

Theile 1

**A Broader Look at Why the American Public Education System is Failing**

**Jill Theile**

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**Clement Adibe, Political Science**

**Horace Hall, Educational Policy Studies and Research**

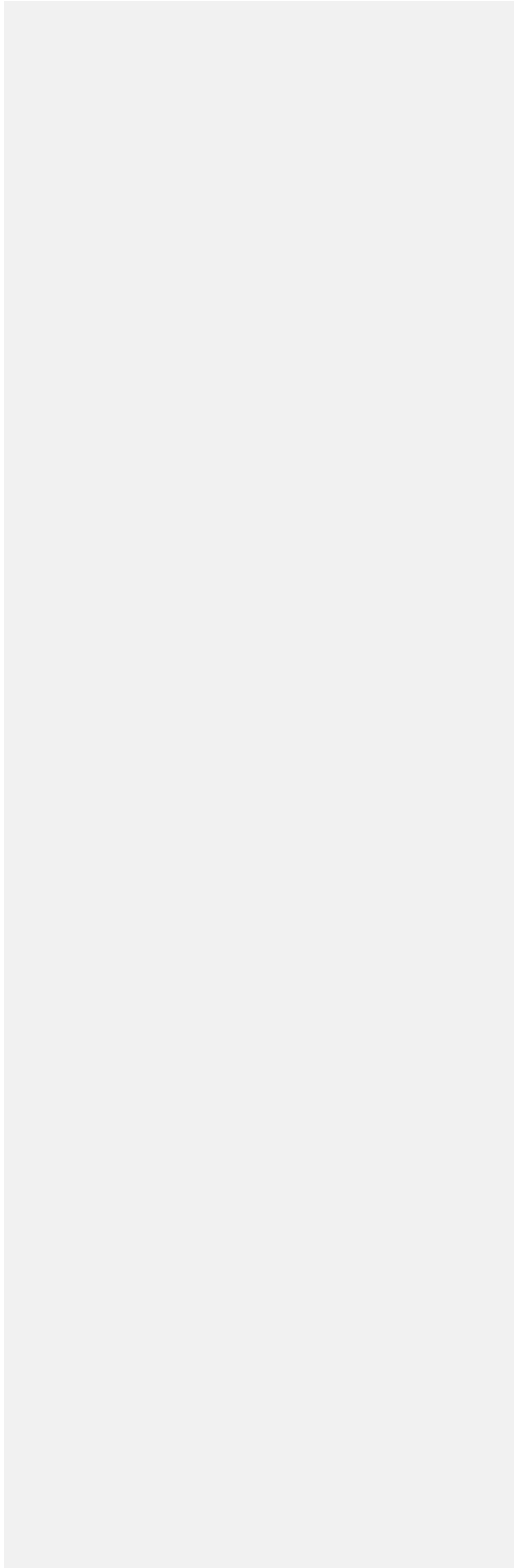
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**Abstract:**

This thesis is an analysis of the reasons behind the failing American public education system, as well as solutions that have the capability to close some of the gaps within the system. This failure of American public schools is defined by the inability of the American education system to provide equal educational opportunities for students coming from all social, racial, and economic backgrounds. The problems of the failing education system will be examined through several different contexts, namely, historical, socioeconomic, and racial. This thesis discusses the injustice of the social engineering that is, the intentional construction of society by those in positions of power, which has taken place historically and is continuing to take place today in order to structure society within a particular ideological framework and springboards further social, racial, and economic issues affecting the education system. It describes the systematization of education and its failure to accommodate the increasingly diverse student population it should be educating. It also calls for schools to take responsibility in providing a socially just education, that is, a high-quality public education for *all* American children.

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**Introduction:**

Growing up, I attended private international schools and middle-class, suburban public schools. To a certain extent, I knew that I lived in somewhat of a bubble. But it wasn't until I moved to Chicago for college and started my studies in education at DePaul University that I became aware of just how naïve I was. For the first time, I was exposed to what poverty really looks like, I learned, for example, that some kids show up for school without having been fed breakfast, I heard terms such as institutionalized racism and white privilege for the first time, I engaged in discussions about the 50 of Chicago Public Schools being closed in 2013.

Throughout my time at DePaul, I have reflected upon, read about, and discussed America's failing public education system. Over the years, I pointed fingers at several different factors being the cause of this failure: segregation of schools, poor teacher quality, emphasis on standardized tests, poor curriculum. Even now, I do not claim to know the source of the problems with the education system, but throughout this continuous thought process, I have finally come to an explanation that makes sense to me. I have established an understanding of a web of systematic failures that function as one vicious circle. So this is an explanation of the failing American public education system as I see it.

In this thesis project, I am writing on why American public education is failing to provide a "socially just" education to all students. I do believe our public school system is failing, not in the sense that our students are not passing state and national high-stakes tests, because, evidently, there are plenty of schools that are thriving, but in the sense that the system is not able to provide an equally high-quality educational opportunities for *all* American children. Specifically, I am referring to the achievement gap, which is the difference in academic achievement, as measured in standardized tests, between the affluent, population and the poor, and overwhelmingly

minority, population. It seems to me that depending on where a child is born, where his or her neighborhood school is located, is likely to determine the quality of the local neighborhood school, which, in effect, determines his or her future. There are schools, such as the one I attended in high school, which prepares its students for college and later for white collar careers - medicine, law, or business. I felt that becoming a teacher was even socially below what my school expected me to pursue. This type of school tends to be located in suburban and affluent areas. On the other hand, there are schools that are unable help its students even pass high school, almost trapping these students into the vicious cycle of unemployment and generational poverty. These schools are often located in urban environments. Finally, there are schools that meet somewhere in the middle, schools with students coming from diverse racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds and are prepared to go into a variety of walks of life in adulthood. I believe that the American public school system has been manipulated and molded in order to create a social hierarchy as I described above, as a result of outside factors that are beyond the reach of schools themselves. Through my research, I have found that there are historical, socioeconomic, and racial factors contributing to the failure of schools to perform at an evenly high level. I argue that we cannot have a successful school system if we are not able to make amends with these external issues affecting the universal opportunity for a high-quality education for all children. Some of these other factors include the origin and beginning of our education system intentionally creating a social construct, putting black students at the bottom of society, the failure of impoverished or low socioeconomic, overwhelmingly minority, families to adopt certain middle-class values, that seem to ensure success of students in the public education system, and, conversely, the ability of the schools to adapt to the diverse group of learners within the school system to support and ensure the success of all students, not just the middle class, and

finally racial and social expectations and pressures of minority students that tend to negatively affect the academic success of those minority students. These are all issues which I consider to be extrinsic to the school system since they are not able to be regulated by the schools themselves. Ultimately, I have concluded from my research that the social engineering that took place during the conception of our public education system following the Civil War, which intentionally placed blacks in a subservient position to whites, is responsible for the isolation of blacks from the middle class, and the poor in general from the middle class, which resulted in blacks developing an “oppositional American identity” which contributes to low academic performance, all of which results in inequality of opportunity to a high-quality education.

I will actually be focusing on these extrinsic factors which I see to be the most influential to the failure of the education system. I have decided to focus on these factors mainly because I see the typical problems within the education system, such as too much focus on standardized tests, poor teacher quality, and over-protective teachers unions, as having more feasible solutions, if only those solutions were actually implemented. As I see it, even if all these internal problems were resolved, we would still be left with some high-performing schools and many low-performing schools and an ever-present achievement gap because of the socioeconomic, demographic, and racial disparities that are taking place in our country. In order to complete this research, I will start by defining the terms which I will utilize to express my thinking; it is important to me that I articulate my thoughts thoroughly. Next, I will examine the historical context of our public education system because I believe we cannot separate the present state of education from the historical implications of it. Then, I will look at these socioeconomic and racial differences which seem to contribute enormously to the achievement gap. Finally, I will discuss potential solutions that could be practically implemented. These

solutions alone are not what I think will “fix” the system, but they might help to bridge the gap between the education system and the intertwined socioeconomic, demographic, and racial systems that have become institutionalized in our country.

