

The Disparities between Urban and Suburban American Education Systems: A Comparative Analysis Using Social Closure Theory

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Abstract

Education is pivotal for the existence of humans. Education is used to develop minds in a myriad of ways for an individual to excel in critical thinking and fundamental learning. In America, education is a valuable resource for one's social, economic and mental standing in society. About 86% of Americans now receive college degrees, compared to the 25% in 1927 (Pew Research Center, 2011). But education is still treated as a privilege instead of a right. Public education in urban areas is said to be significantly worse than in suburban areas. Only about 19% of students from urban school districts seek higher education compared to 70% of their suburban counterparts (Pew Research Center, 2011). Suburban and urban sectors of the education system are drastically different due to resources, teacher attrition rate, and lack of parental support. Funds are allocated to the top performing schools, leaving many low performing schools at a plateau to produce mediocrity. Consequently, even when education laws such as No Child Left Behind and The Elementary and Secondary Education Act which are suppose to create equity are implemented in schools, they instead create inequality in America's public school system. Students in certain regions remain at a disadvantage, as one district is favored based on performance over low-performing districts. Using the Social Closure Theory, this comparative study tests the hypothesis that if school systems were granted equal access to the same funds and materials, then the disparities between suburban and urban school districts would diminish. Qualitative and quantitative data from case studies, scholarly articles and expert interviews were collected and analyzed to show the recursive lack of funding in urban school districts. The substantive findings of this study support the hypothesis tested and the call for equal educational resources for both urban and suburban school systems.

Keywords: Public Education, Urban, Suburban, Social Closure Theory

1. Introduction

In America, public education systems prove to be important cornerstones for the foundation of education. Institutions created to develop students efficiently in education have steadily decreased in standards, compared to its international counterparts. America ranks among the 25th percentile in mathematics, 17th in science, and 14th in reading, according to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). The educational system in America is fraught with many economic and social problems. As a result, the battle for equal education in America has been a constant fight for equality.

The problems of America's education system are deeply rooted in America's history. The history of education is filled with segregation, bias, and inequalities for minorities and the poor. During slavery, African people, both men and women, were denied the opportunity to any forms of education. After slavery was abolished, heavy segregation laws were upheld by the Supreme Court case *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. This court case established sixty-two years of formal segregation. African Americans were forced into inferior schools that lacked resources and teachers for the students. (Anderson, 1988)

In 1954, *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the central question addressed by the Supreme Court was whether or not segregation of children in public schools based solely on race, deprived minority children of equal educational opportunities. The court declared that racial segregation was unconstitutional and demanded that immediate desegregation was implemented within the school districts.

While desegregation spread quickly throughout the states, school districts began to witness the formation of marginalized communities. This resulted due to massive suburban sprawl in the mid 1960's, when a majority of White children began to move to the suburbs, leaving a majority of poor minorities in urban districts. The development of suburban sprawl led to an imbalance in ratios between races in schools. Inequalities of races between districts are still shown in statistics today. America's education systems suffers from a multitude of problems but the main issue, which effects the majority of the population, are the disparities found between urban and suburban school districts.

This paper utilizes the Theory of Social Closure to demonstrate the inequality between urban and suburban school districts. Major cities such as Atlanta, Chicago, New York, Dallas, and Washington D.C often have major differences between their suburban and urban schools districts. This study will look closely between the disparities between regional school districts based on the funding gap, teacher attrition rate, lack of parental support, and the achievement gap.

For the Social Closure Theory, Weber states that a dominant group attains its position in society based on monopolizing resources and opportunities for it own group and denying the same resources to others. Within this paper, the Social Closure Theory is used to demonstrate how suburban schools receive higher funding allocation; while urban schools receive less funding allocations due to their testing scores or geographical locations. The funding gap has proven to be a factor in school districts when it comes to resources, parental support and teacher attrition rate. This paper provides evidence that with education reform and reallocation of funding, the discrepancies between school districts would diminish.

The major research questions under investigation in this paper are as follows: (1) What factors hinder the equality of education? (2) Does the allocation of funds affect the access to resources in school districts? (3) Through education reform, can equality exist in education throughout the United States? The importance of this essay hinges on the fact that it inquires about ways to develop and evolve the education system into an effective structure; that will be able to produce equality education for all. America's ranking in education is a terrifying awakening that must be replaced with a new system capable of equality.

