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# Poverty, Race and Educational Attainment: Time For An Ideological and Structural Rethink?

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# Poverty, Race and Educational Attainment: Time For An Ideological and Structural Rethink?

by Dr. Roger Wilson

## Have We Been Solving the Wrong Problem?

The most significant social institution that we have created to assist with the development of humans in our modern society is the public school. Here, in theory, we have all of our young on a daily basis during the most formative years of their intellectual, physical, and emotional development. What other institution offers such possibilities for enlightening young minds and shaping future adult worlds? And yet, not all of our young citizens have access to quality education in America. While they may still attend their local public school, that is not the same as participating in a quality instructional environment and acquiring a quality education. And therein lies part of the problem. The strongest predictor of future academic success in America is socioeconomic status. While many of our young have already “won” the lottery of birth and are reaping the benefits of having middle and upper middle class parents, many other of our youth find themselves “a distant second” in the acquisition of knowledge/learning and in academic achievement. Thus, their meaningful participation in the adult world and its potential rewards, including economic, are diminished. The natural response of school reformers and legislators has been to develop standards and testing for accountability purposes so “no child is left behind.” And yet, as Berliner (2006) points out, somehow “fixing” schools, classrooms and teachers may not necessarily remedy the problem.

[T]he individuals living in those school neighborhoods are not a random cross section of Americans. Our neighborhoods are highly segregated by social class, and thus, also segregated by race and ethnicity. So all educational efforts that focus on classrooms and schools, as does NCLB, could be reversed by family, could be negated by neighborhoods, and might well be subverted or minimized by what happens to children outside of school. (p. 951)

As well intentioned as some of our school and classroom-based initiatives may be, the larger issue of poverty and its ability to undermine our best reforms remains unaddressed—the elephant in the room we acknowledge, but seem disinclined or unable to do anything about. In our urban centers where the effects of poverty in the schools seem more resilient to reform initiatives, Anyon (1995) noted that we have been more focused upon “isolated educational, regulatory, or financial aspects of reform [divorced] from the social context of poverty and race in which inner city schools are located” (p. 69). Our tendency to address the symptoms of the problem rather than its root cause is at the center of our failure to achieve the kind of substantive results we might otherwise have expected to see.

## Issues of Funding

Educators and reformers alike struggle, albeit differently, to address the symptoms of poverty that materialize in student assessment performance, graduation rates and so forth. But what is too often glossed over is the strong relationship between school funding and student performance.

*The most recent, comprehensive studies indicate that school funding and student performance are strongly related. In particular, they find that low-income children can substantially benefit from policies designed to provide additional resources to high poverty school districts. New research, however, indicates that the amount of additional resources necessary to reduce the achievement gap is significant and may not be reflected in current state funding policies. (Carey, 2002, p. 1)*

In Michigan, it is interesting to note that the 20 or so districts that were “held harmless” under the school aid fund restructuring of Proposal A in 1993 had their thousands of dollars in *extra* per pupil funding maintained (some were receiving more than double the per pupil amount compared to the majority of the state’s districts). It is also interesting to note that most, if not all, of those same districts appear today in the top quartile (even top 10 per cent) of the MEAP score rankings. But my claim is not that funding alone was the cause. One has only to look at those district’s demographics to appreciate the other variables at play (schoolmatters.org). The stronger point

that needs to be made is one that calls for an inquiry into significant differentiated funding to assist impoverished schools and districts.

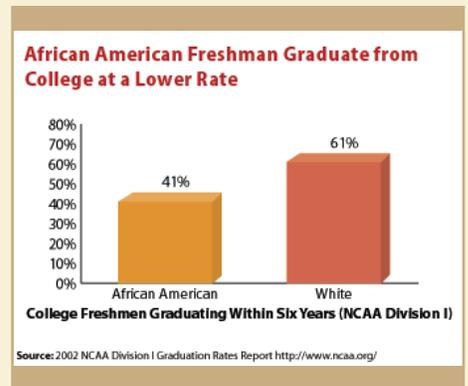
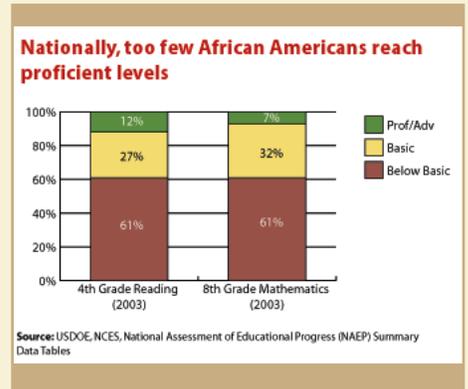
Such thinking is not particularly radical. We would already appear to have such a funding formula for our wealthier schools. Are there other reasons, then, that we might be disinclined to engage such a consideration? Funding regimes for states' schools are definitely affected by our political and social thinking regarding individualism and self-reliance. So much so that even in times of state fiscal crises, we find educational funding becoming a pawn in the budgetary wars where, frankly, both sides are wrong.

