Urban Education's Core Challenges: How Racial and Socioeconomic Segregation and Poverty Help Create a Culture of Low Expectations and Achievement in Urban Schools

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Abstract

The educational performance gap – defined as the difference in graduation rates and academic achievement between higher-performing suburban students and lower-performing urban students – and its relationship to equal educational opportunities has been the subject of considerable research since the 1966 Coleman Report demonstrated that the socioeconomic status of a student's family and peers were the most important variables in determining the level of academic achievement. However, 56 years after the seminal Brown decision, the educational performance gap between suburban (mostly white and Asian-Americans) students and urban (the vast majority of whom are African-American and Latino) students continues to exist throughout the country. This article will explore how segregated poverty and a culture of low expectations contribute to the persistent differences in educational performance between urban and suburban students. The article will offer viable solutions to narrowing the educational disparity between urban and suburban students.

Key Words: urban education, poverty, segregation, health, culture, politics, equal protection clause

1. Introduction

In 1954, in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case, the United States Supreme Court ruled that *de jure* (state-mandated) segregation was an unconstitutional violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause that guaranteed all citizens equal protection under the law. This decision, a significant component of a nation-wide campaign by civil rights advocates to eliminate all forms of segregation and discrimination in public life, validated the assertion that state-mandated segregated schools denied African-American students equal educational opportunities, inflicted permanent harm to their self-esteem, and hindered their academic achievement. It is important to note that the *Brown* decision only dealt with *de jure* segregation; schools that remained segregated because of residential segregation – which remains the primary barrier to significant school desegregation – were not impacted by the *Brown* decision. Therefore, many school districts implemented a variety of plans – mandated busing, voluntary school choice programs, magnet schools, changing school district boundaries, and other efforts – to desegregate public schools.

However, major judicial decisions in the past 20 years ruled against desegregation plans, including voluntary plans to remedy segregation. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Civil Rights advised school districts to end judicial desegregation plans and implement race-neutralapproaches, which often fail to integrate schools (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2010; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Thus, racially and economically segregated schools – an epic consequence of pervasive residential segregation – remain a centrifugal force in the United States (Massey & Denton, 1993; Moore, 2002; Orfield & Lee, 2007). Minority students who attend urban and high-poverty schools continue to experience high rates of educational failure, which, in turn, is positively correlated with unemployment and a host of pathologies (incarceration rates, drug abuse, illegitimacy, poor health, and violence) that ruin individual lives and cost society in lost productivity and welfare expenses.

However, many civil rights advocates lauded the *Brown* decision as a monumental step forward in America's efforts to provide equal educational opportunities to all students regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, sex, or religion. This expansion of equal educational opportunity was viewed by civil rights advocates aspart of a nation-wide effort to abolish the fiction of "separate but equal" created by *Plessey v. Ferguson*(1896).

As Gunnar Myrdal (1944) asserted in his classic analysis of American race relations, *An American Dilemma* , the ideals inherent in the "American Creed" – equality of opportunity, liberty, social justice, individualism, and the rule of law – would goad America into fulfilling its Constitutional mandate to provide equal protection under the law for all citizens. In this manner, the "American Creed" would be conscripted to reduce the pervasive discrimination which has been the "Achilles' Heel " in America's experiment with democracy since our nation's founding in the late 18th century. Indeed, an objective analysis of American history from 1776 until the present demonstrates that the United States – possessing a strong capacity for dissent and the airing of grievances, self-criticism, and social change— has evolved into a highly inclusive, albeit far from perfect, pluralistic democracy.

However, while America has made great progress, there is still a tremendous amount of work to be completed in our efforts to close the socioeconomic and educational gaps that remain among various subgroups in American society. Indeed, there is strong demographic evidence that indicates the United States is experiencing increasing levels of residential and school segregation.Many recent studies show that many major school districts are resegregating after being released from court-mandated desegregation plans (Frankenberg, 2009; Lee, 2004; Moore, 2002; Orfield, Frankenberg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2010).Unfortunately, residential segregation remains the major cause of school segregation, and its role in perpetuating school segregation and hindering African-American and Latino students is often ignored in discussions regarding educational performance.