2. Literature Review

Fifty-seven years after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, inequality still existed within schools districts in America. Recent studies along with new legislative acts in education have shown that disparities still exist within in school districts today. Student in urban school districts are stricken with poverty and inadequate material compared to their affluent suburban counterpoints. The following literature review thematically summarizes a sample of the sources found in researching this topic.

Jonathan Kozol in *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (1991) exposes the worsening conditions of the effects of extreme wealth and poverty lines in between urban and suburban school districts. Kozol visited more than thirty cities, including New York, Washington, D.C, Camden, NJ, and St. Louis, MO, to examine different case studies for his book. His critical analysis explores the findings that correlate in environment, teachers, and test scores in school districts. His findings concluded that integration of schools declined immensely over the years and urban school districts suffer greatly from the formation of a "two-tier" system in education. This book analyzes the systematic inequalities that have been upheld in the injustices of education for centuries.

Richard Rothstein in *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic and Educational Reform to Close the Black-white Achievement Gap* (2004) suggests the way toward social and economic reforms that would give all children in America a more equal chance to succeed in school. He challenges the assumption by contemporary public policy analysts that the achievement gap between Black and White students could be closed if only schools would do a better job.

The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935 (1988), by James Anderson reconstructs the development of education in the post antebellum era. His use of political, cultural and economic outlook on education in Black America allows the reader to gain full access to the experience of this struggle.

The Black-White Test Score Gap (1998) edited by Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips creates a critical analysis of the achievement gap in educational school systems. The analysis offers insight on a race-based institution that allows certain groupings access to resource, which uphold the achievement gap in today's society.

The Schools We Need: And Why We Don't Have Them (1999), by E.D Hirsch explores the overall school system and its failure to produce capable students for today's economy. Hirsch focuses on establishing "core knowledge" for academics and core beliefs in reforming education. The book analysis provides critical insight on the fundamental errors in America public school system.

Deborah Meier, Joshua Cohen, Joel Rogers review the concept of standardized testing in today's education system in, *Will Standards Save Public Education?* (2000). The authors look at the methods used to establish standardized testing in classrooms. They question the effectiveness of standardized testing ability to measure the proficiency-relating students. Meier believes the effects of standardized testing established an achievement gap within school districts and have the potential to attack future generations capability of creativity and ability to become productive individuals of society. Additionally, each author provides solutions to replace an inadequate testing policy in school districts.

Thomas L. Good in *The Great School Debate: Choice, Vouchers, and Charters* (2000) writes about education reform over the past fifty years. Its analytical look into solutions for the disparities in school districts, produce compelling development in the structure of charter schools and voucher plans. Good's methodologies on implement change in education reform, develops ideas that have potential use to the future of public education system.

Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hilliard in *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement among African-American Students* (2004) writes three provocative essays that displays the lives of three different African American students and the struggles they face in the educational system. These authors reveal a deeper analysis of the achievement gap forced upon the black community. Each essay develops a critical understanding of black existentialism in America.

Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and A New Social Movement (Critical Social Thought) (2005), by Jean Anyon discusses the influence of federal and metropolitan policies that effects urban community development. While Anyon focuses on the entire urban community, she also focuses on the inconstancies of urban school districts. She dissects public policies that need to be replaced in order to begin reforming urban school districts. She develops a paradigm and an understanding on how to implement urban school district reform and destruction of inequality in America's school district.

The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America (2006), by Jonathan Kozol is another provocative book produced by the author. Kozol recent development of the effects on the public education system in America has reflected the growth and changes in schools over the past 50 years. The author compares several case studies to show how the effects of No Child Left Behind have continued to impact urban school districts in a negative way. His compilations of cases studies challenges the nation to provide a structured education system filled with equality. While there are still noticeable differences within the education system, Kozol takes the time to acknowledge the teachers and students that have broken the boundaries of the achievement gap and the lack of funding within districts.

Charles Payne develops a cohesive analysis of the deterioration of urban schools in the education system with his book, *So Much Reform, So Little Change: The Persistence of Failure in Urban Schools* (2008). His book adequately critiques diminishing factors that have been established in Urban Schools. Payne develops a structure of reforms that would allow urban schools to be revitalized within their communities.

Although it is evident that an educational reform is needed in the United States, the most important challenge that faces this economy is the equality that must be maintained between school districts that must be achieved in order to succeed. This study attempts to provide effective solutions to diminish the separating factors between urban and suburban school districts, in order to establish a credible education system for future generations.

3. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

As stated earlier, the theory used to guide this study is the Social Closure Theory, which is based on the Neo-Weberian theory idea that "the process by which social collectivities seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligible" (Parkin, 1979:4). The Social Closure Theory applies to the gains of social capital allocated in certain communities, which alters the economic infrastructures to sustain social mobility for a dominant class.

This theory is useful because it analyzes the relationship between the dominating class and the flow of social capital. Funding gaps analysis show undistributed allocation of money between schools based off of geographical locations. Low poverty communities are able to produce thriving school environments and focuses on enhancing the achievements of their pupils. While high poverty communities are forced to maintain similar standards of student achievements; without the gains of the district social capital. Understanding the discrepancies between funding and

the status of one's socio-economic status can potentially allow the formation of new educational reforms in order to diminish the widening gap of discrepancies.

This paper relies on the idea that social groupings are affected by the social environment they live in based on their accessibility to resources. These developments of undistributed funds within school districts have a direct correlation between environment and location. The Social Closure theory is important in this study because the paper aims to show that equal allocation of funding and reformation of school systems will create a foundation for equality within education systems.

The methodological approach used in this study is a qualitative, comparative approach. What makes it qualitative is that the information is expressed through words rather than numbers. The study is comparative in that its purpose is to analyze two separate things by weighting one against the other (Kumar 1999: 32).

This paper hypothesizes that if school systems were granted equal access to the same funds and materials, then the disparities between suburban and urban school districts would diminish. The unit of analysis in this study is represented by school districts, which are analyzed on a macro level to represent the regional differences between allocations of funding and the development of achievement gaps. Data collection was established on the expert interview and document analysis technique, incorporating primary and secondary sources. Primary and secondary sources consist of interviews with teachers and principals, books, scholarly journals and internet sources. The main factors that shaped the choice of this data collection technique were the amount of time, availability of research material, and the extensiveness of the issue.

4. Data Analysis

The analysis of this study consists of three subsections. The first subsection is the analysis of the statistical data found between the monetary differences between districts, cities and states in education. The second subsection examines the effects of the achievement gaps between races and how it correlates between test scores.

4.1. Funding Gap

America has established a belief of "liberty and justice for all", so it is not a surprise that most Americans find themselves products of an educational system that is universal throughout the nation. While the education system proves to be a structure established to help educate the general public, many schools suffer from inequalities that are existent due to the funding gap. The funding gap is the amount of money spent per student in school districts.

The funding gap shows that many low-income minority students are subjected to inferior facilities, less adequate teachers, and an incomparable curriculum to their counterparts. "In both 2002 and 2011, the 10 poorest schools on average spent 30 percent of what the 10 richest schools spent on average to educate each student, according to the analysis" (Russo, 2011:1).

The core of these problems stems from the fiscal policies that are put in place, that consistently short-change urban school districts and the students that attend these schools (Liu, 2006:4). Many times state funding is inadequate and has to be recovered by federal funding. Federal funding was meant to supplement and not supplant for the lack of funding in states (Liu, 2006: 2). Figure 1 illustrates the funding that varies between states. This figure shows that states that tend to have a higher funding gap are states that have the most urban cities. State's government has control over the distribution of funding, while the federal government contributes less than 10% to each district, to supplement for state and local resources.

State-by-State IDEA Funding Gap (in millions)

Alabama	\$ 251	Kentucky	\$ 219	North Dakota	\$ 38
Alaska	\$ 50	Louisiana	\$ 262	Ohio	\$ 605
Arizona	\$ 256	Maine	\$ 76	Oklahoma	\$ 204
Arkansas	\$ 155	Maryland	\$ 277	Oregon	\$ 178
California	\$ 1,696	Massachusetts	\$ 392	Pennsylvania	\$ 590
Colorado	\$ 214	Michigan	\$ 554	Rhode Island	\$ 60
Connecticut	\$ 184	Minnesota	\$ 262	South Carolina	\$ 245
Delaware	\$ 47	Mississippi	\$ 166	South Dakota	\$ 45
District of Columbia	\$ 24	Missouri	\$ 314	Tennessee	\$ 327
Florida	\$ 874	Montana	\$ 51	Texas	\$ 1,358
Georgia	\$ 451	Nebraska	\$ 103	Utah	\$ 152
Hawaii	\$ 55	Nevada	\$ 96	Vermont	\$ 37
Idaho	\$ 76	New Hampshire	\$ 66	Virginia	\$ 390
Illinois	\$ 700	New Jersey	\$ 500	Washington	\$ 306
Indiana	\$ 357	New Mexico	\$ 126	West Virginia	\$ 105
Iowa	\$ 169	New York	\$ 1,049	Wisconsin	\$ 288
Kansas	\$ 148	North Carolina	\$ 452	Wyoming	\$ 39

