

Rachael Ledwidge
Final Reflection
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When looking back on a few short months of learning in this course, I have begun to realize the magnitude of societal inequalities our public-school students face. I feel as though I have taken off a pair of rose-colored glasses and realized that “best intentions” are not enough. Particularly for our low income, black, and Latinx students, school is not the championed place of equalizing power and opportunity I thought it to be. Instead, it presents the perfect institution to perpetuate harmful inequalities and further stratification of society. Prior to this class, I was completely unaware of the many maladies and conditions our public schools face and often unwittingly perpetuate. I am left with a litany of questions, rather than answers. However, there is hope in awareness. With a shift from simple equal opportunities to striving for equality of outcomes, it is my hope that schools can help to influence our society for the better.

Before this class, I believed equal opportunity to be a sufficient goal to work towards as teachers and administrators often use this phrase to highlight their reach to all students. In fact, in my first reflection at the beginning of this course I wrote, “Educational equity means that all students have what they need to be successful learners,” (2021). This implies that students only have certain barriers removed (such as lack of access to high quality teaching and curricula) but that the outcomes can be vastly different. However, now I recognize this approach is a low bar for which to strive. Students come to us from diverse backgrounds and levels of readiness. Because the public school can only truly influence about 20% of student lives, aiming to simply remove barriers isn’t enough to ensure everyone has what they need to enjoy successful outcomes. Rather, if we want to move society forward in a more equitable way, we need to also strive for equal outcomes. We should expect equal, successful outcomes for all our students and employ efforts of vertical equity to achieve them. I used to think regardless of a student’s race, socioeconomic status, gender, and intersection of identities, schools should provide equal opportunities. But now I think schools need to do better. We need to provide different accommodations and instruction to best suit the needs of varying populations, providing the highest and most thought-out levels of support to students with identities most vulnerable to unequal treatment or outcomes.

I used to think if teachers provided excellent instruction and used high quality curricula, students of all backgrounds would be afforded the same opportunities. Unfortunately, I was naïve in my approach even with loftily high expectations of myself and others in the field. I thought that students would receive an education that was equal if we simply provided the same information in accessible ways to all of our students. While I still believe strongly that students need varied approaches to instruction based on their learning style and needs, I now know that school isn’t just the information and instruction we provide. It is the act of “schooling” as is defined in *Despite the Best Intentions* (Lewis and Diamond 2015) that can create and perpetuate inequalities in any school, even one that is purposefully ethnically diverse. In their book, Lewis and Diamond highlight several seemingly innocuous policies and typical practices of most schools (i.e. dress code, advanced level class placement, teacher recommendations) that produce racialized achievement gaps. While the authors (and I) would argue that teachers, administrators, and policy writers have the best intentions for kids, we must take a step beyond intending-we must interrogate our practices and policies. Dr. Kieran Killeen stated, “Rational choices can

be perverted in a racist system,” (2021). As we learned this semester, we might have the best ostensive practices in our daily routines and policies for the students and yet the performative or actual outcomes as a result of our practices and policies creates racialized achievement and access gaps. We must look closely not just at the policies we write and routines we expect, but also what outcomes they produce. Are our students of color being penalized at higher rates than our white students for the same infractions? Are their punishments more severe? What does our student discipline data say? We must investigate if our policies for student tracking are racialized.

Lowered expectations of teachers for parental involvement of students of color was another unintentional but racist practice I have seen but had not contemplated before. What do our population demographics look like for our students of color, low-income backgrounds, and nonmale participation in higher level courses? What are the practices we employ to create these tracks? What are teacher’s beliefs about our students? How can we insist on higher expectations and become more aware of our own biases for the intersection of these identities? After all, race nor gender cause achievement gaps. Attitudes, beliefs, and biases contribute to the unfair treatment of these students. Combined with the remnants of highly (and both intentional and unintentional) racial housing policies as described in the *Color of Law* (Rothstein 2018) it is unsurprising that our schools and classes within schools are resegregating. I am left wondering, what happens when landmark Supreme Court cases such as *Brown vs. the Board of Education* don’t withstand the test of time. Why are white, middle- and upper-class families allowed to hoard their privileged status and wealth at the expense of our lower income and students of color?

