years from 1986 to 2000. These data presented parallel results, where the oral vocabulary of the average African-American infant was more than a year behind that of an average white infant. In particular, Farkas and Beron state, “We have found that the highest rate of vocabulary growth occurs during the preschool ages (zero through five) and that this rate declines for each subsequent age period. Thus, the preschool ages play a crucial role in the development of oral vocabulary knowledge” (p. 491). What this indicates is that the period from 0 to 36 months is the period in which the inequality gap first emerges.

This large race gap in vocabulary knowledge reaches a peak during the preschool phase, and remains constant thereafter. This suggests that, to an extent, inequality in cognitive performance between black and white children is attributable to differences in family practices. This is consistent with Hart and Risley’s (1999) emphasis on early class and race disparities in language experience within families. The finding that oral
vocabulary knowledge increases across social classes indicates that attendance in kindergarten and school has somewhat of an equalizing effect, as children from lower social strata are exposed to peer and teacher interaction. As part of the socialization process, schools provide an alternative, homogenous vocabulary that is distinct from that found in the segregated home and neighborhood environments poor black preschool children live in. Therefore, once they return home, the opportunities for academic growth are limited and there are several socioeconomic conditions that aid in constructing those limits.

**The Summer Learning Gap**

Children initiate formal schooling with different skill levels, partly because they are exposed to different home environments and neighborhoods. Not only do children spend the vast majority of their time outside of school, the quality of non-school environments varies severely. Seasonal comparison research has shown that gaps in reading and math skills grow primarily during the summer, suggesting that non-school factors such as neighborhood and family are the main sources of inequality.

Heyns’ studies (1978, 1987) analyzed a sample of approximately 3,000 sixth and seventh graders in 42 schools across Atlanta, Georgia during the 1971–72 school year and summer. By comparing the students’ cognitive gains during the summer versus during the school year, Heyns concluded that learning during the school year was a product of both school and non-school factors, while summer learning reflected only the influence of non-school factors. In particular, she found that when school was out during the summer and non-school influences were dominant, the gap between disadvantaged and advantaged children’s test scores widened, ostensibly due to disparate home and neighborhood
environments. When school was in session however, Heyns discovered that advantaged and disadvantaged children gained cognitive skills at approximately the same rate.

Heyns’ position was strengthened considerably by Entwisle and Alexander (1992, 1994) whose research reported similar patterns in a different sample. While Heyns studied children in the sixth and seventh grades, Entwisle and Alexander analyzed children at the beginning of first grade. In 1982, they observed 790 children at one of 20 randomly sampled schools in Baltimore, Maryland. They discovered that gaps in reading skills grew across both socioeconomic status and race and at different rates, in different seasons.

Consistent with Heyns findings (1978, 1987), Entwisle and Alexander conclude that because schooling occurs in some seasons and not others, the rate of children’s cognitive development reflects the schoolyear calendar, suggesting that socioeconomic gaps form mainly in the summer when school is not in session. More importantly, they emphasized the importance of studying children early in their educational careers, noting that young children are “maximally sensitive to home and school influences” and “cognitive growth rates are higher in the first few grades than they are later on” (1992:73).

The seasonal comparison research by Heyns (1978, 1987) and Entwisle and Alexander (1992) provides a unique view on the role of social class in children’s lives. Chin and Phillips’ study (2004) however, focuses on the relative importance of parents’ resources in influencing their child-rearing practices. Using ethnographic data on children’s summer experiences, the authors examine how families from various ethnic and social-class backgrounds construct child care and activities for their children during summer vacation. They argue that differentiations in the quality and quantity of children’s activities do not stem chiefly from fundamental differences in parents’ desires to help their children develop, or cultivate their skills and talents. Rather, these differences stem from parents’
differential access to a wide range of resources, including money, the social capital to uncover and gain access to programs and activities, the cultural capital to know how best to cultivate their children’s talents and the human capital to ascertain how best to assess and improve their children’s skills.

Summer break has no mandatory or normative structure, leaving parents fully responsible for structuring all of their children’s time. This time can consist of little to no stimulation, leaving children to entertain themselves or, it can consist of an arrangement of activities that occupy the entire summer. Additionally, children are not limited to developing the skills outlined in their school curriculum and may take the time to pursue their own interests and develop their talents. When Chin and Phillips examined the various, complex ways in which children from different social-class backgrounds came to be involved in different summer activities they found that, “The middle-class children in our study tended to have varied and often highly organized summer experiences” and “The middle-class parents constructed their children’s summers by combining vacations, day camps, lessons and other educational enrichment, and specified ‘free time’” (p. 193). One boy for example, attended a private summer school in the mornings and sports camp in the afternoons. He then attended baseball camp for two weeks, vacationed in Hawaii for a week, as well as horseback riding camp for two weeks.

None of the working-class or poor children in Chin and Phillips’ study had summers as active or varied as the middle-class children’s. Differences in the availability of both financial resources and parents’ time typically differentiated the middle-class children’s vacations from those of the working-class and poor children. Additionally, the middle-class families reported choosing camps they thought fit best with their children’s needs and interests. “The less-advantaged families, in contrast, spent more time researching prices,
using social connections to obtain discounts, or driving to less expensive sites” (Chin and Phillips, p. 196). Though the middle-class children tended to go on more expensive vacations, parents from all social classes used vacations to expose their children to novel experiences.

In addition to vacations and camp, the middle-class parents filled their children’s summers with organized lessons and enrichment activities. Though money prevented some working-class and poor children from experiencing art and music lessons for example, their parents used social capital to arrange discounted, or sometimes free lessons for their children. The authors’ data indicate that while children’s summer experiences are fundamentally stratified by social class, “most parents from all social classes aspire to develop their children’s skills and talents. This argument challenges Lareau’s (2003) contention that middle-class families make ‘a deliberate and sustained effort to stimulate children’s development’ (2003: 238), while working-class and poor families view a child’s development as unfolding spontaneously, as long as they were provided with comfort, food, shelter, and other basic support” (Chin and Phillips, p. 204).

Not only do Chin and Phillips’ findings contest the stereotypical child-rearing practices associated with working-class and poor children, they imply that numerous interventions are needed to narrow social-class disparities in children’s summer experiences. More working-class or poor families need access to information on affordable, or free programs that coincide with their rigid work schedules, as well the types of programs that are available to develop their children’s talent. Informing parents on what kinds of materials can enrich their children’s summers and where to get them is also crucial. Moreover, sharing methods on how to make a vacation enriching and educational is
essential to children’s cognitive development over the summer. Lastly, information and activities should be more directly accessible to children. By publicizing in schools, community centers, libraries, parks, and recreation centers, parents are not forced to do all the research, decision-making and planning. These spaces also provide opportunities for children and parents alike to create, build and utilize their own social networks.

Families with a higher socioeconomic status- measured by education, occupation and income- are generally more embedded in stronger networks of social relationships. Lareau (1989) also explores the intra-institutional relationship between home and school. Her research looks at how and why social class influences parent involvement in schooling-specifically classroom activities- revealing that family-school relationships vary between the working-class and upper-middle class communities. Relationships between working-class families and the school are characterized by separation, where the parents believe that teachers are solely responsible for their children’s education. Therefore, they seek little information about the curriculum or the educational process, and their criticism of the school consists almost entirely on academic matters. By leaving schooling to the school, Lareau suggests working class families protect themselves from added stress.

In contrast, upper-middle class parents forge relationships characterized by scrutiny and interconnectedness between family and school life. These parents believe that education is a shared responsibility between teachers and parents and they have extensive information on their children’s schooling, often very critical of it, including the professional performance of their children’s teachers. Lareau further observes that most, but not all, upper-middle-class parents read to their children and reinforce the curriculum at home.

Parents of both communities shared a desire for their children to succeed in school. “The communities differed, however, in the skills and resources parents had at their
disposal for upgrading their children’s performance in school” (Lareau, p. 9). The upper-middle-class parents had more education, status, and income than working-class parents. Lareau suggests, these factors boosted the upper-middle-class parents’ confidence and competence for helping their children in school, whereas working-class parents lacked both the skills and confidence to assist their children.

In addition, upper-middle-class parents had relatives, friends, and neighbors who were educators. Upper-middle-class mothers also had close ties with other mothers whose children attended the school. As a result, upper-middle-class parents had much more information about the educational process in general and about the specifics of their children’s school experience than did working-class parents. Lareau implies that middle-class parents understand that children will not automatically attain the same social status as them unless they do well in school. Working-class parents recognize that doing well in school will help children succeed later in life as well, however, they have fewer resources to direct their children’s school experience and less confidence to shape it. They see teachers as trusted professionals who have their children’s best interests in mind. They use extrinsic indicators such as grades, stickers and written comments to track how their kids are doing in school. Since teachers typically aim to be positive, these parents may not always recognize when a child is falling behind.

