

***Inequities in Public Education Sustainability Threatened***

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Still Separate and Unequal

Abstract

The societal goal of the institution of education is to transmit knowledge, to teach all students skills and values that will enable them to live fulfilling lives, participate in the labor force, and contribute to the functioning of society. Currently, however, the institution of education in the United States is in crisis. This article addresses the status of public education and raises questions about its capacity to meet the educational and social requirements of future generations for all its members. Since every society's future is tied to its educational system, it is essential that we respond critically to the segregation and discrimination that still exist in American society and especially in our public schools. We need to seriously consider what the consequences will be if we continue to inadequately educate minority children when, in the not too distant future, the minority population will be the majority. Changes in educational outcomes are still possible but it will take considerable effort from many different segments of society to make a significant impact. One technique with far-reaching potential and addressed in this article is to bring lessons from the field into the college classroom.

## **Inequities in Public Education**

### ***Sustainability Threatened***

*It is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.*

Brown v. Board of Education, Supreme Court of the US

Unless we adequately educate all segments of American society, our individual and collective abilities to sustain ourselves economically will be severely compromised. This article addresses the status of public education in the United States and raises questions about its capacity to meet the educational requirements of future generations. Since every society's future is tied to its educational system, it is essential that we respond critically to the segregation and discrimination that still exist in many American public schools. As a sociologist, I make that critical evaluation a part of my Introduction to Sociology (SSS100) classes at LaGuardia Community College. Two recent volunteer experiences have fueled assignments which I developed for this course.

Over the years that I have taught sociology at LaGuardia, I have volunteered in a number of educational settings. In August 2007, I volunteered for two weeks with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in St. Louis, Missouri, in an impoverished, struggling school district whose students were largely African American. I worked directly with teachers, providing emotional support and hands-on help as they prepared classrooms for the

approaching school year with very limited resources. In 2009, I volunteered closer to home, as a judge at the annual New York City Science and Engineering Fair (NYCSEF). My experience in St. Louis sharpened my awareness of how the terms “failing schools” is often tied to schools serving people of color. I subsequently brought that heightened awareness to the Science Fair where I was sensitive to which groups were contenders at the Science Fair and which groups were not. This paper describes in further detail the nature of my volunteer experiences in St. Louis public schools and at the New York City Science and Engineering Fair, what I learned from them about public education, and how I incorporated these lessons in my Introduction to Sociology classes at LaGuardia Community College.

In St. Louis, I joined educators from around the country, recruited by the AFT, to assist in their “back-to-school” efforts which focused on failing schools located in low-income neighborhoods and in need of practical and moral support. Upon arrival in St. Louis, we became aware that the predominately African American St. Louis public schools had recently lost accreditation because of low test scores, and had two school boards – one elected and one appointed by the mayor. We also learned that high school students, parents, and teachers had protested the state takeover of their schools in the spring of 2007, just two short months before graduation, and had conducted five days of sit-ins at the mayor’s office. Many graduating students feared that, as graduates of now non accredited high schools, they would lose their places in the colleges where they had been accepted. We discovered that students had been arrested for their protest actions, sprayed with mace by the police, subjected to insults and demeaning behavior, and lied to by public officials.

One of the ways we assisted the St. Louis schools in their back-to school efforts was by helping first-year teachers set up their classrooms. In some cases, the enterprise turned out to be more than challenging since the teachers were issued very limited supplies. In some classrooms, we hung colorful borders, cut out pictures, and helped arrange educational material, but in one school, we made the display borders ourselves out of hand-me-down construction paper since there were no funds to purchase anything. In another classroom, we assisted a teacher with great supplies but quickly discovered that she had purchased them with her own money: A brand new teacher who had not even received her first paycheck had already spent \$250 on materials that should have been provided by the school district. In another school, although teachers appreciated our decorating skills, we found that some of them had a different request – for help with various computer tasks. One problem we could not solve was that not enough computers had been issued to the teachers, yet they were expected to access lesson plans online via the school’s intranet. One teacher we assisted told us that the computer she was working on at school was a personal computer she brought from home.

In 2009, I joined other City University of New York professors invited to be judges at that year’s New York City Science and Engineering Fair (NYCSEF). The fair is the “largest high school research competition in NYC [and] is sponsored by the New York City Department of Education and the City University of New York.” In the words of Jeanette Kim, director of the 2009 fair, it showcased work based on research in “categories including the biological sciences, Behavioral and social sciences, physical sciences, computer sciences, engineering, and mathematics.”

