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DECIPHERING THE COMPLEXITIES AND UNCERTAINTIES IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

This literature review paper sheds light on the systemic deficiencies, complexities, and untold stories in the public school system in the United States. It reveals that despite being an advanced democracy and a first-world country, the US education system still faces issues that hinder its developmental trajectory. Surprisingly, the uncertainties unmasked in the US education system are not far-fetched from the experiences that persist in developing countries. The paper is thought-provoking and raises important questions about the state of education in the modern world. As a result, relevant literature was thematically reviewed on systemic disparities that hinder the growth and development of education. The findings of the paper among others discussed issues that include the quantification of educational outcomes, systemic inequality, and segregation, school funding, differential access to infrastructure resources, as well as teachers' competencies and retention. Addressing the complexities and uncertainties of public education requires a multi-faceted approach involving policymakers, educators, parents, and communities to ensure equity and efficacy.

Keywords: *Education, Public School, Inequality, School funding, Systemic Disparities, United States, USA Education*

Introduction

The foundation of the American public education system was built on the ideals of democratic governance and civic participation (Achen & Bartels, 2017). To cultivate an enlightened and engaged populace, the Northwest Ordinances of 1785 and 1787 designated land for the provision of free public schools in towns across the country. This pivotal moment in the history of education solidified the crucial role of public schools in fostering democracy (Ravitch, 2021; Justice-stan, 2015).

The implementation of the free public school system in America has undergone significant changes over the past centuries (Fabricant & Fine, 2015). The history of the American public education system is complex and multifaceted. During the 1600s and 1700s, education was informal and took place in homes and designated community locations. Public education systems existed mainly in the New England Colonies, such as New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. Education was primarily rooted in religious values to cater to the needs of the Puritan and Congregationalist communities of that time. The only teaching and learning resources available in the 17th century were the New England Primers, which were based on reading and religious principles (Butterworth, 2017; Thattai, 2001).

The vision of the Puritans and Congregationalists was disrupted by the emergence of new groups in the colony from different parts of the world (Waldrop, 2018). These groups were not keen on English-speaking and religiously indoctrinated education and strongly opposed it. In response to this, they called for a change in the education system, which led to the establishment of private schools as early as the 18th Century (Fiske & Ladd, 2021).

Fiske and Ladd (2021) argue that education was a privilege for the affluent children in the community until the mid-18th Century. However, reformists like Horace Mann from Massachusetts spearheaded a new era of hope by demystifying the myth of the public education system. Johnson (2020) argues that Mann's ideas were based on a "common school" system that aimed to provide equal access, equity, and inclusivity in diversity.

According to Thattai (2001), the national formal education system in the United States was developed in the 19th century. The American education system is unique because it is a shared responsibility of states and school districts where public schools are located. Fiske & Ladd (2021) further argue that the public school system was established based on Jefferson, Adams, and Rush's educational values and principles, which resonate with Horace Mann's common school concept.

Mathis (2021) asserts that Horace Mann's ideology in the 19th century focused on creating equal access for all children to attend public schools by eliminating systemic deficiencies that support racial segregation and marginalization. This rejuvenated Jefferson's ideas for universal education nationwide as a catalyst for civic education and democratic values. Mann's resilience and persistence in fighting for equality, equity, and balance in education for everyone were inspiring and admirable. Education is a key tool for producing informed, engaged individuals, which is necessary for a democratic society to function. His stance on philosophy was influenced by "common schools," which emphasized inclusiveness above exclusion. Mann contends that every child should have access to education as a fundamental right for their political, social, and societal growth. Around the 1950's universal public education dominated the academic discourse which led to the establishment of public schools at the length and breadth of the United States.

Mathis (2021) and Fiske and Ladd (2021) assert that the foundation of a democratic society lies in the collaborative mindset, inclusivity, and empathy for humanity. They contend that public schools require a complete overhaul and transformation to ensure that every child receives equal opportunities and is not imperiled by racial segregation.