Middle-class parents differ in the extent to which they activate their cultural resources to shape their children’s school experience. Being equally or more educated than teachers, they tend to evaluate teachers’ performance. They may obtain supplemental services such as tutoring, if they feel their child is not receiving all they need at school and are more likely to make requests of the school for special programs, or specific teachers. Looking at these parents’ networks, Lareau found that the middle-class parents were more
likely to form relationships with one another. Whether among their friends or relatives, these parents were more likely to know or be change agents themselves, such as principals, teachers and lawyers. Thus, they have informally learned how to meet criteria. Lareau proposes that teachers invite involved working-class parents to bring a relative or friend in order to leverage existing networks and expand parental involvement among the working-class. While innovative, this proposal might prove to be challenging when working-class parents tend to socialize within their kin groups.

**Poverty and Academic Performance**

The severe disparities in the socioeconomic conditions of children permeate every aspect of their lives. Lower-income children suffer dramatically from the ravages of poverty, which in turn, affects their academic performance. Single-parent households-most prevalent in African-American communities-have fewer financial resources than two-parent households and therefore, possess half the amount of non-monetary resources, such as time and social contacts. These factors provide the setting within which parents’ time and effort can be directed to help their children develop those cognitive skills and behavioral habits that lead to success in school and subsequent employment. Lin and Harris (2010) write:

In addition, parental household structure, education, income, and occupation are correlated with other variables that tend to magnify their effects. Thus, single parents who are high school dropouts and earn little are also more likely to be teenage parents, to suffer from inadequate health care, to be depressed and to have other psychological, behavioral, and health related problems, to live in unsafe neighborhoods, and to send their children to substandard schools (p.108).
Using data from the 1998 Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), Table 1 synopsizes some of these differences in family circumstances, illustrating for example, that 20 percent of African-American mothers have symptoms of depression. Among Asians, only 10 percent of children are being raised in a single-parent household; among whites, 15 percent are. Among Hispanics, the proportion rises to 27 percent, and among African-Americans to 54 percent. It also illustrates that 42 percent of African-American children are being raised in poverty. For Hispanics, the figure is 37 percent, and for whites, 10 percent.

Table 1.

| TABLE 5.1 / Disparities in Family Circumstances When Schooling Begins, Selected Estimates |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Percentage single parent       | White           | Black           | Hispanic        | Asian           |
|                                 | 15              | 54              | 27              | 10              |
| Percentage experiencing poverty | 10              | 42              | 37              |                 |
| Average socioeconomic status (standard deviation) | 0.2  | -0.5 | -0.4 | 0.5 |
| Percentage non-English household | 1              | 1               | 31              | 51              |
| Percentage mother high school dropout | 7              | 18              | 35              |                 |
| Percentage teen mother         | 10              | 22              | 19              |                 |
| Percentage mother depressed    | 11              | 20              | 13              |                 |
| Percentage low birth weight    | 6               | 15              | 8               |                 |
| Percentage four or more hardships | 4              | 29              | 18              |                 |
| Average number of books        | 93              | 40              | 53              | 56              |
| Percentage own home computer   | 66              | 33              | 42              | 65              |

Source: *Lee and Burkam (2002); ^Duncan and Magnuson (2005).

Physical and mental health differences are particularly imperative in examining how social inequalities impact children’s education. Rothstein (2004) asserts, “But we prevent ourselves from solving it because of a commonplace belief that poverty and race can’t ‘cause’ low achievement and that therefore schools must be failing to teach disadvantaged children adequately. After all, we see many highly successful students from lower-class
backgrounds. Their success seems to prove that social class cannot be what impedes most disadvantaged students” (p. 378). In examining the brutal effects of poverty, he found that overall, lower-income children are in poorer health and have poorer oral hygiene and nutrition, more lead poisoning and asthma and less sufficient pediatric care, among a host of other health issues. “Recent surveys in Chicago and New York City’s Harlem community found one of every four children suffering from asthma, a rate six-times as great as that for all children” (Rothstein, p. 382).

Lower-class children have poorer vision, partly due to prenatal conditions and partly because as toddlers, many watch too much television, hence, their eyes are poorly trained. When trying to read, these children’s eyes may have difficulty tracking words or focusing. Rothstein claims, “A good part of the over-identification of learning disabilities for lower-class children may well be attributable to undiagnosed vision problems that could be easily treated by optometrists and for which special education placement should then be unnecessary” (p. 381). Less-adequate dental care means that poorer children are more likely to have toothaches that result in discomfort, ultimately affecting concentration. They are also more likely to be absent from school. Since the physician-to-population ratio is less than a third the rate in middle-class communities, even those with health insurance are more likely to miss school for fairly minor problems—such as common ear infections, for which middle-class children are treated swiftly.

The increasingly unaffordable housing market also has a great impact on academic achievement for low-income families. When families have difficulty finding stable housing, they are more likely to be mobile. Student mobility is a significant cause of failing student performance. “A 1994 government report found that 30 percent of the poorest children had attended at least three different schools by the third grade, while only 10 percent of
middle-class children had done so. Black children were more than twice as likely as white children to change schools this often” (Rothstein, p. 383). No matter how well-skilled and competent, it is extremely difficult for teachers to be as effective for children who come in and out their classrooms, as they can be for those who attend on a regular basis.

Each of these social-class disparities in health is likely to have a profound effect on academic achievement and combined, their effect is undoubtedly immense. Bringing more attention to the link between poor health and academic performance is vital to narrowing the achievement gap. Provision of health-care services to lower-class communities overall and social support services in schools must be a part of the solution.

**Residential Segregation and School Financing**

Neighborhood socioeconomic conditions impact social processes and opportunities for social mobility. The social policies and forces that lead to racial and socioeconomic residential segregation reinforce patterns of racial prejudice and discrimination everywhere else, including America’s public schools. Decades after the Brown vs. Board of Ed desegregation order, separate and unequal continues to be the pattern in American public education. Logan, Minca and Adar (2012) illuminate the relationship between the location of schools and educational quality and find that persistent school segregation means that children of different racial and ethnic backgrounds attend different schools that are unequal in performance.

If students typically attend schools based on their residence and household income, the impact of receiving a low-quality education can play a key role in maintaining their low status in the stratification system. “Orfield and Lee (2005) pointed out that more than 60 percent of black and Hispanic students attend high-poverty schools (defined as more than
50 percent poor). Only 18 percent of white students and 30 percent of Asian students attend high-poverty schools” (Logan, Minca & Adar, p. 288). This in turn maintains spatial inequality where residents of middle and lower-class communities are in a position of helplessness. “Black and Hispanic students are also more likely to attend city schools. The 24 largest central cities (with 4.5 million students) have enrollments that are more than 70 percent black and Hispanic (Orfield and Lee 2005). In 20 of these districts, the student population is 90 percent black (Logan, Minca & Adar, p. 288).

Residential segregation also leads to inequities in school financing. Public schools are funded through local, state, and federal sources; therefore, most urban school districts spend exorbitantly less per pupil than wealthier suburbs. More specifically, most school finances come from state and local taxes, with the latter being a dominant source of revenue. “About 46 percent of public spending on elementary and secondary schools is derived from local government budgets” (Burtless, p. 2). Thus, more affluent communities can provide more pupil per spending than poorer districts.

Major disparities in spending across school districts has been hotly contested in courts across America. As Sadovnik, Cookson and Semel observe, “This unequal funding has been the subject of considerable legal attack by communities that argue funding based on local property taxes is discriminatory under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and that it denies equality of opportunity” (p. 430). It is problematic to support any notion of educational equity when local funding sources depend on the size of the tax base, that differs considerably from district to district.

While some states, such as California, do not allow large spending disparities across school districts, other states such as Massachusetts and Missouri, have disparities significantly larger than the national norm. (See Figure 2). Some state courts have made
attempts to prove financing arrangements are illegal by demonstrating that schools with high spending per-pupil achieve better results than poorly funded schools. California is one of several states that have reached this conclusion.
Figure 1.

