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Humanities

3 October 2022

An Analysis of Education Practices in the American Deep South and Their Contributions to
Cycles of Poverty and Inequality

The American Deep South is often stereotyped as an area rampant with racist incidents, intolerance, radical political views, and poverty. This stereotype may seem accurate in some regards, but is often confusing when factors like racial diversity and urban areas with high populations (two demographics that tend to lean left) are taken into account. While some of these common criticisms of the deep south are simply the results of individual's actions or media storytelling, a concerning amount of these issues- especially poverty, can be directly tied to the history of the area, and perpetuated by the public school system. The structure of the educational system in the American deep south directly contributes to a cycle of ongoing poverty through lack of funding and more recently the absence of progressive teachings like Critical Race Theory.

The American deep south is an incredibly racially diverse region, which makes it surprising that it has a high republican majority and alt-right policies in place. The deep south is home to more than a third of the nation's students, as well as 53% of the nation's black population. Cities in the region account for over a quarter of the total US population and more than half of all recent population growth. For instance, Texas experienced a 38% increase in population between 2010 and 2018, increasing from 21 million to 29 million in just eight years (Robson et al.). Even with six of the eight fastest growing cities in the US being located in the

deep south, it is an area characterized by a higher percentage of rural living than areas in the rest of the United States. The deep south also contributes more to the overall US economy than any other region, accounting for 21% of the total US GDP in 2017 (Robson et al.). However, the deep south remains the poorest area in the entire US, having the lowest average median income as well as the highest poverty rate. How can a region that contributes so heavily to the economy and experiences rapid population growth suffer such poverty? It all comes down to the public education system, its roots, and its current practices.

The foundations that the public education system was built upon may seem radical by modern standards, but some of the basic ideas and motives for public education; especially forcing conformity onto the youth, in the 19th century are still prominent today. Historically, the purpose of public education was simple; to take uneducated and “uncivilized” children and teach them manners, the excerpts from the Bible, and basic math and reading skills as a form of preparation for the factory work that would come later in their lives. Horace Mann, the founding father of the public education system in the United States made the claim that a good society is one that “calls itself civilized, can be cleared from the harpies, the wild beasts, and the foul creeping things which now dwell therein.” He then said that educating the youth “is the work of civilization and Christianity”. The idea that wealthier more civilized areas should “bestow a thought upon the barbarism and heathenism around [“uncivilized” nations] own doors” (Shea et. Al *The Common School Journal*) is extreme, and was often used as an excuse for horrific practices like colonization and imperialism. All of these ideas are radical by today’s standards, and the fact that the man that created the public education system thought these things is unsettling. Even centuries later, when school houses turned to large thousand-person buildings and laws required students to go to schools up until a certain age, some of these ideas of religion

and conformity remained. Over half a century after the Supreme Court's decision to ban mandatory prayer in schools, the bill is currently at risk of being overturned. The deep south's history of public education contributes to modern-day issues as well. The push for all children to attend public schools- including African Americans did not begin until the 1860s. More than 60% of black children living in the deep south were attending public schools by 1930. However, these schools were segregated, and when *Brown v The Board of Education* and the Supreme Court decisions that followed made school segregation illegal, white students that were able to afford private schooling flocked to places where few minorities would be educated. This created unintentionally segregated schools, where public schools in some areas had a higher minority population than average and private schools continued to have a white majority. The foundations of the public education system and where it gets its funding has direct ties to influencing generational poverty. A fundamental purpose of the education system is to "train" students so that they can get into colleges and universities and have a higher chance of getting jobs that have above average wages that allow them to thrive. But what happens to college matriculation and graduation rates when public highschoools are underfunded by the government, and why do some regions get less government funding? When looking at the deep south, generational poverty can be connected to the post-abolition time period. When slavery was outlawed in the United States, newly free slaves had two options; to purchase their own land and begin working for themselves or to continue working on plantations for low wages. Many people chose to remain in the same locations their families had been living for years, working under their previous masters. However, those who attempted to purchase land often fled to unfamiliar areas and faced oppression and criticism. They were given land that was often infertile or unsuitable for crops, creating an inescapable cycle of crop failure and poverty. Centuries later, any members of the

