

Empirical Studies in Social Stratification Research on Educational Inequalities —A Case Study of Two High Schools in Detroit

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ABSTRACT

This paper is aiming to explore the relationship between social stratification and educational inequality through a case study of two high schools in the Detroit area, where distinct differences between poor communities and the wealthy ones are reflected. Two public high schools, Denby High School and Grosse Pointe South High School, will be examples of two different types of high schools in the U.S. education system. The study collects data to compare their educational qualities and the students' backgrounds. The results show that the school which has students with a better family background provides higher educational quality. This evidence lends qualified support to the status quo that education is reinforcing the social classes instead of giving low-income family opportunity.

Keywords: Education inequality, Social class, Race and income

1. INTRODUCTION

Bourdieu's [6] social reproduction theory has previously been referred to explain the educational inequality phenomenon that exists in society [9] and introduces the methods in which social class is reproduced in institutions, societies, and individuals [5]. This article is concerned with the implications of the steady situation of social class for understanding the reasons behind educational inequalities. The definition of social class is discussed here in broad terms as '...a nexus of unequal lived relationships arising from the social organization of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption [7].' This article considers a key problem in social stratification research on educational inequalities. Namely, the contradiction between the gap in social status and the consistency of educational quality in different regions with distinguishing economic situations.

Early studies focused on the factors that contribute to the distinguishing educational experiences among students with different social backgrounds. For instance, researchers discovered that low-income college students were less likely to be accessible to advanced high school courses and be less prepared for university based on the measures of reading, math, science, and some social science areas [8]. It has also been considered from the aspect of some of the same identity among low-income students. College students from lower social classes are more likely to be underrepresented minorities, to have parents with low educational degrees, and to come from single parent families [10].

While much of these is about low-income students and their different academic experience with other students, little is known about analyzing the reason why education does not help people to change their social status. Students' experiences and involvement in college influence their aspirations and persistence [4]. Therefore, education should change people's life and provide them with more opportunities to achieve better performance in college, so they could earn a better life. According to the researcher's study, the truth is, however, education is not as efficient as people think.

2. OVERVIEW OF TWO HIGH SCHOOLS

In the U.S, public schools receive financial support from local communities, largely composed of tax income. In contrast, public schools of many other countries such as Greece and Italy are sponsored by the government. Since the funding depends heavily on the income level of the community, there is a direct relationship between revenue and education development. That is to say, people are unlikely to receive qualified education in a poor neighborhood where the school's funds are deficient. Researcher examines two schools locating in similar communities but acquiring distinctively different education resources. They receive funding from separate governments since they are not in the same community. The economy of Grosse Pointe, a city adjoined with Detroit on the south and west, is much better than that of the place where Denby High School is located. Therefore, Grosse Pointe South High School is classified as the school located in the community with residents of high social class. In contrast, Denby High School is the example

of schools in poor neighborhoods. Schools in the same area with unequal educational quality are common in America, so these two cases are not particularly chosen. It will be a typical example of the common situation, educational inequality in America.

3. ANALYSIS OF CURRENT STATUS

All the data in this article comes from Great Schools [1], Public School Review [2], and TownCharts [3] data base.

3.1 Educational Quality

Table 1: Information about educational qualities in these two high schools

	Denby High School	Grosse Pointe South High School	(MI) State Average
Number of students	502	1665	/
SAT score	700-1000	1100-1300	1000
Graduation rate	70%-74%	95%	80%
Student:teacher ratio	24:1	19:1	18:1
Plenty of activities for students	15% agree	91% agree	/
Students achieving proficiency in math	equal or less than 5%	69%	39%
Students achieving proficiency in reading/language arts	10-14%	86%	49%

As table 1 shows, in Grosse Pointe South High School, there are 1665 students and the average SAT score of students is between 1100-1300, which is above the state average of 1000. Also, most of the students in this Grosse Pointe South High School can successfully finish their high school education, as its graduation rate is around 95%, compared to the graduation rate of only 70%-74% in Denby High School which is the home of 502 students. We

have to know that both schools are in Michigan State with the state average graduation rate is around 80%. The average SAT score of students from Denby High School is between 700 and 1000 which is below the state average as well. Also, the students achieving proficiency in math is equal or less than 5% and 10-14% of students who can achieve proficiency in reading/language arts in Denby High School. Both of the indicators are below the state’s average. However, in Grosse Pointe South High School, the percent of students achieving proficiency is much higher than the state’s average: 69% in math and 86% in reading/language arts. Besides classroom teaching, extracurricular activities are also important to the students’ learning process. On the Niche website, based on 43 responses, 91% of students and parents agree that there are plenty of clubs and organizations for students at Grosse Pointe South High School. However, in Denby High School, based on only 13 responses, 15% of students and parents agree that there are enough clubs and activities for students to join. This means that only 2 of them have enjoyed school activities. Moreover, the student-teacher ratio is essential to show a school’s educational quality because the fewer students each teacher is teaching, the more attention this teacher can offer to the students. In Denby High School, the student-teacher ratio is 24:1, and 19:1 in Grosse Pointe South High School which is significantly higher than the ratio in Denby High School. Therefore, the comparison illustrates that the academic qualities in the two schools are not on the same level.