### **Section I: Defining Terms**

First, I believe it is important to define exactly what I mean by a high-quality education. When I use the term, high-quality education, I use it in a way to take the idea of a “good education” even further. I believe that a good education is one that properly equips students to thrive in society, to participate politically, economically, and socially. This is an education that, while all children should receive, is the bare minimum that schools should provide. This is an education that develops competence and productivity, one that fits children into a system. What I refer to as a “high-quality education” goes beyond this. A high-quality education provides children with more than a high school diploma; it prepares them to function and participate in society. It develops the whole child, it forces them to question, think critically, solve-problems, to not necessarily accept the world as it is, as a good education prepares students. I have distinguished between these terms because I do not believe that the term “good education” has the connotation to describe what I believe to be a “high-quality education.”

A high quality education is not easily measured. I would argue that our current forms of measuring education quality can measure a good education, but perhaps not a high-quality education. Currently, we measure student achievement as well as school quality through high-stakes tests. These tests can measure competency, which includes but is not limited to basic math and reading skills. But can a test really measure critical thinking and creativity, which are developed by a high quality education? Gert J. J. Biesta, in his book entitled *Good Education in*



*an Age of Measurement*, asks the question of whether our current system of evaluating school quality is truly measuring school quality. Are Do math and reading skills of the students attending a school really determine the quality of the school, or even the achievement of a student? Keep in mind that when Biesta refers to a “good education” in his work, he is referring more closely to what I am calling a high-quality education, a difference in terminology. Biesta explains that our measurement is surely providing us with information and data, but urges us to inquire about the purpose, the meaning of it. Are we truly measuring what we value in education or are we letting what we are able to measure determine what we value in education? In my thesis, I will refer to high-achievement and low-achievement, failing schools and affluent schools. I understand that it is likely that these terms are determined by test scores, which as I have mentioned, is not what I believe accurately measures the quality of an education provided by a school. However, since there is no data on school quality based on what I believe makes a high-quality education, I will use the standard measurements that are most often used. Further, it makes sense that a school that is able to provide a high-quality education must also be able to reflect this in high-stakes tests scores.

Now, I would like to discuss what I believe makes a high-quality education. I believe in a social justice curriculum. I have come to believe that American public schools must go beyond teaching math and reading, they must teach students how to be citizens in our country.

According to the website of the “Teachers for Social Justice,” a Chicago-based organization of educators, a social justice education is one that is:

1. Grounded in the lives of our students.
2. Critical.
3. Multicultural, anti-racist pro-justice.
4. Participatory, experiential.
5. Hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary.
6. Activist.

7. Academically rigorous.
8. Culturally and linguistically sensitive.

This type of curriculum is one that not only prepares students for going to college and getting jobs, but helps children develop a sense of self, who they are, and what their role is in the world. This is the type of education that Pablo Freire, a Brazilian educator and educational philosopher, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, spent his career writing about. As the “Teachers for Social Justice” website cites Freire’s book “Letters to Those Who Dare Teach” (1998): “We are political militants because we are teachers. Our job is not exhausted in the teaching of math, geography, syntax, history. Our job implies that we teach these subjects with sobriety and competence, but it also requires our involvement in and dedication to overcoming social injustice.” As we will see, our education system was manipulated throughout history in order to achieve a political and social agenda; education has always been used as a tool to prepare students to be citizens. If we want our children to become citizens who are aware of themselves and aware of the country and world in which they live, citizens who participate politically and not just economically, as a simply “good education” might prepare them, we need schools that will provide a social justice curriculum and ensure that all students receive this type of high-quality education.

Next, I would like to distinguish between a “social justice education” and a “socially just education.” The former is the type of curriculum I have just described. It is what I see being implemented in schools to prepare students to be citizens who participate in society in a socially just way. The latter, a “socially just education,” is how I describe the equality that needs to take place among schools. This is the idea that *all* children have the right to this high-quality education I have described. While these terms are related, they describe different parts of the

education system, one being implemented *within* schools, and the other implemented *among* schools.

Finally, I would like to mention that a major issue in the education system is that the establishment of neighborhood schools as the foundation of our system has become one of the biggest barriers to achieving a socially just education system. Our current system is one that allows students to attend a designated school based on their addresses. However, the funding of schools is based on the property taxes of that area. Therefore, schools whose students' families pay high taxes have higher funding and more resources than schools whose families pay low property taxes, most likely because they are unable to live in more affluent areas. This is an issue that plays into the different contexts of education I will discuss in my thesis so I do not directly discuss it extensively. While I do not believe that funding necessarily and absolutely determines the quality of a school, it is also a form of social engineering that hinders education equality and a socially just education system.

## **Section II: Historical Context**

In order to fully comprehend the current state of the American public education system, I believe it is essential to go back to its roots, that is, its historical context. In this examination, I have found that there is a direct relationship between the conception of public education and today's resulting system. I began my research in the post-civil war period of American history because education at this time became a central focus in America. This can be attributed to the almost universal belief that education could be a viable solution to the "negro question."

In 1865, the United States found itself working with a totally new population; instead of mono-racial population, there was suddenly a two dimensional population, adding the newly

freed African American slaves to the otherwise completely white population. America was now faced with what is widely known as the “negro question,” that is, what must be done with this brand new population of citizens in our country? Where will the newly freed slaves go? What will they do? How will they contribute to American society? There were three dominating opinions to this question: isolation, deportation, or integration. Isolation suggested that we should keep the freedmen in the country, yet keep them totally separated, isolated from the existing society. Deportation, as suggested by its name, believed that the freedmen should be deported and sent back to Africa. However, the best solution became evidently clear in the eyes of the Northern industrialists. They needed the freedmen to be a part of American society, they were needed to not only help southern plantations thrive, but also to participate in the suddenly booming Northern industry. Since the South was left in destruction and denial, it was the Northern Industrialists who took the reins in shaping American ideology during Reconstruction (Watkins 3).

The reason black education suddenly became a priority for the Northern industrialists’ agenda was because suddenly blacks were citizens in the country, therefore they must be educated on how to be a citizen, what American values are, but even more importantly in the eyes of the industrialists, what their place in American society is. By funding and providing black education, industrialists were able to decide and shape exactly what their education would look like, that being, an industrial education, which would determine their purpose in society.

It is important to note that even before industrialists became involved in black education, Christian missionaries were the first to make their mark on black education. Christian missionaries became involved in educating Southern blacks even before the civil war, working to educate slaves. Following the war, they worked with the Freedman’s Bureau; the teachers who

worked alongside in educating the freedmen were often Christian, even though the Freedman's Bureau was an act of congress. In his work, *The White Architects of Black Education*, Watkins writes, "missionary leaders were fervent believers in education as a tool for racial advancement" (Watkins 15). There is a small overlap of the missionary cause and the industrialist influence, however the industrialists had a radically different motive than racial advancement for blacks. Many of the "white architects" Watkins describes express that they were motivated by Christian faith, but believed in the implementation of an industrial education, also known as the accommodationist education. This overlap between the Christian missionaries and Northern industrialists became less significant as the industrial agenda become increasingly powerful and all-encompassing, and eventually the agenda was purely industrialist with little to no consideration of the Christian mission. Essentially, this multidimensional motivated action in black education actually seems to be contradictory- one side believing in the advancement in blacks and the other side motivated to place the black population in a very particular, subservient place in society. As the history played out, the Christian mission was forgotten, while not completely abandoned as the industrially-envisioned agenda became the forefront of black education.

