

EDUCATION AS LIBERATION FOR LOW INCOME STUDENTS

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“And America is now blood and tears instead of milk and honey. The youngsters who were programmed to continue fucking up woke up one night digging Paul Revere and Nat Turner as the good guys.”

-Gil Scott-Heron, *Comment #1*

“Who will survive in America?” Gil Scott-Heron asked this question in his controversial poetic piece *Comment #1* in the 1970s. The poem was written in response to revolutionaries of the time seeking to liberate the minds and lives of African American men, women, and children. Scott-Heron criticized the white college students who gave up their lives of privilege to fight in the African American struggle, urging them to find their own revolution. Scott-Heron believes a different world has been born out of the poor, disenfranchised black experience, a world the privileged white college student could not possibly understand. America has ceased to live up to the promises its forefathers purported. Children raised in these circumstances are fooled into believing that the system that placed them in poverty is the same system that will set them free. “Who will survive in America?” Depends on the “America”.

Socioeconomic inequality was born from a long history of racial inequality. Scott-Heron believed black youth were programmed to perpetuate their race stereotype, many of our social institutions today maintain the cycle of both inequalities, enabling the rich to get richer, and the poor to get poorer.

In order to stop this cycle of inequality, the institution of education must be radically restructured. The different “America” created by racial and socioeconomic inequality places low-income, minority students at an educational disadvantage compared to their white, middle

class counterparts. White American humorist Will Rogers declared, “America is the land of opportunity.” Rogers must not have seen the stark differences between the opportunities available to impoverished minorities and the racial majority. The schism between Americas begins in the how children are educated. How they are taught to think, what they are given to know, greatly impacts the way they view the world and what they do in it.

Poverty is linked to extreme educational inequity, and poorly educated students have fewer opportunities to make a change for themselves and their futures. In this paper, I will show the link between socioeconomics and education, provide a picture of the current model of education and offer a theoretical change that can end the cycle of educational inequality. Educators, committed to an egalitarian teaching model, can engage low income students in critical thought, effectively ending the cycle of racial and socioeconomic inequality both in the classroom and our society.

### **Two Americas**

Imagine life in Rancho Cucamonga, a city located in Southern California, an hour east of Los Angeles. The average household income there is about \$90,939, the median \$75,429, and one third of the local population have household incomes above \$100,000 (“Rancho cucamonga statistics,” 2009). Renting an apartment in this suburb costs about \$1,333 a month. However, people here are more likely to own a home, which, at the median, costs about \$522,006. 94% of the residents in Rancho Cucamonga are high school graduates.

Drive up Milliken Avenue and you will find the best high school in the area, Los Osos High School. There are about 3,260 students enrolled at the school, 49% male, 48% reported female (“Los Osos High,” 2010). 10.9% of students are African American, 45.4% Caucasian,

8.6% Asian, 26% Hispanic or Latino. The teacher to student ratio is 26 to 1. On the school's summative high school mathematics, 66% of students are proficient. The California state average is 54% ("Test Rating," 2010).

Between Cherry Valley, Arkansas and Hazlehurst, Mississippi, is the Mississippi Delta. Imagine living in Clarksdale, Mississippi, a town located in the Delta. Estimated median income per household in this city is \$24,288, which has gone up in since 2000 when the projection was \$22,188. The population of Clarksdale is 17,733. Renting a house in Clarksdale would cost about \$552 a month, but to own a home here would cost about \$62,510 ("City-data," 2010).

The Mississippi Delta is considered a low-income region, thus its schools look very different than they do in Rancho Cucamonga. Here, only 10 percent of eighth graders, for example, are proficient in math, 12.5 percent proficient in reading (TeachForAmerica.Org, 2010). At Clarksdale High School, 96.4% of students are African American, 3.1% Caucasian, 2% Hispanic. In the 2009/2010 school year, of the 208 students tested for Algebra 1, 54% passed, which is a 15% improvement from the year before ("Clarksdale school," 2011).

The situations in Rancho Cucamonga, California and Clarksdale, Mississippi are very different. A household in Rancho Cucamonga makes nearly triple what a household in Clarksdale makes. While both cities are American cities, the stark contrast between the two illustrates the truth behind the dual America concept. The students in each city undoubtedly experience a different lifestyle and have access to vastly different resources. With highly educated and well-off parents, the students in Rancho Cucamonga can expect greater academic and financial support than those of Clarksdale, whose parents, and a \$20,000 income may be struggling just to keep their children fed and clothed.

