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Separate and Unequal

“Unless you are affluent, auditory, compliant and well-supported, you are screwed in American public schools” (Cashin 220). The word “screwed” is a scary thing. It implies negativity, irreconcilable error, but most of all, hopelessness. As of 2007, over 88% of American students were enrolled in public school (NCES). The futures of almost 90% of American children are at stake and the country looks at them with hopelessness. One can blame suburban segregation, racism, and substandard funding for the overall apathy the country holds toward fixing the urban education system. But all of these problems tie back to a single, larger, institutionalized issue that white suburban Americans have been trying to avoid for decades: inequality. Sheryll Cashin explains in Chapter 6 of her book *The Failures of Integration: How Race and Class are Undermining the American Dream* that “public schooling has become ‘the great inequalizer’ in America because it tends to place white children in predominately white middle-class schools and black and Latino children in predominately minority schools” (206). Segregation leaves urban schools with more problems and less money to deal with them due to concentrated poverty and a declining tax base. This renders urban schools ineffective, or at the very least, less effective compared to white schools at preparing students to succeed in an ever-changing, increasingly global world. As a result, urban and suburban schools are separate but unequal. White suburban America’s misunderstanding of institutionalized inequality perpetuates the ineffectiveness

of urban public schools, making it incredibly difficult for those in poverty, particularly African Americans, to achieve the American dream.

Institutionalized racism and segregation lead to little association between suburban whites and urban minorities, resulting in subpar insight into the problems of city dwellers on behalf of suburban whites. This clear misunderstanding of urban issues shows itself in how suburbanites try to deal with the problem of the urban public school. Primarily, they expect that applying the principles of suburban affluent schools to poor urban schools in the ghetto will make struggling schools improve. Federal education programs like the Bush Administration's No Child Left Behind, which holds all students to the same achievement level regardless of socioeconomic status, focus mainly on numbers and ignore the larger societal factors at play. They should not try to make urban schools more like suburban ones and treat poor minorities like affluent white children, but rather tailor a curriculum and social programs to fit their unique needs.

Urban students will not learn the same way suburban students will. Many urban students lack the luxuries suburban kids have and are cursed with greater problems, such as racism, concentrated poverty, absentee parents, crumbling classrooms, crime, and gang life. In his treatise of the causes and cures of the problems of American cities, *America's Urban Crisis*, Peter Dreier laments that "[m]urder is the nation's tenth leading killer. It is the leading cause of death among black teenagers" (Dreier 96). To think that teenagers will be able to focus on algebra when drug dealers are congregating outside their homes and their friends are getting shot is unrealistic at best. To think that they would care in these wretched circumstances to ponder the problems of America's over-privileged white elite in an essay about *The Great Gatsby* is white suburban privilege clouding reality.

Just as it is unrealistic to think that children under these circumstances could possibly take charge of their academic careers, it is equally unlikely that parents under this kind of stress could find the time to encourage their children to take advanced classes and make the honor roll. However, opponents of reform who object to increased taxes and less attention for privileged students still argue that education should be the parents' responsibility. In an article in the conservative magazine *The National Review*, Frederick M. Hess agrees that "the most important thing [parents] can do is read to [their] children every night, to not have them watching TV and to really be a partner with the teacher. Parents have to step it up" (Hess). Hess believes that the parent should be the primary educator in a child's life, which one could argue is the ideal situation for most families. But like the proponents of No Child Left Behind, he appears to overlook the wider problem of inequality, wrongfully assuming that struggling urban students are merely the victims of negligent parents rather than of an unjust system.

Sheryll Cashin argues that parental distance from the education system in the inner cities is not, in fact, due to negligence. She explains that "for some inner-city parents, getting their kids to school on time and in clean clothes is a miracle given all that they have to negotiate in their daily lives" (224). Like their children, inner-city parents are constantly barraged with the stress and fear that comes with living in poor conditions, constantly vulnerable to the danger of gangs and drug dealers. Many lack the luxury of spending hours helping their children with homework and becoming involved in PTAs and other school organizations. Ultimately, urban schools have very different circumstances, issues, and needs that suburban schools fortunately lack. In order to fix the urban school system, one must cease to look at schools through the No Child Left Behind perspective. State testing,

SAT scores and numbers of AP classes will not tell us how to fix a school. While these numbers may say a lot about a suburban school district, they don't matter as much when looking at schools in extremely concentrated poverty. Instead of looking at the numbers, we should be looking at the students, and finally accept that urban and suburban students are not at all the same, and that they, therefore, should not be held to the same standards. The country must leave numbers behind and look at this issue as an institutionalized problem in American society.

