

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND STUDENT OPPORTUNITY (Case Study from Teaching for Educational Equity)

INTRODUCTION

Brown v Board of Education (1954) was the U. S. Supreme Court case declaring separate public schools for black and white students unconstitutional, overturning Plessy v Ferguson (1896), which upheld state-sponsored segregation in public education. The Brown decision declared de jure racial segregation a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

A major factor in the Brown case was the Clarks' "doll experiments" of the 1940s, illustrating how children were impacted by segregation. Kenneth and Mamie Clark, psychologist at Columbia University, presented participating children with two identical dolls, but for skin and hair color: one doll had brown skin and black hair, the other white skin and blonde hair.

The children when asked which doll they preferred and various other questions such as which one looks "bad" and which one has the "nicer color." The children showed an overall preference for the white doll, which illustrated internalized racism among Black children. Such feelings of self-hatred were more pronounced in children who attended segregated schools (American Psychological Association 2014).

As Kenneth Clark stated, "The Negro child accepts as early as six to seven or eight the negative stereotypes about his own group....These children....like other human beings who are subjected to an obviously inferior status in the society in which they live, have been definitely harmed in the development of their personalities." (Clark as cited in Beggs, 1995, n. p.). Such harm of which Clark speaks still impacts Black and Brown children in US schools. To wit, new data from the U. S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (2014) illustrate how racism and structural inequalities impact school life today.

Some of the most shocking findings from these data include the following: although Black students account for only 18 percent of U. S. prekindergarten enrollment, they account for 48 percent of preschoolers with multiple suspensions; Black students are expelled three times more than their white counterparts; Black and Latino/a students account for 40 percent of enrollment at schools offering gifted programs, but only 26 percent of students in said programs; Black, Latino/a, and Native American students attend schools with higher percentages of first-year teachers (3 to 4 percent) than their white counterparts (1 percent); and Black students are more than three times as likely to attend schools where less than 60 percent of teachers meet all state requirements for certification and licensure.

The above findings have great implications for our kindergarten to twelfth grade schools, for higher education and for society in general. The issue of financial and resource equity in education continues to be a crucial issue. Can the heart of our nation be judged by the allocation of their resources? Tellingly, more resources are allocated to incarceration than to education.

Despite the fact that the United States is one of the wealthiest nations, the United States comprises 5 percent of the world's population and 25 percent of the world's inmates (Darling-Hammond 2013). As Kozol (2005) argues, the discrepancy in funding for public schools in the United States disproportionately impacts the poor and people of color, leading to an intractable opportunity gap. The glaring question remains: how far are we from Brown?

Although Brown was decided over fifty years ago, we are not metaphorically far from the above mentioned feelings of students of color illustrated in Clarks' experiment, trapped in segregated schools and reduced to feelings of inferiority. This issue of equitable school funding is not only relevant to those students attending these schools, but to society in general. We must do better to equitably educate our children.

This is a complex case involving "intersectionality." Intersectional is a theoretical construct functions to describe the experience of individuals possessing interlocking oppression and/or multiple minority statuses and a depiction of the lived experience of individuals who possess identities that may or may not conflict in their political orientations, This case intentionally focuses explicitly on socio-economic status, and implicitly on race. This intentionally highlights the "colorblindness" of the staff working at the school described in this case.

This case alludes to the racial tensions surrounding access to public pools in American history. Even today, we feel the implications of both legalized and socially imposed segregation in this area. To wit, approximately 58 percent of African American children do not know how to swim, which is double the rate of white children (Wiltse 2007). Also, African Americans are three times more likely to be victims of drowning (National Public Radio, 2008).

This case examines the experiences of Dr. Marcia Moore, administrator of the Cambridge Summer Sports Camp (CCSC) Program, and Mr. Jim Griner, physical education teacher, born and raised in the community. Their personal experiences with race and class converge after a controversial incident, which may or may not be classified as a student discipline infraction.

THE CASE

A school district is dependent on the support, resources, and involvement of a community and its members. In addition to collaborative community support, population demographics and history, including socio-economic factors and population growth greatly impact the financial stability and growth of the school district. Likewise, the overall performance and success of the school district may have a direct impact on the growth and the property values of a community (Chiodo, Hernandez-Murillo, & Owyang, 2010).

