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Race & Education

Nicholas Kristof, an American journalist and winner of two Pulitzer Prizes, stated in his article for the New York Times, “Since the end of the 1970s, something has gone profoundly wrong in America. Inequality has soared. Educational progress slowed. Incarceration rates quintupled. Family breakdown accelerated. Median household income stagnated.” If you asked the citizens of America if they thought our country had been stagnate in these areas since the 1970s, without looking at the numbers, I’m sure a large majority of them would disagree with Kristof. Or at least we would all like to think so. We think that because we are an economic power, and because of our idea of the “American Dream,” that our country is not associated with the negative conditions that Kristof believes it to be. However, Kristof is certainly right, and while his assertions are surprising, the numbers don’t lie. His most surprising assertion is that the inequality in America has continued to increase. How could this be? It doesn’t seem right. Since people like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and America’s continued proud progressiveness, one would presume that America’s inequality gap has closed, its incarceration rate has dropped, its families have become stronger, its median household income has soared, and that America’s noble educational system has touched increasingly more communities. Unfortunately, this is not the case. When focusing on the last of these problems in America, education, we must ask

ourselves: Is there a correlation between race and education in America, and if so, which factors could be causing this inequality?

When looking at the problems and divisions within American educational structure, it's important to first understand its history and roots. In its early stages, public school was incredibly hard for anyone who wasn't upper-middle class to attend because that meant sending your child to school rather than having him or her work. Seeing as most blacks were either poor in the North or recently abolished from slavery in the South, there was little growth in black children's education. By 1900, the South's literacy rate for black students reached 50%, thanks to black teachers and black schools. Universities were set aside for only black students which led to two different education systems, one for blacks and one for whites. The black schools were underfunded and therefore under-resourced, while white students prospered.

When the Supreme Court reached a ruling on *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954, ending segregation in public schools, the idea of more opportunities for minorities to get a better education became a possibility. It wasn't until ten years later, though, in 1964, that an impact became visible, with 2.3% of black students attending white majority schools. Desegregation reached its peak in 1986 with 42.9% of black students attending white majority schools. This is when test scores, college attendance, and high school graduation rates all began to increase for black students.

As courts began ordering school districts to desegregate, and schools started to become diverse, a "White Flight" began. Wealthy white homeowners moved out of the city into suburbs and closed gated communities. Then with the advancing of transportation technology, middle class (mostly white) homeowners joined their wealthy counterparts. Before the *Brown* case,

urban schools were predominantly white and well-funded. Now, urban schools are predominantly minorities and underfunded. Even as minorities could afford moving to the suburbs, they moved to the suburbs with other minorities because they felt more welcomed while white families moved to white suburbs for the same reason. With the segregation of suburbs, the segregation of public schools became prevalent again.

In “U.S. Education: Still Separate and Unequal,” Lindsey Cook, a Data Editor for U.S. News & World Report, explains that America spends 39% more on education than any other OECD country. Cook argues that “American education is rife with problems, starting with the gaping differences between white students and students of color...”. From this alone, the conclusion can be made that there is little correlation between the money spent by a government on education and that country’s educational prosperity.

As claimed by Cook, along with a handful of others, the majority of the colored population is born into far more difficult circumstances than those of their white counterparts. To break this down, it is theorized that colored parents don’t hold their children to the same expectations as far as education goes as white parents do. This could be due to the difference of education between the average colored parent and average white parent. Around 40% of white parents possess a bachelor’s degree or higher, while that number for black parents is around 20-25%. Furthermore, it is presumed that “lower expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies, contributing to lower expectations from the student, less-positive attitudes toward school, fewer out-of-school learning opportunities and less parent-child communication about school.” Even before a child enters any schooling, there can be an observed difference between a colored and white child. “Fewer black children demonstrate proficiency in development skills such as

receptive vocabulary, expressive vocabulary, matching, early counting, math, color knowledge, numbers and shapes.” Colored children may be less proficient in these areas because of possibly not having access to the appropriate materials, parents being too busy with work, or even because they feel less comfortable reading. Concerning the latter, it is speculated that this could be a result of children’s books not being as interesting to colored children or parents, because of the “lack of diversity in them.”