The Hampton Institute, founded by Samuel Chapman Armstrong, became the model of black education in America in the late 19th century. Armstrong grew up with his missionary parents and was led by his Christian faith throughout his career. He was a white supremacist but he did believe that blacks should step up to the opportunity presented to them following the war to accept the opportunity to become respectable citizens. Armstrong began working with blacks when he was assigned to lead black soldiers during the war. Following the war, he felt a calling, due to his missionary upbringing, to work with the Freedman's Bureau to help establish stability

in the war-torn South among whites and blacks. This work eventually led him to founding the Hampton Institute, where he established an accommodationist curriculum. Hampton had several main purposes: to train blacks to become teachers (equipped with a particular ideology) to go out and teach the rest of the race in the same manner, to learn the values and behaviors of the white, middle class, and finally, to learn an agricultural or industrial trade, although it could be argued that this was a goal of lesser importance. Essentially Armstrong's goal for Hampton was to train the newly freed black race to become suitable American citizens, a race which he considered to be naturally uncivilized and unable to help themselves. In the words of Armstrong himself,

His [the black man's] worst master is still over him--his passions. This he does not realize. He does not see 'the point' of life clearly; he lacks foresight, judgement, and hard sense. His main trouble is not ignorance, but of deficiency of character...The question with him is not one of brains, but of right instincts, of morals and of hard work (Watkins 57).

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Armstrong aimed to educate the whole person, helping them become moral beings first and foremost. As Watkins writes, the business of the Hampton Institute "was the saving of the race from itself," (Watkins 57).

Therefore, as we can infer, the curriculum at Hampton was one that enforced this type of ideology, instilling a certain mentality in blacks, which they are human and citizens yet meant for one particular place in society and that place is directly below that of whites. In the words of J. C. Kinney, a visitor of the Hampton Institute,

The design of the school is to fit its graduates to do the helpful work among the ignorant and degraded colored masses of the south. For such an object Latin, Greek, and the higher mathematics are useless, and they are wisely omitted from the course. A practical English education is given, sufficient to make good teachers, and with it there seems to have been imparted some comprehension of the needs of the race and a genuine missionary spirit (Watkins 50).

In other words, the black race is deemed unfit, unable to benefit from a classical education that whites received at the time. As we see, the "white architects" determine the place of blacks

through an ideology-based education, to achieve a society based on the needs of the upper-class white society. The reason the Hampton style institutions, located in the South (because other schools of the same type of curriculum emerged) was so popular and successful was because wealthy, white industrialists believed in this ideology because it benefited them. As a result, families such as the Rockefellers and the Phelps Stokes invested in this type of black education, referred to as the Hampton-Tuskegee model, referring to Hampton and another famous accommodationist institution. Because philanthropy of this sort at this time period was not heavily regulated, industrialists could essentially shape ideology in a way government could not. This is essentially the point that Watkins makes in his work, that wealthy industrialists and other powerful white men could essentially shape society, by incorporating blacks into it in whatever way they knew would most benefit them. As Watkins puts it, in discussing Thomas Jesse Jones, yet another white architect,

he understood that funding black schools was part of a larger philanthropic objective of a social engineering whereby neither unbridled capitalism nor racial subservience would be fundamentally altered. Only gradual and planned social change was acceptable to the corporate elite. In fact social change would be sponsored by those most invested in maintaining the status quo (Watkins 111).

Therefore, the elite class was willing to endorse this type of social change, as long as it did not compromise their social privileges, rather supported them. It is important to note that the purpose of forming black education in this manner was not solely for the white elite class to dominate over the blacks, of course this was a prerogative that was certainly taken into account, but this was also the elite's solution for the reconstruction of South, an answer to the "negro question," a way to incorporate this new population into the social structure of the U.S..

Not everyone agreed with this new social agenda, specifically Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois. Unlike the other prominent, well-respected black man of the time, Booker T. Washington, Du

Bois believed that blacks should be entitled to the same type of classical, college-level education as whites, which is the opposite of what the Hampton Institute and other accommodationist institutions aimed to provide. Booker T. Washington, to the disappointment of Du Bois, worked alongside many of the white supporters of industrialist style education for blacks, most notably, perhaps, Armstrong. In his work, *The Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois criticizes Washington,

Mr. Washington distinctly asks that black people give up, at least for the present, three things,— First, political power, Second, insistence on civil rights, Third, higher education of Negro youth,— and concentrate all their energies on industrial education, the accumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South. This policy has been courageously and insistently advocated for over fifteen years, and has been triumphant for perhaps ten years. As a result of this tender of the palm-branch, what has been the return? In these years there have occurred:

1. The disfranchisement of the Negro.
  2. The legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro.
  3. The steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro.
- These movements are not, to be sure, direct results of Mr. Washington's teachings; but his propaganda has, without a shadow of doubt, helped their speedier accomplishment, (Du Bois 16).

By providing a classical education, as Du Bois envisioned for the black people, one that instructed students in subjects such as Latin, Greek, literature, blacks were not necessarily kept in a subservient place in society like an industrial and civics-oriented education would. Thus, the elite industrialists were not interested in funding such an education for the black population. As Du Bois himself puts it,

The tendency is here, born of slavery and quickened to renewed life by the crazy imperialism of the day, to regard human beings as among the material resources of a land to be trained with an eye single to future dividends. Race-prejudices, which keep brown and black men in their "places," we are coming to regard as useful allies with such a theory, no matter how much they may dull the ambition and sicken the hearts of struggling human beings. And above all, we daily hear that an education that encourages aspiration, that sets the loftiest of ideals and seeks as an end culture and character rather than bread-winning, is the privilege of white men and the danger and delusion of black (Du Bois 11).

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Du Bois foresaw a future which consisted of black and white men inevitably intertwined with one another, living in the same country side by side. He argued that the black man has the same right as the white man to a quality education so that he is able to advocate for himself. Even without this type of education, the blacks, at the time of Dubois's writings, were advocating for themselves. However, due to a lack of sufficient education were unable to express themselves in a way that convinced the whites of their rights.

I would like to make a note here, as it seems fit, when a writer of the past speaks of the future, to assess the accuracy to which Du Bois spoke over 100 years ago. I would argue that blacks are still stuck in a systematized subservience under whites. We have a school system today in which the quality of school a child is able to attend is determined by where he or she lives, which is linked to his or her sociodemographic status. Sociodemographic status is, of course, not determined by race, so one might argue that this is a class issue, not a race issue. However, in the heat of the Industrial Revolution, the Great Migration occurred, in which an enormous number of blacks, suffering under the Jim Crow laws in the South, migrated to Northern cities to work in the factories. Within cities as well, however, blacks faced discrimination and cities became segregated, forcing blacks into ghettos. Eventually, the industrialization phased out or was outsourced abroad and the concentrations of black individuals were unable to find employment, leaving entire communities in poverty, (Jarecki, *The House I Live In*). Now, we see the results of this institutionalized racism play out in our schools system. There are neighborhoods with a disproportionate number of poor, black children, all attending their neighborhood schools which is failing to provide an accommodating education for them, disconnected and isolated from their middle-class, white counterparts. For this reason, there are high achieving schools in areas where residents pay higher taxes, receiving multi-million dollar

renovations, and on the other hand there are schools with a disproportionately high minority and impoverished student population being closed. This is a dichotomy we saw taking place in Chicago Public schools in 2013. As a result, we have black students unable to receive a high-quality education like their white peers so that they can advocate for themselves exactly how Du Bois predicted over 100 years ago. Once again, I want to note that race and social class are distinct entities, but because of these historical factors, they are closely intertwined

To return to Du Bois, I wonder how much would have been different today had the white architects of black education favored Du Bois's idea. As we can see, in the 150 years since the Civil War, it does not seem like black education has advanced as much as it should have in the great amount of time. While industrial and manual training schools are not prevalent anymore, there is still a great disparity between predominately black schools and white schools.

Interestingly enough, this is exactly what was addressed in the 1954 Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The decision of Chief Justice Earl Warren read,

Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group... We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal (Goldstein 111).