The economy and population of Cambridge, Pennsylvania, has declined steadily since the closing of the steel mills in the late 1970s. The population decreased from 167,000 people in 1960 to 65,000 by 2015. The city, which had once relied heavily on manufacturing jobs, is now in a state of economic decline contributing to a lack of educational advancement, lower salaries, and high unemployment.

The Cambridge City School District has an enrollment of approximately 5,100 students with 20 percent of the population receiving services for students with disabilities. This program serves 98 percent economically disadvantaged students of which 85 percent African American and 15 percent white. Although many graduates of the Cambridge School District pursue college degrees, few return to the area due to the shortage of career opportunities in the city and county. Only 62 percent of the overall population has earned a high school diploma. In addition, 25 percent of Cambridge residents currently hold a bachelor's degree, while only 4 percent have earned a graduate degree.

The median combined household income in 2015 was \$34,500, well below the state average of 47,000 per household. The Department of Job and Family Services reports that 18 percent of all residents throughout the county currently live below the federal poverty level. In comparison, 36.4 percent of the adults and 63.3 percent of the children currently residing in Cambridge are currently living below poverty level with many families receiving cash and food assistance, child care subsidies, access to basic medical and dental care, as well as access to early learning opportunities for children through the Head Start program.

Research clearly shows a relationship between school level poverty and student academic performance. As the level of poverty increases in a school, student performance declines (Betts, Rueben & Danenberg, 2000; Coleman, 1966; Datcher, 1982; Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata & Williamson, 2000).

CASE BACKGROUND: THE CAMBRIDGE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

The percentage of students classified as economically disadvantaged has steadily increased over the past twenty years. The 2014-2015 Cambridge school District Report Card stated that 98 percent of the five thousand students enrolled in the district are classified as economically disadvantaged. The district currently ranked last of the school districts in the state.

Although evidence does not suggest that the district performance is contributing to population and economic decline within the city of Cambridge, the impact of population demographics and socio-economic factors are evident in the school district. Enrollment numbers have declined substantially over the years, and as property values have declined, lower property tax revenue has had a deleterious effect on the district budget.

The Cambridge City School District has been ill equipped to support the needs of a growing population of economically challenged students attending their schools. No training was provided for teachers to address the challenging needs of students, many of whom come to school hungry and below state expectations for their grade level. Families in this area tend to be transient because jobs and resources are scarce.

Parents typically must work two or three jobs in order to make ends meet. This has great implications for the children currently residing in this area. Because parents are often away from the home working, older siblings are responsible for feeding and tending to homework needs of younger siblings---often areas beyond their expertise. In areas of economic insecurity, gangs tend to flourish as recently evidenced by the explosion of gang activity in Cambridge.

The Cambridge City School District is aware of the societal economic issues that families residing in their district experience. Although they have little control over these issues, the superintendent, Dr. Livingston, wrote a five-year federal grant in order to assist parents in the district. Her plan was to expand the district's summer school program, from a credit and retention recovery program, to a summer enrichment program for all students in the district so that parents could focus on work and cease to worry about their children falling prey to gang influences within their neighborhoods.

CASE NARRATIVE: THE CAMBRIDGE SUMMER SPORTS CAMP

In an effort to provide a summer enrichment program to an underserved population, the Cambridge City School District gained federal funding through Title II to support the Cambridge Summer Sports Camp (CSCS) focusing on sports, and physical activity. Although many of the students in the district were in need of literacy and math skills, the majority testing well below grade level, the superintendent determined that a more pressing need was to repair the negative perceptions the community held of the schools. Dr. Livingston felt that easing the pressures of childcare might help repair the multiple decade-long divide between the school and the community.

Dr. Livingston was unaware of the cause of the divide. In fact, most teachers and administrators were unaware that such a divide and distrust among parents even existed. The historical knowledge of the community among school district employees was not well known; this was exacerbated by the high rate of teacher turnover that is common in urban areas.

Despite the facts, Dr Livingston was confident that the camp could do much to bridge these divides. She determined that this measure would do more for the community than she could do by talking to district employees about historic strife. In her experience, she had found that educators have difficulty in dealing with long-range systemic problems.

Instead, teachers are accustomed to “quick fix” and top-down initiatives. Likewise, she surmised that her parents were too busy to become involved and were likely not well informed about their children needed in order to be successful in school. Moreover, the feds had approved her initiative and funded it well. She was confident that the summer program would be successful.