According to the Education Trust, nearly three of every four African American children could not perform at a basic level for math in 1996 (Education Trust, 2009). Though by 2007 those numbers were down by 30 percent, most low income children, by the time they reach the fourth grade, will be two to three grades behind their higher income peers. Only half of those low income students will graduate high school by the age of 18, and only one in ten of those students will graduate from college (TeachForAmerica.Org, 2010).

### **Children Left Behind**

Low-income students need more than words of encouragement like these to survive the challenges presented to them kindergarten through 12th grade. Advice that may have helped a middle class student navigate school, "Always do your homework as soon as you get home from school," "Do not be afraid to ask your teacher questions," "It does not matter how cool your notebook looks if you are not taking good notes!", will not address the issues of racial and socioeconomic inequality. To address these concerns, the second Bush Administration instituted No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which attempted to standardize education across the board, very much like the College Board's SAT test. Because of this standardization, student's success and worth comes from how well you do on those standardized tests and exams. "Intelligence" boiled down to memorizing and being able to regurgitate facts unrelated to your situation, most often devoid of any critical thinking.

College Board believes the SAT can predict how well a student will do in their freshman year of college, though they acknowledge that the grades they predict are only one indicator of success in college. Their study, "Predictions of Freshman Grade-Point Average From the Revised and Recentered SAT I: Reasoning Test" predicted that women's college grades are

under-predicted and grades of minorities are over-predicted. The findings showed that the SAT predicted well across all ethnic groups, female grades being more easily predictable, males worse. Socioeconomics also played a factor, the grades of students with higher socioeconomic status were more predictable than those with lower socioeconomic status. This study illustrates the dangerous thinking that emerges from standardized testing of students. Educators and the government, following NCLB, believed they could predict a student's worth based off one test while excluding anything else this student may have to offer from experience to new ideas to critical thought. What is valued here is the ability to work well within the system at no benefit to the self other than acceptance. For students who truly care about knowledge and learning, they must grow a dual consciousness, one that both plays by the rules of the system while rebelling against them. Regardless, students of higher socioeconomic status have more advantages to succeed on the SAT, which is used widely in college admissions practices. Classes offered to prepare for the SAT can cost hundreds of dollars that low income families simply cannot afford.

To say the students who do succeed are solely blessed, lucky, or gifted would undermine the true miracle of their achievements. These incredibly hard workers survived a very stressful system to gain what a lot of children and young adults these days do not have the opportunity or resources to attain: a bona fide education. The children growing up in Clarksdale will not receive the same schooling as a child attending Los Osos High School. The socioeconomics of their families and towns contribute to the inequality. There are, at best, two types of students bred in America today: the fortunate and the not-so-fortunate, based upon the factors of socioeconomics and perspectives stemming from the realities of growing up in a specific socioeconomic situation.

### **Constructing Inequality**

Adam Gamoran, professor of Sociology at University of Wisconsin-Madison, finds that from 1901 to 2001, the American education system has witnessed a dramatic reduction in overt racial discrimination. The downward trend in racial discrimination does not mean that racial discrimination has ceased to exist. Though Gamoran states universal literacy rates have held just as well for blacks as they have for whites, both races sharing an average of 13 years for school, white, middle class students can still expect to receive a more resourceful education than their minority, low income counterparts. Gamoran illustrates this point by examining the current, substantial racial inequalities in academic performance between blacks and whites. In 1996, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that among 17 year-olds, black-white differences ranged from .7 standard deviations in reading to about .9 in math. The gap continues into college as well. In 1992, 27.5% of whites obtained a bachelor's degree or higher while only 12.2% of blacks had achieved the same. Gamoran believes one reason for these disparities exists in the socioeconomic differences seen between places like Rancho Cucamonga and Clarksdale. The inequalities do not stop at socioeconomics. Culturally, even poor whites can expect to receive a better education than a poor minority student due to factors of pure racial discrimination. In this way, educational inequality has begun to affect not just black communities, but any impoverished minority student.