While it is highly important that the law recognizes that the separation of the races is unconstitutional and detrimental, the desegregation of schools was a complicated and not completely successful process. Unsurprisingly, many Southern states did all in their power to resist the court decision, threatening to revoke the licenses of teachers who joined organizations in support of desegregation and some states took away teacher tenure in order to more easily terminate black teachers to give priority to white teachers in desegregated schools. More surprisingly to learn, however, was that many blacks also did not welcome desegregation of

schools. In her book, *The Teacher Wars*, Goldstein writes what Anna Julia Cooper, a black teacher in Washington D.C., said in 1958, “‘I’m against it.’ She was one hundred years old, old enough to know, she said, that in black schools led by black educators, children were more likely to ‘take pride in themselves and their achievements’” (Goldstein 112). As a result of the resistance, even a decade after the *Brown v. Board of Education* still 90 percent of southern black students still attended segregated schools. Following the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the desegregation of schools was finally implemented since the Department of Justice could sue schools for delaying or resisting integration, (Goldstein 113). In some areas, integration saw positive results in both school facilities, teacher collaboration and cooperation, and student achievement. However, there was a disproportionate number of black schools closed and black teachers fired in the process, despite teacher qualifications. Goldstein writes, “The federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare estimated that between 1954 and 1971, the nation lost 31,584 black teaching positions and 2,235 black principalships,” (Goldstein 119). Further, white teachers had lower expectations of their black students than black teachers did. White teachers lacked training and experience helpful in teaching black students, “to reach a student population fighting racism, poverty, and political disempowerment,” (Goldstein 121). Some of the strategies developed by black educators to reach black students include strict discipline, close family ties, incorporation of black figures to increase racial pride, and extra time spent on phonics and vocabulary (Goldstein 120-122).

Essentially, it seems that in some areas in which it was taken seriously and implemented intentionally, school integration saw some extremely positive results. However, the hurried and unwelcome circumstances in which schools only integrated to appease the federal mandate saw negative and detrimental results. Even in 2016, I feel that we can claim the same statement.

There are still pushes to bus students across neighborhood lines in order to integrate schools because research shows that poor, minority students perform better in higher-performing schools, which tend to be middle to upper-class white, suburban schools in another part of town. These findings could be explained by differences in curriculum, although I argue that it is more likely that these students perform well because they are surrounded by a culture of high academic expectations, which is, as we will discuss later, not often the case in low-performing schools whose student population is made up of students coming from minority backgrounds.

Personally, I do not see bussing students in order to integrate schools as a solution to our achievement gap. In situations where integration is woven into the mission of the school, where it is taken seriously and implemented with intention, and shows positive results, then by all means, those steps should be taken. However, I do not think this should be a nation or even state or city-wide push. In my own experience, when the neighboring school district, which was a predominantly black, low-income, low-performing school was closed, it was proposed that those students merge into our district, which could seem natural considering their close proximity and the positive influence our high-expectation district could have on these students. However, the school board, not to mention parents, from my district refused because it would “inevitably” bring down our top-of-the-state test scores. Needless to say this integration did not take place, and had it, I don’t think it would have been positive for either community because it would not have been welcomed nor intentionally implemented.

Two years ago, I would have said that integration is the key to closing our achievement gap. In fact, in a paper I wrote in a course on inequality, entitled, “Education Inequality in the U.S.,” I made the following argument:

We are now ready to begin looking at our second question: what needs to be done about it [inequality of education]? First, to improve the problem of inequality in schools based

on socio-demographic reasons, it would be beneficial to reduce this segregation for the sake of the poor students. Research shows that within classrooms, heterogeneous grouping is a more beneficial way to help advance low-leveled students; the problem is that high-leveled students thrive best with other advanced students. Therefore, it makes sense to mix low students with high students so that they can be exposed to the experiences and witness the high achievement and be positively influenced, (Theile 10).

At the time, I thought this was a totally realistic and plausible solution to the system. I now see this as being idealistic but certainly not a realistic solution. It would be beautiful if students and their parents were able to come across social, racial, economic, and community boundaries to all learn as one human class for the benefit of everyone. But over the past two years I have continued to consider this question of what to do about the educational gap and I see it being far more complex than my naive self did two years ago.

Having looked into the historical roots of the American education system, I have a better understanding of the purpose of education, or at least what that purpose has been if not what it should be. Education has been a tool used by the elite, predominately white, class to further their particular ideological, political, economic, social, and racial agenda. It could be said that the American public education is working just fine by helping the wealthy and powerful at the top receive the best education in order to keep them wealthy and powerful, whereas the poor, minority children are kept “in their place” at the bottom of the social order by only having access to poor-quality education. I, however, see this as a failing system because it is failing to provide a socially just education, one that provides equal opportunity, in giving all students equal and high-quality education. It fails to let students determine their own success, their own path in life and instead it opens doors to some students and traps others in a vicious cycle, unable to escape poverty or the bottom tiers of society. As I see it, education should grant freedom, instead, the American public education system seems to imprison a certain category of students, overwhelmingly poor and minority students.

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### Section III: Socioeconomic and Racial Implications

Starting with his “Pound Cake” speech at the 2004 NAACP award ceremony to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* court decision, Bill Cosby began filling auditoriums across the country. In these “town-hall meetings,” Cosby spoke out about the black community, in an extremely critical manner. Specifically, he criticized the black family, admonishing them to take responsibility for raising their children. This movement, of sorts, raised quite a bit of hype across the country, and rightfully so. It may come as a surprise for some that American public schools cannot be solely held responsible for the notorious achievement gap, for the seemingly failure to educate the poor, often black and Hispanic, students in our schools. The fact that students entering into kindergarten are already performing at disparities, according to Kay Hymowitz, is evidence enough to support this notion. If there is a gap taking place in the first quarter of kindergarten, most often students’ first exposure to public school, then we can’t possibly assume that it is because of the failing of the schools that this gap exists. Instead we have to turn our attention to the exposure and experiences a child has prior to kindergarten- their home and family life.

In her article, “Like It Or Not, Bill Cosby Is Right,” Kay Hymowitz looks to sociologists to understand the thinking behind the words of Bill Cosby. She writes,

Let’s start with a difficult truth behind Mr. Cosby’s rant: Forty years and trillions of government dollars have not given black and white children equal chances. Put aside the question of the public schools; the problem begins way before children first go through their shabby doors. Black kids enter school significantly below their white peers in everything from vocabulary to number awareness to self-control. As the liberal Economic Policy Institute puts it, “Disadvantaged [disproportionately black] children start kindergarten with significantly lower cognitive skills than their more advantaged counterparts.”

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So why is this happening? She continues, “One reason towers over all others, and it’s the one Mr. Cosby was alluding to, however crudely, in his town-hall meetings: Poor black parents rear their children very differently from the way middle-class parents do, and even by the time the kids are 4 years old, the results are extremely hard to change.” (Hymowitz). I think this is an important time to explain that this is not a “race difference,” or, as many like call it to seem politically correct, a “cultural difference.” [This tends to be a class difference, which we will discuss further later. However, as I have mentioned earlier, race is extremely intermingled with class as a result of the aforementioned historical events. Statistically, blacks and Hispanics overwhelmingly represent to the lower-class; this, of course is not to say that there are not whites living in poverty because there certainly are. So, it is important to remember that “poor” and “black” are not interchangeable terms, but there is a relationship between them that is important to define.