This highly organized event featured inviting displays by 500 students and made me wish to jump into my assignment to evaluate projects that related to the social sciences. However, I decided, before starting to look at individual projects, to get an overview of the entire fair. I walked up and down the aisles, scanning the projects and the young scientists. That was when I noticed that something was missing. To make sure that I was not seeing something that could not be substantiated, I started taking pictures. As evidenced by my observations and photos, there were few Hispanics or blacks competing in the fair. Blacks were the very group that populated the troubled St. Louis public schools and both Hispanics and blacks were well represented in my LaGuardia classes. According to the “Fall 2009 Ethnicity Breakdown” in LaGuardia’s *2010 Institutional Profile*, 41% of LaGuardia students in that semester were Hispanic and 17% were black (5).

## **Lessons from the Field**

### *Segregation and Discrimination in Public Schools*

Initially surprised by the absence of groups prominent in my classes, I remembered that the New York City Science and Engineering Fair traditionally represents the most academically prepared students often coming from New York City’s elite public schools. It is well known that the populations in these schools do not reflect the diversity of New York City school students. A 2008 *New York Times* article, “Racial Imbalance Persists at Elite Public Schools,” reports these statistics:

In this city [New York] of 1.1 million public school students, about 40 percent are Hispanic, 32 percent are black, 14 percent are Asian and 14 percent white. More than two-thirds

of Stuyvesant High School's 3,247 students are Asian (up from 48 percent in 1999). At Brooklyn Technical High School, 365 of the 4,669 students, or 8 percent, are Hispanic; at the Bronx High School of Science, there are 114 blacks, 4 percent of the 2,809-student body. (Hernandez)

Thus, my observations in St. Louis and at the Science Fair reminded me of the segregation that exists in public education despite the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. Jonathan Kozol wrote in 2006 that "[s]egregation has returned to public education with a vengeance;" he backed his claim by noting that the "percentage of black children who now go to integrated schools has dropped to its lowest level since 1968." Pointing a finger at New York State and New York City, Kozol wrote:

New York State is the most segregated state for black and Latino children in America: seven out of eight black and Latino kids here go to segregated schools. The majority of them go to schools where no more than two to four percent of the children are white. The level of segregation statewide is due largely to New York City, which is probably the country's most segregated city.

In a 2009 report entitled *Reviving the Goal of an Integrated Society: A 21st Century Challenge*, Gary Orfield, Professor of Education and co-director of the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA, writes about the implications of the resegregation of American education: "Segregated black and Latino schools have less prepared teachers and classmates, and lower achievement and graduation. Segregated nonwhite schools usually are segregated by poverty as well as race" (6).

Recently, a new twist has been added to an already highly inequitable institution: More local school districts require visas and passports to register children. Twenty-eight years after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that all children have a right to public education regardless of whether they are in the country legally (Plyler), the New York Civil Liberties Union “surveyed New York State’s 694 school districts and discovered that at least 139 are asking, either directly or indirectly, for proof of a parent or child’s immigration status before a student may be enrolled in school” (“NYCLU”). Requiring documentation such as social security numbers, visas, passports, and citizenship status to register students is clearly against the law yet apparently common practice in many school districts, adding another layer to the level of inequity in public education.

Statistics pointing to New York City’s failure to prepare large groups of students to enter competitive arenas are part of a wider national failure signaled by high school dropout rates in the United States. In remarks made to a joint session of Congress on February 24, 2009, President Barack Obama cited the statistics and emphasized the potentially dire consequences of the United States high school dropout rate:

In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity— it is a pre-requisite. Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma. And yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation. And half of the students who begin college never finish.

This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow. That is why it will be the goal of this administration to ensure that every child has access to a complete and competitive education – from the day they are born to the day they begin a career.

In my Introduction to Sociology classes, my students' accounts of their own experiences in public education, combined with my experiences in St. Louis and at the New York City Science and Engineering Fair, have intensified my concern that public education, increasingly characterized by racial segregation and other inequities, is failing to prepare large segments of the population to enter and excel in competitive arenas. Ultimately, that failure poses a threat to the livelihood of individuals. According to Kaleem Caire, President and CEO of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, “[c]hildren who do not graduate with a high school diploma stand little chance of sustaining themselves or a family in today’s economy” (i). On a larger scale, as articulated by President Obama and noted above, the failure threatens the ability of the United States to sustain itself in the global marketplace.