Our current model of education purports equity. With *Brown v. Board* and the Civil Rights Movement, students were delivered the promise of the end of separate but equal, yet this inequality still exists. Jonathan Kozol, author of *Savage Inequalities*, finds the birthplace of this inequality in the application of the idea of equity. Kozol believes what those in charge of school

finances mean when they speak of equity is really “something that resembles equity but never reaches it. Something close enough...to silence criticism by approximating justice, but far enough to guarantee the benefits enjoyed by privilege” (Kozol, 262). As an example, Kozol writes that in Maryland a state court, in looking at fiscal inequalities between school districts, decided that 100% equality was too expensive, and pursued 75% equality, which was more economically affordable and, in turn, formalized the differences in student destinies.

Students in this case have become profit chips to be moved around, their concerns no longer valid or considered. As Kozol puts it, “children in one set of schools are educated to be governors; children in the other set of schools are trained for being governed. The former are given the imaginative range to mobilize ideas for economic growth; the latter are provided with the discipline to do the narrow tasks the first group will prescribe” (Kozol, 263). The children, students all across the world, are dependent on those who have authority over them. When the people in charge, the teachers, principals, superintendents, educational policy makers, decide that money is more important than their education, there is little for a student to do in revolt. Many of these students become disillusioned and begin to associate education with a power play against their situations as they become more and more alienated from their realities.

The question then becomes, what led the people in charge to allow the institution of education to become an oppressor of student thought and engagement for the sake of money? Sociologists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis investigate the end goals of our current educational system. Bowles and Gintis find that the major role of education is the reproduction of labor power in capitalist societies, education becoming “subservient to the needs of those who control the workforce-- the owners of the means of production” (Haralambos, 787). One way the

education system functions to serve capitalism is to teach a hidden curriculum, one that creates students who are “hard-working, docile, obedient, and highly motivated” (Haralambos, 787).

Bowles and Gintis believe the hidden curriculum rewards students who have personality traits that favor the capitalist work system. In a study, “Schooling in Capitalist America,” Bowles and Gintis conducted with 237 seniors at a New York high school, it was found that grades awarded related more to their personalities than their academic abilities. Low grades were then related to creativity, aggressiveness, and independence, higher grades related to perseverance, consistency, dependability and punctuality. Bowles and Gintis also believe the hidden curriculum encourages an acceptance of hierarchy, motivation by external rewards, and a fragmentation of school subjects. All of this coupled with the breeding of a belief in equality of opportunity leads to what Bowles and Gintis believe to be the three myths of education: educational attainment is based on merit, occupational reward is based on merit, and education is the route to success in the world of work.

### **Deconstructing Inequality with Education**

Our education system, through an illusion of equality, ties itself to the workplace and class status. The educational institution as it stands grooms students to take their place in society based on where they were put into it. If a student’s family is low-income, they more likely to become low-income themselves once they enter the workforce. Remember, 94% of Rancho Cucamonga residents are high school graduates with an average income of around \$70,000. Compared to a town like Clarksdale, with a median income of \$24,000, which set of students might be better served by this current method of education?

Yet there still exists some desire among students of low-income to attain an education as a way out of their situations. While Bowles and Gintis believe that education is not a route to success, I argue that it very well can be if education happens in a way that serves the student and not the capitalistic economy. In the summer of 2010, I traveled to South Africa with a non-profit called Keep a Child Alive (KCA). Founded by Alicia Keys and Leigh Blake, KCA does HIV/AIDS work in Africa and India, going into communities and providing them with the care and support they need to serve the disenfranchised suffering from or affected by HIV/AIDS. One specific day, we went to Soweto, one of the poorest townships in the country, to speak to young adults at Ikageng Ministries, a place of refuge for those who have lost parents and guardians to HIV/AIDS. I was given the opportunity to sit with these students and speak with them about their experiences, and in our conversation, one theme emerged: the desire for an education.

These students were not seeking to make a lot of money or to get a better job, but to become educated, to be able to provide, to be able give back to their respective communities. These young students possess a different perspective on their education, one rooted in necessity. To them, education is not a burden to bear, but a tool to be utilized for the advancement of themselves, their families, and their communities. Viewing education this way liberates them from the oppressive strings that would confine them to a life of servitude and silence. Instead, by pursuing their own learning, they become free to do what they would of their own accord.