Figure 1: State-By-State Funding Gap Education Trust
Source: Education Trust, 2006

In an interview with a principal from Norfolk, VA school systems, she explains the heavy grievance she deals with due to the funding gap. “The differences between the amount of funding between suburban and urban school districts are there. The discrepancies that exist in Virginia aren’t as vast as surrounding states, but there are disproportionate amounts of funding that exist. As a principal in one of the highest poverty areas in Virginia, funding differences are immensely greater in the area of urban schools. Students are taught in schools that do not have the funding capable of producing comparable learning environments, to their counterparts. Teachers can provide excellent learning environments and a rigorous curriculum, but they cannot produce the same supplies as comparable schools. It’s unfortunate but funding creates disadvantages learning environment created by educational policy laws. Laws and standardized test limit educational opportunities. Students deserve equality in education and should not be deemed unworthy based off the zip codes they may live in. When children are given the opportunity to excel, they will. The opportunity just has to present itself” (personal interview, December 28, 2011).

Figure 2 displays the percent change of funding within the states due to budget cuts in Congress. While federal cuts have been made in education, states and local revenue have suffered the price creating even bigger funding gaps.

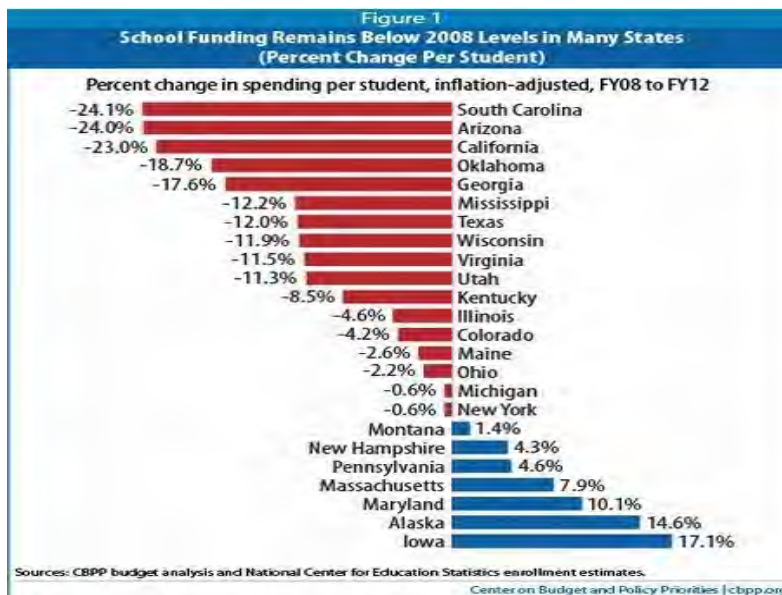


Figure 2: School Funding Gaps Between States
Source: *The Washington Post* (2011)

The following facts from the University of Michigan Urban Education Web site underscore the disparity between urban and suburban schools and the reasons (http://sitemaker.umich.edu/rosman.356/funding_):

- 31% of all students in the United States are concentrated in 1.5% of urban schools with total per person revenues that are only 89% of the average total pupil revenue.
- Under-funding of urban schools is affected by funding formula including low weights for compensatory education, bilingual or English as a second language programs, and attendance-based foundation programs.
- Urban school enrollments are made up of 25% or more students who are low income.
- Urban schools enroll higher rates of immigrant and diverse students, including ethnic, racial, linguistic, and religious populations.
- Urban students are likely to have higher rates of mobility, absenteeism, and poor health. They are also less likely to have health coverage, which decreases attendance and reduces funding based on attendance-based formula.

It is quite evident from the preceding facts that there is, indeed, an equity issue when it comes to funding urban and suburban schools that is inevitable.

4.2. Achievement Gap

The Achievement Gap is the widening disparities between low- and high-income Blacks and Hispanics against non-minorities achievements. Educators use the achievement gap to show the differences in standardized testing, drop out rates, and academic achievement. The gap can also show the discrepancies between low income and high-income students. Educators have noticed the widening of the gap and have tried to place educational policy in effect to change it.

The No Child Left Behind Act focuses on closing the gap, which focuses on the federal government taking accountability for the achievement of student's throughout the school districts. While the law was established to enforce academic achievement on a national basis, the law has become a crippling stature; that provides the lowest poverty school districts an advantage towards funding. Schools that produce higher achieving student often receive more help from the federal government.

