Educational inequity among children in our society

Sociology, Social Issues

It cannot be contested that to invest in a child is to invest in a society's future. Hence it would not be absurd to say that it is our moral imperative to provide a child with resources to aid their development and achieve their full potential. This starts with education. Hence research into the academic achievement gap has gotten much attention in recent years due to the implications of educational inequity among children on our society. Stark disparities in test scores, high school graduation rates and college degree attainment have strong correlations with social identities such as one's race, class and gender. However, so far research has tried to determine a single most prominent factor to explain for the gap, neglecting to consider the interactions among all three. I contend that there is a need to move past analyzing single factors but instead consider the interaction between all aspects of one's identity and the effect of systematic oppression on the child's education. This paper aims to use an intersectional lens to review how various social identities namely a child's class, race and gender collectively contribute to differing levels of capital that influences their access to qualifications and education credentials necessary to attain success in the future.

Why the Intersectional Approach?

There is a need to not view the issue of education stratification from a single perspective. People live within multiple contexts and are exposed to variety of social inequalities such that individuals of the same race and gender would have different resources and across their socioeconomic statuses. For example, a Black middle-class child would have a vastly different educational experience from a Black working-class child as a result of the resources they

are allocated. Growing up as a Black, Latino or White in the United States is a starkly different experience for a boy and for a girl. Similarly, growing up as a boy or girl would have different outcomes for a Black, Latino or White child. It is necessary to evaluate how various a child's various social identities interact to influence and contribute to academic disparities. Doing so would highlight issues of multiple marginalizations and privilege within the lines of marginalization. Neither race nor class nor gender alone can fully account for the processes that influence outcomes for children. To only look at education stratification from a single perspective would be to oversimplify the situation hence it is imperative to view this problem from an intersectional approach considering multiple dimensions.

Data on Academic Achievement Gap

The academic achievement gap has been well documented but exactly how the three dimensions of gender, class and race intersect to influence academic achievement is not well understood. Hence borrowing data collected by Bécares and Priest, this paper seeks to highlight how the interactions between various aspects of social inequalities affect the academic outcomes. Firstly, they categorized their samples into 4 categories; namely Class 1 (Individually and Contextually Disadvantaged), Class 2 (Individually Wealthy, Contextually Disadvantaged), Class 3 (Individually and Contextually Wealthy) and Class 4 (Individually Disadvantaged, Contextually Wealthy). In order to classify children into these 4 classes, nine constructs were used to measure their individual and contextual level of advantage/disadvantage. Individual level variables included: whether the child is in the: lowest socioeconomic strata in

kindergarten, first, third, fifth and eighth grades; whether they lived in a single mother household food insecurity index if they live below poverty line parental expectation of their academic attainment (only up to high school or past high school) if their parents moved since previous interview School level variables was measured by: percentage of students that were eligible for free school meals percentage of students of racial/ethnic minority present in the child's school. Both of these variables were measured dichotomously – more than or equal to 50% belonging to each group. Lastly, to measure the child's environment, parents were asked " How safe is it for children to play outside during the day in your neighborhood?" to measure the level of safety of the neighborhood that the child resides in. Furthermore, to measure the intersection of gender and race/ethnicity within the above classes, 6 other variables were created: namely White Boys, White Girls, Black Boys, Black Girls, Latino Boys and Latino Girls.

Class 1 (Individually and Contextually Disadvantaged)

- Highest proportion of children living in socioeconomic deprivation and below poverty line
- Highest proportion of children growing up in single parent household
- Highest proportion of children going to schools where more than 50% of pupils are eligible for free school meals and more than 50% of student population are of racial/ethnic minorities.

Class 2 (Individually Wealthy, Contextually Disadvantaged)

- Lived in unsafe neighborhoods

- Attended schools with more than 50% of students that were of racial/ethnic minority and more than 50% eligible for free school meals

Class 3 (Individually and Contextually Wealthy)

- Lowest proportion of children in socioeconomic deprivation, living below poverty line

- Lowest proportion of children growing up in single parent households

Class 4 (Individually Disadvantaged, Contextually Wealthy)

- Highest proportion of children with lowest parental expectations of academic attainment• High proportions of children living in socioeconomic deprivation

- Low proportions of children attending in racially diverse school and living in unsafe neighborhoods

It is worth noting that, upon analyzing the associations between race and gender groups and membership into each class (Classes 1, 2, 4 as compared to 3), Bécares and Priest found that boys and girls of racial minorities (Black and Latino) were more likely to be assigned to classes of disadvantage than White boys (Refer to Appendix Table B).

In general, results show the largest inequalities in the most privileged classes. This is evidenced by there being little to no difference in test scores within the most disadvantaged class (Class 1) across all gender and racial categories but in all the other classes which contain at least one form of advantage and especially so for Class 3 (Individually and Contextually Wealthy), we can observe striking gaps in test scores across gender and racial categories as compared with White Boys. This shows that advantages

brought about by wealth and class are not equal across racial and gender groups. The advantages/disadvantages conferred to children here refer to the capital that their parents can offer them which implies an intergenerational transmission of advantage. Coincidentally, many other studies have shown this similar pattern of differential outcomes of advantage where for example a White teen would benefit more from an affluent neighborhood than a Black teen would. Hence an intersectional approach such as this one is necessary to reveal gender and racial systems operate to differentiate the outcomes and access to resources.

Possible explanations?

The education system is typically viewed as a means of social mobility and should possess the ideal of meritocracy whereby every individual is rewarded based on their merits regardless of race, gender or class. However, one cannot deny that children start out with different resources due to their different backgrounds and this would influence the " merits" that they generate. A child's various social identities influence the amount of capital that they have and it is this very capital that contributes to inequality.