But not everyone in South Africa or our own country for that matter, has the opportunity to pursue education in this way, let alone learn there is a different way to pursue their education. Our economic system, which seeks to reproduce inequality through education, denies resources to the students who need them most. Students generally are not taught to value liberation as an

end goal of education. Rather, students are dominated and confined by the chains of socioeconomics and race. These children do not have access to that which could tip them in that direction of freedom. Educators, policy-makers, and social institutions need to be there to help close the gap of educational inequality, to give low-income students a fighting chance at a life that has not been offered to them yet. Even more so, these students need to see why their being educated is crucial to the success of our nation and their own growth in their lives.

The educational institution, in light of this perspective, becomes a sacred place. A ground where students are engaged, encouraged, challenged and stimulated to the point of empowerment. Showing a student why they need to be educated themselves is the most powerful motivation that can be offered.

Can low income students trapped in a system not made to serve them be motivated to continue to pursue an education? In studying race, cultural capital, and educational resources, Vincent Roscigno and James Ainsworth-Darnell of Ohio State and Georgia State respectively find that black and low-income students receive less returns from educational resources than their white and high-income counterparts. While this disadvantage can be partially measured from family background, such as generational poverty, a greater factor is explained by “micropolitical processes that are tied specifically to teacher’s evaluations of student’s efforts and more systematic relegation associated with tracking” (Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell, 171). There exists a lot of power in the student-teacher relationship, and it is from that point that educational change can begin to be made. If the process of class reproduction in America is to be stopped, change must begin with students.

### **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**

The process of education is about more than absorbing math theorems and being able to read at such and such level, though both are important. What underlies and makes academic learning possible is the unfettered desire to reach a place different than you are at now, a new understanding, a new horizon. GPAs and midterm scores are checkpoints that should be monitored and cannot come at the cost of a dead spirit. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, an exposition of education as social change.

Freire, in his pedagogy, seeks the development of a critical consciousness in the oppressed. The “oppressed” are the group of people that experience dehumanization at the hands of the “oppressors”, those with socioeconomic power and racial dominance. Freire would consider the ways in which we utilize GPAs and midterm scores as a process of dehumanization. Dehumanization, defined by Freire, “is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human...emancipation of labor, [the] overcoming of alienation” (Freire, 44). Scores such as these only offer finality to the student receiving them. If the student does not succeed, they have little recourse to course correct, and in that way become more prone to demoralization as a result of dehumanization. Freire asserts, however, that “both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for a person as an uncompleted being conscious of their incompleteness” (43). There is another way to encourage and track student growth. If the student can be empowered and the educator seeks a path of humanization for their students over dehumanization, students may delight in their own education.

Achieving what Freire calls critical consciousness would enable both the oppressed and the oppressors to begin the work of “becoming more fully human”, what he believes to be the chief goal of humankind. To reach critical consciousness, Freire believes we begin with

education. There are two main models used in education: banking and problem posing. While banking assumes the student is an object, problem-posing assumes the student is an actor. In order to encourage the growth of critical consciousness, educators must pose the problems of the world in relation to the student, enabling them to break free from the shackles of alienation.

### **The Banking Method**

In the "banking" method, the teacher "talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized and predictable." (71) The words, ideas, and concepts passed on in this way, according to Freire, do not have any transforming power, but merely sound pleasant. Though the knowledge may be passed, the passing becomes toxic because nothing is truly understood; a student can know when the Treaty of Versailles happened, but not understand its significance or impact on the world. Because knowledge is given in this way, the expectation becomes that students do not have to think critically about it, merely receive it. Freire believes this method not only files away information, but people due to their inability to participate in the education process. "Banking" education, then, assumes that students are objects, unable of being involved in their own education. The teacher becomes a subject, the only individual capable of filling the student-object's mind. Freire cites social psychologist Erich Fromm's idea of "necrophily", the pursuit of control of life and objects leading to the death of that life and those objects. Freire believes this model of education is oppressive, and in that way, is nourished by a love of control, death, and stagnation over freedom, life, and progress.

"Banking" education, though widely used, does not aid in the quest for liberation. It instead guides a student into stagnation and does not prepare them for critical or creative thinking. Again, we must consider the goal of this model of education, which we have already

discovered to be the replication and perpetuation of class inequality, preparing students to be good workers who follow orders without asking questions. Students face a much more difficult time attaining levels of critical consciousness when borne of this educational model.