With this in mind, in looking at class differences, there are several value differences between the middle and lower classes that have been researched to explain the achievement gap. William Sampson, a DePaul University public policy professor and researcher, was another expert mentioned in Hymowitz’s article. In his work, Sampson observes a number of black and Hispanic, poor families in Evanston, Illinois, to see if they uphold and demonstrate the middle-class values and how the students in the families perform academically. Before examining Sampson’s research, it is important that we understand what these middle class values are. Sampson uses the findings of several researchers to determine the values that most attribute to the achievement gap; these researchers are: R. M. Clark (1983), J. Ogbu (2003), A. W. Bempechat (1998), J. Tapia (2000), S. Valdez (1998), W. Sampson 2002 and 2003, J. P. Comer (1993). Sampson writes that the poor children who perform the best in school are the ones whose families exhibit the middle class values of:

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The stress placed upon discipline, the effort to see to it that the children have high self-esteem, the internal control, the ability to delay gratification, and high expectations. The families in these homes also monitor the child's time fairly closely, for example, making certain that they do not watch a great deal of television, and that none is watched until homework is complete. The children are involved in extracurricular activities. This helps with discipline and helps the child to understand the value of structure in his or her life. The parents engage in learning activities with the child, activities such as reading and discussion of school-related topics. The parents tend to assign household chores to the children. This too helps with discipline and the development of a sense of responsibility (Sampson 9).

Ultimately, these are the middle-class values that many poor families, of all races, seem to lack, resulting in the low achievement found in poor communities, or the values that the high-performing students in poor communities seem to exhibit. It seems to me that these are values that generate responsibility, time management, high-expectations, and discipline. Further, Sampson notes in his preface that "public schools are middle-class institutions, and we should not therefore be surprised to learn that middle class students do better than others," (Sampson viii). This is surely because the poor, lower-class population in public schools do not hold the middle-class values that support that public education. I would also note that parental and family support refers to more than simply attending PTA meetings and parent-teacher conferences, it has to do with the active support at home, such as inquiring about homework, working alongside the student while working on homework, and reading to the student or listening to the student reading.

Although Sampson has published several books on this type of research, all of them varying in method slightly, I will be examining the research found in *Black and Brown: Race, Ethnicity, and School Preparation*. In this research, Sampson sends his students, all of whom have been trained for this type of observation, into the homes of 21 disadvantaged minority students, all associated with a family support organization by the name of Family Focus, to observe how the families uphold middle class values mentioned early and how it seems to impact

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the student achievement. Since all the families are associated with Family Focus, it seems as though they are all interested in upward mobility and the improvement of their poor situation. In the chapter in which Sampson describes the observations of families with multiple students observed, including two above-average achievers, the rest being average or below-average achievers, he concludes that in the majority of the homes, there is little observed that exhibit the values of the middle class. He writes,

For the most part, the black and Latino students observed for this chapter do much of what they want at home, and they rarely want to do homework or housework. Their parents rarely make certain that either are done, nor do the parents seem to go out of their way to compliment the students in order to raise their self-esteem. There was little involvement in the extracurricular activities that help to develop discipline, a sense of responsibility, and high self-esteem, all required for high educational achievement...The homes seem to be warm and loving, but are not particularly conducive to high achievement. The students believe that education and family are very important to them, but do little to demonstrate the importance of education to them, and their parents, as I have indicated, do almost nothing about this (Sampson 59).

Therefore it seems that even though after initially interviewing the students and families, it was determined that they all highly valued education. Yet in observation, students and their families did not live out the values in practice. In many of the observations, the television was turned on most of the time, students were not expected to help with the preparation or clean-up of dinner, and there often seemed to be miscommunication between parents and their children.

I also noticed that parents most often seemed disappointed or unhappy with the schools that their children attended. This is particularly interesting to me. In the Hymowitz article, one of her researchers, Dr. Lareau explains that poor families tend to see the education of their children solely as the school's and teachers' responsibility and it is not up to them to educate their children or prepare them for school in any way. This is a great difference between poor and middle-class families. As a pre-service teacher myself, I firmly believe that parental involvement in a student's education is imperative for that student's academic success. Only so

much can be covered during school hours, but so much more needs to be practiced further and reinforced at home. For example, sight words are high-frequency words and often words which do not follow word patterns. These are words that might be introduced at school, but cannot be practiced enough for a child to know it completely within school hours, especially with pressures of keeping up with standards and completing a curriculum within a school year. But as I am learning, poor families often see the education of their child completely in the hands of the teacher. This disconnect or miscommunication between schools and families is not ideal and should be addressed on the part of the schools.

In his conclusion, Sampson insists that the achievement gap is not due to race, but to social isolation and generations of poverty. He explains that poor blacks are stranded, isolated in the “ghetto” and are only exposed to poverty; the only middle-class individuals who have benefited from education are their teachers. With this in mind, what could motivate a poor child to work hard in school? It is the entrapment in a poverty-stricken community, not race that inhibits poor, black students to achieve academically. He also adamantly rejects the notion that it is a “cultural difference” between whites and blacks that contributes to the achievement gap between them. He writes, “Some scholars...have argued that blacks do not do as well in school as whites because of cultural differences between blacks who attend schools and the whites who teach, develop curriculum, and administer the schools,” however, “upper-income blacks are not the same as those on welfare, and middle-income urban blacks are certainly not the same as poor rural blacks. They have little in common beyond race,” (Sampson 131). This refutes a “cultural difference” between blacks and whites and instead supports his claim that differences in class values are responsible for the gap. Ultimately, however, Sampson concludes that “there is nothing ‘black’ about it. The urban poor are disproportionately black and little is expected of

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them. Many, therefore, give little.” (Sampson 133.) Later, I will examine a differing perspective, one that does, in fact, see race as a cause of low black achievement. In any case, the purpose of Sampson’s work is to explain that the focus in education reform should be, indeed not ignoring school improvement, but turned to family reform, because, as he conveys, family values and the extent to which the family exhibits these values are a determining factor in a student’s academic achievement.

One big question I encountered while examining Sampson’s work was, what if poor, low-income, minority or white families are so segregated from the middle and affluent classes that even if they value education and truly want to escape generational poverty, they just don’t know what it takes to do so? Every family in Sampson’s study indicated that they valued education, mostly because it led to a good job, or some other reason linked to escaping poverty, however, they often failed to actually exhibit the practices that they said they did in order to prepare their child for school. For example, in the Knowles family, (name was changed,) Ms. Knowles indicated prior to being observed that “she encourages her children to read a book for at least 30 minutes a day,” and “stresses self-control and discipline, and talks to them about their future,” yet, in his conclusion of this family, Sampson points out that “the family does not seem to exhibit a number of characteristics of the families of high-achieving students. Her mother talks about discipline being important, but we saw little attempt to enforce discipline with Ashley. Both Ashley and her mother seem to have high educational expectations, yet we saw her do little schoolwork at home.” (Sampson 25-26, 28). As I read through the rest of the family observations and conclusions, it seemed to me that most of the conclusions were similar, indicating that the TV was turned on the entirety of the observation, little schoolwork was done, books were not even found in the house, and parents did not expect children to do chores. I

wonder if these families simply are not aware of the competition that exists, that they think they are completing enough schoolwork to do well, yet they are not. As I see it, these poor families are so separated, so trapped in their impoverished neighborhoods, that even if they value hard work and responsibility, for example, they simply do not know what true execution of these values looks like every day in today's increasingly competitive society.

Similar to Sampson's ideas are those of Gordon Dennis, whose ideas have been influential on my own. In my conversations with Dennis, he has discussed with me the power of environment on students' academic success. Due to his involvement with a non-profit organization, Valley Interfaith Food and Clothing Center (VIFCC), which provides food, clothing, and some financial aid to families living in poverty in the Cincinnati area, he has had experience working with low-income families and has developed an understanding on the role poverty plays on a child's ability to potentially escape poverty. Like Sampson, Dennis agrees that it is not race but poverty that is one of the largest contributing factors to the achievement gap in American public schools. Upon asking him what he saw as the biggest factor impacting public schools, he mentioned two: poverty and family.

