Urban Versus Suburban Public Schools:

Resolving the Issue of Racial Inequality in Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to address a possible solution to the racial inequality in urban versus suburban public schools. It also addresses the stereotyping and racial bias associated with this issue. Students enrolled in the urban school districts are predominantly African American and are found to be at an educational disadvantage compared to the students attending the predominantly White suburban schools. Three suburban high schools were interviewed on their perception of African American students in general. Results showed that the majority of the respondents which include students and teachers, saw African American students in a very negative light. Teachers, school administrators, parents and the community need to take responsibility in ridding the negative stereotyping associated with students of color. The best possible way to provide equal educational opportunities for all students attending public schools is through a unified school system. But in order for a unified school system to be successful teachers, school administrators, parents and the community are going to have to come together in support of equal educational advancement for all students regardless of race, ethnic group or economic status. (Contains 2 tables).

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Since the start of the Civil Rights Movement, breaking the barriers associated with racially segregated schools in America remains to be a challenge today. A study conducted on educational inequality in urban and suburban schools found that racial segregation is damaging as a whole to the educational experience specifically, among high school students. Results also indicate that students in urban schools are significantly underprivileged academically compared to students in suburban schools (Lleras, 2008).

In 1848, a five year old African American child from Boston, Massachusetts walked past five predominantly White schools in an effort to get to the segregated school that she attended. Her father filed suit against the city of Boston for excluding children of color from attending certain public schools. In the *Roberts vs. Brown* decision in 1850, the Supreme Court ruled that the elimination of "colored only" schools was not in violation of the Constitution. It wasn't until 1974, that school integration in the Boston school districts took effect. (Columbia Law School, 2012).

Over one hundred years later in Topeka, Kansas, a little black girl seven years of age was forced to travel one mile by foot each morning to school. Her journey also consisted of having to cross a dangerous railroad track while in route in order to catch a bus that would take her to the all- black school that she attended, even though an all-white school was located only seven blocks from her home. The little girl's father along with several other parents of the African American community, united in filing a lawsuit with Topeka's Board of Education after being denied admittance when attempting to enroll their children in nearby all-white schools. (O'Brine).

This monumental lawsuit, better known as *Brown vs. the Board of Education* was established in an effort to end segregation in public schools and to allow African American students an equal opportunity to exceed academically. The 1954 Supreme Court decision in the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* lawsuit affirmed segregation in public schools as unlawful (O'Brine, Kritsonsi, 2008).

A few years following the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* decision, another historic milestone transpired in association with the 1954 ruling against "separate but equal" in public schools. In 1957 in Little Rock, Arkansas, nine heroic African American high school students accompanied by law enforcement, bravely entered the doors of all-white Central High School in an effort to exercise their constitutional right to attend what was then a school intended for Whites only. These nine individuals helped to pave the way for public school integration in the south by taking a stand and giving others in the African American community the courage to fight for their right to equality as Americans (Arkansas Dept. of Parks, 2010).

These and similar historic landmarks have been beneficial to the cause and contributed greatly to the start of a positive outlook for the future of America's underprivileged African American youths, but studies show that these meaningful moments in history have not been totally effective in the overall desegregation of public schools. Research indicates that racial division among students in the public school system in the United States continues to be a problematic issue.

Court- ordered desegregation of public schools was followed by much debate. The integration of schools basically affected the urban schools where minority housing was more prevalent. Court mandated desegregation evoked much violence and legal actions in many cities

throughout the United States. It also caused many White middle-class residents who lived in the city to leave their homes and move their families to the suburbs (Favro, 2007).

Since the 1954 Supreme Court's decision to declare the segregation of public schools unconstitutional, efforts to eliminate division among races in public schools has been somewhat of a gradual process. Following the ruling, school segregation in the Northern states was deeply rooted due to restrictions in segregated housing (Franklin, & Moss, 2009). Research suggests that current school segregation in the United States has been linked to residential segregation of neighborhoods (Miron, Urschel, Mathis &Tornquist, 2010). During the 1960's, powerful rallying in areas such as New Rochelle, New York, Englewood, New Jersey; Chester Pennsylvania; and Chicago, Illinois, was a strong indication of what was ahead. The opposition to the desegregation of schools in the South was quite apparent in their less than mediocre approach to moving forward with this transition. By 1958, the integration of public schools in the South went from a gradual process to practically a complete halt (Franklin, & Moss, 2009).

Throughout the past five decades, there has been a steady increase of urban school systems that are developing into tremendously impoverished and minority categories while the majority of most suburban schools districts continue to be predominantly White and middle class. Predominantly White families move into suburban districts in search of better neighborhoods and quality schools. Low income families, who are basically classified as the minority, are not financially capable of moving out of the city mainly due to the cost associated with living in the suburbs (O'Brine, & Kritsonis, 2008). This paper examines the differences associated with urban and suburban schools in reference to racial inequality, stereotyping and academic achievement. It also addresses measures that could be taken in an effort to resolve these differences.