Public Elementary-Secondary School System Per Pupil Current Spending by State: Fiscal Year 2015

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau 2015 Annual Survey of School System Finances
Compensatory funding provisions are sometimes targeted at schools facing resource inequities caused by the unequal distribution of tax resources or low-income students across school districts. Although the resources targeted at the most disadvantaged students are helpful, they are not nearly enough to eliminate wide spending gaps that exist across United States school districts. Moreover, poorer districts have struggled to use the compensatory resources provided to them effectively. Increases in school resources should produce better student outcomes, yet the solution is not so simple. Burtless (1996) concludes; “Statistical evidence and recent historical experience suggest to me that school performance is unlikely to be improved solely by investing extra money in the nation’s schools. Increased spending on school inputs without any change in the current arrangements for managing schools offers little promise of improving either student performance or adult earnings. (p. 41).

The current public-school funding formula more often than not, works to exacerbate public school financing inequities and not reduce them. Compared to their more advantaged peers, low-income children begin kindergarten in much lower quality elementary schools. School quality is typically defined in terms of the number of school resources and qualified teachers, the neighborhood and school conditions, teacher attitudes and student achievement. When the least advantaged children begin their educational journey in poor quality schools, they are systematically placed behind the starting line.
Chapter II:
A Name and a Place for Everyone:
Labeling, Tracking and Sorting Practices
Dominant vs. Non-Dominant Cultural Capital

Sociologists Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) presented the concept of cultural capital in their ground-breaking book *Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction* to explain the differences in academic performance and achievement of children in France in the 1960’s. Bourdieu further develops the concept in his 1986 essay, *The Forms of Capital*, describing it as a person’s education, knowledge and intellectual skills that provide an advantage in achieving a higher social-status in society. More specifically, cultural capital refers to an individual’s social assets; one’s education, style of dress, speech, etcetera. The term ‘dominant cultural capital’ refers to high status, or powerful, cultural attributes and codes, while non-dominant cultural capital’ refers to a set of tastes or preferences for particular linguistic, musical, or interactional styles, representative of a lower status group.

Bourdieu (1973) argues that members of the upper-class determine what is considered culturally important and that the educational system was designed to reward the cultural knowledge and characteristics of those from the middle and upper-classes. In particular, exposure to the arts socializes children into the dominant culture that is valued by educators. This socialization process starts at home during childhood when children acquire language styles, orientations, and cultural tastes. Therefore, children from lower class backgrounds do not have the same exposure as children from upper-class backgrounds. In this way, schools reproduce the social class structure, while on the surface, claiming to reward students based on merit. Parents from less privileged backgrounds may not even be aware that these resources and cultural capital are considered valuable and necessary by dominant social class groups.

Lareau (2003) draws from Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital within an American framework. She argues that disparities in resources result in different
approaches to parenting. Upper and middle-class parents engross their children in various extracurricular activities to develop their cognitive and social skills. Additionally, by gaining more exposure to adults, these children learn to interact with authority figures in ways that benefit them later in the school setting. Lareau argues that by participating in extracurricular activities, “Middle-class children have extensive experience with adults in their lives with whom they have a relatively contained, bureaucratically regulated, and somewhat superficial relationship.” (2003: 244). These children are building confidence, learning discipline and how to present themselves outside the school system. They have learned how to negotiate with adults and have been trained to advocate for themselves through time invested at dance studios and swimming lessons. Upper and middle-class parents also engage in practices that benefit their children inside the school setting. By volunteering at school or obtaining information about specific teachers, parents place themselves and their children at a great advantage.

Carter (2003) illustrates how both forms of capital exist within the social and academic lives of poor black students. Using in-depth interviews from a small data set of 44 low-income African American adolescents, Carter manages to provide evidence that, “These students do not reject academic achievement, but rather resist the cultural default—that which is regarded as “normal” or “regular”—namely, white, middle-class standards of speech, dress, musical tastes, and interactional styles (Carter 1999)” (Carter, p. 137). A significant number of those involved in the study spoke of their problematic relationships with teachers, who they felt expected little of them. Low-status and minority pupils experienced the most difficulties in classrooms led by high-status teachers, who evaluated these pupils as less mature and less capable. Carter found that a teacher’s own social origin exercises a great deal of influence over their reactions to the social attributes
of their students. Dress and demeanor were referred to by students, as two cues that especially garnered teachers’ attention. Carter writes of one student, “In her view, those students seen as unintelligent did not conform to the dominant expectation of clothing and deportment that teachers associate with intelligence and diligence” (Carter, p. 148).

One student named Moesha shared her perception of student-teacher relations at her high school. In particular, she noted how teachers valued passivity in the classroom and were intolerant of assertive students. While Moesha learned to conform by gaining an understanding of what practices warranted teachers’ high regard, other, more assertive students were not able to circumvent these problems as easily. Most of all, she was highly cognizant of the fact that the interactional styles valued by teachers, often led them to ignore very intelligent students who resisted the dominant culture of schooling. School teachers and staff that prize students for obedience and conformity fail to recognize that while respectable, these traits are unsatisfactory criteria for academic improvement.

The possession of non-dominant cultural capital does not automatically imply a student rejects commonly shared values, like social, economic, or educational attainment. Nor does it mean they are incapable of mastering the cognitive skills required to perform well. “However, full reliance on non-dominant capital to maintain one’s cultural status position does provide a challenge to socioeconomic mobility, since dominant cultural capital facilitates success within mainstream institutions and organizations (Carter, p. 139). When black students who do not conform to the cultural expectations of the school are then expelled, or drop out after constant conflicts with school authorities, this suggests that teachers enforce the stratification system by granting rewards to students who adopt the ‘proper’ cultural signals, habits, and styles. Ironically, these same black students’ non-
dominant forms of cultural capital yield social benefits and rewards within their communities.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) theorized that black students, especially adolescents, face the burden of 'acting white' if they are academically successful. The authors contend that the cultural orientation of the black communities has equated school achievement with 'acting white' therefore, black students perform poorly because "they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic efforts and success" (p. 177). Fordham and Ogbu claim that this occurs in both integrated and predominantly black schools. Moreover, they contend that black students who are successful must adopt a generic persona, distancing themselves from black cultural attributes.

Like Carter (2003), other authors advocate that these Black children do not define success as 'acting white,' but rather, their goal is to attain success in this society without assimilating and compromising their racial and cultural identities. Tyson and Darity (2005) affirm that instead, black youth perceive a racist society which devalues their cultural heritage and are struggling to cope with it in an adaptive way. Using interviews and other existing data from eight North Carolina secondary public schools, they find that generally, black adolescents are achievement-oriented and racialized peer pressure against high academic achievement is not prevalent in all schools. Tyson and Darity’s analysis illustrates significant similarities in the experiences of black and white high-achieving students, demonstrating that dilemmas of high achievement are not specific to a particular group.

Typically, high achieving students, regardless of race, are to some degree stigmatized as 'nerds' or 'geeks.' The data suggest that school structures, rather than culture, may help explain when this stigma becomes racialized, producing a burden of acting white for black adolescents, and when it becomes class-
based, producing a burden of ‘acting high and mighty’ for low-income whites. (p. 582)

None of the black middle school participants reported any concerns about acting white in regard to academic behavior or performance. Moreover, the high-achieving black students across the sample schools were not deterred from taking advanced courses, or striving to do well out of fear of acting white or teasing. Additionally, high-achieving white students experienced a similar but more pervasive burden of high achievement in some schools. In other words, high-achieving students, black and white sometimes encounter forms of hostility from lower-achieving peers.

Tyson and Darity’s study contributes to the debate on the burden of acting white hypothesis in a critical way. Few qualitative studies addressing this hypothesis have focused on multiple schools. By gathering qualitative data from students and staff at eight secondary schools, a multi-site design allowed the authors to unveil the influence of contextual aspects of schools. More importantly, the in-depth nature of their interviews allowed them deeper insight into the issues related to a burden of acting white, including specific academic behaviors and decisions. These factors are not generally captured by large-scale surveys. Characterizing black youth as a homogenous collective that is opposed to academic excellence has led researchers to under-examine the heterogeneity of black students and their academic strivings.

**Labeling Theory**

Given the middle-class nature of schools, teachers inevitably label students and it has been suggested that working-class students are more likely to get negative labels. Sociologist Ray Rist published a study that examined the relationship between social-class and academic achievement (1970). While observing a teacher place students in separate
learning groups, he noticed the teacher determined placement by social class. Looking at external factors like dress and speech, the middle-class students made up the group of ‘fast learners’, while lower-class students made up the other two groups of ‘slow learners’. This was determined by the eighth day of kindergarten. From the data he gathered, Rist concluded that the labels given to these children by their kindergarten teacher set them on a course of action that could possibly affect the rest of their lives.