The problem importantly involves the poor, not exclusively, but I think that's where the major problem is...And maybe I'm getting to the bigger problem. The biggest problem is the lack of family, the disintegration of the family...that's a problem specifically in families with less money because they don't have people to take care of the kids, time to spend time with the kids, because they don't have money. That's the crux problem, the poor kids, who are not unintelligent, but are not well educated...That is the major cause of other problems that keep them from obtaining a good education.<sup>1</sup>

So, according to Dennis, the problem with American education has nothing to do with schools at all, it doesn't seem to be a matter of education, but of the social factors which influence results

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis, Gordon. "On Schools." Telephone interview. 11 Feb. 2016.

within schools. Our achievement gap, in my opinion, has less to do with our education system than it does these historical and social factors. Students living in poverty are not prepared by their families to go to school, since impoverished families seem to see the schools possessing full responsibility of their children's education, when the school as we know it today, does, in fact, requires a certain amount of family involvement. As Dennis says,

I don't think it's the schools' responsibility. I think at the present time we are putting too much pressure on the schools. I think, and I'm talking from a little bit of experience at Valley, I think it's reasonable that a large number of heads of households look to the schools to solve all the problems and I think that historically we in the United States have tried to encourage the schools to fix it, like having breakfast and lunch, so the school has the child for an important part of the day and they take care of some of their needs but I don't think they should be responsible for developing integrity and honesty and reliability and taking charge of your life, I think that's a parental responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

Here, he touches on the notion that there is more involved in a student's success than simply the academics learned at school, but there are character values such as reliability and responsibility that are taught at home, not at school. These seem to allude to the middle-class values discussed by Sampson, values that are needed to thrive in the public school environment, which, as we discussed earlier, is a middle class institution.

So, as we have seen in Sampson's research and Dennis' observations in his work at VIFCC, school preparation on the part of the families is a determining factor in student success, this is independent of race. Families living in poverty view education as the responsibility of the school so there is little reinforcement at home of these values such as responsibility and delayed gratification that help a child to succeed. This perception of education through the families' eyes becomes the norm in a particular area, so that this is the overall view of the families attending a given neighborhood schools. This creates a gap between expectations of schools and teachers of

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<sup>2</sup> Dennis, Gordon. "On Schools." Telephone interview. 11 Feb. 2016.

their students and, on the other side, students and their families of their schools and teachers.

When this takes place, the quality of education is reduced because teachers are teaching in a way that requires students to possess values which are developed by middle class family, but the families are not able to reciprocate their part because they, unknowingly, hold a differing view of their child's education. With this in mind, Dennis explains, in his opinion, what make a bad or poor quality education. He says,

Does the child come to school prepared to learn? A lot of times the environment doesn't have anything to do with the school, the teachers or the administration, it's because the kids and their peers, their education isn't as important, their willingness to learn may not be there, it may be, but it may not be, it's not the thing to do, so learning and taking tests about 'dumb' things, and going through all this 'silly stuff' isn't worth it for the child, they don't see the value of it. A bad school isn't that - the teachers may be fine and the administration may be fine, but when you're faced with that attitude from a large number of kids, you end up making the day go by in compromising and you accept the misbehaving of some that interrupt the attention of those willing to learn. So the bad school is a combination of a lot of things, much of which is not related to the teacher, the building, or the administration.<sup>3</sup>

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According to Dennis, therefore, a poor education has to do with the environment the students going to the school are surrounded by, that they aren't equipped by their families with the values that schools expect their students to have. In response to Dennis' observation, I would say that often schools serving poor students focus heavily on math and literacy curricula in order to increase high-stakes test scores. These schools are often not interested in implementing a social justice curriculum that I believe educates the whole child, helping to develop values that are important for participating as a citizen in our country. However, schools should recognize that their system, as it is, is not successfully helping this diverse student population to thrive. Their purpose is to educate all the students attending their school, not the middle class students who

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<sup>3</sup> Dennis, Gordon. "On Schools." Telephone interview. 11 Feb. 2016.

are the successful ones in the middle class institution that are schools. The United States found what type of education worked for the middle class over a hundred years ago, now it's time to find what works for the poor class. One could say that the school system tried to do this by establishing trade schools, so that poor children had a trade upon high school graduation. But this cannot be the solution! We should be educating the child, not training them. A child who is properly educated should be equipped to decide for themselves what type of life they want to pursue, not the other way around with schools determining the type of life their students will have. At the same time, if poor families want to escape poverty, they need to realize the sacrifice involved in improving their situations. This is, perhaps, unrealistic to expect of them because of their isolation from the middle class I discussed earlier. Today, they are stuck in a system working against them. Schools are not meeting their educational needs and government agencies and not-for-profit organizations are, for the most part, simply maintaining them in their poverty instead of helping them come out of their poverty. Thus, students coming from poor families and poor communities are mal-equipped to succeed academically in our middle-class-oriented school system, which is then reflected in what we call the achievement gap. It is the responsibility of the school to educate the students attending the school, not it is not the responsibility of the students to fit into a system that is failing to provide them with a high-quality education.

Even though we have, up to this point, distinguished between class and race and discussed that this is a class problem, not a race problem, I think it would be naive to leave race out of the question entirely. As we saw in Goldstein's analysis of the desegregation of schools in *The Teacher Wars*, and in Sampson's research, white teachers tend to hold lower expectations for their black students. Several families observed in Sampson's work suggested that they

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believed that their children's teachers expected less of them. For example, "Ms. Knowles suggests that she believes that teachers have low expectations for poor minority parents, which adversely affects their teaching of the children," and, "Ms. White does not believe that discrimination plays a role in her life, but noted that it did so for her daughter and for African American students at her previous school," (Sampson 27, 73). As Sampson points out, this is not a new observation, the stigma that white teachers hold low expectations for their black students emerged at the beginning of desegregation of schools. As Goldstein writes about the 1966 report entitled "Equality of Educational Opportunity," "Coleman's message was that although family income might be the biggest factor in student achievement, teachers and schools also mattered, especially for poor kids....As research would begin to show definitively by the end of the decade, such low expectations for children would be self-fulfilling," (Goldstein 121).

One sociologist, Beverly Tatum, who writes specifically on the topic of racism, speaks directly on the influence race, specifically black race, has on student performance in school. In her book, "*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*", Tatum describes the identity journey black adolescents undergo in their middle and high school years, and how the schools system has an influence on their racial identity development. I see three main points she makes as being of particular importance. First, that schools' tracking systems of varying levels of courses offered to students exhibits strong racial patterns. Black children are much more likely to be in the lower tracks, which may be influenced by other factors which I have already or will soon mention, and this forms a black student's idea of what it means to be black. Tatum includes the thoughts of one black honors student on his experience in the tracking system at a racially mixed school. She writes,

One young honors I interviewed described the irony of this resegregation in what was an otherwise integrated environment, and hinted at the identity issues it raised for him. 'It

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was really a very paradoxical existence, here I am in a school that's 35 percent Black, you know, and I'm the only Black in my classes....That always struck me as odd. I guess I felt that I was different from the other Blacks because of that' (Tatum 56).

I remember having similar observations on the other side of this scenario. In my predominantly white high school, with a black population of just over 10 percent, the only classes in which there were more than one or two black students were my elective courses and my lower-track math courses. In my school and in the schools Tatum discusses, it has become institutionalized that the black students are in the lower track classes.

Commented [CE16]: That's an interesting observation

The next point that Tatum makes regards what I have already discussed, is the low expectations white teachers have of their black students. Tatum discusses the need for black students to overcome stereotypes pushed upon them so as to not let the stereotypes inform their identity. She describes one student's reflection on being a victim of this very stereotyping:

A young ninth-grade student was sitting in his homeroom. A substitute teacher was in charge of the class. Because the majority of students from this school go on to college, she used free time to ask the students about their college plans. As a substitute she had very limited information about the academic performance, but she offered some suggestions. When she turned to this young man, one of the few Black males in the class, she suggested that he consider a community college. She had recommended four-year colleges to the other students (Tatum 58-59).

