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Humanities

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<div align="center">The Chains of the Education System</div>

From the glamorous Disney and Nickelodeon movies to classic young adult novels, most children have a toy, character, or person they admire and aspire to be like. Although not all children may grow up with positive role models, public education is designed to serve as an equalizer and provide every student with encouragement and support to achieve their dreams. Unfortunately, this commitment remains a fantasy for students from minority backgrounds as the current education system is rooted in a history of bias and discrimination. Traditionally, society condemns students or their families for their academic failures. However, when pointing fingers at someone, there tend to be three fingers pointing back. It is crucial to take into account the uncontrollable factors such as geographic location, race, and socioeconomic background that control the resources and support systems a student has access to. Families from minority backgrounds are statistically less likely to attend an adequately funded school, and will therefore become victims of the biased system. The persistent opportunity gap between different groups of students stems from systemic prejudice that negatively shapes students' classroom experiences and their self-perception.

So, where does the opportunity gap seen today come from?

Although schools have been designed to promote equality and social good, not all public schools are inherently equal. The disparity seen today in public education stems from a history of segregation, making education molded along racial and socioeconomic lines. The Brown v Board

of Education 1954 landmark enforced the "separate but equal" doctrine, bringing the evils of American society into schools. However, black and white schools were not anywhere close to being equal as funding for schools comes from taxpayer money, and black neighborhoods earn significantly less than white neighborhoods due to discrimination in the workforce, a history of redlining, isolation of neighborhoods of color, and more. The US Chamber of Commerce published a thorough study describing how the achievement gap seen in different groups of students starts from the day a child is born; the exposure to museums, libraries, books, etc. all controlled by the parents' socioeconomic background. Black Americans are two times more likely to live in poverty, and this disparity compounds as "60% of Black students in America attend a high-poverty, majority-minority school…and the average per pupil spending in high-poverty, non-white school districts is $1,500 less than the national average" (US Chamber of Commerce). This results in poorer neighborhoods having overcrowded classrooms, and lack of adequate services and counseling, especially for students with varying needs, all of which ultimately "locks students into second-rate educational environments" (American Civil Liberties Union). Systemic discrimination and inequalities deprive students of the services and interventions they need to succeed. Poorer schools are unable to hire quality staff and provide services outside of academic support to accommodate the urgent needs of their students, trapping them in a never-ending cycle of poverty. This greatly explains the low graduation rates in areas with high poverty. Adamant believers of the American Dream may argue that one can overcome systemic barriers and achieve their aspirations through diligence and resilience, especially given the increasing number of social services, and programs to support those from different walks of life. While this may hold some value, the sad reality is that uncontrollable factors such as a student's zip code control the quality of their academic journey and the doors that will open years

down the line. The ramifications of this are seen in various aspects of a student's educational journey.

A student's identity and socioeconomic background also control the disciplinary actions they face which can have long-term implications on their success. Stemming from the War on Crime era, harsh disciplinary actions such as the zero-tolerance policy were implemented in schools to prevent violence and drug abuse. While the intentions are understood, such policies disproportionately impact students of color and other minority groups, generating the detrimental school-to-prison pipeline. The American Psychological Association states that "suspension, expulsion, and arrest do not make schools safer…found that these practices harm academic achievement for all students while increasing the chances that those excluded will be held back, drop out, and become involved with the juvenile and criminal justice systems" (Legal Fund Defense). Rather than providing stronger services and mentorship for students who fall through the cracks, the system is pushing them further and further back. As they grow older, they are three times more likely to end up in the justice system in the future (American Civil Liberties Union). The transition back into schools and society is even more challenging, locking students from underprivileged backgrounds into a vicious cycle. Rather than helping students, schools are incarcerating them which can have a detrimental impact on their learning and future growth. It paints the picture that such students do not deserve or lack the ability to succeed. The current system is failing students most at risk by unfairly targeting them and enforcing the idea that not conforming to the ideal expectations of schools results in retributions rather than support.

Above all, the way schools mold students' self-perception and academic identity is one of the most detrimental evils of the system. Students from minority and underprivileged backgrounds often lack the role models and support system they need to envision and strive

toward a better future. While systemic barriers construct the opportunity gap, the negative self-image that students develop adds fuel to the problem. Through media content and lack of educator diversity, stereotypical ideas are reinforced. For example, "the overrepresentation of Black students in nonhonors academic tracks [shapes] how Black students view their racial identity and their psychological orientation toward being Black" (Legette). Many students internalize the harmful representations they see around themselves and lose faith in their academic potential. While many argue that a child's family plays a greater role in instilling confidence and work ethic, schools are designed to serve as equalizers, as not all students come from safe and supporting households. Having a diverse educator force is key to supporting students from different walks of life as they can form meaningful connections and build trust with adults who share their experiences and challenges. Once again, the problem ties back to socioeconomic disparity. Most people of color shy away from entering the education system due to financial struggles, cultural pressure, and negative teacher interaction growing up. Furthermore, those who choose to enter the education field disproportionately work in urban schools with tighter budgets and are ultimately more likely to leave the field (Deray). Over the years, the ramifications of this can be seen in students of color who associate their intelligence and self-worth with their racial and other identities. Because such students don't see positive role models in their lives and are taught about other leaders who may share their lived experiences, they are unable to envision their growth and prosperity. As the saying goes: "How can you be it if you can't see it?"

The current education system is plagued by centuries of bias and discrimination along socioeconomic, racial, and other minority identities. The structure of zip codes perpetuates the harmful cycle of poverty and disproportionately affects students of color. As the majority of

students of color attend high-poverty schools, they fall behind academically, lack critical services and uplifting role models, and get locked into a negative outlook on their academic identity and self-worth. However, all hope is not lost. Numerous studies provide intervention strategies, restorative justice practices, and improvement plans to better support all students. By acknowledging the problem and working to create a shared vision to uplift all students, we can ensure that no child falls through the cracks of the system.

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