In an interview with a Prince Georges County teacher, Simone Ferguson stated, "Students have variety of learning styles that allow them to learn concepts differently, whether it is with difficulty or ease. With standardized testing implemented through school systems, it forces the teachers to teach memorization, rather than application methods in the classrooms. Teachers are forced to pass their students on to the next grade, in fear of facing harsh consequences. It's not fair to our children, to use them in order to receive adequate funding or resources. Schools should have equal access to the same resources, regardless of zip codes" (personal interview, December 28, 2011). Many educators view the achievement gap as the foundation for educational reform. Teachers strive to create learning environments that will close the gap and increase the rate of African American and Hispanics student's dropout rates. The achievement gap has shown a direct correlation between socio-economic factors and progress in school. "According to a seminal study of language development in 1995, by age 3, children in poverty have smaller vocabularies and lower language skills than children from middle-income families. Research has also shown that dropout rates tend to be higher for children who live in poverty" (Trust, 2011:3).

Figure 3 demonstrates the achievement gap between races and the dropout rates according to socio-economic factors. From this table, it can be seen that overall, the achievement gap is the basis of education reform initiative. The easy part is seeing the gap; the hard part is correcting it.

Tyrone Sims, a teaching assistant in District of Columbia school system states: "A school has a duty to provide all students with adequate learning environment to prepare them for the opportunities and challenges that awaits them. The education that school districts provide must shape intellectual capable students, equipped with problem solving abilities and developmental strategies; that will allow them to compete effectively in an international market. Using standardized testing to measure student and teacher performances, doesn't equate to student achievement, but it creates competition within school systems. America's school systems are simply encouraging financial competition,

instead of producing students of intellectual capability personal interview, December 28, 2011). Achievement gaps are likely the main focus of educators in today's time. Federal and state governments implement laws that try to diminish these gaps and provide a better future in education for America. But the reform must equalize funding within districts and create adequate learning environments equal for every student.

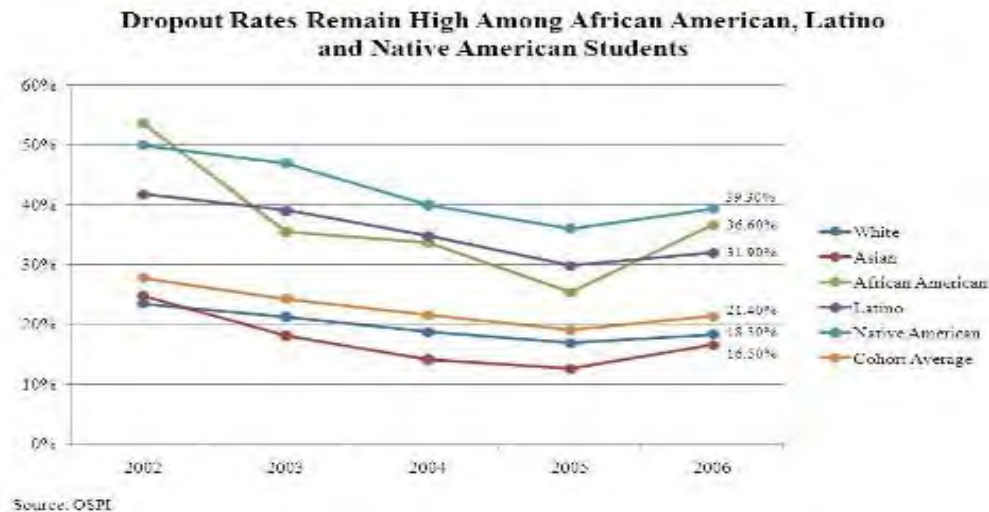


Figure 3: Dropout Rates amongst High School Students
Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2006

5. Conclusion

The reason for this study was to understand the disparities between suburban and urban schools. Based on the Social Closure theory, it was hypothesized that if school systems were granted equal access to the same funds and materials, then the disparities between suburban and urban school districts would diminish. The hypothesis appears to be rational.

After extensive research, it has been shown that equality of funding can produce comparable schools and decreasing the achievement gap can produce similar achievement levels. Through these findings, one sees that the need for education reform is needed to revitalize America's education system. Also, race and socioeconomic statuses can negatively correlate with the disparities found in educational factors. Hopefully, this analysis will stimulate more studies on the reformation of educational policy.

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