Despite the strides made by prominent individuals like Horace Mann and Jefferson, the system of education in the United States has seen dramatic change and improvement, some public schools remain segregated, disadvantaged, and under-resourced. Let us not forget that the idea of accessibility of education cannot be misconstrued as quality education. The gap between affluent and poor schools is nothing more than comparing apples and oranges.

According to Rose (2021). Fiske and Ladd (2021), one of the major issues hindering the success of public schools is school finance. Ostrander (2015) argues that, in the Constitution of the United States, the responsibility for financing schools lies with the state, not the federal government. However, local schools rely on property taxes, which can lead to further segregation, inequality, and social injustice. Due to the current system, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen, as schools in wealthy states and districts have more resources than those in poorly located areas. This systemic challenge goes against Mann's vision of a common school.

For the past 20 years, public schools in the United States have been evaluated based on standardized test scores. This evaluation system results from the "No Child Left Behind" and "Every Child Succeeds" Acts, which were introduced in 2001 and 2015 respectively. The annual numeracy and reading tests are taken by students in grades 3 and 8, and the performance of individual schools is evaluated based on these scores. This evaluation system holds school authorities accountable for their stewardship, but it has some drawbacks. The focus on test scores can undermine the holistic development of students, and the pressure to prepare for tests can be overwhelming for teachers and school authorities. Schools may focus too much on test-based accountability, neglecting other important areas that support the school ecosystem. This approach has led to the establishment of many charter schools that do not operate under strict government policies but use unfair and undue advantage to arbitrarily obtain high test scores (Ravitch & Stoehr, 2017).

The Horace Mann Common Schools' guiding principle directly conflicts with test-based accountability, which worsens the gaps of marginalization and stigma. To promote children's futuristic development in schools, a supportive environment must be created. Accessibility, equality, and equity should be contrasted with an effective system of school welfare. This corroborates Labaree's (2021) assertion that school welfare fosters the total development of an informed and accountable citizenry.

According to Rose (2021), there is a significant and positive relationship between schools and communities in the United States that has strengthened the country's democratic principles. It is commendable that parents and communities have a direct influence on the management of schools in their locality. However, constitutional

legislation and the bureaucratic systems of school management in school districts can hinder school operations (Osenbloom, 2016). Policies designed to solve a problem in one school can automatically affect other schools. Therefore, individual schools should be given some autonomy to make their decisions.

School budget discrepancies, unfair standardized tests, teacher qualifications, and quantifications of educational outcomes are just a few of the major setbacks that American education continues to experience. According to Fiske and Ladd (2021), Horace Mann's idea of inclusive valued education that should flow from education is still as potent and current as it was in the middle of the 19th century. Unfortunately, the fight to realize his vision in the United States against segregation, inequality, and marginalization persists within the corridors of academia.

Quantification of education is an affront to Horace Mann's idea of common schools and should not be permitted to win over any educational system. Therefore, this paper thematically reviews the systemic disparities in the United States public schools: School Funding/Finance, Quantification of education outcomes, Teacher Competencies, Infrastructure and Resources, and many others.

1 Methods

Our paper involved a thorough analysis of the United States public school system, which is currently facing a range of complex and uncertain challenges. To support our argument, we drew upon a variety of secondary data sources, as well as peer-reviewed books and articles. Through a process of thematization, we were able to identify and critique the underlying issues that emerged from this analysis.

2 Literature Review

The paper meticulously analyzes and examines each of the thematic areas that have been identified, delving deep into the underlying concepts and theories. Through thorough research and analysis, the paper draws insightful and well-supported conclusions that shed light on the subject matter at hand.