While many sociological frameworks reinforced biological, or cultural determinists’ theories of educational outcomes, the labeling approach shifts our focus to what is occurring inside of schools. The labeling theory gained significant support after the publication of Rosenthal and Jacobson’s *Pygmalion in the Classroom*. Rist describes, “Rosenthal and Jacobson’s findings in Pygmalion in the Classroom (1968) suggested that the children who were randomly selected as ‘intellectual bloomers’ somehow caused teachers to treat them differently, with the result that the children really did perform better by the end of the year” (Rist, p. 77). By definition, a self-fulfilling prophecy is a prediction that directly or indirectly causes itself to become true, by the very terms of the prophecy itself, due to positive feedback between belief and behavior. Self-fulfilling prophecy in education is activated by teachers who label students, evoking a new behavior and therefore, making the original false conception a reality. Rist argues, “While teacher expectations are not always guaranteed to be self-fulfilling, in many instances, what we expect about people does cause us to treat them in a way that makes them respond just as we expect they would” (Rist, p. 71). Furthermore, the role of teacher is critical as they have the authority to claim almost exclusively whether mastery of content has occurred and thus, provide certification for credentials.
Sociologists have dedicated more time to studying how these norms are actually created and enforced. Deviance refers to an action or behavior that violates social norms, including formally enacted rules. Labeling theory has shifted our attention from the deviant to those who label the deviant. “It is through the sorting mechanisms of the school, which are demanded by institutions of higher education and the world of work, that youth are labeled and thus sorted into the situation. Schools and the way in which they label their students, serve as a chief instrument in the creation of delinquency” (Rist, p. 78).

Both first-hand information, and a great deal of second-hand information is available to labelers about students. Previous report cards, records, and test scores, parent meetings, or comments from other teachers, welfare agencies or psychological clinics, are all forces that affect one’s judgement. “In addition to this second-hand information, social status and performance is inferred and observed in the ongoing context of the classroom” (Rist, p. 75). Characteristics of children such as sex and race are immediately apparent to teachers, yet, indications of social status are inferred from grooming, style of dress or language patterns, for example. Even a need for free lunches, information on enrollment cards and parent interactions are used to form judgements about students. Not only do teachers expect less of lower-class children than they do of middle-class children, they also receive praise more frequently for success and are criticized less for failure.

Similar studies began to surface in the years following including one conducted by two sociologists, Clifford and Walster (1973). Rist highlights this study stating:

Our experiment was designed to determine what effect a student’s physical attractiveness has on a teacher’s expectations of the child’s intellectual and social behavior. They hypothesized that a child’s attractiveness strongly influences his teacher’s judgements; the more attractive the child, the more biased in his favor we expect the teachers to be. Given a report card and a photo attached, 404 fifth
grade teachers in the state of Missouri were asked to state their expectations of the child’s educational and social potential. Their hypothesis was correct; whether boy or girl, the child’s physical attractiveness had a strong association with the teacher’s reactions to him or her. (Rist, p. 76)

Ian Mackler’s (1969) study of schools in Harlem demonstrated how children were placed in tracks based on a variety of social characteristics, independent of measured ability. Even worse, they often stayed in these tracks throughout their school career. Rist quotes Mackler who states;

For example, I found during my three-year longitudinal and ethnographic study of a single, de facto segregated elementary school in the black community of St. Louis, that after only eight days of kindergarten, the teacher made permanent seating arrangements based on what she assumed were variations in academic capability. But no formal evaluation of the children had taken place. Instead, the assignments to the three tables were based on a number of socio-economic criteria as well as on early interaction patterns in the classroom. (Rist, p. 76)

Rist features these studies as implications that teacher expectations are produced for academic purposes, as well as for classroom interactional patterns. The power dynamic between the teacher, the institution it represents and the student has long been unequal in American education. As Rist eloquently explains, “The vulnerability of children to the dictates of adults in positions of power over them leaves the negotiations as to what evaluative definition will be tagged on the children more often than not in the hands of the powerful. When that resistance is manifested in school by children and is defined as a lack of motivation, intellectual apathy, sullenness, passivity, or withdrawal, the process is ready to be repeated and the options to escape further teacher definitions are increasingly removed” (Rist, p. 80). Hence, the only time one can be labeled a deviant is after the label
has been successfully applied by a social audience. So, while many schoolchildren may commit norm violations, only select students are consequently labeled. What is determined as deviance and who is determined a deviant is induced by those who possess the power to enforce such determinations. Deviance is thus, subjectively applied and problematic to say the least. School achievement is therefore, not simply a matter of a child’s innate ability, but involves directly the teacher and other school authorities.

**Sorting and Tracking Practices**

The weight of teachers on student achievement has been well documented, however, teachers are not randomly assigned to schools or students either. A few large-scale studies have investigated whether teacher characteristics are associated with the characteristics of students they are assigned. *Systematic Sorting: Teacher Characteristics and Class Assignments*, by Kalogrides, Loeb and Béteille (2013), analyzes the relationship between teaching experience and class assignments to assess the extent to which teacher sorting occurs within schools. Using data from one large urban school district, they compare class assignments of teachers from the same grade in a given school year. They find that more experienced teachers who have attended more competitive undergraduate institutions, are assigned higher achieving students. Less experienced teachers, typically minority and female, are assigned classes with lower achieving students. The authors find these patterns across elementary, middle and high school and have direct implications for achievement gaps and teacher turnover.

Schools in lower-income districts have a harder time attracting and retaining highly qualified, effective teachers. Therefore, the students who attend these schools are less likely to be exposed to more experienced teachers, in comparison to their more advantaged
peers in other schools. Within school sorting, however, can prevent lower achieving students from being matched with the most effective teachers that might make the most difference.

Several factors contribute to the class assignment process including: school leadership, parental preferences, and teacher influence. Middle-class parents in particular, may try to interpose in the class assignment process to request a teacher they deem desirable. Teachers in more powerful positions, or those with more experience may be better situated to acquire the teaching assignments they desire. Additionally, “In lieu of salary increases or promotions, over which principals may have little control, principals may give their best teachers the most desirable class assignments as a retention strategy” (Kalogrides, Loeb and Béteille, p. 106).

Prior research suggests that new teachers who are assigned more low-achieving or problems students, are more likely to leave their schools than their colleagues. As a result, teacher turnover becomes prevalent, exacerbating within school achievement gaps. Poor students and students of color typically bear the consequences of the all-too-common rotating door of new, less experienced teachers. “Consequently, given that black, Hispanic, and low-income students have a higher likelihood of receiving an inexperienced teacher, their achievement is likely to suffer as a result of the patterns of assignment we document” (Kalogrides, Loeb and Béteille, p. 120).

Tracking is the practice of dividing students into separate classes by placing them on different curriculum paths. As a result, high-achievers learn separately from average-achievers and average-achievers learn separately from low-achievers. While some students are being prepared for college, others are bound directly for the workplace. Most high
school students are assigned to a curriculum track outlined by college-preparatory, vocational, or general courses. Both junior and senior high schools use ability grouping which divides academic subjects—like mathematics, English language, science, or social studies—into various class levels geared towards students of different abilities. In her seminal piece *Keeping Track* (1985), Jeannie Oakes explains, “Both curriculum tracking and ability grouping vary from school to school in the number of subjects that are tracked, in the number of levels provided, and in the ways in which students are placed” (p. 13).

Despite variations among schools, tracking has common, predictable characteristics. Oakes outlines them as follows:

- The intellectual performance of students is judged, and these judgments determine placement with particular groups.
- Classes and tracks are labeled according to the performance levels of the students in them (e.g., advanced, average, remedial) or according to students’ postsecondary destinations (e.g., college-preparatory, vocational).
- The curriculum and instruction in various tracks are tailored to the perceived needs and abilities of the students assigned to them.
- The groups that are formed are not merely a collection of different but equally-valued instructional groups.
- They form a hierarchy, with the most advanced tracks (and the students in them) seen as being on top.
- Students in various tracks and ability levels experience school in very different ways.

Since schools are composed of diverse populations, tracking has been seen as the
best way to address individual needs. Oakes asserts that the general assumption among teachers and administrators is that tracking promotes overall student achievement when they learn in groups with similar capabilities, or prior levels of achievement. Underlying this assumption is that lower-achieving students will not suffer emotionally from daily classroom contact and competition with their higher-achieving peers. Oakes views this notion as damaging stating,

Most tracking research does not support the assumption that slow students suffer emotional strains when enrolled in mixed-ability classes. Often the opposite result has been found. Rather than helping students feel more comfortable about themselves, tracking can reduce self-esteem, lower aspirations, and foster negative attitudes toward school. (p. 14)

As a consequence, tracking amplifies initial disparities among students rather than provide the means to diminish them.