In taking this class, I’ve begun to examine my own bias and interrogate my position as part of the public school system. I find that teachers, like schools, have the power to both create equalizing opportunities and also exacerbate existing inequalities. I need to understand my role within this system and work to undo policies and academic choices that increase inequalities. We need to be on the lookout for those who exploit our policies and systems both in a purposeful way and in a less overt manner, as it harms our most vulnerable populations. For instance, as was highlighted in *Despite the Best Intentions*, many white students were placed in higher level courses at their parents’ behest, despite a lack of aptitude or ability. Likewise, counselors were more likely to suggest lower-level classes or discourage placement in higher level classes to black students. As researcher Yasmyn Irizarry also found, teachers and counselors made a large impact (both positively and negatively) on whether black and Latinx students sustained their educational tracks, particularly in higher level math classes (2021). The opportunity hoarding occurring rampantly throughout our schools harms our students and moves our society farther away from equality of outcomes. Teachers can influence a student’s educational outcomes with the implicit and explicit influence they wield (Irizarry 2021). While we can’t change the community or home lives of our students, we can influence the educational access they deserve.

While the classic rhetoric that school *can* positively impact one’s economic status might be true, it is not a guarantee. More than school resources, the Coleman Report found that economic status determined academic success (1966). Furthermore, it is more likely that one’s socioeconomic status impedes one’s academic achievement in lower-income families. Researcher Sean Reardon of Stanford University found, “The achievement gap between children from high- and low- income families is roughly 30 to 40 percent larger among children born in 2001 than among those born twenty-five years earlier,” (2011 p. 1). Moving to Vermont and taking this course has highlighted the fact that where you live determines the kind of education you receive. Although this is true on a larger, macro scale in the United

States, Vermont presents a stark case in which a few districts in the state receive a tremendous amount of support and funds from the most affluent areas. To Vermont's credit, I realize we are trying to equalize funding across the state but nevertheless, money matters in education (Baker 2018). Not only are smaller districts less well-funded by lower property values and fewer homeowners, but the state continues to wrestle with weighting the cost of pupils within a school based on need. Per pupil spending is well above the national average in certain locations, while much lower in others. Because of Vermont's small population, it is also somewhat of a feedback loop as more affluent areas have better funded schools and larger populations that continue to drive property values and taxes up. Meanwhile, rural districts have lower property taxes based on valuations and fewer inhabitants to raise the tax base. Of that base, the median household income is much lower than the national average so higher property taxes are voted down as citizens struggle to make ends meet.

With less available resources, there are less opportunities for investment in specific programs, supports, and enrichments. I see this in the district where I work. There is a lack of identification of Special Education students in the youngest grades with administrators very hesitant to initiate testing. I speculate that although funding for Special Education comes from a different pool, that pool is still quite small. If a child is found to be eligible for specific services (i.e. 1-1 paraprofessional), the school must find the funding for that. As a result, many students are instead put into intervention which is a universal system of support within our school. After taking this course, I have questions about this system as I believe those students whose families have slightly higher socioeconomic or positional power within the town tend to get the testing and identification for special education with services guaranteed, when necessary, earlier on. We know this is a major benefit, particularly for students with disabilities. Parents who advocate for their children are more likely to be middle-class than from lower socioeconomic statuses (Calarco 2018). Even on a small scale, this is opportunity hoarding at work again. Inequitable levels of service are being provided to students not just based on need but based on involvement (or perceived involvement) and power of the families involved. On a larger scale, Duncan and Murnane found that education is in fact widening the wealth gap and contributing to it, not abating it (2011).

Overall, this course has completely disassembled my thoughts about education and created an incredibly complex and visceral portrait of inequalities in education. How can we promote and move towards greater equality in outcomes for our students within a capitalist society? Our society believes in the false paradigm that hard work begets economic achievement, no matter what the circumstances. Even for those who have faced generational poverty, trauma, systemic racism, federally implemented racist housing policies, and sexism, the rhetoric is that they simply need to work harder and go to school if they want to succeed in life. However, this class has highlighted that there are so many inequalities at play that prevent all students from reaching academic and ultimately economic success. Our U.S. culture promotes a false system of meritocracy where the playing fields are anything but level. My hope for my continued studies is that I can seek answers to questions involving effort in equitable funding in Vermont and other states. How can we work toward a need-based, wealth-equalized state aid formula like the one presented by Bruce Baker and Sean Corcoran in *The Stealth Inequalities of School Funding* (2012 p. 4)? How can we provide more adequate funding to the *students* who need it most, not simply district based? My hope going forward is to work to understand a more progressive outlook, not just for taxation but for school policies that promote educational equality of outcomes.

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