This article will analyze how residential and school segregation and poverty adversely impacts poverty-stricken urban students (the vast majority of whom are African-American and Latino) in terms of educational performance and life aspirations. Finally, the article will discuss some viable, albeit difficult to implement and sustain, solutions to these urban challenges. While desegregating schools across the country remains a worthy, albeit an extremely difficult, goal, improving educational performance for minority students who attend segregated schools must be a focus of educators and policy-makers. Social studies education, charged with producing competent citizens characterized by specific civic virtues, can contribute to narrowing the gap in educational performance between relatively affluent/white suburban students and relatively poor/ minority urban students by teaching the essentials of civic education.

2. How Residential and School Segregation Adversely Impact Poor Urban Students

Residential segregation is a major barrier to school integration; simultaneously, it denies equal educational opportunities to African-American and Latino students by forcing them to attend isolated schools that are characterized by a wide variety of educational problems – high poverty rates, insufficient funding, a lack of high quality and experienced teachers, and a student population that has experienced numerous social and economic problems in their families and communities (Crane, 1991; Massey & Denton, 1993; Orfield, 2009; Taylor & Frankenberg, 2009; Wilson, 1987). Urban residential segregation produces schools that are segregated by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status; thus, the vast majority of students in these schools are poor African-American and Latino children.

Furthermore, the consequences of residential segregation — teenage child-bearing, community norms that reject achievement, negative peer pressures, unemployment, crime, a dearth of successful role models, and the prevalence of single-parent (usually female) household, social isolation, political impotence, concentrated poverty, the development of speech patterns incompatible with Standard American English, and the evolution of sub-cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors that are in direct opposition to mainstream American society — severely inhibit the realization of equal educational opportunities for minority students (Massey & Denton, 1993; Moore, 2002; Ogbu, 2003; Rank, 2004; Stepick, 1998). Moreover, residentially segregated poor minority children experience a plethora of health problems – low-weight births for African-Americans, vision problems, poor diets, ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder), cognitive impairments (many attributable to lead poisoning), and asthma – which significantly limit academic achievement (Basch, 2010; Belligener, et al., 1988; Needleman, 1992; Rank, 2004; Walton, 2009; Weitzman, 2003).

Therefore, even African-American and Latino students who attend desegregated schools, but are consigned to residing in segregated and poor neighborhoods, are adversely impacted by the deleterious consequences of residential segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993). Clearly, it is very difficult for school officials to overcome the negative impact of residential segregation on minority students.

Urban African-American and Latino students experience pervasive residential segregation, as well as discrimination in access to vital social services and employment opportunities, and denied equal educational opportunities by being assigned to high-poverty schools (Dunn, 1997; Massey & Denton, 1993; Mohl, 1990; Orfield, 2009; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

Much like other social institutions, such as families, schools, and churches, a neighborhood can have an enormous influence on the values, goals, attitudes, behaviors, and opportunities of its residents. Where one lives strongly influences a variety of important factors that will have an impact on an individual's future socioeconomic status — the quality of schools, the environmental conditions in the neighborhood, the adult role models, the quality of public services, the character of children's peers, and the individual's own aspirations, knowledge, and skills — because there is a very strong correlation between spatial mobility and socioeconomic mobility (Crane, 1991; Massey & Denton, 1993;Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Wilson, 1987). Segregation hinders black and other minority students from acquiring the important linguistic skills, knowledge, values, and personal behaviors that are central to academic success.

For example, the high degree of residential segregation between African-American and Latino students in many large cities has resulted in the development of a dialect, popularly known as Ebonics, African-American Vernacular English, or Black English, widely spoken throughout black communities across the country (McWhorter, 2000). While this dialect is a legitimate form of communication, black students who have not mastered Standard American English — the dominant language in instruction, educational materials, examinations, and writing assignments throughout the nation — are at a distinct educational disadvantage. Furthermore, the evolution of Black English away from Standard American English reflects the high degree of spatial and social isolation between black and white students and sharpens the cultural differences between many blacks and the white American mainstream (McWhorter, 2000).