Believing urban schools should have programs and curriculum unique from their suburban counterparts is not to suggest that they should be unequal. In fact, the stress that results from the inequality in city schools makes it even more difficult for urban students to succeed and bring themselves up out of poverty. Helen Epstein asserts that “[t]he experience of racism and discrimination in everyday life is also very real, and very stressful. Blacks are faced with a society that institutionalizes the idea ‘that you are a menace’—and that demeans you” (79). When children are constantly told by society that they are not good enough, this oppression instigates a stress that privileged whites cannot even fathom. Epstein explains that the institutionalization of this inequality is what really takes its toll, saying, “Nancy Krieger, a Harvard researcher, found that working-class African-Americans who said they accepted unfair treatment as a fact of life had higher blood pressure than those who challenged it” (Epstein, 79). It's the feeling of helplessness that one sees in urban ghettos that truly causes this stress. Lack of control in the face of societal oppression kills the optimism and motivation for children to learn. What's the point in learning and building a future if the world isn't fair? What's the point in working hard when working hard is never enough? Epstein quotes a young woman in the ghettos of

Detroit who feels defeated by the system. The girl explains, “You wake up stressed, you see all the garbage and the dealers . . . you say, ‘What’s the use of doing anything?’” (79). The sense of hopelessness created by institutionalized inequality and discrimination against African Americans in American society creates a culture of people who feel defeated by the system and lack control over their own lives.

Michael G. Marmot claims in his scientific commentary for the American Medical Association, “Status Syndrome: A Challenge to Medicine,” that black inequality has less to do with income and more to do with “2 fundamental human needs: autonomy and full social participation” (1305). Blacks are deprived of the control over their lives and of the nondiscrimination that most whites take for granted. This assumption hits the heart of the problem of inequality that sets urban schools apart from their suburban counterparts. The greater problem of this “status syndrome” and helplessness is infinitely more significant in determining the ineffectiveness of public schools than are test scores. In such conditions, the go-to pathway to achieving the American dream, education, is anything but effective in rescuing young African Americans from the stress of ghetto life.

The white privileged suburban sect of American society refuses to accept and/or address the crucial issues of urban poverty that end up effecting all of American society, both economically and socially. Institutionalized segregation that manifests in redlining (when minorities are refused loans because they live in areas deemed to be poor financial risks) and isolationist public policy creates a schism in American culture. White suburbanites lack empathy and understanding for their urban neighbors, resulting in a reluctance to pay for the necessary social programs needed to remedy a problem that has been festering for decades. Suburbanization is the key contributor to this lack of

connection between whites and blacks. Peter Dreier explains that lack of understanding and common ground between city-dwellers and suburbanites result from suburbanization and segregation. Dreier accuses whites of false ideological concern for the poor, quoting from Thomas and Mary Edsall, who write, "Suburbanization has permitted whites to satisfy liberal ideals revolving around activist government, while keeping to a minimum the number of blacks and the poor who share in government largess" (Dreier 83). Basically, whites are "all talk" when it comes to taking care of the poor. This reluctance to share especially applies when increased social programs and reforms call for a tax increase, as evidenced by Hess's opposition to increased federal intervention in the education system. Perhaps suburbanites' lack of desire to help their urban neighbors stems from a deeper problem: segregation. Like suburban schools, suburban towns with mainly white middle-class residents rarely require the kind of money and social programs that cities require. As a result, suburban residents do not really see where their money is going and assume that it is misspent, or wasted on the "undeserving poor." This misunderstanding leads the successful white middle-class to hide behind the stereotypes of the ghetto and avoid empathy with this struggling part of America. In order to even begin chipping away at this gargantuan social issue, America needs to begin fixing the education system to address the needs and concerns of a diverse and troubled urban student body. A problem this huge cannot be remedied simply with more funding, more teachers and more tests. But America's students are not, as Cashin so eloquently puts it, "screwed." There is hope.

Works Cited

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