THE CAMBRIDGE SUMMER SPORTS CAMP

The new initiative, the CSSC, consisted of a summer-long series of active sports training camps. The day camps provide specific sports training in baseball, basketball, inline hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball, tennis, and volleyball. All children, grades three through ten, enrolled in Cambridge City Schools and residing in a low-income household were eligible, but enrollment was limited based on funding.

Campers arrived every morning at 8:30 am and left at 5:00 pm. Activities included warm ups/stretching, lessons, drills and small group instruction, breakfast and lunch, free time, scrimmaging and a break period where children could watch movies or rest. Supplemental classroom activities such as drug and alcohol awareness, team building, and sex education for older students were also scheduled. For six weeks each summer, students were provided free breakfast and lunch through the U. S> Department of Agriculture summer food service program. The camp was provided to students at no cost with funding from the federal grant.

THE FIRST YEAR

In the first year, the CSSC quickly grew in popularity. Working parents were anxious for a safe place for their children to go to in the summer, away from the growing negative influences of the neighborhood; this program fulfilled that need. At the close of the first year, the program administrators were thrilled with the success of the CSSC. Attendance was high and the children seemingly enjoyed the activities. / Dr. Livingston and program directors felt that the parents were thankful for CSSC as a safe haven from gang activity that ruled the neighborhoods because they diligently ensured their children's attendance.

However, in the first year, program enrollment only reached 158 with a target of 200. Reasons for the under enrollment were investigated by Dr. Livingston, who determined that the target was not reached because of student transportation. Because of budget cuts, bussing had been drastically reduced during the school year and no bussing was available for summer programs. During the first year, parents and guardians were responsible for getting their children to and from camp.

The program administrator, Dr. Marcia Moore, felt strongly about finding a way to ease the burden of transportation for parents. Additionally, Dr. Livingston communicated to Dr. Moore that the goal for year two was three hundred students. Because of this charge, Dr. Moore decided to use the public transportation system to get students to and from the program. Dr. Livingston thoroughly endorsed this idea, as she believed this would alleviate pressure from the parents and serve to further ingratiate the parents to the school district.

THE SECOND YEAR

Once accepted into the program for the second year, parents received a letter welcoming them. The welcome letter included a sample daily schedule, breakfast and lunch menus, and an explanation of the bus transportation system.

Although some parents still relied on their own personal transportation both to and from the camp in year two, the majority of parents sent their children to camp through the public transportation system. Parents explained to their children which bus stop to exit for the summer program, but many did not tell their child what exit to take to get back home. As the staff loaded the buses at the end of the first day, students got on not knowing when to get off, and many missed their exits.

As for Dr. Moore turned to leave at the end of her first day, she heard the phone ring. One parent after another called to find out where their child was. One child who did not know where to get off stayed on the bus and ended up at the bus station. Immediately, Dr Moore called her office staff back in to help field calls. She also contacted the public transportation bus system. Dr. Moore had no experience riding public transportation; in fact, Dr. Moore's inexperience of the public transportation system, and that of other staff, created the problem.

Dr. Moore felt that the creation of a master schedule would alleviate all future transportation issues. That night she and her office secretary mapped bus routes and student stops. Dr. Moore had assumed that when the students came to school on the bus that they would know how to get home. Despite the master schedule, another glitch occurred.

The bus pass system involved a summer camp staff member escorting the students to the bus stop where they would hand each student a bus pass to get home and another pass to return the next day. The box of bus passes were budgeted to last 65 percent of students enrolled in the camp thirty days. Because the duty rotate among staff members, the passes were kept in the main office where they were readily accessible to staff. A few weeks into the program, bus passes were disappearing. There were not enough passes to make it to the end of the program, and additional funds would be needed to secure the necessary bus passes. After some investigation, Dr. Moore determined that the shortage in bus passes was caused by student theft. However, no student was found to be the culprit of said theft.

As the second year of the program closed, Dr. Moore held a staff meeting to discuss the outcomes of the program and improvements that were needed for the next year. Other than the missing bus passes, the second year had ended with great success. Student enrollment was a full capacity, children and parents were happy, and funding was continued for the following year.