Oakes also highlights the well-established link between track placements and student background characteristics as a disproportionate number of poor, black and Hispanic students are placed in low-ability or non-college bound groups. “By the same token, minority students are consistently underrepresented in programs for the gifted and talented. In addition, differentiation by race and class occurs within vocational tracks, with blacks and Hispanics more frequently enrolled in programs that train students for the lowest-level occupations (e.g., building maintenance, commercial sewing, and institutional care)” (Oakes, p. 14). These initial differences in access to knowledge and skills have important long-term educational and social consequences. First, low-track students are much less likely to ever encounter the knowledge and skills that are most valued by society at school. Second, the classes outlined on a low-ability track will likely keep them in a
continuous cycle of low-level placements because they have been neglected the chance to learn various concepts and skills. By being denied this knowledge, it is highly unlikely that these students will have the opportunity to move into higher track classes, or do so successfully.

In *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, Ann Ferguson highlights her three-year experience of field work at an inner-city elementary school (2000). There, she discovers that just as children were tracked into futures as doctors and fast-food workers, there were an abundance of tracks offered to predominately African-American male students that led to prison. In the making of these ‘bad boys’ through school punishment, the power of institutions to create, shape and regulate social identities is reflected in the behavior of school staff, black and white.

Ferguson initiates the dialogue stating, “Soon after I began fieldwork at Rosa Parks Elementary School, one of the adults, an African-American man, pointed to a black boy who walked by us in the hallway. *That one has a jail cell with his name on it*’ he told me. I was shocked that judgment and sentence has been passed on this child so matter-of-factly by a member of the school staff” (Ferguson, p. 1). Though African-American boys made up a quarter of the student population, they accounted for almost half of the number of students sent to the ‘punishing room’ during the 1991-92 school year.

During her course of study, it became clear to Ferguson that labeling practices and the enforcement of rules marginalize and isolate black male youth in disciplinary spaces and brand them as criminally inclined. While these children are not always innocent-talking out of turn, arguing with teachers and using profanity- the reality is the consequences of these acts for young black males have scarring effects on adult life
chances. Labeled as troublemakers, this group of boys at the Rosa Parks School was suspended at least once over the course of the year for infractions such as fighting, or obscenity. "Not once have they ever been charged with illegal acts such as bringing drugs, or real guns to school...the vast majority rarely voluntarily missed a day of school and were usually on time. All had been labeled at risk of failing, unsalvageable or bound for jail by school personnel" (Ferguson, p. 9).

Ferguson had observed how the racial composition of the teaching staff had not changed much since desegregation, as it continues to be predominantly white and female. She found that, “Children as early as the first grade are conscious that there is a disparity in teachers’ interactions with students. The kids recognize that teachers treat ‘high achievers’ differently than they do those they perceive as low achievers...receive more negative feedback and more rule-oriented behavior from teachers...they conclude that when and how teachers called on children in class sends an implicit message about the expected performance” (Ferguson, p. 98). Frequently branded as troublemakers or unintelligent, black males tend to greet the schooling experience with pessimism.

Ferguson’s examination of the role of schooling in the marginalization and criminalization of African-American boys gives readers insight on how educators’ beliefs shape their decisions. This ethnographic account of the racialized and gendered institutional practices and treatment provides a vivid picture of how public schools place several young African-American boys on a track toward incarceration, or control in the criminal justice system. Ferguson maintains that the culture and institutional policies and practices of the school are instrumental in the creation, maintenance, and internalization of the predominant societal images of black males, as either criminals or endangered species.
Chapter III:
From Student to Criminal
School Environment, Zero-Tolerance Policies and the School-to-Prison Pipeline
School Environment

Mateu-Gelabert and Lune (2007) boldly ask, “Why do so many students enter secondary school with a belief in education and a commitment to schooling, and leave without it?” (p. 187). Many young students hope that attaining an education will permit them the opportunity to escape the poverty and violence that plague their home environments. Yet as Gelabert and Lune explain, “Once in school, however, they find that the school is not only ill-equipped to control the presence of street codes, but that it often does not even provide an alternative model of values or behavior” (p. 187). In seeking to find an answer to their question, the authors engage in conversation with students at “Old Castle” high school, who state that the school does not see them as partners in education. Instead, they see themselves as habitually treated as the source of conflict, or a hopeless cause, rather than as victims who are attempting to survive in a dysfunctional environment.

Like Tyson and Darity (2005), Gelabert and Lune’s study directly challenges Ogbu’s social resistance theory (1986) that claims working-class students tend to reject education. Cultural theories that seek to explain the link between race and academic performance often remove the responsibility of the educational institutions to find a solution to the achievement gap. What Gelabert and Lune have found instead, is that students’ commitment to education varies throughout the years; at times, one is fully committed and engaged in the educational process and other times, a student’s priorities shift based on their current needs and interests. Similar to Tyson and Darity (2005), they state, “Students respond to the ways in which they are treated by the educational institutions they attend. Educational outcomes are clearly a product of the interaction between students and school officials, incorporating the assumptions that each hold about the other” (Gelabert and Lune p. 188). The effect that the school environment has on a student’s educational commitment


is crucial to understanding why working-class and black students engage in or reject school.

Gelabert and Lune also find that the administrators’ challenges countering school violence at “Old Castle” has forced students as a whole to adapt to the street ethos that plagues schools. In describing how many black students are too preoccupied with their safety while attempting to receive an education, the authors state, “It has little to do with resistance against racism and economic marginalization and far more to do with navigating the web of violence that surrounds them and delimits their opportunities” (p. 190). Being forced to learn in a violent school culture is unjust to the majority of students who actually desire to learn.

Social Control Through Schooling

Throughout United States history, there has been an obsession with social control through public education. The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts provides a critical commentary on the origins of contemporary aspects of urban education (1968). Katz analyzes the ambivalence of educational thought and reform in response to the urbanization and industrialization of the 19th century. On one hand, educational reformers favored and promoted industrialization and the material benefits it offered, but on the other hand, many agreed that industrialism encouraged materialistic attitudes and that urban living increased immoral behavior. Hence, they believed that the development of inner moral restraints in children was an important duty of the school. Yet these same educators were also interested in preparing youth for productive lives and saw a need to equip students with the skills, habits, and knowledge necessary to function profitably in the present society.
At the time, universal education was an idea held by only a few visionaries. The United States in the 1830’s had greater diversity in social and economic status, as well as in religious and moral values. Within a decade, a majority of the states had bought into the idea of universal education and the key figure was Horace Mann. To this heterogeneity, Mann introduced the idea of the common school that would provide a common and unifying experience for all the people, with social and national unity as its ultimate goal. The common school would be commonly supported and commonly controlled. His vision of education in a free society was that “no republic can endure unless its citizens are literate and educated” (Bolino, p. 57). Moreover, he believed that education should be moralistic. Mann believed that the traditional curriculum could be universalized, but most importantly, that schools could preserve and sustain a democratic society.

The high school was invented as a remedy for societal ills-to promote communal solidarity, foster social mobility and elevate the cultural tone of society. It also was intended to act as a stimulus to further economic growth and prosperity by preparing youth to pursue careers in business and commerce. According to Katz, the reform efforts of the era were largely unsuccessful. High schools did not exactly lead to greater social mobility except perhaps for middle-class children. Additionally, schools did not eliminate, or even reduce crime and poverty nor did increased amounts of learning produce greater communal wealth, culture or unity. Katz claims one reason is that, reform by imposition alienated many of those whom the schools intended to serve. By largely premising the need for change on the assumed social and moral deficiencies of the working class, reformers incur resentment of those to be manipulated and transformed. Other reasons were that the reformers’ goals were inconsistent and their understanding of the problems they wanted to solve, inadequate. The efficacy of schools was overestimated.
Katz concludes that there are evident similarities between current reform efforts and those of the early nineteenth century. He argues that this nation has yet to see an educational revolution driven "by a desire to bring joy and delight to the life of the individual, to enrich experience solely for the purpose of making life more full and lovely" (Katz, p. 214). Like previous ones, present-day reform efforts are based on the utilitarian value of schooling for the individual and on middle-class fears and perceptions of the social and economic needs of society. Imposition, moreover, remains a primary mode of reform.