Capital

Bourdieu came up with the concept of capital whereby each form of capital can be converted to another to promote social mobility. An example would be parents using their economic capital to send their child for private elite school which confers them additional " merit" or cultural capital over others who do not have access to the same economic capital. This cultural capital is then used in the child's future to secure better jobs which leads to more

economic capital again. This idea of capital challenges the ideology of meritocracy. Meritocracy suggests that individuals gain success solely because of their talents and effort and schools are the platform that rewards these very deserving people. However this narrative neglects to mention the unequal types and quality of educational experiences. Children come into school with vastly different resources and hence they leave school with differentiated outcomes, that is the outcomes of children are not solely based on their innate abilities or effort. This paper posits that educational stratification is perpetuated by schools which rewards individuals who possess certain forms of capital and penalize others who do not. Possession of capital not only allows individuals to gain access to better resources (better schools, tuition etc.), maximize their experience within school but also allows them to secure even more capital in the future.

Economic Capital

Economic capital provides parents with access to good schools – they have the capabilities to send their children to private schools or can choose to live in more affluent neighborhoods where schools are high performing.

This is one of the struggles that low income individuals of the racial minority face because they live in areas of concentrated poverty, the schools in these neighborhoods are underfunded as compared to other schools in more affluent neighborhoods, they lack the means to move despite their motivations to send their child to a better school. The inequity between poorer and wealthier districts is reflected in their schools. Education is paid for with the amount of money available to the district but this may not be

equal to the amount required to adequately teach. This means that these schools have more children in need of additional help but have fewer resources. Children of these classes are not able to get a good education within their own neighborhood. Intersectional approach reveals that the concentration of poverty is not limited to class, it is well documented that the white poor are more likely than the minority poor to live in mixed class neighborhoods hence less likely to attend a high poverty school.

One's family background greatly influences children's school performance and this begins very early on in childhood. Low income minority children are the least likely to receive any form of schooling before the age of 5. Head Start a government funded program targeted for poor children only serves one in five low income children aged between 3 to 5. This data suggests children from disadvantaged families are handicapped from early on before they even enter the formal schooling setting. Instead of relocating to a good neighborhood or sending one's child to a private school, some families tapped on their economic capital to maximize their child's experience within the public school setting. This is done by sending their child for extracurricular activities or educational tuition. The benefits of extracurricular activities would then be limited to children who possess the economic capital. Such activities have been advocated to provide children with assets that are beneficial for educational and occupational attainment as well as prevent development of risky behavior which would all serve as mortgage for their futures. Hence it can be seen that economic capital can provide access to better educational opportunities as well as educational credentials which are beneficial for their future however this capital is not

equally available across race/class/gender. This has the implications that even children within the same school, with the same instructions/materials provided by the school may not be have the same outcomes due to the fact that their differing social identities confers them differing levels of economic capital which results in some having extra resources while some do not.

Cultural Capital

Across all groups, they possess a unique culture that is useful in their own community setting however only certain culture resources are valued in a school setting. The education system recognizes and rewards cultures unevenly. In Lareau's research she found stark differences in rearing methods between classes which she posits that perpetuates the intergenerational transmission of advantage in middle class children. Middle class families practice what is called ' concerted cultivation' form of child rearing which is characterized by enrolling children into organized activities, active interventions into children's lives and challenging people of authority. Whereas working class parents practice a different form of child rearing characterized by unstructured informal play, freedom to develop spontaneously and deference towards authority. Middle class parents actively fosters a child's talents by enrolling them in a multitude of extracurricular activities and actively promoting their development through enrichment classes such as ballet, sports, musical instruments, advanced reading, brain training etc. This reflects their desire for their child to not be excluded from any potential for advancement. On the other hand, working class children have far less hectic lives where they enjoy unstructured and impromptu play also known as ' achievement of natural growth'. Many

minority children enter formal schooling lacking the competencies and skills required by schools which other middle class children would have been exposed to before. Another characteristic of middle class parenting is that they feel comfortable with bringing up their concerns with persons of authority whereas working class parents would defer to authoritative figures. Middle class parents are also more willing to climb up the hierarchy of authority in order to pursue their child's interests. An example of this would be a middle class parent would encourage their child to ask their teacher why did they only get a B on a recent exam. Children raised by the method of concerted cultivation grew up with a more personalized experience with teachers and other professionals, they begin to expect the same in their adult lives too, fostering a sense of entitlement which helps them gain advantages in the working world because they have acquired the language and vocabulary that would be useful for them in the future when they attempt to gain an upper hand on their own. These benefits from concerted cultivation are not shared with children of working class as they were not transmitted the same assets. It is not to say that achievement of natural growth is disadvantageous but rather that institutions in society do not reward their cultural capital equally hence lending more advantage to middle class children. Middle class and working class have very different relationships with institutions. When middle class children move outside from the home to social institutions, they will come to realise that their cultural resources are not of equal value. Generally, the systems convey advantages to middle class children due to the degree of similarity between the cultural

capital adopted by their family and the standards adopted by the institutions.

CONCLUSION

The educational experience in the US is not equal for all and this is influenced by the individual's access to capital. Capital is not equally distributed in the country and this is attributed to the intersecting systems of race, class and gender. Children live within multiple contexts and are exposed to a variety of risk factors at the family, school and environmental level and this influences the amount and type of capital that they possess which ultimately determines the differential life opportunities and resources they get. In this sense, capital plays a key role in educational inequities and ultimately social/life inequities. We need to question this myth of meritocracy whereby individuals have differing resources at their disposal as a result of intersecting systems of oppression influencing their access to credentials required for success.