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Educational Inequities Among Minority Student Groups

Introduction

It has become increasingly clear in recent years that there are alarming levels of inequities within the public education system of the United States. Scholars from all over the globe observe how detrimental educational inequities can be to a student's success, during and after their years in school. Student groups that are particularly affected by this issue are those who live at or below the poverty line, students with disabilities, and students of color. Regarding the issue of educational inequities, there are multiple factors that appear frequently in the research of scholars: racial inequities, the growing achievement gap - defined as a consistent disparity of academic achievement between certain student subgroups, and the relationship between poverty and disability. There is a general consensus among scholars that the issue of educational inequities is a complex problem that has multiple contributing factors, such as those aforementioned. This is a relevant issue as there are limited visible efforts to remedy the increasing inequities, despite the fact that inequities continue to negatively impact generations of students. Scholars view the problem of inequities in our public education system from different angles, and I will analyze these different factors and methodologies in this essay.

The Importance of Addressing Racial Inequities in Early Education

"Equity starts early," says Christine Johnson-Staub in her 2017 article on addressing racial inequities in early education. Johnson-Staub uses scores of sources to support her research, which largely focuses on the problems with lack of diversity within a school's workforce. Namely, the fact that the early education workforce has been devalued and there are racial inequities that translate to wage inequities in this field (Johnson-Staub 2017). The problem is that a large percent of the early education workforce tends to be under certified and underpaid (Johnson-Staub 2017). According to scholars, observing racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse educators that reflect the diversity of students is extremely beneficial to a student's education (Johnson-Staub 2017). All students will undoubtedly benefit from diverse educators, no matter the race of each individual student. Having diverse educators helps diverse students develop closer and more attentive relationships with their teachers, and aids in squashing cultural and racial bias for all students from a young age (Johnson-Staub 2017). However, schools need to begin paying a living wage to educators to ensure retention of diverse employees.

There is a conspicuous challenge to achieve true equity in American schools. This is a fact that scholars are largely in agreement about. The issue of inequities in schools “is deep-seated, with historical roots in the nation’s values” (Kagan 2009) and policies. The “deep-seated” problem that scholars refer to is the lack of quality investment in early childhood education. There is a consistent low level of quality within early education programs (Kagan 2009), which inevitably favors wealthier communities that can afford to make investments into early education programs. Stemming from the problem of weak investments, there is inherent inequity in which groups of students actually attend early education, like preschool. Scholars have analyzed attendance data and determined that “Hispanic children had the lowest participation [in early education]...and showed the lowest increase in participation rates of any ethnic group” (Kagan 2009). This is an early teller of whether or not students will go on to be successful in primary, secondary, and higher education, explaining why scholars often point to early education as the start of the inequity issue.

Factors that Contribute to the Achievement Gap

One way that scholars analyze the impact of inequities in education is observing state-mandated testing scores. Researchers Gideon D. Schleeter, John R. Slate, George W. Moore, and Frederick C. Lunenburg analyzed patterns amongst English Language Learner (ELL) students in a Texas school district, in relation to poverty level and reading level based on state-mandated testing scores. They used a “causal-comparative” method of research to analyze their data. The general conclusion was that “in all cases, reading achievement was lowest for English Language Learners who were Very Poor” (Schleeter, et al. 2019). They were able to affirm that “the most definitive factor that affected student academic achievement” (Schleeter, et al. 2019) was the socioeconomic status of a student’s family, or in the household where they lived. This particular research took place over a multi-year period and was able to document the consistently lower academic performance levels of ELL students living in poverty (Schleeter, et al. 2019). An interesting finding that resulted from following the trajectory of the students analyzed in the research was that “the implications [of living in poverty]...include limiting access to secondary education and subsequent effects on employment” (Schleeter, et al. 2019). Additionally, these students were more likely to graduate late than were their non-ELL peers (Schleeter, et al. 2019). This research topic remains relevant as the number of English Language Learner students in America has been steadily increasing, and the numbers are projected to continue to climb (Schleeter, et al. 2019).

Another contributing factor to the growing achievement gap is absenteeism. Scholar Kevin A. Gee observes patterns of chronic absenteeism in his research, pointing to certain subgroups of students who overwhelmingly contribute to absenteeism rates. This particular type of data could benefit from more reliable collection methods. Research shows that “disparities in absenteeism by race/ethnicity, poverty and disability are clear and unequivocal” (Gee 2018). Despite how

obvious these disparities may be, scholars know “less about the pathways through which these disparities emerge” (Gee, 2018). This is a missing link in the data that, when solved, could help determine how to reduce the absenteeism gap and ultimately improve student success. Gee notes that it is imperative to reduce “systemic gaps between key subgroups,” and not maintain a narrow focus on solely reducing absenteeism. To do so, it is proposed that schools “need to think about designing individualized approaches” (Gee 2018) that are geared towards meeting the needs of student subgroups. Intensive, individualized support and interventions on a school-wide level are examples of potential remedies (Gee 2018). Chronic absenteeism is an often overlooked and underreported factor that can have a detrimental impact on a student’s success in school, which also negatively impacts their likelihood of success after primary and secondary education.