### **Lessons in the Classroom**

At LaGuardia Community College, students in Introduction to Sociology (SSS100) are mostly Liberal Arts majors, fulfilling a requirement of their major. They frequently take the course during their first year at the college, often entering the course with a great deal of personal experience in and very little academic knowledge about a subject central to sociology – the impact of societal institutions on groups and individuals.

One of my goals in teaching Introduction to Sociology is to provide students with an understanding of the roles of institutions. I also wish to heighten student awareness of the role of activism in ensuring that American institutions fulfill their roles equitably. In order to fulfill these goals, I ground my lessons in difficult-to-teach sociological theory. In introductory sociology classes, the syllabus covers dominant theoretical viewpoints, both macro (the social structure or organization of society) and micro (how social organization impacts the individual). Generally, I attempt to present opposing viewpoints – one side focusing on the expected order of things and how equilibrium needs to be maintained, especially when change is occurring, and the other side focusing on issues of power, control, domination, and how change may occur to benefit a few at the expense of the many.

Understanding theory – what constitutes a theory and theoretical assumptions, how theories are formulated and applied, how theories change – is often new and difficult for students. They generally have difficulty comprehending that differing points of view can be applied to the same situation and that neither is “right” or “wrong.” Usually students want to think that one position is the correct one and the other incorrect. In Introduction to Sociology, students are encouraged to see theories, different sociological viewpoints, as tools for understanding behavior or phenomena.

For example, students are introduced to structural functionalism, sometimes referred to as functionalism, a major sociological theory popularized at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. Durkheim asserted that society was like an organism and “much the way each organ in the body contributes to the survival of the organism, each part of a society contributes to the successful functioning of

society” (Pampel 74). This paradigm also suggests that societal institutions, analogous to spokes on a wheel, provide the necessary structure and support needed by society. And just as a wheel becomes unbalanced if a spoke breaks, so does society suffer if its institutions do not function properly. By applying functionalism to a real-life situation such as public education that is not fulfilling its societal obligations, students can come to appreciate the necessity of remedying educational problems and the need to implement reform quickly in order for America to keep up with the rapid technological and economic advances taking place in other countries.

On the other hand, conflict theory helps students appreciate how disregard for the inequities in public schools, especially as they affect lower-income and minority students, relates to the power structure of American institutions. Conflict theory, originating in the ideas of Karl Marx, stresses imbalance of power within a society, struggle over resources, and control by people in positions enabling them to exercise it. From a conflict viewpoint, institutions are structured to benefit those in positions of power at the expense of those on the opposite side of the spectrum. Students therefore learn the significance of the frequently applied sociological adage that, in order for significant social change to occur, it must occur at the institutional level. Thus, with regard to civil rights, for example, individuals did not change racist ways; the government had to pass legislation. Similarly, with regard to the economy, government involvement is needed to foster hoped-for recovery.

### **From Theory to Application**

Classroom discussion and research assignments are important to my application of sociological theory to the problem of failing schools. I often try to use the students’ first-hand

experiences with societal institutions as a starting point for the academic study of those institutions. Reviewing the structure and functions of the institution of education provides for lively discussions in Introduction to Sociology classes. As we approach assignments focusing on educational institutions, students tell their stories. Prominent in the stories of students who went to public schools in New York City are accounts of violence and attempts on the part of school personnel to prevent violence. Students sometimes comment on how some of their classmates obtained good grades and were promoted merely by not being disruptive in school.

For students at LaGuardia Community College who attended schools in other countries before coming to the United States, the topics of searches, metal detectors, weapons, and violence are surprising. In their countries of origin, such searches and violations of privacy are unheard of.

A very important point regarding the structure of institutions, including the institution of education, is that institutions typically reproduce ideas of the privileged while disadvantaged groups frequently remain passive (Margolis et al. 7). As a means of helping students understand this point and to illustrate what happens when people take action rather than remain passive, I give the students information about the St. Louis school system. I provide a verbal account of my 2007 experiences. I assign a *New York Times* article, “State Takes Control of Troubled Public Schools in St. Louis” (Gay) in addition to the chapter about the institution of education in the Introduction to Sociology text, *Society: The Basics* (Macdonis). Students also read a paper I wrote and presented at the 2007 annual meeting of the New York State Sociological Association, “A Case Study of Advocacy at St. Louis Public Schools.” Finally, students view a live *YouTube* video clip about the 2007 five-day sit-in at the office of St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay

(*Exclusive*). The St. Louis experience specifically shows the failure of an educational institution to promote a fair and equal society and to address adequately issues that concern primarily people of color. The St. Louis experience also illustrates advocacy that was successful in addressing that failure. Having set the stage, I go on to place students' experiences with public education and the experience in St. Louis in a broader context, one that requires an understanding of sociological theories.