The high degree of African-American and Latino residential segregation, in conjunction with a long history of racial discrimination in all areas of social life, is a major catalyst in the development of an urban subculture that rejects the values, attitudes, and behaviors of mainstream society (Dunn, 1997; Massey & Denton, 1993; Mohl, 1990; Ogbu, 2003; Portes & Stepick, 1993). These values, attitudes, and behaviors — self-reliance, hard work, high academic achievement, speaking Standard English, steady employment, marriage, and sacrifice — are viewed by many urban minorities as an integral part of a white culture that is, in large part, responsible for the segregation, lower socioeconomic status of blacks relative to other groups, and the social problems that are pervasive throughout many black communities (McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu, 2003). Of course, not all urban students possess these oppositional attitudes; however, they are pervasive in large urban areas across the country and have infiltrated many African-American middle-class neighborhoods (McWhorter, 2000; Steele, 1990). This may help to explain why some middle class African-American students continue to lag behind their white counterparts. While socioeconomic status is a vital predictor of educational performance, cultural factors that may exist independent of SES – parental expectations and rules, the school climate, and the attitudes and behaviors required for academic success (hard work, perseverance, intellectual curiosity, integrity, self-discipline, and personal responsibility) – are also vital in improving urban education (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

Unlike most white residential areas, where a majority of adults work and serve as positive role models for children, the conditions in most urbanAfrican-Americanand Latino neighborhoods make it very difficult for people to internalize the values, attitudes, and behaviors of mainstream society. The socioeconomic conditions and pathological behaviors that have taken root in urban communities — pervasive poverty, poor infrastructure, high unemployment rates, wide-spread illegitimacy, high crime rates, drug abuse, and high rates of diseases associated with poverty (lead poisoning, tuberculosis, malnutrition, and AIDS) — often breed feelings of despair, apathy, stress, and hopelessness (Dunn, 1997; Fauth, Leventhal, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007; Massey & Denton, 1993; Mohl, 1990; Portes & Stepick, 1993).

This oppositional subculture, which developed in response to the brutal conditions created by racial segregation, explains the behaviors and attitudes of manyAfrican-American and Latinos as a rational and ethical response to racial discrimination. Speaking Black English, shunning marriage and stable employment, doing poorly in school, and having children outside of marriage are viewed as "authentic black behaviors" and validating a cultural identity that is constructed in opposition to the oppressive white culture (Ogbu, 2003).

Social scientist Kenneth Clark, whose testimony regarding the effects of segregation on black children was instrumental in the *Brown* decision, writing in his 1965 book *Dark Ghetto*, stated:

> Because the larger society has clearly rejected [the black ghetto dweller], he rejects. . . the values, aspirations, and techniques of that society. His conscious or unconscious argument is that he cannot hope to win meaningful self-esteem through the avenues ordinarily available to more privileged individuals, [which] have been blocked for him through inadequate education, through job discrimination, and through a system of social and political power which is not responsive to his needs (p. 13).

By isolating African-American and Latino students in racially homogenous neighborhoods, segregation creates a climate in which these oppositional attitudes, behaviors, and values are maintained and constitute a critical component of racial/ethnic identity. This oppositional subculture has had a devastating impact on the larger society's constitutional mandate to provide equal educational opportunities to all citizens and to improve the academic achievement of urban students (Ogbu 2003; Massey & Denton 1993).

Segregation produces a social climate in which poor academic performance is the norm, negative attitudes towards authority and mainstream values predominate, and motivated students lack access to the challenging courses, experienced teachers, and high-achieving peers that form an integral part of a quality education (Massey & Denton, 1993; Orfield, Frankenberg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2010).This is why socioeconomic segregation – and not racial or ethnic segregation per se – is often devastating for poor urban students: the socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of a student's peers are of critical importance in influencing the student's values, behaviors, work habits, and attitudes that, in large part, affect academic achievement (Coleman, et al., 1966; Kahlenberg, 2001; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

In addition, the persistence of an oppositional subculture pressures bright and motivated African-American and Latino children to avoid "acting white" by doing poorly in school. The pressure on these black students for doing well academically is most intense during their teenage years. For example, Stepick (1998) documented this behavior when he described how many Haitian students at Miami Edison High in Miami, Florida were ridiculed, ostracized, and beaten by American blacks because of their desire to do well academically and their alien cultural behaviors. Indeed, many Haitian students, much to the chagrin of their immigrant parents, gave in to the pressure and assimilated into the oppositional subculture so pervasive throughout the inner city; this capitulation by many Haitian students can only hinder their educational progress and future socioeconomic status.

