

ISSUES IN EDUCATION*

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Abstract

- Identify and discuss historical and contemporary issues in education

As schools strive to fill a variety of roles in their students' lives, many issues and challenges arise. Students walk a minefield of bullying, violence in schools, the results of declining funding, plus other problems that affect their education. When Americans are asked about their opinion of public education on the Gallup poll each year, reviews are mixed at best (Saad 2008). Schools are no longer merely a place for learning and socializing. With the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling in 1954, schools became a repository of much political and legal action that is at the heart of several issues in education.

1 Equal Education

Until the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, schools had operated under the precedent set by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, which allowed racial segregation in schools and private businesses (the case dealt specifically with railroads) and introduced the much maligned phrase “separate but equal” into the United States lexicon. The 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision overruled this, declaring that state laws that had established separate schools for black and white students were, in fact, unequal and unconstitutional.

While the ruling paved the way toward civil rights, it was also met with contention in many communities. In Arkansas in 1957, the governor mobilized the state National Guard to prevent black students from entering Little Rock Central High School. President Eisenhower, in response, sent members of the 101st Airborne Division from Kentucky to uphold the students' right to enter the school. In 1963, almost ten years after the ruling, Governor George Wallace of Alabama used his own body to block two black students from entering the auditorium at the University of Alabama to enroll in the school. Wallace's desperate attempt to uphold his policy of “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever,” stated during his 1963 inauguration (PBS 2000) became known as the “Stand in the Schoolhouse Door.” He refused to grant entry to the students until a general from the Alabama National Guard arrived on President Kennedy's order.

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Figure 1: President Eisenhower sent members of the 101st Airborne Division from Kentucky to escort black students into Little Rock Central High School after the governor of Arkansas tried to deny them entry. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

Presently, students of all races and ethnicities are permitted into schools, but there remains a troubling gap in the equality of education they receive. The long-term socially embedded effects of racism—and other discrimination and disadvantage—have left a residual mark of inequality in the nation’s education system. Students from wealthy families and those of lower socioeconomic status do not receive the same opportunities.

Today’s public schools, at least in theory, are positioned to help remedy those gaps. Predicated on the notion of universal access, this system is mandated to accept and retain all students regardless of race, religion, social class, and the like. Moreover, public schools are held accountable to equitable per-student spending (Resnick 2004). Private schools, usually only accessible to students from high-income families, and schools in more affluent areas generally enjoy access to greater resources and better opportunities. In fact, some of the key predictors for student performance include socioeconomic status and family background. Children from families of lower socioeconomic status often enter school with learning deficits they struggle to overcome throughout their educational tenure. These patterns, uncovered in the landmark Coleman Report of 1966, are still highly relevant today, as sociologists still generally agree that there is a great divide in the performance of white students from affluent backgrounds and their non-white, less affluent, counterparts (Coleman 1966).

2 Head Start

The findings in the Coleman Report were so powerful that they brought about two major changes to education in the United States. The federal **Head Start program**, which is still active and successful today, was developed to give low-income students an opportunity to make up the pre-school deficit discussed in Coleman’s findings. The program provides academic-centered preschool to students of low socioeconomic status.

3 Busing

The second major change brought about after the release of the Coleman Report was less successful than the Head Start program and has been the subject of a great deal of controversy. With the goal of further desegregating education, courts across the United States ordered some school districts to begin a program that became known as “busing.” This program involved bringing students to schools outside their neighborhoods (and therefore schools they would not normally have the opportunity to attend) to bring racial diversity into balance. This practice was met with a great deal of public resistance from people on both sides dissatisfied with white students traveling to inner city schools and minority students being transported to schools in the suburbs.

4 No Child Left Behind

In 2001, the Bush administration passed the **No Child Left Behind Act**, which requires states to test students in designated grades. The results of those tests determine eligibility to receive federal funding. Schools that do not meet the standards set by the Act run the risk of having their funding cut. Sociologists and teachers alike have contended that the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act is far more negative than positive, arguing that a “one size fits all” concept cannot apply to education.

5 Teaching to the Test

The funding tie-in of the No Child Left Behind Act has led to the social phenomenon commonly called “teaching to the test,” which describes when a curriculum focuses on equipping students to succeed on standardized tests, to the detriment of broader educational goals and concepts of learning. At issue are two approaches to classroom education: the notion that teachers impart knowledge that students are obligated to absorb, versus the concept of student-centered learning that seeks to teach children not facts, but problem solving abilities and learning skills. Both types of learning have been valued in the American school system. The former, to critics of “teaching to the test,” only equips students to regurgitate facts, while the latter, to proponents of the other camp, fosters lifelong learning and transferable work skills.

