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Citlalli Solis

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The Racial Inequalities of the American Public School System

by Citlalli Solis

Introduction

When compared to other countries, it is evident that the United States of America falls behind the others in its public education system. As highlighted by Matthew Lynch in “18 Reasons the U.S. The Education System is Failing” (2017), America’s education system fails the continuously evolving society despite the many attempts by the United States government to put forth policies to potentially fix the issues and disparities brought forth by the flaws. Some of the biggest ongoing issues seen in the public education system are the racial disparities and inequalities that continue to exist which target student minority groups. The American public education system continues to show the disparities that target many of its students of color and disproportionately places them at a disadvantage.

Institutional Racism in the Education System

Institutional racism is seen as any norms or policies present in institutions that effectively target a certain group of people based on race or ethnicity and seek to put forth unjust conditions for these targeted groups. Institutional racism dates back to the earlier years of the education system in America, largely during the years of Jim Crow laws and segregation. American history is plagued with years of segregation and its connection to placing others at a

disadvantage in their education. This can be seen “in the American South, [where] laws against African-Americans completely obstructed their ability to get an education. By law, it was illegal for an African-American to learn how to read and write” (Lynch, 2019). Through the usage of Jim Crow laws and segregation, America saw the existence of institutional racism in its education system. These laws and policies created a “‘separate but equal’ doctrine [creating] an educational system of segregated schools (i.e., Plessy vs. Ferguson)” (Lynch, 2019). The outward adoption of these policies in the American education system created the umbrella of institutional racism that overshadows the current education system and the issues that continue to be seen to this day.

Although the passing of *Brown v. Board* ultimately desegregated schools, and further actions pushed to integrate the public education system, America continues to see the effects of institutional racism within its education system. Matthew Lynch regards institutional racism in the education system as the “New Racism.” Lynch explains how “New Racism” occurs when “...blame for underachieving students of color is shifted to their parents, who are portrayed as slacking or uninvolved with their children’s education” (Lynch, 2019). Lynch points out how when students of color fall behind the curriculum or struggle to maintain passing grades, this new racism places the blame on the parents for the lack of teaching their children rather than blaming the education system for failing to teach these students to succeed. Through the presence of institutional racism in the education system, we see students of color placed in situations where their schools lack the necessary resources and funding to appropriately accommodate the students in a way that does place them at a disadvantage.

Unequal Opportunities for Students of Color

Public education continues to provide unequal opportunities for students of color. A way in which we continue to see this trend is through the continued racial segregation that is seen in public schools. It is reported that “two-thirds of minority students still attend schools that are predominantly minority, most of them located in central cities and funded well below those in neighboring suburban districts” (Darling-Hammond, 2016). This shows the issue of ongoing segregation that exists in today’s education system. There is a common trend when looking at schools where the population is highly consistent of minority students where we see a lack of funding and resources but increased disciplinary policies in place, as opposed to suburban districts with predominantly white student populations.

Lack of funding and resources for public schools with high minority student populations contributes to the unequal opportunities for students of color. Darling-Hammond reported that in “recent analyses of data prepared for school finance cases in Alabama, New Jersey, New York, Louisiana, and Texas have found that on every tangible measure—from qualified teachers to curriculum offerings—schools serving greater numbers of students of color had significantly fewer resources than schools serving mostly white students” (Darling-Hammond, 2016), showing the financial disparities seen in school populations with a majority of students of color. The lack of funding and resources greatly diminishes the rate of opportunity and educational success for the students that attend these underfunded schools. The underfunded schools can be further linked to the lack of exposure to a rigorous curriculum. When comparing these wealthier schools to those that are underfunded, one can truly see the educational system’s

lack of acknowledgment towards the financial disparities within it and the ways these disparities disproportionately affect these students.

Racial Discrimination Through Disciplinary Actions in Public Schools

The discipline policies and actions present in the public schools where a high minority population resides further exemplifies the inequalities brought forth by the public education system in the United States. One example of the major disciplinary policies that are highly criticized for targeting students of color is the zero-tolerance policies. These policies were once simply aimed at preventing the presence of weapons and for promoting drug enforcement in schools but later developed into school districts utilizing these policies to adopt punishments such as expulsion or suspension for not only minor behavioral actions but also other infractions deemed as punishable. The American Psychological Association (APA) conducted studies on the zero-tolerance policies via a task force which found that these policies often were linked to faulty assumptions between punishment and improvement in student behavior. In the evidence reported, the APA found that African-American students were more likely to be disciplined at higher rates than any other race, and in most instances the disciplinary actions were issued on account of smaller offenses at a more frequent rate. Furthermore, statistics shown in Winter's (2020) article show that through zero-tolerance policies, over 23.2% of Black high school students and a little over 10% of Hispanic students made up the national suspension rates compared to the 6% of white students shown. The increased rates by which the APA found these punishments affected students of color as well as the evidence found in the statistics

further exemplify the way zero-tolerance policies, whether inadvertently or not, target students of color and disproportionately influence the educational experiences for said students.