This experience is not unique to this individual, but is unfortunately the common result of educators' perhaps subconscious stereotyping of black students. These comments, intentional or not, can become formative in a black adolescent's identity. As a result of this racism, black students may not feel comfortable with or comforted by their white friends when they share experiences such as this one. As a result, they turn to those who are able to sympathize and understand them, their black peers. Tatum writes, "Not only are the Black adolescents encountering racism and reflecting on their identity, but their white peers, even when they are not perpetrators (and sometimes they are), are unprepared to respond in supportive ways. The

Black students turn to each other for the much needed support they are not likely to find anywhere else,” (Tatum 60). [This dynamic is what may explain “why all the black kids are sitting together in the cafeteria.” ]

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Finally, Tatum discusses the research of Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu on the result of these stereotypes played out in American society on black adolescents. According to Tatum, Fordham and Ogbu explain that when blacks notice that they are being excluded from full participation in U.S. society they develop an “oppositional social identity.” That is to say, what they see as being white American, they avoid and instead develop what is seen as black American because they are not white behaviors, characteristics, symbols, etc.. Tatum writes, “Certain styles of speech, dress, and music, for example, may be embraced as ‘authentically black’ and become highly valued, while attitudes and behaviors associated with whites are viewed with disdain. The peer group’s evaluation of what is black and what is not can have a powerful impact on adolescence behavior,” (Tatum 60-61). One of these behaviors or characteristics of the white American is academic success. Tatum explains that black adolescents might see a black student who is academically successful as trying to be white and rejecting their black identity. She writes, “While this frame of reference is not universally found among adolescents of African descent, it is commonly observed in black peer groups. Among the black college students I have interviewed, many described some conflict or alienation from other African American teens because of their academic success in high school,” (Tatum 62). This concept was described by some of the families observed in Sampson’s research, when they explained that their child’s peers tried to keep their child from succeeding by distracting them. While Sampson rejects this notion, I do agree with Tatum that it is a very real social construction in the adolescent black community. In my own experience, I distinctly remember talking with a

group of my black peers in high school about a black friend of mine, who they quickly called “white” because of his academic motivation, as he was one of the few black students in honors and A.P. classes with me. [The social expectation for black students to underperform could be an additional influence on the achievement gap between white and black students.]

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Ultimately, while I believe that social class is the biggest contributor of the achievement gap, I also see the responses of racial stereotypes also playing a significant role, if not as strongly as socioeconomic class and school preparedness. Throughout my research on these topics, I have concluded that perhaps the greatest infractions on the American public education system have less to do with education and more to do with what happens outside of schools-with environmental, economic, social, and racial factors. While I believe that it is the responsibility of the school system to provide an appropriate and high-quality education to all students, not just the children of the middle class, there are outside factors influencing the achievement gap that will continue to play a role, even if the internal school changes do take place. While there are significant outside factors, within the education system, factors such as teachers with low expectations of the poor, minority students and a Eurocentric, white curriculum which relies upon middle class values in order to be successful, are major contributors to the failure of the American public education system.

#### **Section IV: Solutions**

At this point, I have examined the relevant history of the American public education system and how it has shaped what it looks like today, I have discussed the impact of socioeconomic class values and implementation of these values in a student’s family life and

how this plays a role in the achievement gap, and finally I have looked into the way race plays into the school system. This now leads me to the question of, what is to be done?

In this section, I will not focus primarily on policy or system or nation-wide solutions since this is not something my studies have trained me for, and, further, because I personally do not see top-down changes as an effective method of school reform. Instead, I will be discussing potential solutions that can be practically implemented at district, school, and even classroom levels, across the country. It is important for me to stress that these suggestions are able to be “practically implemented” because there is little to say about solutions that are only possible in an ideal world, these types of solutions are irrelevant because this is an imperfect system, but we should do what we can to improve it. Some of these solutions are ones that I have witnessed personally. They are solutions that might not be top-down, system changes, but I believe they have the potential for systemic change, that is, they are not feeding the imperfect system, but they are changing how the system works.

Schools have seen so many nationally implemented changes such as No Child Left Behind, which have not proved to be successful, and instead arguably did more harm than good. In fact, I am not of the belief that education should be a federal concern. Our system was created to be decentralized. As Goldstein writes in her book, *The Teacher Wars*, “This is an age-old problem in American education reform. Our system is highly decentralized in terms of curriculum, organization, funding, and student demographics and needs, yet we expected local schools to implement one-size-fits-all reform agendas imposed from above,” (Goldstein 261). In discussing a district-level initiative in Newark, New Jersey, called Children’s Literacy Initiative, Goldstein writes,

Evidence backed programs, like CLI, are rarely replicated so they can reach every school district. ‘Too much school reform is about blowing up systems,’ says Jen Weikert, CLI’s

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director of communications and giving. ‘What we know is that no matter how many systems you blow up, you can’t charter-ize everything. We feel like by helping teachers in the classroom, particularly within the public school system, we serve a major need’ (Goldstein 247).

In other words, the more we enforce policy, or nation-wide reform, the more we’re “blowing up” the system. Instead, considering the decentralized nature of our system, why don’t we complement that by implementing district-wide programs, working with teachers and classrooms, and growing it from there depending on its success? What works in one school might not work in another one, or it might, but let that be decided by individual teachers and schools, not by politicians who can’t see the classroom results of the execution of their policy and reform.

With all this said, I would like to go back to William Sampson because, as a policy researcher, he does have some viable policy suggestions. He writes, “The findings suggest to me that we begin to think seriously about a family intervention policy that identifies the family characteristics of low-achieving poor black and Latino students, develop individual curricula for each family centered on what we know to be the characteristics of the families of high and perhaps average achievers, and then teach the families what they need to do and how to do it” (Sampson 137). He explains that the people working with the families will most likely not be involved at the school, but would be community-based outreach workers instead, because poverty is an extrinsic issue, as I mentioned earlier. He mentions “the collaboration of community-based agencies, schools, and perhaps the scholars who know what goes on in the homes of those who do well in schools.” (Sampson 137). Similarly, Dennis explains on behalf of VIFCC that “we can’t do it all on our own” there has to be a collaboration that takes place between groups and organizations in order to help the poor succeed. To me, this means that we need to head in a new direction, one other than our current “one-size-fits-all” system. I see this

Commented [CE20]: Is that because there’s a pre-existing problem: the breakdown of the family structure?

already taking place at the classroom level with relatively new teaching methods such as differentiation, individualized instruction, and other accommodations teachers make to teach a diverse group of students. We need to see this taking place at a more system-wide level as well, acknowledging that teaching in an urban school serving predominantly minority students will require a different curriculum and teaching methods than in a predominantly white, suburban school. Further, policy needs to include family intervention in order to equip families with the resources they need to help their children succeed.

The first solution that I see schools being able to “practically implement” is providing a social justice education for this students. This is a type of curriculum that meets students where they are, is academically rigorous, develops students’ ability to think critically, encourages them to be activists, among other positive components. This is the type of high-quality education to which every child should be entitled. By providing students with a social justice education, students not only have high expectations set for them, but they are pushed to think about their place in the world, and as a result, become empowered to determine what they want to pressure in life. Students of a social justice curriculum are able to escape the systematized and institutionalized imprisonment they currently face. I recognize that this could be seen as a “one-size-fits-all” approach to curriculum. However, as I mentioned earlier in this thesis, one of the guidelines of a social justice education is that it is grounded in the lives of the students, which means the curriculum is relevant to the students who are following it, or, teachers are amending the curriculum to make it relevant to the specific student in the classroom. Therefore, since the curriculum is adjusted to be relevant to the lives and experiences of the students to whom it is being taught, the implementation of a social justice curriculum will look different from school to school, and even, one child to another.