In addition to deviations in children’s early cognitive skills, disparities can also be seen in test scores, from as early as kindergarten. Black kindergartners score lower than their white counterparts in every category tested, and more shockingly, the variance persists throughout the child’s schooling. The contrast in discipline between white and colored children begins at an early age as well, which most certainly influences the student’s education. “Black students are suspended and expelled at three times the rate of white students,” and “black students are arrested more and are referred to law enforcement more.”

It has been over 60 years since the Brown vs. Board of Education hearing, and the education system in America is separate and unequal. This is due to disparities in teaching, courses offered, household income, and neighborhoods. These disparities “continue to snowball at every level.” White students more often stay in school than black and Hispanic students. Blacks drop out 60% more than whites while Hispanics are 300% more likely to drop out than whites. Then there is the drastic difference in graduating on time, with almost 20% more white students, on average, graduating on time than the average black and Hispanic students. Once colored students finish schooling and make it to the job market, they will be less likely than white candidates to get a call back while having the same qualifications. If all this wasn’t

enough, the minority population is growing and the majority of American citizens, white individuals, is decreasing. Soon, the U.S. education system will not properly support the majority of its children.

Without proper education and access to equal resources, it is much harder for minorities to get into universities than it is for white students. The two biggest factors of getting into a college are GPA and test scores, both of which minorities fall behind in compared to whites. Data on the ACT from 1997 shows black students averaging 17.1, Hispanics 18.8, and whites 21.7. Data from 2010 shows blacks' average decreasing by .1%, Hispanics increasing by .1%, and whites increasing by .7%. Meanwhile on the SAT there is a 54 point difference between whites and minorities. Our education system has been failing minorities from the start of its conception to this very day.

There is no denying the existence of an achievement gap in the United States education system. It is clear that whites compared to minorities are much more educated and successful in classrooms, showing that there is indeed a correlation between race and education, with a "White Privilege". What's not completely agreed on is why this gap exists and how we can create a more diverse and equal education system.

While researching, one cause seemed to be missing: the discrepancy in teaching between communities with less funding and their more privileged counterparts. So, I decided to look further into the problem of teaching in low-income and impoverished communities. "Unequal Opportunity: Race and Education," by Linda Darling-Hammond, founder of Stanford University Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE), addresses the issue of teaching and unequal education. Referring to a Harvard study done by economist Ronald Ferguson, she

explains that “In an analysis of 900 Texas school districts... teacher’s expertise—as measured by scores on a licensing examination, master's degrees, and experience—was the single most important determinant of student achievement, accounting for roughly 40 percent of the measured variance in students' reading and math achievement gains in grades 1-12.” Moreover, Hammond points out that the differences in teaching along with class sizes accounted for as “much of the measured variance in achievement as did student and family background.” Additionally most of the difference between high and low-scoring math and reading tests was “explained by teacher qualifications and class sizes than by poverty, race, and parent education.” This was shocking, because previous research claimed that the inequality of education between races was chiefly a result of poverty, race, and parent education. My short-sighted conclusion: race and education is a problem that can not be fully understood by way of one or two voices, but rather a problem with a profound amount of concerns.

It seems that the reason for educational inequality is a combination of Cook’s snowball effect, the segregation of schools, and the flawed funding system,. However, each problem is riddled with hundreds of cancerous systemic complications. Furthermore, it is not the schools being segregated, but our neighborhoods and communities. This achievement gap, this correlation between race and education, is a much larger symbol for the gap in society between whites and blacks. In order to fix this inequality in education, we can't look at it as a problem of the system. Instead, it is a problem with society, with education as the only remedy.

Sources

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