6 Bilingual Education

New issues of inequality have entered the national conversation in recent years with the issue of bilingual education, which attempts to give equal opportunity to minority students through offering instruction in languages other than English. Though it is actually an old issue (bilingual education was federally mandated in 1968), it remains one of hot debate. Supporters of bilingual education argue that all students deserve equal opportunities in education—opportunities some students cannot access without instruction in their first language. On the other side, those who oppose bilingual education often point to the need for English fluency in everyday life and in the professional world.

7 Charter Schools

Charter schools are self-governing public schools that have signed agreements with state governments to improve students when poor performance is revealed on tests required by the No Child Left Behind Act. While such schools receive public money, they are not subject to the same rules that apply to regular public schools. In return, they make agreements to achieve specific results. Charter schools, as part of the public education system, are free to attend, and are accessible via lottery when there are more students seeking enrollment than there are spots available at the school. Some charter schools specialize in certain fields, such as the arts or science, while others are more generalized.

8

: Public school teachers typically find stability, comprehensive benefits packages, and long-term job security. In 2011, one charter school in New York City set out to learn if teachers would give up those protections if it meant an opportunity to make much more money than the typical teacher's salary. The Equity Project is a privately run charter school that offered teachers positions paying \$125,000 per year (more than twice the average salary for teachers). The school's founder and principal, Zeke Vanderhoek, explained that this allows him to attract the best and brightest teachers to his school—to decide whom he hires and how much they are paid—and build a school where “every teacher is a great teacher” (CBS News 2011). He sees attracting top teachers as a direct road to student achievement. A nationwide talent search resulted in the submission of thousands of applications. The final round of interviews consisted of a day-long trial run. The school looks for teachers who can show evidence of student growth and achievement. They also must be highly engaging.

The majority of students at the school are African American and Hispanic, from poor families, and reading below grade level. The school faces the challenge faced by schools all over the United States: getting poor, disadvantaged students to perform at the same level as their more affluent counterparts. Vanderhoek believes his team of dream teachers can help students close their learning gaps by several grade levels within one year.

This is not an affluent school. It is publicly funded and classes are held in trailers. Most of the school's budget goes into the teachers' salaries. There are no reading or math aides; those roles are filled by the regular classroom teachers.

The experiment may be working. Students who were asked how they feel about their education at The Equity Project said that their teachers care if they succeed and give them the attention they need to achieve at high levels. They cite the feeling that their teachers believe in them as a major reason for liking school for the first time.

Of course, with the high salary comes high risk. Most public schools offer contracts to teachers. Those contracts guarantee job security. But The Equity Project is an at-will employer. Those who don't meet the standards set by the school will lose their jobs. Vanderhoek does not believe in teacher tenure, which he feels gives teachers “a job for life no matter how they perform” (CBS News 2011). With a teaching staff of roughly 15, he terminated two teachers after the first year. In comparison, in New York City as a whole, only seven teachers out of 55,000 with tenure have been terminated for poor performance.

One of those two teachers who was let go said she was relieved, citing 80- to 90-hour work weeks and a decline in the quality of her family life. Meanwhile, there is some question as to whether the model is working. On one hand, there are individual success stories, such as a student whose reading skills increased two grade levels in a single year. On the other, there is the fact that on the state math and reading exams taken by all fifth graders, the Equity Project students remained out-scored by other district schools (CBS News 2011).

9 Teacher Training

Schools face an issue of teacher effectiveness, in that most high school teachers perceive students as being prepared for college, while most college professors do not see those same students as prepared for the rigors of collegiate study. Some feel that this is due to teachers being unprepared to teach. Many teachers in the United States teach subject matter that is outside their own field of study. This is not the case in many European and Asian countries. Only eight percent of United States fourth-grade math teachers majored or minored in math, compared with 48 percent in Singapore. Further, students in disadvantaged American schools are 77 percent more likely to be educated by a teacher who didn't specialize in the subject matter than students who attend schools in affluent neighborhoods (Holt, McGrath, and Seastrom 2006).