The very high degree of racial residential segregation and school segregation throughout America's major urban areas has resulted in the majority of low-income students being surrounded by a substantial number of peers who lack basic skills, strong study habits, personal discipline, and exhibit a strong aversion to academic achievement. Residential segregation, because it is so highly correlated with socioeconomic segregation, pathological behaviors, and the formation of oppositional characteristics, serves to inhibit the realization of equal educational opportunities for all students in public schools (Massey & Denton, 1993). The next section will examine another challenge, although highly correlated with segregation, facing urban students, as well as policy-makers, the medical community, and educators: Poverty and its devastating consequences on student health and educational performance.

3. The Impact of Poverty on Educational Performance: Healthand Nutrition Issues

In addition to residential segregation which adversely impacts students' knowledge, skills, aspirations, habits, and values, minority children must contend with poverty and all of its associated pathologies (Frankenberg, 2009; Massey & Denton, 1993; Rumbarger & Palardy, 2005). One of the most persistent challenges facing urban students is the adverse impact of poverty on academic achievement and cognitive development. Numerous empirical studies conducted by medical researchers and social scientists support the assertion that family poverty adversely impacts children's cognitive development, health, behavior, and academic achievement (Basch, 2010; Children's Defense Fund, 2011; Grantham-McGregor, 1995; Weitzman, 2003).

In addition, living in poor communities presents several confounding factors associated with poverty that severely impede cognitive development and academic achievement; teenage child-bearing, community norms that reject achievement, negative peer pressures, unemployment, crime, a dearth of successful role models, and the prevalence of single-parent (usually female) households contribute to poor educational performance (Boundy, 1991; Crane, 1991; Massey & Denton, 1993; Weitzman, 2003; Wilson, 1987). A wide variety of factors – poor health care and inadequate nutrition, harmful environmental conditions in the home and neighborhood, and poor schools – converge to severely impede the psychosocial development of children residing in poor communities.

For example, lead poisoning remains a serious problem in many inner cities where children reside in older and poorly maintained homes; there is a modest relationship between early lead exposure (generally, children ingest lead-based paint chips) and lower IQs, ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder), and language impairments (Bellinger et al., 1988; Farber, Yanni, & Batshaw, 1997; Stein et al., 2002). Needleman (1992) found children exposed to lead early in life were seven times more likely to not graduate from high school and six times more likely to develop a reading disability; these children have a difficult time organizing their work, following directions, remaining on task, and are more susceptible to antisocial behaviors. And while teachers need to be aware of the consequences of lead exposure on students, solving this problem requires interventions from the medical community, social welfare agencies, and institutions committed to providing safe and healthy living quarters and communities.

Children, in order to reach their optimal intellectual, academic, and personal potential, must have a healthy diet which provides all of the nutrients – water, proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins, lipids, fiber, and minerals – required for growth, cognitive development, and physical and mental health (Beker, Farber, & Yanni, 2002). Of course, healthy child development requires that the pregnant mother make healthy choices – no alcohol, drug abuse, tobacco, and eating a healthy diet – and has the resources to provide a healthy environment for her unborn child (Weitzman, 2003). The socioeconomic status of the mother is important because it influences the choices she makes that are critical variables in influencing the health, development, and future of her children. Less educated women are more likely to expose their unborn children to alcohol, drugs, and tobacco which are correlated with diminished intellectual ability, behavioral problems, learning disabilities, and educational failure (Weitzman, et al. 2002).

Generally, the majority of children in the United States, like most developed countries, do not experience serious malnutrition or other forms of hunger. However, many poor families are unable to provide their children with three nutritious meals daily on a consistent basis; the brain cannot develop properly if it does not receive the required nutrients and children will not be interested in learning anything until they have been properly fed (Brown & Sherman, 1995; Grantham-McGregor, 1995; Rank, 2004; Weitzman et al. 2002). Many of the adverse cognitive effects of lead poisoning, iron and iodine deficiencies, malnutrition and other health problems in childhood may be irreversible or have a permanent impact on cognitive development; this indicates that strong prevention programs may be the most viable solutions to the devastating impact of poverty on children (Weitzman, 2003).