Poverty and Disability

One angle of educational inequities that has recently become more prevalent in research is the relationship between poverty and disability. Similar to the experience of students who do not have disabilities but live in poverty, living at or below the poverty line increases the chances that students with disabilities struggle to succeed after their years in primary and secondary education (Hughes 2013). Despite certain legislations that have been passed, like the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (renamed Individuals With Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]), alarmingly high rates of poverty and poor outcomes for disabled students who live in poverty still persist (Hughes 2013). Living at or below the poverty line can come along with stressors for students, such as joblessness or inconsistent housing, that have a largely negative impact on students’ mental health (Hughes 2013). Black and Hispanic students are three times as likely to attend high-poverty schools, where drop-out rates are high and schools are historically underfunded, compared to their White peers (Hughes 2013). This data supports the fact that living in poverty is disabling, and highlights the fact that racial disparities are not being adequately addressed. This is debated among scholars, but based on research by Hughes and others, it is clear that low-income areas are far more likely to experience poor outcomes for their students.

Specifically pertaining to students with disabilities, “more than one fourth of children with disabilities” live with families who earn below the poverty line (Hughes 2013). These students are more likely to face additional challenges in schools, such as racist and ableist prejudices, on top of challenges associated with living in poverty (Hughes 2013). These students are placed at a disadvantage that traps them in a constant state of being behind where they lack the resources to succeed.

In the past, legislation that has been geared towards increasing student success was also written with “antipoverty intent” (Egalite, et al. 2017). For example, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that was enacted in 1965 aimed to ameliorate poverty and increase opportunities

for students (Egalite et al. 2017). This legislation did achieve one goal of directly distributing money to students in poverty (Egalite et al. 2017). However, the goals of this legislation were met with loopholes and vague definitions by districts. One solution that has been proposed is to “ensure that high-poverty schools get as many dollars per student as schools with more affluent students” (Egalite et al. 2017). This would promote a more equitable system of funding distribution and be a step towards achieving equity in schools. Another model that may promote progress towards equity is the Turnaround for Children (TFC) model, which would support student’s social-emotional learning interests and intends to reverse “poverty-induced traumas that impede learning” (Darling-Hammond et al. 2016). This solution focuses on catering to individual student needs, training teachers to promote a safe and engaging learning environment, and creating a high-performing student culture (Darling-Hammond et al. 2016). It is crucial to invest in reforms such as the TFC model to keep student success in the forefront of reform goals. Employment of this model actually showed “dramatic gains in math and English language arts scores....greater safety, a decrease in suspensions, and a decrease in teacher absences and turnover” (Darling-Hammond et al. 2016). This study is an excellent example to follow as it demonstrates how positive results can be redeemed from experimental reform models.

Conclusion

The impacts of educational inequities stretch far beyond students not attending college. As a result of these inequities, students are introduced to racial and cultural biases, resulting in a lifetime of battling these biases. Students may also suffer from decreased opportunity during and after their years in school, hindering their ability to grow in society. The root of the problem has been analyzed via multiple angles: inequities in early education, the growing achievement gap, and relationship between poverty and different diversity factors. Scholars are generally in agreement that there is an urgent problem to be addressed, but there is variance when discussing how, exactly, the problem should be addressed. One area that is particularly underrepresented in the data is rates of chronic absenteeism. If schools and districts start to be held accountable for reporting accurate, high quality data about absences, remedies that tailor directly to individual student subgroups may be established. This may lead to more positive outcomes on a variety of levels, such as testing scores and postschool outcomes. Increasing data on this problem is one strategy that may move the quest for educational equity forward.

Project Proposal

Based on what I found to be a missing link in research, I will explore methods in which absenteeism can be better reported. I will address a specific, two-part question: What are the best methods to report absenteeism in schools, and how can we reduce these rates of chronic absenteeism?

Understanding trends in chronic absenteeism could reveal potential steps towards achieving equity in America's public education system. It has been observed and agreed upon by scholars that there are definitive patterns and problems in our schools relating to chronic absenteeism, but the reasons behind these patterns remain unknown. Currently, speculation suggests that the trends often relate to race, ethnicity, and disability. However, it remains a question of *why* these student subgroups overwhelmingly contribute to the absenteeism data.

This is a relevant topic in research today because it affects each coming generation. Absenteeism can contribute to a student's level of success during and after their years in school, and if these outcomes can be improved for all subgroups, America may be one step closer to an equitable public school system. Absenteeism is one area that is under researched, but can be a significant factor in students' success. It is crucial to understand how children can be better set up for success, and understanding how to reduce rates of absenteeism may help us set up all groups of students for better outcomes.

In order to develop an accurate reporting system, I will refer to current data and how schools tend to report it. Because it is commonly acknowledged that data is not usually accurately reported, I will determine a way to modify the currently employed reporting system. The new method of reporting should be comprehensible and should make the importance of this data clear to all reporters so that they are motivated to produce quality data. It will include frequent reporting, on a weekly basis. Compiling data on a regular basis is intended to increase transparency with regard to absenteeism in schools. I will employ this new reporting system in a select amount of districts in order to see how the data changes, if at all. I will choose which districts to test based on factors such as geographical location, urban/rural settings, student demographics, and community income level.

Secondly, I will analyze the current data and determine what the common trends of chronic absenteeism are. Based on these findings, I will ascertain a method that captures a consistently accurate picture of how the specific trends progress over time. Doing so will be helpful in determining how schools can reduce their rates of absenteeism by incorporating an individualized approach to their efforts. This will help fill in gaps in current research and possibly provide answers to questions about how to reduce overall chronic absenteeism rates.

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