These are the results of this model, but in practice they may not appear terribly sinister. In fact, many educators across the nation do not realize the effect this educational model is having on their classrooms. Standardized testing and No Child Left Behind standards make it almost necessary for educators to teach this way, it is too simple to blame the teacher. To better understand what this "banking" method practically looks like, Freire offers ten snapshots:

- (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- (d) the teacher talks and the students listen-- meekly;
- (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, the students comply;
- (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
- (h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
- (i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;

(j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. (Freire, 73)

Upon examination, some of the above points may find contention. Control of the classroom is a highly valued ideal in the American classroom. Offering the students freedom, especially at younger ages, is generally asking for disaster and chaos. Most assume that a type of education contrary to this is better reserved for higher education, if even that. While this thinking is valid, what this type of rigid education has done to the student, the educator, and the classroom must be evaluated. Many students are not meeting the set goals of the states and country for reading, math, or science. In order to help students catch up, a common approach has been to call the kids who do not understand slower learners and continue to drill them with the concepts they do not understand in the same way, thinking eventually they will understand. Repeating of the same task and expecting a different result is, what Albert Einstein deduced, the definition of insanity.

Educators, tasked with raising student performance, are in a difficult position. Going about raising the numbers is a Herculean effort, one that takes a lot of creativity and dedication to produce. Without engaging with the needs of their respective classrooms, teachers will have an even more difficult time teaching to their needs. That is another hinging point, for whom is the educator educating, for the system that employs them, or the students that need to learn? The "banking" method of education would argue the teacher teaches for the system who is for the student. In the classroom, however, the teacher is in the best position to know their students on a personal level, to see how they learn, what they need to know, and guide them in that direction.

The system, while not necessarily malicious, is not in a position to offer students the support they need to beat the challenges they are currently facing.

### **The Problem-Posing Method**

Through the banking method, the student becomes an object to be manipulated by the educator. In contrast, the problem-posing method assumes the individual as a conscious being capable of critical thought. Freire states, “[Educators] must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world” (79). As per Freire’s theory of critical consciousness, the problem-posing method of education breaks down the barriers that exist in the oppressed-oppressor relationship and rather supports a dialogical approach, enabling the experience of both the student and the teacher to guide the learning process.

Education in this light becomes a practice of freedom, free of domination or agenda, rather seeking the growth of all involved in the process. The teacher has just as much to learn from the student as the student from the teacher. The classroom becomes a mind-melding center where the whole of learning is not lost on anyone in the process.

Freire argues that this position is not an idle one. Teachers and students must fight to evoke this type of situation. Both must be at war with false perceptions of reality, dehumanization, and oppression. Education, rather than being static, becomes a dynamic practice, more equitable to jazz music than classical. There is both give and take, and while there may be an agreed upon outset destination, how the student and teacher get there and what they experience along the way depends upon the players.

### **Pedagogy of the Privileged**

In contrast to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a pedagogy for the privileged may breed some sense of entitlement within the middle-class, high-income student. Left on its own, being educated in this way, for the high-income student, perpetuates the current model of class inequality in the same way it does for low-income students. According to Ann Curry-Stevens, professor at York University, writes about the importance of a pedagogy for the privileged, on that "seeks to transform those with more advantages into allies of those with fewer, [presenting] a considerable impetus for broad, social change" (Curry-Stevens, 35). Arguments arise against this idealistic viewpoint, however. What encouragement do educators have to liberate the minds of high-income students when success and high achievement are readily available through already less critical means? Curry-Stevens finds the process of liberation for high-income students is "destabilizing, confidence-shaking, and intimately challenging" (40). Curry-Stevens furthers this thought by advocating for the ideal of a new pedagogy for the privileged, claiming "it offers the possibility to remedy an identity premised on superiority, recognizing how fully this identity might damage, at a deep level, one's integrity and values. Accordingly, pedagogy for the privileged, if successfully navigated, enables us to reconnect to all humanity-- not just those like us" (40).