Poor children are more likely to have unmet medical, vision, and dental needs compared to middle class children and are less likely to have medical insurance (Children's Defense Fund, 2011). These children lag behind white middle class children on all important health indicators – prenatal care, infant mortality rates, exposure to harmful environmental conditions, unwed teen pregnancies, exposure to violence, incidence of asthma and obesity, access to health care, dental care, and immunizations. These unmet medical needs adversely impact a child's overall health and educational performance – students may not do well if they are hungry, sick, or can't see the board or read because they have poor vision. This is especially true for the seven million children who live in extreme poverty, strictly defined as annual household income below $11,025 (Children's Defense Fund, 2011).

Many of these children may have poor school attendance because they are sick or have tooth pain that is so bad it prevents them from eating, which, naturally, leads to more health problems. The fact that African-American and Hispanic children are disproportionately impacted by poverty's devastating consequences exacerbates social tensions and provokes civil rights advocates to call for numerous government programs (affirmative action, minority health initiatives, and compensatory educational programs) to reduce minority poverty rates and ensure equal economic and educational opportunities.

It should not be surprising that children experiencing such poverty, and all of its deleterious effects on their physical, emotional, and mental health, will show little interest in learning and may have a low level of achievement and motivation. Compounding these health and nutritional problems, poor students must deal with a host of serious community problems associated with concentrated poverty rates in neighborhoods. Thus, racial and socioeconomic segregation and highly concentrated poverty conspire to severely equal educational opportunities for minority students in America's urban schools. However, segregation and poverty are not necessarily destiny; there are examples of poor and segregated students performing well in K-12 schools, and continuing their education in universities throughout the country. The final section of this article will identify the characteristics of effective urban schools; traits that could be implemented in all urban schools if politicians, parents, educators, and citizens possessed the desire and will to do so.

4. Improving Urban Education: Implementing Proven Strategies

Dramatically improving academic achievement for poor and segregated minority students is a daunting challenge and, simultaneously, there is a plethora of theories from a myriad of academic disciplines on how this goal can be achieved. It is a highly complex situation that is immune to quick and simple solutions; in reality, solving the urban educational crisis will require substantial changes, not only in educational policies, but in the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions found in urban communities. Of course, there are extensive disagreements among experts on how these goals can be achieved. Nevertheless, there are some examples of successful urban schools and specific policies that can contend against the powerful forces of segregation and poverty.

First, it is critical to recognize that efforts to improve urban education often ignore or downplay the vital role of good health and its relationship to high academic achievement (Basch, 2010). Excellent teachers, a rigorous and relevant curriculum, exciting and engaging class activities, safe school environments, modern and technologically-equipped schools, and competent administration matter; simultaneously, educational performance will be severely limited if students are suffering from poverty and its concomitant realities: malnutrition, vision and dental problems, asthma and other diseases, limited cognitive ability owing to lead poisoning and exposure to toxins that are ubiquitous in poor urban areas, family disintegration, and violence. Moreover, poor urban children may not possess the attitudes, foundational knowledge, values, and habits required for successful academic achievement. Teachers and schools can help poor students via excellent instruction, discipline, making ethical and prudent choices, and providing structure that may be absent in the home. However, teachers and schools cannot compensate for a dysfunctional family mired in poverty living in dysfunctional communities.

Culture and family expectations are essential for high achievement. Conversely, other factors, such as good health, can have a monumental effect on performance. The "achievement gap" – the bane of educators and policy-makers across the country – is, in large part, a consequence of health disparities that afflict urban students (Basch, 2010). These health disparities are seen as early as kindergarten and the primary grades where Latinos and African-American children have lower math achievement on standardized exams (Crosnoe, 2006).

Thus, improving or implementing programs that will improve the overall health of urban students should be a priority in educational reform. Expanding the federal free breakfast/lunch program, as well as providing students with access to medical, vision, and dental care would have a major impact on improving their health. Of course, paying for these programs is a source of controversy, particularly in these harsh economic times. The politics are no less riveting: many conservatives contend that these functions are the obligation of parents and families while liberals assert that society must help the urban poor with proper health care, shelter, and nutrition. Head Start, Title I, prevention programs, and intervention programs – services provided by schools and social agencies to help reduce teen pregnancies, STDs, and quality preschool – have had limited results (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). But these programs, which have ardent supporters and critics, have not been an educational and economic panacea for the majority of poor minority students; therefore, educators and policy-makers are constantly creating new alternatives, such as separate schools for students at risk, to close the achievement gap (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

While schools cannot compensate for family dysfunction and poverty, there are several in-school policies that can have a significant impact on poor students. First, schools can implement discipline policies that are fair, effective, consistently enforced, and treat students with respect.