However, staff member Jim Grier expressed concern over the use of bus passes. Jim was a beloved physical education teacher in the district. The students respected Mr. Grier. He was known to be fair and to genuinely care about the students. Also, he saw the benefits of the CSSC offer his students; a safe place to be in the summer months away from gangs and street life, much needed meals (breakfast and lunch), and good role models.

Mr. Grier grew up in the neighborhood and still resided in the area. He was well aware of the gang violence to which his students were subject, and he felt the system of using bus passes for to students to go to and from camp was not well thought out and wrought with potential disaster. He felt the students were too young to be riding public transportation alone.

THE THIRD YEAR

In the third year of the program, Dr. Moore devised an innovative idea for systematizing the bus passes. The system would include a lanyard with a permanent bus pass for each student requiring transportation to and from CSSC, including the beginning and ending date of the program, times of prepaid transportation (arrival and departure from CSSC), and each students name and photo.

On the first day of camp, the public transportation system, Western Reserve Transit Authority, better known as WRTA, came to school and took students' pictures. Bus passes were laminated and put on lanyards for the students. With 320 enrolled in the program, the use of bus passes had risen to 90 percent participants.

At first, things ran smoothly with students arriving to school and going home by bus on time and without difficulty. But two weeks into the summer program on a Wednesday morning, only 180 students showed up for school. Mr. Grier, the only African American employee in the summer program, was on bus duty that morning and he was the first to report that most of the students who rode the buses did not show up for camp. His concern for the students was evident as he pressed Dr. Moore to call WRTA.

Unalarmed Dr. Moore thought this was peculiar that only the older students were not at school. As one of the younger students, Kesha, entered the office, Dr. Moore took the opportunity to ask where her older brother was. Kesha disclosed, "They all went to the mall today." Dr. Moore surmised that as students became accustomed to using the bus passes, they figured out they could ride the public busses anywhere, and they wanted to go to the mall.

Knowing that Mr. Grier was well acquainted with the students, Dr. Moore called him into the office to tell him what she had discovered. Mr. Grier quickly offered to go to the mall to locate the students. Dr. Moore returned to her office to inform parents of the situation. As Mr. Grier walked through the mall, he encountered the missing students and informed them that they were not supposed to use their bus passes to travel anywhere other than school and back home. He escorted many to the bus stop and waited for the appropriate bus to arrive. He drove the remaining students home in his own car.

Dr. Moore and her secretary worked all afternoon and late into the evening calling parents and guardians to explain what had happened. Most of the parents did not know that the students had used the bus passes to go to the mall. The students had arrived at their homes at their normal time to avoid getting in trouble with their parents. While most parents were upset about the situation, some were not at all troubled. As one parent remarked, “Well you give them a pass. It was just something that kids know how to do—ride the bus. What did you expect? They are teenagers.”

Dr. Moore was upset with her student, their parents, and the entire situation. She was livid at the ungratefulness of the students, who were provided with an amazing opportunity that, she believed, would ultimately help them with academic progress, keep them out of trouble, and provide unique summer programming that would benefit their health. She expressed these sentiments to Mr. Grier when he came to her office to meet with her the next morning. She had called upon him to express her outrage.

Mr. Grier was not shy about expressing his concerns. “With all due respect, Dr. Moore, you have no idea what it is like to live in this community. I grew up here. Just give me a few moments to tell you a story.” Mr. Grier paused and looked at Dr. Moore. She nodded.

“When I was a little kid, this community was more integrated. I mean, don’t get me wrong. There were white neighborhoods and black neighborhoods. Although this is not the south, Jim Crow lived here. We had a public pool, but it was for ‘whites only.’ Everyone knew this. After the Brown decision, parents started sending their children to the pool. But instead of welcoming us, they drained it.

This is the legacy in which we live Now, I was a little too young to experience that myself, but my older brothers and sisters lived that reality. Can you imagine what that does to a person? Knowing that you are undervalued so much that a community would rather take the opportunity for swimming away from everyone, rather than have black children in the pool?”

“I am so sorry this happened, Mr. Grier.” Dr. Moore replied, “but I am not sure I see the connection.”

“I said this might take a while, Dr. Moore.” Mr. Grier smiled. “You see, kids know immediately whether they are valued by the adults around them. I mean, they may not be able to articulate it, but they understand if they are valued as human beings, or if they are looked down upon by the adults who are in authority over them. The older kids, they may have gotten that message. And despite your best intentions, they are not going to respect you if you do not respect them.