Thus, we reach a new notion in the field of education, whom do we want to serve and how will we serve them? The institution's obligation is to the student and we wish to set their minds free, to liberate their critical, creative thoughts on all fronts. To allow them to choose what they become and how they become. Nothing is really more American than this ideal, that these students ought to not be constrained by any person, but rather embraced and lifted up for

the gifted mind they can become. Educators must begin with assuming these students are capable of great depth and works. The teacher's goal must be to facilitate this quest for freedom.

Paul Gorski, professor at George Mason University and founder of EdChange, interviewed educators to learn the myths of the culture of poverty. One interview was particularly poignant:

"I love these kids," she declares, as if trying to convince me. "I adore them. But my hope is fading." "Why's that?" I ask, stuffing my notes into a folder. "They're smart. I know they're smart, but . . ."

And then the deficit floodgates open: "They don't care about school. They're unmotivated. And their parents—I'm lucky if two or three of them show up for conferences. No wonder the kids are unprepared to learn." (Gorski, 32)

Gorski believes this educator and many other well-meaning teachers have fallen into believing in the culture of poverty, "the idea that poor people share more or less monolithic and predictable beliefs, values, and behaviors" (Gorski, 32). The myth surfaced in 1961 with Oscar Lewis' book *The Children of Sanchez*. The book was an ethnography of small Mexican communities, in which Lewis found shared attributes such as a lack of future planning and frequent violence, and proceeded to coin the term "culture of poverty". Gorski states that Lewis' ideas sparked a plethora of research, most of which concluded such a culture was non-existent, but the paradigm still hung around. Gorski addresses several myths of that paradigm and rebukes them with the reality. Despite the myth, "poor people are unmotivated and have weak work ethics," "83% of children from low-income families have at least one employed parent (Gorski, 2); close to 60% have at least one parent who works full-time and year-round" (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2004). Gorski finds that poor parents aren't uninvolved in their children's learning because they don't value education, but because they have less access to school involvement than their wealthier peers. Though the culture of poverty may

be a myth, there does exist a culture of classism that proves to be a great challenge to those of low-income. Gorski states “it diverts attention from what people in poverty do have in common: inequitable access to basic human rights” (Gorski, 3). It is in accepting a pedagogy for the privileged for the high-income student and empowering the low-income student through the pedagogy of the oppressed that the nation can be grown, how the education gap can begin to close.

The student population can be defined as children and young adults in the grades of kindergarten through 12. Delving deeper into the process of becoming that the student population goes through provides insight into how socioeconomic inequality and education are linked. In attempting to raise the performance of low-income students, ending the replication of inequality on the society level also emerges as a goal. Analyzing which educational processes can be changed in order to close the education inequality gap leads to a wider scope of ideas that come to fruition through the changing of society as a whole. Through gaining an understanding at what can be done in the classroom to liberate student minds, we inevitably learn ways in which society would subsequently be altered. Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* provides a clear picture of the importance educational models and their ensuing results.

### **The Educational Calvary**

There is a lot of good work being done to help young children in these systems get a running start and many organizations are popping up to help those students already entrenched. Teach For America recruits recent college graduates and professionals to teach for two years in a low-income school, kindergarten through 12th grade. Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) is a

network of college preparatory schools in undeserving communities that trains students for better life skills as well as providing a good education. Harlem Gems is an all day pre-kindergarten program that helps close the inequality gap before it even starts as part of the Harlem Children's Zone project. The first step to empowering young adults is transparency and honesty about the situation we are in. If we can give them all the knowledge up front, they will be better able to combat the challenges and navigate themselves if they so choose. Like paratroopers at war, educators must drop into the lives of these low-income students and empower them to see the choice before them, because as of now, they are not able to.

### **Teach For America**

Teach for America (TFA) recruits potential educators who may not have considered teaching as their career path. This population generally consists of recent college graduates and professionals from a variety of fields aside from education. TFA seeks to end educational inequality by enlisting these individuals to teach in low income schools for a two year commitment. TFA corps members are placed in any one of thirty nine urban or rural regions all over the United States. In order to prepare corps members for teaching in low income areas, TFA institutes a summer institute, a five-week long intensive training program during which teachers-to-be teach a four-week summer course along with taking classes on teaching practice, classroom management, diversity, learning theory, literacy development, and leadership. The classes taken are specific to each corps member's specific grade and subject.

Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., a group that helps its clients make evidence-based policies and programs, conducted research on the effects of TFA teachers in the field. The study, "The Effects of Teach For America on Students: Findings from a National Evaluation", asked

“Do TFA teachers improve (or at least not harm) student outcomes relative to what would have happened in their absence?” (Mathematica, xi). In order to measure this research question, Mathematica compared outcomes of students taught by TFA teachers with that of students taught by non-TFA teachers in the same grades at the same schools. The results showed that there was a statistically significant increase in math scores for students with TFA teachers when compared to non-TFA teachers, but no evidence was found for any increase (or decrease) in reading scores. The impacts of TFA teachers were consistent for all grades, genders, and racial/ethnic groups.

Mathematica finds that hiring TFA teachers is an inexpensive way for low income schools to increase their student’s math scores without decreasing their reading scores. TFA was also been shown to attract high-level educators to disadvantaged communities. A downside found by Mathematica was that there is a high turnover rate for TFA teachers, but not any more so than non-TFA teachers in low income schools.

Interestingly, Mathematica found that TFA attracts students from very competitive schools, more so than teachers who were non-TFA. This could mean that these students are less connected to the realities of low income students and more rooted in theory than in experience. It is true that TFA provides an attractive option for college graduates to fast track into helping low income students, and regardless of the motives of those graduates, the statistics do show their positive influence on disadvantaged schools.

Despite the positive (and neutral) effects of TFA, without individual case studies into the classrooms of individual teachers, it is not possible to determine whether these educators are using the banking or problem-posing method of education and what effect that may have on their students. It would be safe to venture to say that since the training TFA teachers receive is meant

to mimic and condense that of non-TFA teachers they do tend to provide a banking method of education. As such, for an educator trained by TFA, more effective change may be brought about by breaking away from that method and creating a problem posing situation in their own classroom.

### **Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP)**

KIPP enters low income communities to prepare students for higher rates of success than the resources allotted them allow. The goal of KIPP is to put learning first in the lives of students. In order to do that, KIPP keeps kids in school a little longer than average, sets up meetings between parents, schools, and students, and recruitment of high caliber teachers. The result of all this work is an 85 percent college attendance rate of KIPP alumni. KIPP, being a charter school, receives some public funding, but is not bound to follow all the rules other public schools do. Enrollment to such charter schools is not mandatory, but compulsory.

Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. also conducted a survey on the effectiveness of KIPP and had four findings:

- KIPP does not attract more able students (as compared to neighboring public schools).
- KIPP schools typically have a statistically significant impact on student achievement.
- Academic gains at many KIPP schools are large enough to substantially reduce race and income-based achievement gaps.
- Most KIPP schools do not have higher levels of attrition than nearby district schools.

Like TFA, the model of education individual educators use in their classrooms could vary between banking and problem posing. Due to the necessity of meeting standards through NCLB, many organizations may find it easier to use the banking method, but the results of the problem posing education offer critical thinking and freedom, a cut above the fact-memorizing education of the banking method. Due to the ability of the students from KIPP schools to think critically, it may be suggested that there is some problem posing taking place in the schools.

### **Harlem Gems**

Harlem Gems is part of the Harlem Children's Zone, founded by Geoffery Canada who wished to transform his community in Harlem. In order to do so, he chose to offer a variety of community enriching programs in the 97 block area of central Harlem in an effort to transform the low income community into one of respect and accountability. Harlem Gems seeks to stop the inequality gap before it even begins. An all-day pre-kindergarten program, a 4:1 student teacher ratio, that teaches children English, Spanish, and French. The program currently serves 200 kids.

While there may not be much problem posing that can take place with children before kindergarten, the assumption that these children are capable of performing at their best and offering them the opportunity to explore their limits may in fact be the best example for problem posing education out of these three.