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Commented [CE23]: what, exactly, does that mean? How does that translate into curriculum?

Commented [CE24]: conceivably, it could also be different from one child to another

Another solution that I see as having the ability to be “practically implemented” is team-teaching. This is not a new idea by any means, but it seems as though it is still close to unheard of. In my observations at a number of schools around Chicago, it is becoming less normal for there to be only one adult teacher in the classroom. It is becoming more prevalent for students with disabilities to require the assistance of a paraprofessional. Teachers’ aids are becoming more prevalent. Co-teaching is even becoming a more widely-used practice. I think it’s safe to say that it is beneficial to have more than one teacher to educate a class of 30 students. Team teaching presents opportunities such as small group or individualized instruction, multiple teaching styles within one classroom, and collaboration in curriculum, unit, and lesson planning, among other positives. There is a tremendous number of responsibilities in a teacher’s job description that go beyond standing in front of a class and teaching. Teachers are expected to prepare lessons, which includes matching lessons to standards or learning goals and collecting resources, collecting and analyzing data through assessment, providing feedback, establishing relationships with students and their parents, and being involved in the school community beyond their classrooms. Even though teachers seem to be able to manage these responsibilities, why not maximize the efficiency to which they perform by distributing the responsibilities among a team of teachers?

One school which has greatly benefitted from multiple adults in the classroom is Bernhard Moos Elementary School in Chicago. According to Frank Tavano, a DePaul University College of Education professor, in just four years, this school has improved from a warning, level 3 school to a level 1 school., (in Chicago Public Schools, schools are rated by the school board from level 3 at the lowest rank, to level 1+, rated on a basis of student test scores, attendance records, input from parents, and parent participation.) I think it is important for me to

Commented [CE25]: In terms of focus, is this work based on Chicago? If so, say so!

Commented [CE26]: Footnote

note also that the students attending Moos predominantly come from low-income families, which as we have already discussed, is a major factor influencing the achievement gap. In addition to a new principal's excellent leadership, there is now a formal partnership between Moos and DePaul University's College of Education. In this partnership, pre-service teachers in all programs within DePaul's College of Education are able to complete their required field experiences at Moos. At the beginning of a given quarter, DePaul's pre-service teachers are placed with a teacher and classroom at Moos and subsequently complete 20 or more hours working with that teacher. The teachers at Moos utilize this extra help effectively, by assigning pre-service teachers to work small groups or with individual students. In the Fall of 2015, 95 DePaul's pre-service teachers worked alongside Moos teachers, and it is expected that by the end of the 2015-16 school year, there will be over 200 pre-service teachers helping at Moos (Tavano). This is a mutually positive relationship because the pre-service teachers gain classroom experience and the Moos teachers have an additional resource available, which they often use to work for small group instruction with struggling students and English language learners.

Ultimately, what I am suggesting is that this type of team teaching model is becoming more prevalent, in terms of having more and more teachers' aids and paraprofessionals in classrooms in addition to a lead teacher. Teachers benefit from the alleviated workload so they can focus more deeply on the quality of their teaching and students benefit from the possibility of individualized instruction or multi-strategy instruction. This is a solution that I see as particularly beneficial in schools serving students coming from low-income families and one that has the potential for being realistically implemented.

Commented [CE27]: Has this been extended to another school that you've observed? If so, describe



Another solution I see as having a great impact is making schools into community centers. As Sampson's research demonstrated, family participation in a student's education is a determining factor in that student's academic success. By placing the school as a community center rather than just a school where children go from 8:00 to 3:00 during the week, we are naturally placing more emphasis on education. This can have several practical implications, for example: planting community gardens or setting up farmers markets on the weekend. We should open the school gym for use outside of school hours, for example Saturday recreational basketball leagues. Offering more after school activities for children, such as robotics, Girls on the Run and book clubs, is beneficial for a number of reasons such as expanding children's interests and providing positive after-school care for parents. Students could become more proud of their school by reinforcing school pride by supporting sports events through activities such as pep-rallies and building homecoming floats. Another way to bring families to the school is by opening up library use for parents and younger siblings before they are school-aged. By establishing schools as community centers, we provide opportunities for families to become more involved in the school community in non-academic forums. Parents who might shy away from their children's schools because of negative experiences from their own school career might feel welcomed in a school again and students might not dread coming to school because they associate it with other positive experiences in their lives.

One final solution that I see as non-negotiable and am disappointed that this is something I even have to discuss in 2016. As Goldstein and Tatum point out, white teachers tend to have lower expectations of their students of color. I would argue that a teacher might think the same of students living in poverty. Research shows that classes whose teachers set high expectations for their students were higher achieving than those classes whose teachers had set low

expectations for students. Goldstein describes the 1968 research of Harvard professor, Robert Rosenthal, called "Pygmalion in the Classroom." In this research a group of students with varying IQ scores were placed in a class whose teacher was told it was a class of high achieving students, while in another class of students with varying IQ scores, the teacher was told she had group of average students. At the end of the year, the class whose teacher believed her students to be high achievers performed better than the control group deemed average, simply because the teacher with the "high achievers" class set higher expectations for her students, even though they had the same abilities as the students in the "average" class. Goldstein writes, "The researchers concluded that teachers' lower expectations had damned the control group students- a finding that had disturbing implications for children from groups that had been historically discriminated against, whose teachers might assume could not learn at a high level," (Goldstein 137).

Therefore, schools need to hire teachers who see students of color and students living in poverty as having the same abilities as their white, middle class counterparts. I believe that by starting with a positive classroom environment, which of course includes high expectations, schools can then become positive school environments. A positive school environment, which welcomes and nurtures students, would encourage students as opposed to making them feel as if their teachers don't expect them to succeed. As mentioned earlier, environment is so influential on student success. Society should not be able to look at a poor, black kindergartener and have a 50 percent chance of correctly assuming that child will drop out of school before his or her high school graduation. Students need to know that they are not a statistic. This needs to start with teachers, administrators, and schools.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, I have tried to make sense of so many factors that play significant roles in the failure of the American public education system. The American public education system cannot be properly understood without an examination of its historical context. Having examined America's educational history following the Civil War, we now understand that the Northern white industrialists acted as the white architects who informed black education in order to support their political and social agenda of increasing their booming businesses and keeping blacks just beneath them in a new form of slavery. The Great Migration placed blacks in urban environments, only to become stuck in what became ghettos following the end of industrialization. The large number of poor blacks within a neighborhood led to the low performing schools we see now. As a result it seems as though these poor, overwhelmingly minority students do not fit into the education system that was designed for the middle-class, when in reality, the system does not fit them. The poor live in such isolation from the middle class that they are unable to know what values it takes to succeed in the school system. Therefore, schools need to start changing the system in order to accommodate for the diverse population of students they serve in the 21st century. Public education should guarantee a high-quality education for all American children, not just the children of the middle class. I am suggesting, among other solutions, that schools provide a social justice education for students so that they are empowered to work towards a socially just world. We need to move away from top-down reform and need to accommodate instruction school by school, classroom by classroom. The system must educate each child so that each child can participate in society actively, socially, politically, and economically and are not restrained to one destiny designated by the system. Ultimately, I have found that the crux of why the American public education system is failing actually has little to do with the schools themselves but the systematic issues

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surrounding them, specifically, the historical, socioeconomic, and racial issues that are reflected within the education system. From the social engineering of education in the U.S., beginning soon after the Civil War, intentionally placing blacks in a subservient position to whites, and the isolation of blacks from the middle class, blacks, and other minorities, began to further isolate themselves in order to create an “oppositional American identity” which, in part, discourages academic success. Despite this vicious cycle of extrinsic issues, schools have the responsibility to actively work to meet the needs of their students to ensure that all children receive a socially just, high-quality education.

Commented [CE29]: But why not, if the schools have been built on a post-slavery model of securing cheap labor for industrial capitalists?

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