Again, the kids may not be able to articulate this, surely not if you asked them, but even if I did. But I suspect that this action is an assertion of their autonomy, of their personhood.”

“I totally understand what you are saying, Mr. Grier, and I respect it. But I take issue with the fact that any adult working in this program has communicated any notion that we do not value the students,” Dr. Moore implied, feeling her pulse rise.

“Again with all due respect,” Mr. Grier began tentatively, “I disagree. Think about it this way. Yes, these students, many come from poverty. Their parents work multiple jobs, with crazy unstable hours, and so they may not be able to come into the school, help their with homework, and some of these teachers take that to mean that the parents do not care about their kids. But this perception comes from their own lives, from their own recollections of what their childhoods were like, or from their own parenting styles.

Do the teachers here every try to get to know the lived experiences of our kids? Also, the curriculum, particularly in the early grades---it is highly scripted. The literacy program? Success for All? I call it ‘Success for None.’ This is nothing less than watered down curriculum presuming that our kids are stupid and incapable of critical thought. The reading materials have nothing to do with their home lives, cultures, languages, or community. Can you say that you would endorse such a curriculum for your own children?”

Dr. Moore was torn between throwing Mr. Grier out of her office and listening. Although she felt her face flush and perspiration flow seemingly out of each and every pore of her body, she decided to pause. She nodded, “I am listening.”

“ I know I am just a gym teacher. This is not a job that carries much prestige, but I have never cared about that. All I ever wanted to do was to live and work in the community that I love---the community I grew up in, the community that made me who I am. But I know these kids. And I am not going to say that I am not mad as hello at them, because I am. But I want to tell you, that I understand. I understand why they did what they did. When I was putting them on the buses to return home yesterday, I pulled Jamal to the side, Do you know Jamal?

Dr. Moore shook her head to indicate that she did not, feeling the guilt rise within her for not knowing one of her students.

Mr. Grier nodded. “I asked Jamal what they were thinking. Whose idea this was. And do you know what he said to me?”

Dr. Moore closed her eyes and shook her head again, her anger subsiding. “He said it was the first time in his life that he felt free. He felt free to be able to go and hang out with his friends at the mall---something that teenagers in the suburbs have the opportunity to do all the time. Am I right?”

“You are not incorrect.” Dr. Moore suddenly realized that there were many problems within her school that she was not privy to. She wondered just how foolish she looked to the community.

“Again, Dr. Moore, I am not telling you that I am not upset with these kids. In fact, I am very upset. But, given the opportunity for free travel, as a kid, I am not sure I would not have done the same. What I am saying is that this issue is not just about kids breaking rules. It is about so much more. And let’s talk about lacrosse. I mean, who outside of prep schools and liberal arts colleges, even knows what the heck that is? And what suburban kid has to be shuttled to school every day over the summer, not having any choice in what to do on any given day?”

Although Dr. Moore was surprised that the students in the program would use their knowledge of the public transportation system, knowledge that she did not possess, to serve their own needs, upon reflection, she wondered, if given the opportunity in my own teenage rebellion phase: would I have done the same”? Dr. Moore then thought of how many times she had disobeyed her own parents. However, the difference here was that her students were supported by a federal grant.

Dr. Moore felt she needed to question everything. Was the program what the students needed? Why had the district not considered the community, the parents, in how to best address the needs of their student population? Had she been viewing her students from a deficit mindset as Mr. Grier implied? Would such a paternalistic program ever fly in the suburbs? Why did educators deem parents living in poverty to be uninvolved or uncaring about their children's education? All of these questions flew through her mind as she sat across from Mr. Grier. Who was now silent, waiting for her to speak.

Dr. Moore sighed. "Mr. Grier, I think you for your candor. I really do. You have given me so much to think about, and I have a lot of thinking yet to do. But, let me ask you: Where do you see us going from here?"

"Before I get to that, I have one more question for you Dr. Moore. I do not necessarily want you to answer it, but I ask you to think about it. Why did you ask me to come and speak to you about this issue? Are you speaking with all of the teachers?"

Dr. Moore thought for a moment. But she knew the answer. She did not even think about asking any of the other teachers, all of whom were white, to speak to her. She had only asked to speak with Mr. Grier.