Disciplinary actions and policies highly contribute to racial inequalities in public schools as they can result in implicit biases that place students of color at an even bigger disadvantage. When looking at the topic of implicit bias, one should refer to the term as “the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions unconsciously. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual’s awareness or intentional control” (Quereshi and Okonufua 2017). In reference to implicit biases brought forth by disciplinary policies, Gordon (2018) shows how these policies lead to an implicit bias that exists in the education system towards these students of color in minority groups, prevalent in the disciplinary actions taken. Through these policies and their prevalence in being used towards students of color, attributing the implicit biases linked to the disciplinary policies present in public schools with a minority student population highlights the disadvantages these students will come to face during their education. Studies done by the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (2019) found that disparities in disciplinary actions that target students of color are linked to racial biases at a county level, which contributes to the presence of implicit bias in education. In regard to the disparities, it was found that “these disparities are particularly concerning as they are associated with long-term outcomes, including employment and involvement in the criminal justice system” (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Thorough analyses and examination of these policies

are necessary to fully acknowledge the long-term effects they will have on students of color and their future educational and employment opportunities.

School to Prison Pipeline

Byproducts and direct trends that emerge as a result of disciplinary policies such as the zero-tolerance policies can also be used to further expose racial inequalities within the public education system. The school-to-prison pipeline is a trend too often seen in the United States' public education system that targets students of color and places them upon an indirect path from school into a prison or jail. This pipeline is most often seen through the different policies and other methods of discipline being used in public schools, most often in cases of discipline towards students of color. The American Civil Liberties Union (2020) points out that this trend begins with the over-policing of public schools whose student populations consist of mostly students of color, as well as the failure to provide these schools proper resources such as funding and counseling for their students. Deprivation of necessary resources and funds for these minority-populated schools shows another way in which these students are targeted by the public education system as it places them further behind in education than students in schools that do not lack these necessities. Although educational resources given to students and school funding should not be a measure of student success, the ugly truth of the matter is that it in fact does affect it. When looking at trends like the school-to-prison pipeline, it is difficult not blame of the failure for these students to succeed on their schools. The school-to-prison pipeline criminalizes students of color and therefore disregards the importance of promoting educational success to these groups of students.

Proposed Solutions and Counter Claim

Although there is much evidence of the racial inequalities in the public education system, some argue that schools in America are not to blame for the racial disparities and therefore should not be responsible for fixing these issues. Hanauer criticizes the argument of the need to fix the education system and argues that “...even the most thoughtful and well-intentioned school-reform program can’t improve educational outcomes if it ignores the single greatest driver of student achievement: household income” (Hanauer, 2019). Those that agree with Hanauer argue that fixing the educational system will do nothing to address the even bigger overarching issue faced by many in household income and the gaps in social statuses in the American economy. Many argue that “placing the blame solely on teacher training, or the curriculum, or the design of the high school—alleging ‘brokenness’—perpetuates the fiction that all schools can be made great without addressing issues of race, class, and power” (Schneider, 2016). However, in refusing to address the outward disadvantages being faced by students of color in the education system, Americans will not progress nor be able to address the overarching issues seen in the opposing arguments.

By beginning to address the byproducts that racial inequalities create, such as the achievement gap for students and the lack of opportunities given to these students and the existence of the racial discrimination and targeting that is currently prevalent in the public school system, the issue will begin to be regarded as a problem in dire need of multifaceted solutions. Developing the current curriculum in schools to address diversity and culturally relevant topics and improving upon the individual classroom practice to improve engagement

by connecting students of color to their lived experiences within the classroom are simple solutions to promote change and a diversified narrative in the education system. To address the issue of harsh disciplinary policies, restorative justice—which aims at providing a safe space for students being accused of disciplinary infractions as well as simply ridding the system of the harsher policies like zero-tolerance policies—will help to diminish the negative effects the policies have on students of color. Through proposed educational reform and improvement in curriculum and school employee training, progress is a foreseen byproduct of the necessary efforts. Through the improvement of these attributes, among others, the broken education system America currently struggles with will slowly improve as well.

Conclusion

Racial inequalities continue to exist in America's education system because of its many contributors, such as the unequal opportunities given to its students of color, racial discrimination through disciplinary actions, and the existence of the school-to-prison pipeline. It is important to address just how these racial inequalities place students of color at a great disadvantage not only when it comes to education but also when it comes to life outside of school. If allowed, the great gaps that exist when looking at educational success comparing students of color to white students will continue to differ greatly, in turn continuing to target these students. If something is not done, racial inequality will continue to place students of color at a disadvantage.

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