*In order to reduce significantly the academic achievement gap, school districts need funding for poor students equal to two to two-and-a-half times of the cost of educating non-poor students. These amounts are much greater than the supplemental amount provided by any state prior to 2002. (Carey, 2002, p. 2)*

## Implications of Being Young, Poor, Undereducated and Non-White

The following offers a snapshot of the implications of being poor, undereducated and non-white in our society. While some might argue that such circumstances are derived, in part, from personal decisions (individualism and human choice), to deny that it has larger social and economic implications for us all is misguided.

- In 1990, the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce reported that 20-25% of students left High School before graduating; that number has remained essentially the same through 2004
  - In 2004, employment amongst 16-19 year-olds within high poverty areas in city centers reflected racial differences—Blacks, 18% Hispanics, 24% and Whites, 29%
  - In 2004, employment amongst 20-24 year-olds within high poverty areas in city centers reflected those same racial differences—Blacks 48%, Hispanics 61%, and Whites 64%
  - Percent of 16-19 year-olds with no paid employment at any time during 2004:
    - Blacks 74%, Hispanics 65%, and Whites 49%
    - HS dropouts 53%, College students 38%
    - Of the HS dropouts those who had no employment: Blacks 75%, Hispanics 52%, and Whites 45%
  - Trends in the median real annual earnings of employed 20-29 year-old men from 1973-2004 (in 2004 constant dollars):
    - A decline of 30% for those without a HS diploma
    - A decline of 32% for those with a GED
    - A decline of 1% for those with a Bachelors degree
    - An increase of 10% for those with Masters degree or higher
  - Mean weekly earnings of employed out-of-school 16-24 year-old males in 2004
    - No HS diploma \$352, HS diploma \$434
    - Associate's degree equivalent \$461, Bachelor's degree \$771
    - Blacks with Bachelor's degree \$553, Whites with Bachelor's \$881
  - Percent of out-of-school 16-24 year-old males with no weeks of paid employment in 2004
    - 19.2% for all, irrespective of race or educational attainment
    - No HS diploma, 31.1% for all; Blacks 65.7%, Whites 24.7%
    - HS diploma 17.7%
    - Associate's degree equivalent, 11.5%
    - Bachelor's degree 8.9% for all; Blacks 20.9%, Hispanics 16.5%, and Whites 6.9%
- (Sum et al., 2006)



### Conclusions

What is evident from that snapshot is the burden of being born non-white and poor in our society, and then not acquiring an adequate education. That educated people of color earn considerably less than their Caucasian counterparts is particularly troubling. Additionally, our prison populations are undereducated and typically of a lower socioeconomic class. Furthermore, those of lower socioeconomic status also have a higher incidence of health-related issues and lower life expectancies. These are not mere individual concerns, but collective ones as well. Consequently, Berliner (2006) argues that there is a need for us to rethink the mindset that is the foundation of our individualism, our free market economy and how we come to view our schools.

*Our vision of school reform is impoverished because of our collective views about the proper and improper roles of government in ameliorating the problems that confront us in our schools; our beliefs about the ways in which a market economy is supposed to work; our concerns about what constitutes appropriate tax rates for the nation; our religious views about the elect and the damned; our peculiar American ethos of individualism; and our almost absurd belief that schooling is the cure for whatever ails society. These well-entrenched views that we have as a people makes helping*

*the poor seem like some kind of communist or atheistic plot, and it makes one an apostate in reference to the myth about the power of the public schools to affect change. (Berliner, 2006, p. 954)*

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