

Chapter 36

Public School Education: Minority Students at a Disadvantage

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines public schools in low income communities in the U.S. by example of two low income high schools in Chicago. It addresses how alliances between U.S. corporations and local government, and public-school officials do not work in the best interest of students of color in low income communities in their pursuit of higher education. The chapter posits that schools for low income communities do not prepare students for white collar corporate positions, putting them at risk of not qualifying for higher education. Considering the claimed school to prison pipeline, the author calls for closing the educational gap between low income and rich public schools in the U.S. by eradicating racism and classism that appears to prevail in U.S. institutions of education.

INTRODUCTION

President Donald Trump, in a meeting with Senators Dick Durbin of Illinois and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina stated: “People coming to the [U.S.] from shithole countries” (Watkins & Phillip, 2018). They were discussing ideas for immigration reform, where emphatically criticized the idea of more Africans and Haitians coming into the U.S., “[...]why we want people from Haiti and more Africans in the [U.S.?], the [U.S.] should get more people from countries like Norway” (Watkins & Phillip, 2018). I am not from any African country nor am I from Haiti. I am from Guyana, and my country’s GDP is no different from Africa’s or Haiti’s, so my home country can easily be within the category of shithole countries, too. I came to the U.S. in 1992 and went straight into the Chicago Public School system. What I have learned and continue to learn about public schools, especially in low income communities, is all new to me. While spending four years at Chicago’s Morgan Park High School, I never realized that there were various kinds of curriculums: The concomitant, phantom, hidden, tacit, latent, paracurriculum, and the informal (Longstreet & Shane, 1993). I hadn’t paid attention to concepts like The goals of public

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education, The restoration of apartheid education across the USA, “The Zero Tolerance Policies and the “School-to-Prison Pipeline” (Smith, 2015, p. 125), which delineate how easily students can go from the classroom and to prison due to the zero tolerance policies, and what schools really teach.

REFLECTIONS OF A U.S. HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE

My Perspective on Being a Black Youth in a Chicago School

At Morgan Park, I knew I was going on to college. How I was going to get to that point, however, was not clear to me at the time. Looking back at my academic experience, I can strongly conclude that after I had graduated high school, I was not prepared for college academically. I had the experience of not only getting a U.S. public school education; I had also attended high school in Guyana. I will say, from my perspective, the U.S. public schools and the American society in general are divided by race. I find it extremely difficult to understand how a country with two dominant cultures is as different and divided for such a long period of time, with no end in sight for a meaningful reconciliation.

The public schools in Guyana have no such problems with race relations. There are six cultures in Guyana: Indians, Blacks, Amerindians, Portuguese, Chinese, and Mixed. Guyana is divided into ten administrative regions, which, similarly to the U.S, are divided based on culture. However, in spite of the regions being divided based on culture, Guyana’s school system and communities are diverse. The majority and minority population across Guyana’s communities emerged based on the slave trade followed by the indentured servitude during the 19th century. From 1850–1920, people were brought from India during the indentured servitude to, at the time, British Guyana and the island of Trinidad (Roopnarine, 2011). The present make-up of Guyana’s communities is almost the same as when that country was still under British rule. Guyana received its independence in 1966. So, the present make-up of Guyana’s schools’ population is mixed, but in harmony.

Living in low-income communities across the U.S., however, is considered to be a negative and it comes with quite a few challenges. Many of those communities are blighted. Parents there would prefer to send their children to another location to further their education but too often meet with serious objection by parents in better off urban or suburban communities, who resist increasing a diverse student population. Segregation laws do not exist in the U.S. anymore, but the school system across America is democratically re-segregating. White Americans send their children to majority white schools and Black Americans, in most cases, have no choice but to send their children to majority black schools (Labaree, 2010, p. 180).

I, too, grew up on the south side of Chicago during the 1990s in an area that was considered low income. During my time of residence, this inequity was no different than it is now, the only difference for me was that I did not distinguish between high and low incomes. It was not even on my radar as a recent immigrant in a new and different culture. According to the Illinois report card data for the school year of 2016 – 2017, racial and ethnic diversity for Morgan Park student body stood at white (0.4%), black (97.3%), Hispanic (1.3%), Asian (0.1%), American Indian (0%), two or more races (0.8%), and Pacific Islander (0.1%). Low income students which include the families of students receiving public aid, living assistance, and reduced-price lunches are 87% with a chronically truant statistic of 74.7% (Education, 2017-2018).

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