An examination of successful urban schools, such as the KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program), demonstrates that attendance and punctuality, dress codes, prohibitions on profanity, civility, and no tolerance for violence make a profound difference in performance (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). These schools teach and model the virtues required for success in the modern, and rapidly globalizing, economy. Any student, regardless of social class, race, or ethnicity, can learn to inculcate the virtues of self-discipline, personal responsibility, honesty, moral courage, tolerance, compassion, respect, and a strong work ethic. Classes in these schools are engaging, challenging, and disciplined – no one is sleeping, texting, putting on make-up, wandering the room, eating, or engaging in inappropriate talking.

Second, successful urban schools have high expectations for teachers and students. Teachers often work well beyond the normal workday tutoring students before and after school, as well as running extracurricular programs (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). These teachers and schools focus on academic achievement, treat all students with respect and while demanding that students treat each other with respect, develop positive administrator, faculty, and student relationships that foster communication, and provide a safe, violence-free, and orderly school climate that is conducive to high achievement and improves the educational and life aspirations of students (Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Morrison, 2006).

Excellent teachers matter and too many urban schools have unqualified or mediocre teachers – teachers who fail subject matter exams and minimum competency exams, including some exams written at the 8th or 9th grade level (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). In addition, the evidence suggests that advanced degrees and years of experience do not have a strong impact on student achievement. Urban schools need intelligent, hard-working, and passionate teachers who have a mastery of their subject and engaging ways to transmit that knowledge to their students. These teachers possess important virtues and exhibit a "no nonsense and no excuses" attitude that is required if poor urban students are to dramatically improve their academic performance. In addition, quality professional development programs help prepare teachers for working with high-poverty students by providing them with specific instructional strategies and expanding their content knowledge (Moore, et al. 2011).

These highly qualified teachers push their students to reach their potential, insist on hard work, civility, and believe that poor urban students can, with excellent teaching, overcome the barriers of segregation and poverty. It is not the lack of funding, per se, that hinders excellence in urban schools; often, it is the lack of discipline, high expectations, and a school culture (of course, this is a reflection of community standards and SES characteristics) that accepts mediocrity or less (Thernstrom & Theronstrom, 2003). Thus, increased funding will be useless unless there are profound changes in the schools by all concerned parties; establishing discipline, high standards, demanding excellence from teachers and students, and creating a school culture that does not accept excuses for poor performance requires little in financial costs but a great deal in political courage.The trends in resegregation are very troubling for advocates of integration; this is a geopolitical and economic reality that, so far, has proven to be immune from efforts to desegregate American schools.

Therefore, with the realization poor and minority children will continue to attend schools in segregated communities for the foreseeable future the focus should be on improving urban education, combined with a realistic understanding that the "educational messiah complex" – the belief held by many Americans that schools can compensate for poverty and dysfunctional families and can solve almost all problems – is a harmful myth (Reitman, 1992). Increasing funding, building modern schools with superb technology, changing curriculum and instruction will have a limited impact without profound changes in attitudes, values, and habits by urban families.

Any dramatic improvement in urban education must be accompanied by behavioral changes by urban residents; teen-age child-bearing, crime, violence, and hopelessness must be reduced if students are to succeed academically and economically. Funding education matters; however, no amount of money can compensate for highly dysfunctional families, impoverished communities, and pathological behaviors that develop in the absence of virtue. All Americans concerned with improving life and educational achievement for the urban poor should remember the words ofCharles Darwin: "If the misery of our poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin" (Gould, 1996, p. 19).Poor urban students can excel academically – if they are healthy, well-fed, attend safe schools, exposed to positive role models, receive excellent teaching in classes with high-achieving peers, and are taught the virtues of discipline, hard work, and personal responsibility – if Americans have the political will to reform our institutions and reduce the harmful behaviors that destroy many young lives.

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