**Zero Tolerance Policies and the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

Rather than occupy traditional disciplinary measures, such as counseling or detention, public schools today are increasingly utilizing suspensions, expulsions, and law enforcement to punish students when they misbehave. One might assume zero tolerance policies started after the Columbine school shooting in 1999, when two white high school students from Colorado went on a shooting rampage at their school, killing and injuring dozens of students and school staff. The students also killed themselves. The fact is, while Columbine put zero tolerance policies in the spotlight, these policies actually became popular in the 1980's. They were fueled by President George H.W. Bush's war on drugs and the 'broken windows’ theory, that proclaims cracking down on minor crimes prevents more serious ones.

The 'broken windows’ theory and zero tolerance policing were publicly introduced by James Quinn Wilson and George Kelling in the March 1982 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. They state, "Social psychologists and police officers tend to agree that if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken" (Wilson and Kelling, p. 34). Without empirical basis, Wilson and Kelling hypothesized that,
if human 'broken windows' are not fixed, disorder will turn into serious crime because “serious street crime flourishes in areas in which disorderly behaviour goes unchecked” (Wilson and Kelling, p. 34). This culture ultimately permeated our nation’s public schools.

In 1994, the federal government passed the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) in reaction to several school shootings that had taken place. As a result, to qualify for federal education funds, states had to pass a law requiring all local school districts to expel any student who brings a weapon to school, for at least one year.

To put some muscle behind these policies, the federal government and the states began to increase funding for security guards and other school-based law enforcement officers and later to install metal detectors. Between the 1996–97 and 2007–08 school years, the number of public high schools with full-time law enforcement and security guards tripled. (vera.org)

This disturbing shift in school disciplinary policy and practice contributes to an ever-growing juvenile justice system that closely resembles the adult correctional system.

Sughrue (2003) describes how quickly public policy expanded school safety efforts. “As what happened in times past when the federal government issued educational mandates, the 50 states complied with the GFSA to protect their federal dollars...many states used this opportunity to take a stronger stand on safety in public schools, expanding the scope of their legislation to cover a number of other criminal acts, including drugs and violence” (p. 242). Policymakers began to threaten suspension and expulsion for non-criminal behavior, such as truancy and disorderly conduct. What is, or is not determined a crime has been left to the discretion of the school board or officials, penalizing children as they see fit. One must question how much the American public, particularly families with children in public school, were aware of the scope of these statutes and district policies.
This funneling of students out of school and into the streets and the juvenile correction system perpetuates a cycle known as the ‘School-to-Prison Pipeline’. The policies and practices that allow our nation’s schoolchildren, especially our most vulnerable, to be forced out of classrooms and into the criminal justice system are a clear reflection of the United States’ increasing prioritization of incarceration over education.

African-American boys and students with disabilities face the harshest discipline in schools. “In Chicago, for example, while blacks make up 41.3 percent of the city’s public-school students, they account for 71 percent of expelled students” (abajournal.com). As stated by the American Civil Liberties Union, “Even worse, schools may actually encourage dropouts in response to pressures from test-based accountability regimes such as the No Child Left Behind Act, which creates incentives to push out low-performing students to boost overall test scores” (aclu.org). This discipline gap is so prevalent that the United States Education and Justice Departments issued a joint Dear Colleague letter in January 2014 urging school systems to fix discriminatory punitive practices:

The CRDC data also show that an increasing number of students are losing important instructional time due to exclusionary discipline. The increasing use of disciplinary sanctions such as in-school and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, or referrals to law enforcement authorities creates the potential for significant, negative educational and long-term outcomes, and can contribute to what has been termed the “school to prison pipeline.” Studies have suggested a correlation between exclusionary discipline policies and practices and an array of serious educational, economic, and social problems, including school avoidance and diminished educational engagement; decreased academic achievement; increased behavior problems; increased likelihood of dropping out; substance abuse; and involvement with juvenile justice systems. (ed.gov)
Suspensions and Expulsions

Lacking resources and facing incentives to push out low-performing students, schools openly embraced zero-tolerance policies. Moreover, the adoption of zero-tolerance policies in response to a few highly-publicized school shootings was highly compelling. These policies have unfortunately allowed for the expulsion of students whose infractions range from defiance, or chronic tardiness, to possession of items as simple as nail-clippers, or scissors.

Here are some examples:

- A seven-year-old boy in Baltimore chewed his toaster pastry into the shape of a gun and said, "Bang bang" during a snack break at Park Elementary School. Not only was he suspended for two-days, the assistant principal sent a letter home to parents informing them that a fellow student "used food to make inappropriate gestures that disrupted the class" (abajournal.com). To add injury to insult, the letter offered counseling to any student who might need it. A hearing examiner who claimed the boy had had prior discipline problems upheld the decision in July 2014, arguing the suspension was "used as a last resort" (abajournal.com).

- In May 2013, a kindergartner in Palmer, Massachusetts, brought a quarter-size Lego gun on the bus with him. When another student saw the 6-year-old boy with the toy gun, he informed the bus driver. The school gave the boy detention and commanded him to write a letter apologizing to the bus driver. Additionally, the school told his mother he may be temporarily suspended from taking the bus.

- In 2010, Alexa Gonzalez wrote 'I love my friends Abby and Faith' and 'Lex was here 2/1/10' on a desk with an erasable marker during class. The 12-year-old girl was handcuffed and arrested by police in front of her classmates and school staff. She was then detained at the New York City Police Department precinct, located conveniently across the street from the school in Queens. After several hours, she was released. The doodling incident—which is considered graffiti under zero-tolerance policies—was investigated and Gonzalez was eventually given an apology and her suspension was
terminated. Former City Education Department spokesman David Cantor later stated how this should have never happened. The traumatized student was still mandated to complete eight hours of community service, a book report, and an essay about what she learned from the incident.

Organizations such as the ACLU and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund have worked rigorously to bring attention to just how terrifying public school disciplinary practices have become. “Rates of suspension across the United States have increased dramatically in recent years—from 1.7 million in 1974 to 3.1 million in 2000— and have been most dramatic for children of color” (aclu.org). Furthermore, since 2009, the nation’s schools have, on average, reported an annual suspension rate of 10 percent, the highest it has ever been:

In some charter-school networks, including Success Academy in New York and Uncommon in Newark, as well as some public-school districts—such as Pontiac, Michigan, and Saint Louis, Missouri—nearly a third of students are suspended annually, according to the UCLA study. Meanwhile, Florida as a whole has a 19 percent suspension rate. And in Texas, nearly 60 percent of students have been suspended by the time they graduate high school, according to a 2011 report by the Council of State Governments’ Justice Center. (theatlantic.com)

The Cost of Punishment

Some of the most rigorous research studies on zero-tolerance policies (see Kafka’s, The History of "Zero Tolerance" in American Public Schooling) show that out-of-school suspension can severely disrupt a student’s academic progress in ways that have lasting negative consequences. Forced outside, suspended and expelled students are often left unsupervised and without productive activities. Consequently, they also tend to fall behind in their coursework, leading to an increased likelihood of disengagement and dropout. These struggling students return to their schools unprepared, are permanently locked into
inferior educational settings, or are funneled through alternative schools into the juvenile justice system.

There are substantial administrative costs to suspensions as well. According to the UCLA Civil Rights Project, 3.3 million American students were suspended in the 2009-2010 school year alone. Several of the nation’s largest districts suspended 18 percent or more of their total enrollment. “From the financial perspective of the schools, the loss of state and federal attendance funding for those 3,300,000 suspensions amounts to over $257,000,000 per year” (community-matters.org). Moreover, each time a student is suspended, an assistant principal, dean, or guidance counselor must spend time meeting with parents and students, completing paperwork, tracking and reporting the data. “If we use a conservative estimate of 2 hours of administrative time per suspension at an average wage of $48/hour, the wasted time for 3.3 million suspensions costs American schools nearly $317 million per year. Added together, the lost attendance funding plus the cost of administrative time equals more than $500 million per year” (community-matters.org).

As schools are punishing students by denying them access to education, they are increasingly dumping the cases formerly handled within the school system into the juvenile justice system. Increased costs arise that are necessary for funding the juvenile system. “It is estimated that America spends in excess of $10 billion per year on juvenile courts and correction. In addition, fifty percent of high school dropouts are not employed, and as much as eighty percent of the prison population is composed of high school dropouts” (aclu.org).

Students who commit minor offenses may find themselves pushed along the pipeline into juvenile detention facilities where few educational services are provided, if at all. There was no mandate in the GFSA to provide education to students who were going to be deprived of their place in their regular schools. Furthermore, not all states have statutes
that require alternative education settings. “When crafting their zero-tolerance legislation, 36 states included possibilities for alternative education. Of those 36, only 13 required such provisions as by local school districts that expelled students under zero-tolerance policies. Department of Education data for 1996 to 1997 indicate that 44% of expelled students did not have access to alternative educational opportunities (Sughrue, p. 255).

