

RACE, REDLINING, & RED PENS: The Effects of Socioeconomic Status on Education



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Many would say that the United States of America is currently in a post-racial society. While it cannot be ignored that there has been progress in developing policies, attitudes and a nation against racism, we are most definitely not in a post-racial society. While many institutions in the U.S. continue to engage in systemic racism, a primary one that overtly shows this continued engagement is the U.S. education system.

Systemic racism, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, is “policies and practices that exist throughout a whole society or organization, and that results in and support a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race.” It can be stated plainly: the U.S. education system fulfills this definition, thus remaining systemically racist. The current education system exhibits disparity in the quality of education between minority and white students.

To understand this, we must begin with the connection between socioeconomic status and race, as a disparity in socioeconomic status leads to a disparity in education. Socioeconomic status, as defined by the American Psychological Association, is “the social standing or class of an individual or group. It is often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation,” and “examinations of socioeconomic status often reveal inequities in access to resources, plus issues related to privilege, power and control.”

Socioeconomic conditions greatly contribute to the quality of education, as they contribute directly to the funding the school receives through property taxes, and all of the materials and devices students can use to heighten and nurture their education.

Currently, there is a large disparity in average socioeconomic status between white and (many) minority

families. In 2018, the U.S. Bureau of Labor reported that the average household income and education attainment for minorities, excluding those of Asian descent, was significantly less in comparison to their white counterparts, revealing the bridge between the disparity in socioeconomic status and education. This disparity did not come to be on its own, as history has been the cause for it and contributes to it today.

Brought up by the likes of colonization, indentured servitude and slavery, America was born with a racial and ethnic hierarchy: white, European ethnicities on the top, and essentially every other race or ethnicity on the bottom. This hierarchy was displayed through blatant discrimination and codified racism, where policies, laws and attitudes were created to further enforce this. In examining socioeconomic status and how it plays into education, we see how a pattern of racist historical actions have determined exactly who is higher in socioeconomic status—and, by effect, education—and who is lower.

A fundamental contributor to this is redlining. Redlining, which was outlawed in 1969 by the Fair Housing Act, was an act where lending offices outlined areas on a map, deeming “safe” ones in green and “risky” ones in red. Typically, the areas deemed “risky” were ones where people of color lived and redlining was intentionally an act of discrimination. Overwhelmingly, Black Americans were the targets of these redlines. When an area was redlined, its members were often denied any sort of goods or services by the federal and local government and many private sectors, including mortgages, funding and housing in other areas.

Redlining has left its mark today, with many people of color living in the same congregated areas that were underfunded and provided little to no aid in comparison to the “safe” areas with primarily white people. Redlining, in its blatant sense from before 1968, played a heavy role in the education of the students that live in those areas.

Schools receive funding largely based on the property taxes of the area that it covers and, while everyone would like to have high funding for their schools, that is not always the case. Property taxes are determined by the value of property in a specific area, according to Investopedia, an



American financial website. Areas, primarily with people of color, that had previously been redlined and underfunded, have low property values and, therefore, are in an area with schools that are underfunded, contributing to a lower socioeconomic status and quality of education.

Conversely, areas with primarily white people had not been redlined previously and now have high property values. In essence, these schools are better funded due to a higher socioeconomic status and receive a greater quality of education. Students receiving more funding at their schools have greater access to resources like technology and school-based internet, as well as personal technology and reliable home internet access.

In early March of 2020, when COVID-19 began rapidly spreading in the U.S., all students who attended school away from home experienced a significant change in their usual schooling experience. Schools, by the direction of public health officials and experts, were forced to send students home and have them participate in virtual learning, also known as online or e-learning. A student doing online learning spends anywhere from five to seven hours in front of the computer, engaging with classmates and a teacher over a virtual meeting device like Zoom or Google Meet. For all students doing virtual learning, technology and internet access is a necessity.

However, for many students of lower socioeconomic status who attend schools of lower funding, this necessity is not necessarily a given. Technology, either school-funded or personally owned, is not accessible if that school or student cannot afford it, which is largely the case in areas of lower socioeconomic status.

The same can be said for reliable internet access at home. In having less access to technology and the internet, these students that are typically of color receive a lower quality of education in comparison to their white peers. While there are always outliers, this pattern of deprivation is based in a history of racism.

The news journal Education Week published data on the disparities in remote learning during COVID-19, finding that “in districts with the lowest percentages of students from low-income families, just 1 in 5 [school officials] reported in late March that a lack of basic technology is a ‘major’ problem, compared with nearly two-thirds of [officials] in districts where the highest percentages of students are from low-income families.” While a disparity in education between white and minority students existed before COVID-19, it has certainly been exemplified due to

a socioeconomic difference in access to reliable education resources, such as technology and the internet.

While this pandemic-driven widening of disparity is currently affecting minority students greatly, it will leave its mark on all students in the future. Minority students of lower socioeconomic status may be greatly behind their white counterparts, according to Michelle Fox of CNBC, and receive less educational attainment in their lives. This is not any fault of minority students; this is a national history of racism working against them.

Unless something is done to combat this disparity in access to technology and the internet, the long-standing effects will be detrimental to many students of color. Because of how flawed the education system is, generations of students are having their fundamental years destroyed

and are facing extreme developmental challenges. In lower socioeconomic areas, educators, parents, students and advocates all recognize and endure this problem. A student born into issues outside their control should not be deprived of chances, should not be prevented them from the quality of education promised by the American Dream. Together, we can fix this.