3.1 Quantification of Education Outcomes

Accountability is the hallmark of every democratic government, making value for money one of the prime areas of previous and present U.S. governments when it comes to educational spending. The U.S. Department of Education earmarked \$270.92 Billion for 2023, making it one of the highest educational budgets among developed countries (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). To ensure that the monies allocated to the education department yield the intended results, relevant stakeholders, especially policymakers, have resorted to student and teacher evaluation as a means of ensuring accountability (Hanushek, 2019).

Student and teacher evaluation is one of the areas that has attracted many reforms at the federal and state levels. For instance, Mississippi State introduced a standardized test called the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) in 2015-16 to evaluate students' and teachers' performance to ensure accountability and academic improvement (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d). Standardized tests are considered external evaluation. Unlike internal evaluation, which is administered by principals through classroom observation (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019), external evaluation uses students' tests scores on standardized tests such as SAT, ACT, MAAP, etc., to measure their performance and hold teachers accountable (Von Der Embse, 2019).

The utilization of standardized tests is not new. Thorndike's measurement scale was introduced in 1910 to measure the quality of handwriting (Geyer, 1922). The scope of contemporary standardized tests has widened over the years to include teacher accountability (Saeki, 2018). However, over-reliance on standardized tests as the sole or major approach to teachers' accountability has come under serious criticism and scrutiny. Several exam malpractices such as cheating have been linked to teachers' desperation to look good by helping their students to pass standardized tests (Royal & Dodo, 2018). In addition, standardized tests have resulted in teaching to the test (Adesope et al., 2017), deviating from the purpose of teaching higher-order thinking skills.

To some scholars, with the diverse U.S. population, the composite of standardized tests should represent all persons in the country. However, reports have shown a pattern of standardized test performance among males and females, younger and older students, and socio-disadvantaged and nonsocial-disadvantaged students (Zimmermann et al., 2018). In addition, with the huge influx of immigrants into the U.S., teachers in immigrant-dominated communities are under pressure to deliver compared to their colleagues in traditional American communities since immigrants underperform in standardized tests (Potochnick, 2018). As a result, some teachers see the utilization of students' standardized test scores as an accountability tool as unfair, compelling them to leave the teaching profession (Ryan et al., 2017).

3.2 Infrastructures and Resource Differentials

The public education system in the United States, much like developing nations, is facing infrastructure and resource deficits in many states. These challenges hinder progress towards achieving sustainable development goals. According to Modafarri and Alleyne (2022), a report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) suggested that school buildings across America were deteriorating and about 54 percent of American school districts needed replacement or refurbishment. An expanding body of peer-reviewed research indicates a connection between the quality of school facilities and student achievement (Earthman, 2002; Ekundayo, 2012). A comprehensive literature review conducted by Mark Schneider (2002) revealed that, on average, researchers observed a discrepancy in student achievement between schools with above-standard facilities and those with substandard facilities to be in the range of 5 to 17 percentile points (Filardo, Vincent & Sullivan, 2019).

Solis (2021) posits that the United States public education system has faced and continues to grapple with issues of inequality, despite the government's implementation of policies aimed at addressing this concern. Weber (2022) argues that public school funding in the USA heavily relies on local property taxes, which creates challenges for schools in poor areas to compete with schools located in more affluent communities. Given the socioeconomic segregation of schools and the correlation between poverty and ethnicity, African American and Latino students are more likely to find themselves in schools with limited resources and inadequate infrastructure, in contrast to their Asian and White American counterparts (Philips & Chin, 2004).

The resource disparities among these schools are structurally connected to systemic inequalities. Lack of funding and resources for public schools with high minority student populations contributes to unequal opportunities for students of color (Solis, 2021).

Solis (2021) further asserts that in a study conducted by Darling-Hammond, data analysis performed for school finance cases in states like Alabama, New Jersey, New York, Louisiana, and Texas revealed a consistent pattern. According to Rubinton and Isaacson (2022), predominantly black schools spend \$140 less and \$160 less on instructional and total expenditures, respectively. Schools serving larger populations of students of color demonstrated significant resource disproportions when compared to schools primarily serving white students. This highlights the notable financial inequities prevalent in school populations with most students of color.