As students are pumped down the pipeline from school to jail, it is extremely difficult to reverse the flow. Schools increasingly bypass due process protections for suspensions and expulsions. Despite the growing protections afforded to them under law, special needs students are disproportionately affected by having their rights ignored. “Youth who become involved in the juvenile justice system are often denied procedural protections in the courts; in one state, up to 80% of court-involved children do not have lawyers” (aclu.org). Students who enter the juvenile justice system for even the most unacceptable reasons face many obstacles to re-entry into traditional schools. The vast majority of these students never graduate from high school. The results of the 1978 National Institute of Education Safe Schools study supported the assertion that punitive school climates can exacerbate student misbehavior and that safe schools are ones where students perceive discipline to be administered fairly. Students of color are expected to be the most disapproving of their schools’ discipline policies and enforcement and as a result, their feelings of abuse and powerlessness may lead them to become entirely apathetic toward school.

Despite the national decline of school violence over the past two decades, security and discipline measures in schools have been steadily growing. Additionally, we should not ignore the fact that youth are more likely to be killed, or commit suicide when they are away from school than on school property. “From July 1, 2005, through June 30, 2006,
there were 14 homicides and 3 suicides of school-age youth (ages 5–18) at
school...Combined, this number translates into 1 homicide or suicide of a school-age youth
at school per 3.2 million students enrolled during the 2005–06 school year” (Dinkes,
Forrest Cataldi, and Lin-Kelly, p. 6). Numbers also vary greatly by school district therefore;
rates of suspension appear to correlate more with policy than student behavior.

Primary arguments by proponents, such as the American Federation of Teachers,
advocate that zero-tolerance policies and the principles that underlie them are sound and
have resulted in lower rates of school violence, particularly in urban areas. Adoption and
implementation of zero-tolerance policies clearly indicate however, “the state, through its
agents, the schools, has relinquished its role as *en loco parentis* and has expanded its role as
policeman” (Sughrue, p. 256). School administrators have sadly relinquished discipline to
law enforcement officers who inhabit the hallways and other common areas of schools. The
groups who were denied access to education historically, are the same groups that are
most likely to be denied access to public education under zero-tolerance policies. Getting
suspended for minor offenses is at minimum, counterproductive when a school's goal is to
prepare its students for college and a career in the increasingly global economy.

Large cities are at the vanguard of a shift away from zero-tolerance school
discipline, toward less punitive strategies that emphasize due process and in-school
resolutions. A March 2015 article of *The Atlantic* describes some of these efforts illustrating
how New York City Department of Education Chancellor Carmen Fariña called for an end to
principal-led school suspensions without prior approval. It explains that New York City, the
largest school district in the country with 1.1 million students, may have looked for
inspiration from the second largest. The Los Angeles Unified School District has
experienced shocking parallel suspension rates for its roughly 700,000 students. In 2013,
it banned suspensions for ‘willful defiance,’ punishment that impacted students of color disproportionately. This resulted in a 53 percent plummet in the first two years.

“Graduation rates in Los Angeles, meanwhile, rose by 12 percent between the 2012-13 and 2013-14 school years” (theatlantic.com). This provides proof that there are alternative options to current disciplinary practices, but the question remains, when will more school districts consider and utilize those options?

**Lack of Cultural Representation**

A major contributor to the persistent criminalization of black children in the public-school system is the scarce representation of the multicultural voices that comprise the present-day American educational scene. Delpit (2006) discusses this issue as what she terms the ‘silenced dialogue’. In examining the ‘culture of power’ that exists in society in general and in the educational environment in particular, she finds that it is precisely what Bourdieu (1973) describes as cultural capital. This culture of power dominates school culture, is reflective of upper and middle-class people and is inherited from home and ancestors.

Delpit began the ‘silenced dialogue’ discussion after receiving several calls and letters from numerous teachers, professors and state school personnel across the country. The calls and letters were in response to an article she wrote on the differing perspectives on skills-versus-process approaches in writing pedagogy. All the non-white respondents spoke fervently on being left out of the dialogue on how best to educate children of color. Pondering on how such enormous communication blocks could exist when teachers of all races believe they have the same aim, Delpit discovered a complex theme known as ‘the culture of power’. The five aspects of power are as follows:
1-Issues of power are enacted in classrooms: the power of the teacher over the students; the power of the publishers over textbooks and of developers of the curriculum to determine the view of the world presented; the power of the state in enforcing compulsory schooling; and the power of an individual or group to determine another’s intelligence or “normalcy.” Finally, if schooling prepares people for jobs, and the kind of job a person has determines her or his economic status and, therefore, power, then schooling is intimately related to that power.

2-There are codes or rules for participating in that culture: that is there is a "culture of power." The codes or rules I’m speaking of relate to linguistic forms, communicative strategies and presentation of self; that is, ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing and ways of interacting.

3-The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power. This means that success in institutions—schools, workplaces and so on—is predicated upon acquisition of the culture of those who are in power. Children from middle-class homes tend to do better in school than those from non-middle-class homes because the culture of the school is based on the culture of the upper and middle-classes—of those in power.

4-If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.

5-Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. For those who consider themselves members of liberal or radical camps, acknowledging personal power and admitting participation in the culture of power is distinctly uncomfortable. On the other hand, those who are less powerful in any situation are most likely to recognize the power variable most acutely. (p. 24-26).

Delpit argues that the assumption that everyone’s children should be provided the same schooling reflects liberal-minded, middle-class aspirations to ensure the maintenance of the status quo, so that the culture of power remains in the hands of those who already possess it. Parents who do not function within the culture of power are in search of schooling that will provide their children with spoken and written language codes and interactional styles that will allow them more success in greater society. One parent
exclaimed, “My kids know how to be black-you all teach them how to be successful in the white man’s world” (Delpit, p. 29). Delpit warns that this should not be done without considering the knowledge children already bring to the table. As only teachers are allowed to be the expert in the classroom, denying students their own expert knowledge is a huge form of disempowerment. The sense of being cheated in one’s educational experience can be so prevalent that black male students may be completely be turned off to schooling altogether.

Delpit finds that black children also often perceive middle-class and white teachers as weak and incapable of taking on the role of being the teacher. Working-class mothers use more directives with their children than do middle and upper-class parents. Teachers might try to lessen the power dynamic by expressing themselves in indirect terms, yet it is explicitness that many black children need in order to learn and understand the rules of classroom culture. Like Ferguson (2000), Delpit finds that instead, teachers often send children to the main office for disobeying their directives, disturbing working parents frequently.

Middle-class people tend to believe authority is established by the mere acquisition of an authoritative role. In contrast, many people of color expect authority to be earned by personal effort and exhibited characteristics. When a teacher operates as a pushover, students perceive this as the adult failing to exercise authority, so the children react accordingly. Delpit asserts, “The authoritative teacher can control the class through exhibition of personal power; establishes meaningful interpersonal relationships that garner student respect; exhibits a strong belief that all students can learn; establishes a standard of achievement and "pushes" the students to achieve that standard; and holds the
attention of students by incorporating interactional features of black communicative style in his or her teaching” (Delpit, p. 35-36). This would be a start.

Pedagogy should be continually evolving to meet the needs of students. As attitudes differ across cultural groups about the characteristics of a good teacher, it is impossible to create a prototype without taking the students’ culture and community into account. Culturally relevant pedagogy considers the fact that students must learn to navigate between home and school and that teachers must find ways to equip students with the knowledge needed to succeed in a school system that oppresses them. Ladson-Billings (1994) defined culturally relevant pedagogy as one that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 16–17). Ladson-Billings (1995a) further proclaimed that culturally relevant pedagogy is a “pedagogy of opposition not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment” (p. 160). This framework seeks to develop sociopolitical consciousness, where teachers are obliged to find ways for “students to recognize, understand, and critique current and social inequalities” (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p. 476). This consciousness begins with teachers recognizing sociopolitical issues of race, class, and gender in themselves and understanding the causes before then incorporating these issues in their teaching. In her view, adopting culturally sustaining pedagogy pushes educational researchers to consider global identities, including developments in the arts, literature, music, athletics and film, rather than focusing on only racial or ethnic groups.
Conclusion

One of the main objectives of public spending for education is to promote social mobility by providing access to education for everyone, regardless of their race or socioeconomic status. The importance of schooling is so prevalent in our society that children’s success in school determines their success as adults; it determines whether and where they go to college, what professions they enter, and how much they are paid. Despite changes in legislation over the past several decades, the United States continues to be largely stratified by race. The correlation of race to educational outcomes is unmistakable and in a highly-segregated society such as the United States, it is not surprising that minority students receive fewer and inferior educational opportunities than white students.