family who did manage to make enough money to afford homes in “white” neighborhoods often had their loans denied because they were deemed to be from a poor and unattractive area, a practice called *redlining*. This kept African Americans in poor areas even when they became wealthy enough to move elsewhere. While legislative action was taken against the practice in 1968 by the *Fair Housing Act* (History of fair housing - HUD), it was too late. These racist systems and practices that existed centuries ago and are studied heavily by CRT offer explanations as to why the deep south has a high African American population.

But what do redlining and low-income communities have to do with an underfunded education system? The funding the public schools get is directly tied to the property value of the surrounding area and the incomes of the people that live there. The deep south has an average percent poverty of 16%, the highest in the United States. Additionally, the average median income of someone living in the deep south is \$49,893, which is the lowest nationally. Property values in these areas, especially rural ones, are lower than the average in the US. Lacking budgets and funding in public schools creates issues like insufficient materials for students and trouble retaining or recruiting school teachers. While the deep south has a high school graduation rate similar to that of the rest of the United States, college matriculation and graduation rates are significantly lower. Studies have shown that “increased spending improves college attendance rates, graduation rates and test scores... [yet] ...school districts enrolling “the most students of color receive about \$1,800, or 13%, less per student” than districts serving the fewest students of color”(Black and Crolley).

Teaching Critical Race Theory or CRT is incredibly important for inspiring much needed change and reformation of the American public education system, however it remains taboo in the deep south. Out of the fifteen states in the region, teaching CRT is banned in four and has

bans in progress in eight states (Robson et al.). This leaves only three states in the deep south; Mississippi, Virginia, and North Carolina, “open” to the idea of teaching Critical Race Theory in public schools. So what makes CRT so controversial in many of these southern states? Critical Race Theory is a teaching that functions on four hallmarks; the belief that racism is not isolated incidents but rather the result of an oppressive system, that white people will only fight for racial justice when it benefits them directly, that race itself is a social construct and a way for humans to organize social structures rather than a biological fact, and that someone's race, sex, class, and other factors play a large role in everyday interactions with others.

Many people fear the teaching of CRT in schools because they believe that it will teach their young children to feel ashamed of their ethnicity and race. An anonymous *Washington Examiner* editorial author stated that CRT is “a thoroughly racist ideology, because it imputes evil to people solely based on the color of their skin. It is already bad enough to attribute faults to people based on their own ancestors’ misdeeds before they were born”. This is a common idea among people who oppose critical race theory. Many believe that if we teach that our ancestors built racist systems that still stand, that racism is no longer in the past and therefore people will be blamed for actions taken by someone else over a century ago. However, this is far from the purpose of CRT itself. CRT teaches that racism can exist without racists and that most is the result of a system; however, ideas like patriotism and many political beliefs make people believe that their identity has direct ties to US institutions (Ray and Gibbons). Therefore, many cannot separate themselves from the government, often seeing themselves as the system and therefore see the teachings of CRT as the equivalent of being called racist. The overall goal of teaching CRT in public schools is to demonstrate that historical events and biases from centuries ago influence and maintain social, political, and economic inequalities, not to shun people for the

irreversible actions of their ancestors. Teaching CRT in schools could explain to many students how the racial diversity in the deep south may contribute to factors like low average median incomes and high poverty rates.

When the structure of the educational system in the American deep south directly contributes to a cycle of ongoing generational poverty, policies need to be adjusted to ensure that everyone in America regardless of race or birthplace has equal opportunities for learning and career success. If things in the south are ever going to change, the government must change their policies on where school funding comes from and why each school gets the amount they have. Having property values tied to school funding puts lower income students at an automatic disadvantage by providing them with less resources and learning opportunities. Additionally, teaching high school students CRT integrated within American History classes will allow students to recognize patterns of inequality and inspire change

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