3.3 School Finance

The attainment of Sustainable Development Goal Four (SDG 4) in the 21st Century is heavily reliant on school financing. However, funding discrepancies have resulted in systemic inefficiencies worldwide, which in turn have a ripple effect on the development of students to meet the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

In the United States public school system, each state is responsible for the finances of its schools. Funds for the schools are allocated by the state to the local district in which the schools are situated (Fiske & Ladd, 2021). Within the local school district, families tend to be segregated by income such that high-income families live in wealthy districts, whereas low-income families live in poorer districts (Fiske & Ladd, 2021; Lafortune, et.al., 2018; Owens, 2018).

Chingos and Blagg (2017) intimated that a portion of funds allocated to schools within the district are generated from local taxes. The schools located in wealthy districts receive more money and quality education than schools in poorer districts. Students from wealthy districts have access to quality teachers, better educational facilities, low teacher-student ratio, and attain high student achievements which is in sharp contrast to the reality in poor districts.

Fisher (2018) corroborates with Chngos and Blaggs' (2017) disposition. Fisher (2018) emphasized that different states within the country have different funding policies. Even within local districts, the distribution of funds to public schools varies. This has led to disparities in the finances between schools even located in the same district. Some local school districts distribute funds based on adequacy, equity, or a combination of both adequacy and equity.

If the distribution of funds to schools in the district is based on adequacy, then all schools within the district will be provided with sufficient resources to ensure that students get quality education. This implies that schools in low-income districts and schools serving a high number of students with disabilities, English language learners, and students enrolled in special education will receive more funding to address those needs to meet educational standards (Ladd, 2012).

On the other hand, if the distribution of funds is based on equity, then resources should be allocated equally to all schools within the district to ensure all students have access to equal educational opportunities (Baker et.al.,2016; Brighthouse et.al.,2018; Lafortune, et.al., 2018).

3.4 School Teachers' Competencies and Retention

The characteristic of a good education heavily depends on the competence of the teachers, making it a crucial contributing determinant. The public school system in the United States has long existed plagued by an issue that considerably influences students' educational experience. Education holds principal significance in the United States as both a catalyst for societal progress and individual opportunities (Dewey,1916). Consequently, the qualifications possessed by educators within this system play a pivotal role in its overall effectiveness because they serve as vital channels by which knowledge and skills are imparted to future generations. Beneath this commendable endeavor lies an enduring problem deeply ingrained within American education. Structural deficiencies in teachers' proficiencies permeate throughout the entire public school landscape. Conversely, Public education systems can differ widely, but they typically follow a hierarchical structure, with elementary, middle, and high schools feeding into one another. In the United States, for example, public schools are organized at the district level, and overseen by local school boards. The structure and funding mechanisms vary considerably between states (Baker & Green, 2019; Ladd & Fiske, 2019).

Several studies have repeatedly shown that educational institutions primarily serving Black and Hispanic students frequently encounter limited availability of professors possessing excellent qualifications (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Ingersoll, 2004; The Education Trust, 2006). In their scholarly article entitled "Wanted: A National Teacher Supply Policy for Education," Darling-Hammond and Sykes examined the inequitable allocation of proficient educators throughout educational institutions.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) consistently compiles data on the qualifications of teachers' and students' demographic characteristics (n. d.). Kuykendall05 (2022) postulated that the NCES data consistently shows inequalities in the quality of teachers, which are contingent upon the racial and socioeconomic backgrounds of students. For instance, the "Condition of Education" reports, which are published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) have extensively shown the existence of discrepancies in teacher experience and qualifications across schools serving diverse student populations. The causes of these disparities are myriad. Racial inequalities continue firmly as a persistent factor, with schools serving predominantly Black and Hispanic students often facing challenges in attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers. Socioeconomic factors further compound the issue, as high-poverty schools struggle to compete in the teacher labor market which leads to competency gaps. In addition, geographic location plays a significant role, with rural schools encountering unique challenges in recruiting and retaining skilled educators (Baker & Welner, 2011).