### **Research Assignment**

In addition to grounding the students in basic sociological theory, the Introduction to Sociology course seeks also to train students in skills essential to sociological research. As part of a research assignment, I have students apply sociological theory after assessing educational data on the website of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). By reviewing the NCES's *Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 2008–09* (Sable, Plotts, and Mitchell) and their locations on maps available through the School District Demographics System of the National Center for Education Statistics, they must determine the following:

- locations of the country's largest school districts and student enrollment in each
- overall ethnicity of students in the largest school districts
- number of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals (as an indication of students' family income)
- high school graduation rates by states identified
- how graduation rates are calculated

After they find answers to the above questions, I ask students to reflect on what they have learned by applying some of the assumptions of conflict theory mentioned above and to include their reactions to the discovery of the composition of school districts across the United States and national graduation statistics.

The second part of the research assignment asks students to review national and international data on the NCES website (“Fast Facts”; US NCES. Condition 86, 210). Here they review and compare the following:

- America’s mathematics and reading literacy rankings with those of other world nations
- how the number of scientists in the United States compare internationally

Again, after the students find answers to these questions, I ask them to reflect on what they have learned, this time by applying some of the aforementioned assumptions of functionalist theory. I also ask them to write about their reactions to the international rankings and the number of scientists worldwide. This assignment encourages students to research socioeconomic, residential, and international data and to reflect on quality of education and the consequences of educational inequities. The assignment also encourages them to think critically about educational outcomes, including some of the consequences of inequities in public education, and to apply sociological theories by engaging in abstract thinking. And, not unintentionally, the assignment also engages students in quantitative reasoning with the goal of increased quantitative literacy.

Such an assignment contributes not only to the development of basic academic skills and important life skills but also to the empowerment of students who, often, have been the victims

of inequities in their education. In a report on the requirements of 21st century education, the Center for Public Education (CPE) stresses the importance of acquiring traditional academic skills, including science, social studies, and strong math and English skills, in order to succeed in work and life (Jerald). In addition, based on employer surveys and other evidence, the CPE identified four kinds of “broader competencies” that are essential today:

- The ability to solve new problems and think critically;
- Strong interpersonal skills necessary for communication and collaboration;
- Creativity and intellectual flexibility; and
- Self sufficiency, including the ability to learn new things when necessary (Jerald).

Students who have attended failing schools often internalize the failure of those schools. It is especially important for these students to see the sociological reasons for their poor preparation for college and to see where American public education stands in relation to education in other societies. Conducting the research makes vivid and clear to students sociological concepts and how they can be viewed from different perspectives. Thus, from a functionalist viewpoint, the education system should be doing a better job. From a conflict perspective, the institution of education is there to enhance the role of people in power and not necessarily designed to benefit students from all walks of life. My Introduction to Sociology course is designed not only to teach students the skills associated with the discipline, but also the outlooks and theories that will help them understand critical information in order to make sound decisions and empower them to take action in the face of inequities.

## **Conclusion**

In the fall of 2008, according to the 2009 *Digest of Education Statistics* compiled by the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 50 million students (Table 2) headed off to approximately 99,000 public elementary and secondary schools (Table 5), and before the school year was over, an estimated \$596 billion would be spent on their education (Table 27).

The societal goal of the institution of education is to transmit knowledge, to teach all students skills and values that will enable them to live fulfilling lives, participate in the labor force, and contribute to the functioning of society. As a nation, we may wish to ponder what the consequences will be of not adequately educating minority children when, in the not too distant future, the minority population will be the majority. The United States Census Bureau recently released revised projections for the composition of the population over the next three decades. By the 2040s, minorities will make up more than one-half of the United States population, up from the present 34%. The largest gains will be in the Latino, Asian, and African American sectors (“U.S. Minorities”).

Although public education in the United States remains discriminatory and segregated, and fails to meet the needs of countless numbers of low-income students, mainly students of color, changes in educational outcomes are still possible. It will take considerable effort from many different segments of society to make a significant impact; one technique with far-reaching potential is to bring lessons from the field into the sociology classroom.

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