Funding for the Future

Mackenzie Colburn

ABSTRACT

This research paper touches on the fundamental issues surrounding inequality in the American educational system, specifically between race and class. Prior research has indicated that minorities and lower class families experience far less ideal and adequate educations than white families with higher incomes. This paper brings together work done by Jonathon Kozol and the Civil Rights Project while using examples from New Hampshire schools in order to emphasize the disparate treatment of children in American schools.

The amount of materials a school uses to administer learning and engage students in extra-curricular activities is obviously dependent on the amount of money they have available for funding. The quality of teachers is also dependent on how much a school’s district can offer as an annual salary based on the teacher’s qualifications, (i.e. experience and number of degrees attained). Children who are exposed to more in-depth and widespread learning are more likely to be cultured and educated by the time they go to college or begin working. Unfortunately, the appropriate funding needed for each child to experience the level of cultivation that is essential for obtaining the knowledge and confidence to succeed is not equally dispersed. Because funding comes from property tax rates, lower income families and minorities are negatively affected. Attitudes revolving around race are arguably the determining factors pushing the segregation that separates many families from living in communities that provide a more than adequate education.

Many people would expect or at least agree that funding for public schools in America should be equal in order to provide each child with the same tools to achieve their educational and/or career goals. However, that is not how public educational funding works in America. The amount of funding a school receives is dependent on that district’s property tax rate and rates vary by each district. Therefore, the more property taxes a district pays, the more resources their public schools receive and ultimately a better education is provided to those children. In other words, if you’re wealthy and live in a big house within a nice community then you pay higher property taxes. Therefore, you contribute more to the public school in your district where your children experience ample resources in the education system. However, just forty minutes away in the bustling inner-city, another family lives in a run down two bedroom apartment in a crime infested neighborhood where they pay much less in property taxes. Do they enjoy their community? Would you? Probably not, but they have to live there because they cannot afford a better living situation. Their children have to attend the local elementary school with broken windows and a rodent problem where they have limited resources and overcrowded classrooms (Kozol 2005). The children in these two families were given a life they
had little choice in and absolutely no responsibility for. The disparate educations given to children based off of geographical location and amount of parental income, rather than the child’s own abilities and aspirations, is unjust.

In his book, *The Shame of the Nation*, Jonathan Kozol exemplifies this issue by the wealthy parents who have the money to either move to a better district or apply to be accepted in a prestigious school. The end result is that lower class families are left behind in these subpar schools. Lower income families do not have the financial or social capital required to either move to a better community or gain acceptance to a prestigious school for their children. The application process is very extensive and requires a lot of preparation. Many lower income families may not have the time to practice interview questions with their child or the money to hire a consult to help. They also are more likely to lack the networks to these institutions that can help with advising about preparation (Kozol 2005). In sum, lower income families are at a disadvantage because they do not have the resources, or the social capital to compete with these wealthy families that are able to provide so much for their children. A segregation of schooling is the result when privileged families benefit and unprivileged families must accept what they are handed within the education system.

The differences between an outstanding and adequate school are stark. Kozol (2005) cited that in the 2001-2002 school year, there was about an $8,000 difference in spending per pupil from the lowest to highest spending districts on Long Island, New York (p. 151). When considering what the $8,000 provides to students, it is no wonder why competition to get into such selective schools is so fierce. Hunter College Elementary School in New York City uses tables and chairs instead of desks among other tactics to help the children develop necessary skills and understanding of what they are learning (Kozol 2005). By providing such a rich learning experience, these prestigious schools set their students up to continue on through prestigious high schools and universities. They provide students with a deep knowledge and understanding that sets them apart from the students that attend ordinary elementary schools.

In comparison, students in a fourth grade classroom from Boston described what they thought of their school. One student wrote, “I see dirty boards and I see papers on the floor. I see an old browken window...I see cracks in the walls and...pigeons flying all over the school.” Another student wrote, “I see new teachers omots every day,” (Kozol 2005; 162). The conditions that these children are exposed to are unthinkable and it is hard to believe that they encourage learning. These inner city schools do not provide a safe and stimulating environment for their students. They are short on supplies that encourage learning such as books, pencils, and project materials. Instead of promoting widespread knowledge, a lot of these inner city schools prepare their students for managerial work and standardized testing. Most students are not even given options (Kozol 2005). The saddest part is that most of the students blame themselves for their situations. When they are exposed to what students from better schools experience compared to what they have, for example, new playgrounds and extensive libraries, they begin to wonder why they do not have those simple luxuries. These feelings of doubt spiral...
into a self-fulfilling prophecy where the students will begin to believe that they do not deserve and cannot have a better education (Kozol 2005).