Negative Aspects Associated with Urban Schools

Schools located in urban districts are frequently linked deeply with visions of walls covered in spray paint, neglected and congested facilities, unruly behavior, dangerous hallways, drug distribution, low teacher morale, poor parent participation, low test results, widespread poverty, and predominantly African American student enrollment (Boutte, 2012). Social and political factors often associate the term "urban" in reference to minority students who are oftentimes disorderly, living in poverty, and academically challenged. Students that are enrolled in urban schools are considered to be disadvantaged to a significant degree from those of students enrolled in suburban schools specifically when it comes to the quality of textbooks as well as the qualifications of the teacher (Boutte, 2012).

A study was conducted at three suburban schools; Kelly, Johnson, and Parker High. Students and faculty were interviewed on their perception of African American students. The results from the study showed that African American students were viewed as rowdy and overly outgoing, less driven, less equipped for school, more argumentative and had less parental support than White students. Faculty members also believed that the academic level of African American students was lower than that of White students (Evans, 2007).

Respondents of the study suggest that the African American student can also be associated with bad habits such as skipping school and tardiness due to a lack of parental involvement in their education. The respondents addressed the language used and the gang related attire worn by African American students as well. They expressed how the two gave them a feeling of fear and discomfort (Evans.2007).

Table 1 shows the proportion of African Americans at Kelly, Johnson, and Parker High Schools and in their communities in 1990 and in 2000 (Evans, 2007).

Table 1

**Proportion of African Americans at Kelly, Johnson, and Parker
High Schools and in Their Communities, 1990 and 2000**

	Kelly	Johnson	Parker
Community			
1990	20	19	60
2000	50	55	84
School			
1990	8	32	75
2000	50	75	95

Studies indicate that if given the opportunity to choose, the majority of active teachers as well as students in training to become a teacher, would much rather teach in a suburban school setting. Educators frequently look at and handle urban students' behavioral issues as being compulsive and uncontrollable. On the other hand, teachers are inclined to treat suburban students' problems as a part of the developmental process while urban school students are frequently judged and dealt with as if they are incarcerated (Boutte, 2012).

It has been reported that there are several obstacles that urban school districts are faced with such as repeated negative results in academic performance; a high percentage of students enrolled in special education courses; a substantial degree of students being suspended and expelled; unavailability of highly quality teachers; insufficient curriculum; lack of motivation by the student ; lack of teacher motivation ; insignificant curriculum; non-participation, support, and absence of organization on the part of parents and the community; and deficiencies in school funding (Butte 2012).

Table 2 shows the percentage of public school teachers who reported "potential problems" as "serious problems" in urban, suburban, town and rural districts in primary, middle and high school settings during 2007-2008 (Butte, 2012).

Table 2

Percentage of Public School Teachers Who Reported Potential Problems as "Serious Problems" in 2007-2008

School level	Lack of Parental involvement	Poverty	Students come to school unprepared to learn	Student apathy	Student tardiness
Primary					
City/urban	24.0	34.4	27.8	9.0	10.6
Suburban	13.8	17.9	16.3	4.9	5.1
Town	18.9	29.2	22.2	7.3	5.4
Rural	11.0	18.4	13.8	5.2	3.2
Middle					
City/urban	27.5	32.6	33.3	24.4	11.5
Suburban	15.0	12.8	18.4	12.7	4.2
Town	19.0	28.6	27.0	17.0	4.7
Rural	13.8	17.6	19.9	15.0	2.7
High					
City/urban	35.4	31.5	41.6	35.4	30.2
Suburban	19.6	12.3	25.0	25.9	18.1
Town	22.9	23.5	30.2	28.1	13.6
Rural	20.7	20.5	27.6	27.8	10.5

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center of Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey, "Public Teacher Questionaire," 207-2008e.

Teacher Responsibility

Teachers' opinions concerning the perceptive dimensions of their students as well as a teachers' obligation to the profession of teaching in itself, portrays an important part in the formation of their students' academic achievement. The success of academic achievement can be impacted by a teacher's negativity in reference to any of their students as a whole, and their lack of enthusiasm and willingness to take on the accountability for the academic progress of all their students. Research has shown that teachers employed in high schools located in urban school districts, and their obligation to their profession, including their obligation of

responsibility for student learning, is associated with how much their students will attain (Andrade, Halvorsen, Lee, 2009).