3.2 RACE

Table 2: Information about students background in these two high schools

	Denby High School	Grosse Pointe South High School	(MI) State Average
Racial compositions	100% African American	85% White	66% White and 18% African American
Eligible for free lunch	75%	5%	40%

According to table 2, the two schools do not have diverse racial compositions and this contrast can be traced back to the history of racial segregation. To be specific, 85% of the students in Grosse Pointe South High School are white whereas 100% of the students in Denby High School are African American, a condition that makes Detroit a prime

example. The racial problem between African-Americans and whites in Detroit started in the 1860s. A democratic paper, *The Detroit Free Press*, was published and opposed to President Abraham Lincoln's policy. Ever since then, the violent conflicts between different races began in Detroit. In 1941, the Detroit Wall was built to divide white and black communities that created one of the most segregated cities in America, and that is why minorities, like African Americans, tend to live in the inner-city whereas the majority, the whites, live in the more affluent suburban area. People are more likely to bought houses in the neighborhood where the residents are in the same race. As a result, students were rejected by schools outside their racial areas. Although the school boards tried to fix this problem by sending school buses to help students in other communities commute to schools, most parents were against this decision, because white parents did not want their children to study with African-American children, and vice versa. In the 1970s, the federal court decided that schools in suburban Detroit did not need to be forced to accept African American students, and white students did not have to attend the schools in the city. However, Justice Marshall's dissenting opinion forecasted that such a discriminative situation can hardly be resolved. The racial issue remains severe and pursuit of education equality is hence hindered. As people are constrained within the residency of their race, the right to education can not be satisfied. It is difficult for people of the lower class to achieve themselves with unqualified learning and study while they are weak to change this fact. Finally, segregation and education inequality become a vicious cycle. As table 2 shows, students' family income is shown by the percentage of students who need free lunch in these two schools. There are 75% of students who are eligible for free lunch in Denby High School, but only 5% of students in Grosse Pointe South High School are eligible. The difference between the student's background and family income is one of the most significant reasons for the distinctive educational quality they have received.

4. SUGGESTIONS

Educational imbalance distinctively reflects the social class status as the upper class can pay more tax which is transferred to local education resources. According to the data on the Great Schools website, about 7% of students in Grosse Pointe South High School come from low-income families, but there are about 74% of students from low-income families in Denby High School. This means the family income can affect the educational quality their children receive. In Michigan, approximately 90% of the schools' funds come from local government, and the rest is from other states and federal programs or some local revenue. That is to say, a public school's quality is dependent on local tax, which is more sufficient in the upper-class district. Studies at Michigan State University show that it is difficult for public schools in Michigan to improve their education quality because of limited funding. Due to this reason, Detroit was planning to close several

unsuccessful schools including Denby High School in 2017. However, the plan was canceled because the residents disagreed with the closure, and it would lose a lot of money if schools were closed. After that, these schools relate closer to the local government, but their educational qualities are still declining. Schools' publicity declines and performance is not getting better. Many schools still cannot recruit faculty members and staff or get fiscal support from the government. Entwining economy, educational awareness, discriminative issues, these problems are hard to fix in the next few years. The negative influence of economy and history exists until today, but several expedient methods can help Detroit to ease educational inequality.

4.1 Resource Sharing

Resource sharing can balance the education quality of public schools at different levels. As we discussed before, not every public school provides low-level education for its students. Public schools like Grosse Pointe South High School can share their courses online, so students who are not in a high-quality school can take these courses as well. This method can give the students who are in an underperforming school to have access to teachers, better facilities, knowledge or information from other high-level schools. The Internet is the perfect media for these purposes. Public schools can establish associations and exchange their strengths. Some schools with high-quality education can record their teacher's lectures and post on the association website for other students to study. Some schools can open their online library to the association to approve access so that more students can enjoy the benefits. For instance, in Australia, there is an education resource sharing system called Scootle. It is owned by the state, territory and Australian education ministry. The platform can provide technologies and changing needs for the education and training sector, and it has more than 20,000 digital resources aligned to the Australian Curriculum. Since it is accessible for all the schools in Australia, the schools without good educational quality can also benefit from it.

4.2 Improve Family Education

Since family education plays an important role in children's education process, an excellent school education also requires assistance from parents. Some parents, who did not receive quality education themselves, do not understand the importance and urgency of sending children to a qualified school and often have difficulty helping their children with problems in school. The local government can fund nonprofit organizations to better inform these parents on the importance of education. The influence of parents on their children is very effective. High school graduation rates could be increased in this way because students will learn from their parents that education is

beneficial for their life. Otherwise, if parents do not even care about the educational quality their children are receiving, teachers cannot help too much to change students' attitudes and mindset on studying in school. So funding a nonprofit organization to help parents to realize the significance of children's study is a practical suggestion because we have a lot of resources to help achieve this goal.

5. CONCLUSION

Educational inequality is reinforcing the existing social classes by limited educational resources and by the historical impact. Education does not play a role that can change people's life completely as we usually think. The reasons behind the problems, such as the economy and historical reasons, are related to many factors that we are unable to manage immediately. It is hard to improve the economy in some cities or mitigate the negative influence of history, but we can reduce education inequality by sharing resources and changing perspectives of parents. So the future is still positive for the next generations. Social classes will not disappear, but every person should have the opportunity to change their social status if they are not satisfied with it. This is the reason why we have to solve the educational inequality, a prospect that more children can see the hope of the future. The logical results of the rapid development in human society contribute to the awareness that Denby High School is not a single case in America, and America is not the only country that is facing the problem of education inequality. We have to let more people consider this fact and try our best to find a way out of this dilemma.

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