These patterns of segregation are not only present in Boston and New York inner-city schools. They are visible throughout the country and even in places one would not expect. These patterns can be examined throughout the education system of New Hampshire. Statistics from the New Hampshire Board of Education were compared between two different districts throughout the state: Durham and Manchester. Durham is located in the seacoast region in the eastern part of the state with 2,037 students enrolled in K-12 in the district. Manchester is located in the center of the state and is one of New Hampshire’s largest cities with 15,732 students enrolled in K-12 in the district (NH Department of Education, 2010). Each of these districts pays different rates on their educational tax. In Durham, 15.7% of taxes go to education. Only 6.7% of taxes go to Manchester’s schools (NH Property Tax Rates, 2011). When comparing the schools’ student-teacher ratios, annual cost per pupil, pupil demographics, and number of safety incidents to the tax rates and school population, it is evident that more attention is given to schools in better off communities and a denser white population.

For example, the district that spent the most on each of their students in the 2009-2010 school year was Durham with $15,748. There were 11 students for every teacher and only 23 safety incidents per 1,000 students in a year. 92% of the students were white and only 5% were on reduced or free lunch (NH Department of Education). When comparing Durham to Manchester, the social differences between the students are apparent. Manchester spent $9,375 per student. In 2010-2011, there were 14 students per 6 teachers and 154 safety incidents per 1,000 students in that year. Only 69% of the students were white and 46% of the students were on reduced or free lunch (NH Department of Education 2010). Not only is there a difference between the socioeconomic status of these students, depicted by percent of reduced lunches and property tax rates their parents pay, but the racial makeup is disparate as well. Kozol (2005) stated that, “a segregated inner-city school is ‘almost six times as likely’ to be a school of concentrated poverty as is a school that has an overwhelmingly white population” (p. 20). These demographic patterns resonate not only through inner cities but throughout other parts of the nation too, as shown in New Hampshire. Although the levels of racial and socioeconomic segregation are not as prominent in New Hampshire schools in comparison to Boston or New York, it does exist.

Is it mere coincidence that poor minorities are receiving less of an education than middle and upper class whites? Tara Jackson (2004) seems to think it is not. In her study contributing to the Civil Rights Project, Jackson found that personal racial preferences are the greatest determinant factor for where people live followed by housing market discrimination and economic differences. The argument for economic differences driving racial housing segregation relies on the assumption that non-white populations simply cannot afford the same housing that white populations can and therefore are separated by economic community lines. However, research is inconsistent on this explanation. Racial discrimination in the housing market takes the theory a step further by suggesting that real estate agents, banks, and lenders
control segregation by limiting the residential mobility of non-white populations. They do this by providing them with fewer residential options that pin point them in and away from certain neighborhoods. However, it is through racial preferences that most affect where a family will choose to reside. Jackson noted that whites prefer lower percentages of diversity in their neighborhoods than minorities do and that these preferences are what cause segregation (Jackson 2004). If a community becomes too diverse, then whites with these racial attitudes will move to more desirable communities, if their finances allow for it. Meanwhile, minorities can withstand higher levels of minority population in their area so they stay in these communities while white families leave.

The end result is communities filled with white families with uniform attitudes and communities left with black and Hispanic families. These minorities end up getting stuck there because of plummeting property values due to the white flight and lack of demand to live in a minority neighborhood (Brown Lecture 10/17/11). Because property values drop in these neighborhoods, the monetary support towards education from property tax rates diminishes with them. It is a vicious cycle where because of racial discrimination and prejudice; minorities are forced into living situations where it is increasingly hard to escape due to the fall in property values. Additionally, property taxes that feed into the education system of that district depend on those property values. In the end, lower income and minority children face the burden of people that consciously and even subconsciously discriminate against race.

Nearly sixty years ago, in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Supreme Court decided that segregation of schools by race went against the Fourteenth Amendment and wheels were set in motion to remedy this issue. However, it is evident that racial segregation exists still today. This segregation has more of an impact on children than one would expect. Edelman and Jones (2004) claim that black children are nearly twice as likely to drop out of school as white children. Also, a black boy has a one in fifty-five chance of earning a master’s degree but a one in five chance of going to prison before he turns thirty (p. 134). The impact does not only affect their experience in school, what they learn, and how they view themselves but it affects their futures as well. The fact that black men are more likely to go to jail than get a master’s degree by that magnitude is an example of how seriously some children are being affected.

In conclusion, the issues surrounding segregation are almost as apparent as they were sixty years ago. Despite efforts made to give children equal opportunities to learn, not every child is receiving the education they deserve. Patterns of racial and class segregation are widespread throughout the country and even exist in unexpected places, like in New Hampshire. Racial preferences, housing discrimination, and economic differences have been used to explain segregation in America. Despite any efforts by the government and the Supreme Court, full integration can be said to only be achieved when the American people have more similar and favorable racial attitudes and can exist side by side whether that is in the classroom or in the community. Funding each child an equal education provides them with a
future they can choose for themselves without the limitations of scarce resources, inexperienced teachers, and hopeless attitudes.

REFERENCES

Brown, Benjamin. 2011. Class Lecture. Presented at University of New Hampshire, October 17, Durham, NH.