Schoolteachers must be competent in their areas of specialty coupled with effective mentorship and professional development programs (Damoah & Khalo, 2024). According to Foulger et al. (2017), the National Educational Technology Plan of the United States recommended that teacher educators who have accepted the responsibility to prepare those teacher candidates to teach with technology ought to have a reasonable level of competence. The competency or quality of a teacher is a global phenomenon. Among policymakers, there are growing general concerns over the teacher quality workforce and the demand and supply of effective teachers across all schools globally (Feng & Sass, 2017). However, the general effects of teacher attrition on their quality will significantly depend on the effectiveness of those teachers who will exit the profession for any reason. In the same way, the teacher turnover rate may alleviate or worsen disparities in the distribution of quality teachers based on the teacher who jumps from one school to the other or even quits the teaching profession and who replaces them.

The disparities in teacher competencies are far-reaching. Students in schools with less competent teachers often experience lower academic achievement (Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002). This contributes to the persistent achievement gap between different student populations. Systemic disparities in teachers' competencies within the U.S. public school system have far-reaching consequences for students' educational outcomes. Addressing these disparities requires a multi-faceted approach that encompasses equitable distribution of teachers, teacher development programs, and policy reform to ensure that all students have access to high-quality teachers who can provide quality education, regardless of their background or location (Damoah & Adu, 2020).

4 Untold Story & Glimmer of Hope

The ideological principles of Horace Mann from the 1800s to the 21st century remain relevant in the academic discourse in pursuit of accessible, universal, quality education devoid of racism, sexism, marginalization, and inequalities. Horace Mann's viewpoint on education continues to dominate the transformational paradigm of United States education, notwithstanding several obstructions confronting the US education system. It is further argued that education inequalities and segregation persisted in the 1800s and the aftermath of the departure of

Horace Mann. In the 1800s the black population was relegated to the background with total exclusion from the formal education system. Thereby criminalizing formal instruction for black folks in the southern communities (Smagorinsky, 2022).

Smagorinsky (2022) emphasized that there are compelling factors that are hindering the development of education in the United States. Exogenous factors continue to affect the transformational process of the education system. The ecosystem that supports the growth of children has direct implications for their academic success. The standardized tests and environment in which a child is born and raised influence the student's achievement. It has been proven that poverty continues to rip off potential students from achieving their academic goals. This phenomenon continues to be a major threat to sustainable development goal 4. This has deepened the gap in the already fragmented United States education system between the black, white, affluent, and impoverished communities.

The systemic differentials continue to persist as students from rich homes and communities have access to well-equipped, resourced schools than their counterparts from poor communities (Damoah & Omodan, 2022). This defeats Horace Mann's vision of creating a level playing field for all irrespective of one status in our communities.

Welner (2021) underscores two critical areas to leverage the fractured educational system which seeks to address specific exogenous elements. He alluded to "Great Equalizer and Systemic Social Safety Net Reform". These are educational intervention initiatives that address systemic racism, poverty, marginalization, deep-rooted segregated school systems, and other external factors affecting the development of education. He believes that these lifters shall go a long way to change the education system's status quo, which requires political will and resources to close the systemic gaps. He further argued that many policymakers have a narrow mindset on the holistic development of children and policies are tilted towards addressing inequalities in schools and not outside the school system.

Berliner and Hermanns (2021) revealed an intriguing remark on social Darwinism which advocates white supremacy and an inferiority complex. They intimated that whites were purported to be right-thinking folks than their black fellow which is a pure fallacy and distortion because there is no scientific basis to support such disingenuous argument. These issues continue to exist in many schools and universities as whites continue to undermine black students because of their color. This is not only a threat to the school's equalization and social cohesion but also an affront to fundamental human rights and social justice.