Hart and Risley (1999) and Farkas and Beron (2004) establish how wide the cognitive skills gaps are between the social classes as early as kindergarten. This early vocabulary development is heavily linked to future school performance. Authors like Heath (1983) have contributed in a significant way to our understanding of the role of language and culture in schooling. Her findings imply that the evaluation of children’s academic ability is not equal across the board, but vary depending on one’s place in the intersection of race and class in the social structure. More specifically, Heath’s study on teachers’ evaluations of language and literacy skills, approaches to learning and interpersonal skills implies that they are based on students’ activities or parents’ involvement—in conjunction with race and class. Therefore, teachers might also formally evaluate the students differently when assigning grades, which could then result in different pathways for students from different backgrounds.
The reality is, some children come to school possessing much more cultural capital than others. Sociologists Passeron and Bourdieu (1973) and Chin and Phillips (2004) demonstrate that social-class differences in the quality and quantity of children's activities do not stem largely from fundamental differences in parents' desires to help children develop or cultivate their skills and talents. Instead, these differences stem from parents' differential access to a wide range of resources, including money, the human capital to know how best to assess and improve children's skills, the cultural capital to know how best to cultivate children's talents, and the social capital to learn about and gain access to programs and activities.

Over the past few decades, sociologists of education have found that over summer vacation, children from poor and working-class backgrounds tend to lose ground academically relative to their middle-class counterparts. Heyns' (1978, 1987) research provides a unique vantage point from which social scientists can examine how differences in family background reproduce social inequality. By comparing children's cognitive growth when schools are open, to children's growth when schools are closed during summer, she separated effects of home background from effects of school. During the school year, both school and home affect children's growth, but in the summer only home can influence their growth. As the distance between the achievement of well-off and poor students narrows during the school year, Heyns determined that, while schools are not equalizing in the absolute sense, attending school attenuates the achievement gap. Furthermore, she stresses that cognitive growth is much more rapid early in life than later. The significance of very early intervention must be taken seriously, including aggressive targeting toward language-related and school readiness instruction. After-school and
summer programs can also work to narrow the achievement gap by offering disadvantaged children middle-class experiences, characterized by activities that develop self-discipline and build confidence.

Too often, we treat what goes on inside classrooms as unrelated to the inequalities of larger society. No matter how high a teacher’s expectations, great deficits cannot be made up by schools alone. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face significantly different problems in their respective communities, due to factors such as racism, poverty, and other societal and institutional processes. Rothstein (2004) illustrates how asthma, Attention Deficit Hyper Disorder, lead poisoning, iron deficiency, poor nutrition, and tooth decay are all health conditions prevalent among low-income children, that contribute to lower rates of school readiness. These, among a host of other health issues, often lead to failure, or placement in special education. While health services can be quite expensive, the placement of vision and dental clinics in schools has the ability to make a positive impact on the academic achievement of lower-class children.

The relationship between the socioeconomic status of children and their educational evaluation is grimly impactful. Rist (1970) informs us on the number of ways social class can affect teachers’ perceptions of their students. They might, for example, conflate sloppy dress with a general lack of organizational skills, when in fact, a child from a poor household might only be able to wear lower-quality, ill-fitting, or even damaged clothing. A teacher still might interpret this as demonstrating general carelessness on the part of the child. This type of subconscious assessment leads many teachers to underestimate or ignore poor students’ diligence and skills. Rist also highlights the self-fulfilling prophecy that exists in schools, by demonstrating how teachers can come to hold
certain expectations of students and how these are then operationalized within the classroom, so as to produce what the teacher had initially assumed. Social control mechanisms of public-schools function ostensibly to benefit its students, while perpetuating the status quo. This suggests that, schools tend to produce results that are nearly the opposite of what they were theoretically designed to produce.

Tracking is assumed to promote educational excellence because it claims to provide students with the curriculum and instruction they need to maximize their potential and achieve excellence on their own terms. As Oakes (1985) expresses, students bring differences with them to school, but practices such as tracking help to widen rather than narrow these differences. Additionally, Oakes brings to light the prevailing pattern of placing a disproportionate number of poor and minority students in the lowest-track classes. As a result, their achievement and learning opportunities seem to be further limited by the quality and type of knowledge and skills they are taught. Tracking appears to reinforce the notion that those not labeled as the best are expected to do less well. To Oakes, a self-fulfilling prophecy can be seen to work at the institutional level to prevent schools from providing equal educational opportunity.

Dominant Cultural Capital provides individuals with the ability to move beyond their current social location. Those who have little access or exposure to the cultural power brokers of American society may not know how to effectively engage teachers and other school officials, so as not to compromise their educational performance. Furthermore, structurally based inequality- in the allocation of educational, financial, and cultural resources- results in different parenting practices and socialization experiences for children. Both help to perpetuate stratification through the next generation.
Sorting practices, as analyzed by Kalogrides, Loeb and Béteille (2013), show that overall, schools located in poorer communities have more students of color, higher student poverty levels, larger classroom sizes and teachers with less experience. Too many urban school systems continue to face teacher shortage and experience significant teacher turnover where skilled teachers are needed most. School financing based on state funding formulas only exacerbates the crises urban school systems face. Most importantly, in many cities there is a crucial shortage of minority teachers to serve as role models for an increasingly minority student population.

The process to identify and create appropriate education for poor children and children of color, must take place with the close consultation of adults who share their culture. Parents must also take responsibility and play a large role in demanding change and be highly involved in their children’s educational lives. Keeping in perspective that people are experts on their own lives, it is necessary to communicate across cultures and address more fundamental issues of power; whose voice gets to be heard in determining what is best for poor children of color.

Delpit (2006) believes that educators often fail to reveal to children the requirements for socioeconomic advancement. She advocates that children should be directly told about the standards for acceptable speech and behavior for social mobility. From Delpit’s perspective, white liberal educators are uncomfortable admitting they are part of the culture of power, whereas students from dominated groups are aware of its existence and would like the parameters of power to be clearly stated. If the public education system is to truly effect societal change, it must be willing to take responsibility for those students who do not already possess the codes of power. Cultural hegemony
should not be the aim of education, as students should be allowed to be themselves. It is not children, but the schools who must change.

Beginning in the 1990’s, especially in urban areas, increases in youth violence and a growing public perception of violence in our nation’s schools have made school safety a major educational policy issue. While students cannot learn and teachers cannot teach in unsafe schools, suspensions, expulsions, and arrests under zero-tolerance policies simply do not make schools safer. Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect, and would benefit from additional educational and counseling services. Instead, they are isolated, punished, and pushed out.

Public schools function as pipeline gateways by replacing teachers and administrators with police as disciplinarians and problem-solvers. As Sughrue (2003) discusses, many schools—increasingly pressured by high-stakes testing and inadequate resources—are choosing to forego mentorship and intervention for students in favor of exclusion and arrest. Children and youth are being deprived of meaningful opportunities for education, future employment, and complete participation in our democracy. Worst of all, these harsh practices contribute to the entrapment of students into substandard educational environments. The failure to meet the educational needs of African-Americans and Latinos leads to disengagement and dropouts, increasing the probability of later court involvement.

In my research, I have found no existing evidence that zero-tolerance policies, which mandate automatic punishment, have done anything to decrease school violence. On the contrary, the evidence of the high rates of repeat offenses and dropout rates, is mounting. We must change the way we view and engage our youth. A school where kids are valued and teachers are appreciated is certainly bound to be more effective than an institution
where the principal rules with an iron fist and cops patrol the hallways. An approach to student discipline that humanizes children should involve conversation; asking them to consider how their actions affect everyone, how they will do things differently in the future, and what they are trying to accomplish. Students must be encouraged to take ownership of their behaviors and school personnel must work with communities to provide a better framework for improving students’ conduct. The bottom line is, students who are suspended or expelled from school, possibly unsupervised, during daytime hours cannot benefit from positive peer interactions and adult mentorship that can be offered in schools.

The connection between socioeconomic status and academic performance is well-documented yet, it appears that educational reform efforts continue to be made without an emphasis on social reform. The impoverished conditions that overwhelm marginalized communities can be devastating for children. Improving learning for lower-class children must require ameliorating the social and economic conditions of their lives. Without this, schools will continue to magnify social inequalities, due to differentiation in educational experiences as children advance through school.
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