### **Perpetuating Inequality**

The banking model of education, predominantly used across the country, presents the same choice to all of its students: follow the rules, get in line, or suffer the consequences. A great divide is created between the student and the educator, and the banking method encourages

that divide. As seen with Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell and Freire, there exists a lot of power in the relationship between the teacher and the student. Educators would do well to adopt a system that works to serve the talents of the educator to awaken the critical thinking of the students. But why do we enable a barrier-inducing system to exist in our schools in the first place? We do so because it socializes the youth of America to prepare for their inherited role in society. Critical education theorist Michael Apple states that many economists and sociologists view the institution of education as a “black box-- what is taught, the concrete experience of children and teachers-- is less important than... the more global and macroeconomic considerations of rate of return on investment or, more radically, the reproduction of the division of labor” (Apple, 368). All that matters, according to Apple, is the input of students before school and the output of those same students into the workforce. Socioeconomic stratification is duplicated in the classroom through use of this divisive mode of education and carried on to the workforce. Really then, the choice these students have is not much of a choice at all, but rather a reality to be realized, a situation to be aware of. This affects students of all socioeconomic students, and may lead one to wonder who we are trying to create through this methodology. Do we want our children to grow up as critical thinkers, evaluators and reflectors of and on the society they find themselves in; or do we want hard, skilled workers and followers who do what they are told without question.

Here we find the beginnings of the inequality gap within education and can begin to see how deep the problem goes. Students of middle class standing are brought up with this method of education and are more likely to be critical of their situation as they are encouraged to think through advanced placement classes and college aspirations. Students of low income are not

presented with the opportunity to think critically on the whole, but rather forced to meet the bar as set by standardization programs such as No Child Left Behind. Students who are behind in school more often than not have resulted from a lack of resources, not a lack of capability. But these students and schools are led to believe there is something wrong with the way they are, and the worse they do, the harder they are pushed, grinding against the gears. If we want to help children escape their educational deficiency, educators and policy-makers need to liberate them from this method of teaching that does not consider the student, but rather the duplication of the very society that put them and their families down.

Such a change would not only affect these students, nor should it stop with the lower classes. There are no evil students or evil institutions, only goals and objectives with results that are not serving a majority of the people. The best possible solution is not found in repetition of what educators have been doing, but a critical re-thinking of the way we do education, K-12 and beyond. But first we have to ask, who do we want our students to become?

The above question hinges on a very particularly chosen word. Not "what" do we want the student to become, but "who." "Who" implies that the student possesses a level of free will that we can respect. They have input, a critical insight, into what they are becoming. To say they are a "what" merely objectifies them, and reduces the chance that they will become a free-thinking individual in their graduation. While the goal of the previously stated, widely used model of education is to perpetuate and replicate the current system of inequality for the benefit of the dominant minority, the wealthy elite, a new model would seek to empower all students, all people, to be a part of their education, not an object of it. While students of a middle class background may be able to choose this for themselves due to their resources, a critical insight

into the role they play in the capitalist education machine is missing. They do not struggle as much as the lower class students will, but their engagement is necessary to help move the institution of education into a more egalitarian direction.

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M.S. 223, a public junior high school in the Bronx, ranked as the 10th best middle school in all of New York City. What makes M.S. 223 so special is the high levels of achievement it was able to inspire from its students in such a short amount of time. In 2003, thirteen percent of incoming class of sixth graders were at their grade level in math, and only ten percent in English. Now, sixty percent are at or above their grade level in math and thirty percent in English. The success of the school's student is attributed to principal Ramon Gonzalez, who has taken intentional steps to ensure his students have access to the resources they need, like textbooks, and to well-trained, passionate teachers. This is an example of how dedicated commitment to student success outside of the system of constructed inequality can positively benefit the lives of low income students. While there is no evidence of what type of educational model is being used in M.S. 223, the actions of principal Gonzalez point to a conviction borne of the pursuit of the humanization of students.

It is this mentality that can lead to breaking the cycle of educational inequality. Educators and policy makers can empower students through encouraging critical thinking about their true realities. In this way, students can cease being, as Gil Scott-Heron put it, "programmed to continue fucking up," and can be given the tool they need to build lives outside of their current situations. Giving low income students that chance begins with breaking the rules of constructed inequality and believing the students have what it takes to survive in America.

Educating in this way liberates both the educators and the students. The banking method of education perpetuates constructed inequality and favors those with economic power and social dominance. In breaking this cycle, educators are free to address the concerns of their students as they see them and engage in the pursuit of teaching students how to think critically about what they are learning. This of course assumes that the goal of education is to teach students to think critically and not to keep them in the same socioeconomic place for the sake of the power elite. Until that power elite is challenged through liberated educators liberating students, poverty and racial discrimination will continue to keep low income students from receiving the education they deserve.

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