10 Social Promotion

Social promotion is another issue identified by sociologists. This is the concept of passing students to the next grade regardless of their meeting standards for that grade. Critics of this practice argue that students should never move to the next grade if they have not mastered the skills required to “graduate” from the previous grade. Proponents of the practice question what a school is to do with a student who is three to four years older than other students in his or her grade, saying this creates more issues than the practice of social promotion.

11 Affirmative Action

Affirmative action has been a subject of debate, primarily as it relates to the admittance of college students. Opponents suggest that, under affirmative action, minority students are given greater weighted priorities for admittance. Supporters of affirmative action point to the way in which it grants opportunities to students who are traditionally done a disservice in the college admission process.

12 Rising Student Loan Debt

In a growing concern, the amount of college loan debt that students are taking on is creating a new social challenge. As of 2010, the debts of students with student loans averaged \$25,250 upon graduation, leaving students hard-pressed to repay their education while earning entry-level wages, even at the professional level (Lewin 2011). With the increase in unemployment since the 2008 recession, jobs are scarce, making this burden more pronounced. As recent grads find themselves unable to meet their financial obligations, all of society is affected.

13 Home Schooling

Homeschooling refers to children being educated in their own homes, typically by a parent, instead of in a traditional public or private school system. Proponents of this type of education argue that it provides an outstanding opportunity for student-centered learning while circumventing problems that plague today’s education system. Opponents counter that homeschooled children miss out on the opportunity for social development that occurs in standard classroom environments and school settings.

Proponents say that parents know their own children better than anyone else and are thus best equipped to teach them. Those on the other side of the debate assert that childhood education is a complex task and requires the degree teachers spend four years earning. After all, they argue, a parent may know her child’s body better than anyone, yet she seeks out a doctor for her child’s medical treatment. Just as a doctor is a trained medical expert, teachers are trained education experts.

The National Center for Education Statistics shows that the quality of the national education system isn’t the only major concern of homeschoolers. While nearly half cite their reason for homeschooling as the belief that they can give their child a better education than the school system can, just under 40 percent choose homeschooling for “religious reasons” (NCES 2008).

To date, researchers have not found consensus in studies evaluating the success, or lack thereof, of homeschooling.

14 Summary

As schools continue to fill many roles in the lives of students, challenges arise. Historical issues include the racial desegregation of schools, marked by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling. In today’s diverse educational landscape, socioeconomic status and diversity remain at the heart of issues in education, with programs such as the Head Start program attempting to give students equal footing. Other educational issues that impact society include charter schools, teaching to the test, student loan debt, and homeschooling.

15 Section Quiz

Exercise 1

(Solution on p. 8.)

Plessy v. Ferguson set the precedent that _____.

- racial segregation in schools was allowed
- separate schools for black and white students were unconstitutional
- students do not have a right to free speech in public schools
- students have a right to free speech in public schools

Exercise 2

(Solution on p. 8.)

Public schools must guarantee that _____.

- all students graduate from high school
- all students receive an equal education
- per-student spending is equitable
- the amount spent on each student is equal to that spent regionally

Exercise 3

(Solution on p. 8.)

Key predictors for student success include _____.

- how many school-age siblings the student has
- socioeconomic status and family background
- the age of the student when she or he enters kindergarten
- how many students attend the school

Exercise 4

(Solution on p. 8.)

Allowing a student to move to the next grade regardless of whether or not they have met the requirements for that grade is called _____.

- affirmative action
- social control
- social promotion
- socialization

16 Short Answer

Exercise 5

Is busing a reasonable method of serving students from diverse backgrounds? If not, suggest and support an alternative.

17 Further Research

Whether or not students in public schools are entitled to free speech is a subject of much debate. In the public school system, there can be a clash between the need for a safe learning environment and the guarantee to free speech granted to Americans. You can learn more about this complicated issue at the Center for Public Education. <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Public-education/The-law-and-its-influence-on-public-school-districts-An-overview/Free-speech-and-public-schools.html>¹

¹<http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Public-education/The-law-and-its-influence-on-public-school-districts-An-overview/Free-speech-and-public-schools.html>

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Solutions to Exercises in this Module

to Exercise (p. 6): Answer

A

to Exercise (p. 6): Answer

C

to Exercise (p. 6): Answer

B

to Exercise (p. 6): Answer

C

Glossary

Definition 1: Head Start program

a federal program that provides academically focused preschool to students of low socioeconomic status

Definition 2: No Child Left Behind Act

requires states to test students in prescribed grades, with the results of those tests determining eligibility to receive federal funding