The techniques by which teachers' opinions inspire student learning have a tendency to be tapered by teachers' actions. Overall, teachers' opinions in reference to a student's capacity to learn, as well as teachers' own state of mind concerning responsibility, has a tendency to encourage their communication with students. Teachers' opinions about their own students' capabilities also encourage the teachers' performance. Research shows that teachers who are eager about taking personal responsibility for their students' learning are apt to have high academic expectations for children in general as well as for students' independent performance and achievements (Andrade, Halvorsen & Lee, 2009).

Teachers' opinions about learning, whether put into operation at either the individual or the collective level, are guided by the contrast of the schools in which they teach. Evidence has shown that elementary and secondary schools that have a larger number of low-income and/or minority students enrolled are inclined to have lower levels of collective responsibility. Teachers in schools that enroll students who are classified as low-income, minority and under achievers have a tendency to give up on or reject such students. However, it is a teachers' role as an educator to take responsibility for their students specifically in schools of this nature. Research suggests that teachers who teach students from low-income families should view themselves as mentors for these students and as someone who cannot only teach them on an academic level, but one who can make a difference in their lives by trying to guide them in the right direction through support, patience and understanding. Teachers need to have the ability to overcome the desire of being taken in by feelings of powerlessness (Andrade, Halvorsen & Lee, 2009).

Administrator's Role

Suburban school principals have to deal with the challenges affiliated with working in predominantly White schools that are not knowledgeable of cultural differences among minority groups, which in turn, can lead to a discrepancy in views concerning learning and behavioral differences of minority students (Urschel, J., Tornquist, E., Miron, G., & Mathis, W., 2010).

The type of leadership exercised by school principals can guide teachers' opinions in reference to student learning if a shared insight about the responsibility of the teacher in relations to the students' academic achievements can be established and maintained. Leadership of this nature can also enhance teachers' involvement in first-rate, professional development activities (Andrade, Halvorsen & Lee).

In several urban schools a principal's authority of resources can be very limited. They also do not have sufficient tools to lead schools as effectively as they should. In several of the urban school districts, principals who have proven to be successful in their leadership are paid on the same level as those principals whose leadership skills have provided little to no progress. Therefore, many of the urban public schools have unproductive leadership indicating the need for a higher degree of leadership incentives. (Murnane, 2008).

Parental Involvement

Studies have found that White middle-class parents are more actively involved at their child's school and in their child's education as a whole. Many years of research indicate how beneficial it is for parents to be involved in their children's education. The positive effects of parental involvement in urban schools would include better grades on classroom assignments and test scores, completion of homework assignments, better attendance rates, improved behavior and higher expectations (Smith &Wohlstettler, 2009).

Parent involvement activities should include making sure your child is at school on time each day. Parents should monitor their child's homework making sure that their homework assignments are completed and turned in on time. If the child is in their primary stage of education, parents should read to the child each night. Parents should make periodic visits to their child's school, help out in the classroom, and chaperone as much as possible on field trips. They should also be involved in decision-making by participating in surveys, group meetings and serving on the school's governing board. It is important that parental involvement be exercised at home as well as at the child's school (Smith &Wohlstetter, 2009).

Possible Solution

Research suggests that one way that the problem of school segregation can come to an end is through the implementation of a school merger (O'Brine, Kritsonis, 2008). The merging of urban and suburban school districts is scheduled to begin in the August 2013 school year in Memphis, Tennessee. Research shows that in 1973, almost twenty years after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, Memphis public schools continued to be completely segregated (Garland, 2012). Although many citizens of the suburban communities are not in favor of this 2013 merger, Memphis school board members and administrators see the merger as a means to eliminate the achievement gap between the upper/middle-class and the poor. Their ultimate goal is to also eliminate school desegregation (Garland, 2012).

Since the onset of the proposal for a school merger of Memphis and Shelby County public schools, the suburban school districts began to make provisions for their own school system. Residents of these communities point out that this is not at all about race. Their initial concern is that their children will not receive the same quality education that they receive in the suburban schools that they currently attend. They also feel that many of the neighborhoods

where the urban schools are located have a high level of crime. Other concerns that they have

are in the conditions and age of the school buildings in the city, along with the issue of

overcrowded classrooms.

Suburban school officials have been told to hold off on the proceedings for now, but it

appears that this controversial issue may end with a continued division among Memphis and

Shelby County public schools (Garland, 2012).

Conclusion

With predominantly White schools still in existence today, one wonders if the efforts of

the *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the *Little Rock Nine,* Dr. Martin Luther King and the Civil

Rights Movement have been laid to rest. The best way to end segregation in public schools is

through the merging of unified school districts. But before unified school systems can be

successful, teachers, school administrators, parents and the community are going to have to do

their part in being supportive of all children and offer them an equal opportunity to advance

academically regardless of their ethnical or economic background. Society needs to let go of the

perceptions attached with race and poverty and save our youth by helping them grow into

productive individuals. The youth of today are the future of tomorrow.

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