There are systemic deficiencies in public schools that undermine social cohesion. The concealed Sorting Machine is a precursor tool for racial discrimination in schools which deliberately divides students on their career paths. Students are grouped under the pretense of proficiency in reading, unfortunately, that is not the intent (Berliner & Hermanns, 2021). It is further revealed that the grouping of students in class hinged on physical appearance, race, and fluency in the English language. Children from affluent homes are pushed into progressive educational programs whereas those from disadvantaged homes and communities are caught up in programs without any future. This is not what Horace Mann stood for and such practices deny potential students from impoverished homes the right to advance their education to greater heights. These are some of the major setbacks that hinder the growth of education in the United States.

5 South African Education Mirrors the United States' Trajectory

United States and South African public schools have similar narratives because of the commonality in historically segregated endeavors. Post-apartheid South African education has made bold decisions to re-align school curricula and policies that abhor racism and segregation in schools and universities (Damoah & Adu, 2019). The white minority's dominance and influence in the education system has gradually eroded to leverage educational opportunities for all students irrespective of color, ethnicity, and geographical location. Interestingly modernized racism and segregation persist in some public schools predominately located in white communities (Damoah et al., 2023).

Schools located in white-dominated communities charge exorbitant school fees to scare poor black Africans from attending such schools (Willand, 2021). This corroborates with Smagorinsky's (2022), disposition of exogenous factors that influence the equalization of educational opportunities. Besides the financial exclusion strategy, the application process and requirements are strenuous to be fulfilled. Many white schools demand parents' tax-compliant certificates, three-month paystubs, proof of residency, and creditworthy reports before granting admission to students. Many black Africans are unemployed and cannot comply with these requirements which technically and indirectly prevents them from gaining access to such reputable schools. The South African education system has institutionalized a contemporary racially segregated public school system that allows the white minority to attend their preferred schools fully controlled by the white school governing body (SGB) which

makes internal policies to favor their race. All the White-dominated schools are top-notch first-class institutions with hi-tech educational resources that guarantee academic success.

The United States public school mirrors the South African education system, it would be hypocritical to brush off the positive strides achieved in recent years in both countries. The enrolment of black folks in public schools has tremendously increased. The United States government has enacted several policies and initiatives to leverage educational opportunities for all students in this great nation.

6 Conclusion

The history of public education in the United States has been distinguished by complexity and uncertainty caused by a variety of circumstances. The research identified several essential components, including the quantification of education results, school funding, infrastructure and resources, teacher competencies, and retention. The structure of the public education system, which undermines Horace Mann's common school ideology, disproportionately affects African Americans and other minority groups. It is instructive to note that the US public school system resembles the South African education system, with a shared history of institutional racism, segregation, and oppression of black people. The UN Charter guarantees the fundamental right to education. Every student deserves equitable educational opportunities, which demonstrate social cohesion and inclusiveness. Most African Americans are coiled and inhibited by these carefully planned institutional disparities that benefit the white majority. There is no perfect human institution, and transformation is a process rather than a single event. From the 1800s premised on Horace Mann and the Jeffersons advocacy, the public education system in the United States and post-apartheid South Africa has undergone significant upheaval and stratospheric development (Wiseman & Davidson, 2021).

The destiny of the children enrolled in public schools in the twenty-first century cannot be decided by continuing to focus on historical segregation and marginalization. No matter where students are located, our communities, parents, and opinion leaders should step up and demand fairness, equity, and high-quality instruction.

We are optimistic that in the coming years, systems will respond to our society's dynamic and inclusive nature by welcoming everybody without any shred of racism, sexism, segregation, or marginalization. We have many educated minority scholars in academia; let us be the change we want to see because the blame game and social movements have not produced the desired results from the days of Martin Luther King Jr. to the present. How long should we criticize the rippling effect of colonialism without decolonizing our education system?

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