Educational Equity Reconsidered

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Introduction

Educational institutions here in the United States provide one of the best learning opportunities in the world. The country leads the world in space explorations and in many other areas of technology due in part to the kind of learning environment it fosters and the importance it attaches to research and youth development. So, it is safe to assume that the greatness of the United States is inseparable with its emphasis on education and its commitment to ensure that every child receives good education.

But a second look at the system of education in American reveals two things. First, the structure of the system is partly antiquated and partly slanted despite efforts to upgrade and modernize. Second, there seems to be little courage on the part of certain authorities to address those areas of imbalance. So, two questions arise: What are the educational inequities visible in America's public schools? And how can educators respond to such inequities effectively in order to serve the learning needs of the current and future multicultural communities in the country?

In addressing the above queries, this work wishes to hopefully motivate the reader to take a second look, a more critical look, at the current educational arrangements. The purpose of the discussion, therefore, is to reexamine the process of educating the youths by probing educational philosophies of our public schools and the textual messages of the materials in use. It is important to do this because the future success of our society is rooted in the entrenchment of a

solid, balanced and effective educational equity for future generations. Before going further, however, it is necessary to explain the topic of this work.

Educational Equity: A Definition

Educational equity is the science of imparting knowledge in ways that recognize the context and the level of the learner. It is universal in scope but local in context. It is the art of preparing all students for better performance. Pointedly, it is an approach that not only believes that all students can learn regardless of their different backgrounds but also an approach that midwifes effective pedagogical styles.

Educational equity and educational justice sometimes mean different things to different people. In this discussion, both terms are viewed as two branches of one tree. Any attempt to unduly separate them will leave a yawning gap in the tree. They serve complementary purposes for each other. So, they are not perceived as rivals.

Contextually, however, a little distinction in connotation may be made. While justice has to do with equality and even-handedness, equity goes beyond that by insisting on ameliorating an existing gap or wrong in order to create a level field of play. In other words, equity is the preliminary material that levels the ground for the implementation of justice. If everyone is at the same level, then it is appropriate to require equal performance from all. So, equity is an action or perhaps a process by which existing imbalance is corrected before the battle begins.

It needs to be acknowledged, however, that bringing everyone to the same level may sometimes require special compensations, restitutions, reparations, or "hands-up" for already disadvantaged groups and individuals irrespective of economic class, ethnicity, and social status. This is because *equal justice does not work when the fingers are unequal*. Learners from unequal

backgrounds produce unequal results. For instance, judging all students by standardized test scores without first ensuring equal academic background and equal learning opportunities is educational inequity. Therefore equity and justice supplement each other.

Classroom Equity and Pedagogy

Classrooms provide contexts where the concepts of educational equity and justice are put to tests. When it comes to student's performance, equity contends that different students need different things (depending on the level of each learner) in order to bring everyone to the same level. So while justice is about sameness, equity is the route to the sameness (Banks, 2001, pp. 259-260). If the two do not go hand-in-hand, the situation will be lopsided. Each is implied in the other in this exercise.

In many ways, classroom teaching is accurately associated with belief (Butcher 2002). Teaching for equity cannot be effective and complete without the teaching for social justice. Maxine Greene argues, for example, that there is no distinction between possessing justice and teaching it: "Teaching for social justice is to teach for nourishing the land. To teach for social justice is to teach for enhanced perception and imaginative explorations, for the recognition of social wrongs, of suffering, of pestilences wherever and whenever they arise. It is to find models in literature and in history of the indignant ones, the ones forever ill at ease, and the loving ones who have taken the side of the victims of pestilences, whatever their names or place of origin." Furthermore, Green contends that the purpose is "to teach so that the young may be wakened to the joy of working for transformation in the smallest places, so that they may become healers and change the world" (Maxine Greene, in Ayers et al 1998, p. 78).

The relationship between educational equity and pedagogy is dictated by how the curriculum is structured. After examining what they considered as a manifestation of inequity and injustice in our school system, some contemporary education scholars are of the view that traditional pedagogy and unequal access foster inequity and social injustice (Zinn and Macedo 2005; Loewen 1995; Levine et al 1995; Ayers et al 1998; Kozol 1991; Gay 2000; Ukpokodu 1996 & 2004; Vallance 1983; Butcher 2010; Sapon-Shevin 2003).

The unscientific guess is that careful observers of the American school system sometimes sound so similar to one another in their writings because of common experiences they have had or observed in the school system. Certain educational phenomena have taken place in several places over and over that attentive authors sound alike in their conclusions.

Reactions from Education Activists

Education activists believe that traditionalism is a hindrance to educational equity. For instance, David Levine and his colleagues devoted time to critique the traditional ways of distributing resources and instructions, theoretically and practically. In the process, they attacked new curricular reforms that accommodate what they call "antidemocratic premises" (1995, p. 49). They subsequently proffer solutions by providing concrete or specific examples of how teachers and school administrators can help to birth transformation of classroom education. Furthermore, Levine makes a case for reaching out outside the familiar cultural box to find newer concepts. He notes areas from which frantic calls for such reforms are emanating: "from the cries of battle-weary teachers, from parents whose children aren't learning, from business people worried about their future work force, from legislators alarmed at the growth of an economic underclass" (1995, p. 52).

The educational system cannot wash its hands off this "antidemocratic" problem because it has contributed tremendously in reducing the effectiveness of teachers. Many teachers are unable to do their work effectively due to the pressure on them to "cover the syllabus" in order to produce a certain level of acceptable test results. In the process, many learners fall by the wayside. To address this predicament, Levine makes its suggestion very unequivocal: "In the place of 'school as factory,' I propose 'school as an experiment in democracy'; in place of 'teacher as technician,' I propose 'teacher as artist'" (1995, p. 53). He views learning as a product of the relationship between teachers and their students. "Teaching conceived as a democratizing art subverts the mold of standardization. It celebrates diversity of style and content" (1995, p. 54; also see Zinn & Macedo 2005; Butcher 2012a; Ayers *et al* 1998; Wink 2005).

Other scholars have pointed accusing fingers at the media and the role of certain publications in perpetuating stereotypes. They therefore recommend that attention be focused squarely at the root causes or the primary media with which information is passed on to learners in America's schools. When information is repeated over and over in a particular way, in a public school textbook, it takes hold of perception and results in stereotypes and myths, especially in the understanding of school children who are naturally and easily given to literal interpretations. An example of the effects of such repetition is illustrated by the paper on "10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism".

The blame on the media has led Donaldo Macedo to express the fear that the educational system of the United States has been hijacked by the dominant culture to the extent that "schools are necessarily engaged in a pedagogy of lies that are shaped and supported by the interplay of

the media, business interests, and the academic enterprise and, believe it or not, by organized labor as well" (Zinn & Macedo 2005, p. 1).

In view of these, Jonathan Kozol (1991), Joan Wink (2005), Ayers et al (1998), and James Loewen (1995) called for a reexamination of the classroom practices of America's public schools. They feel strongly that what we currently have is a sham.

Levine laments that there are the core qualities of a desirable academic content and practices that the present one lacks. He lists the following to support his arguments in this regard: (a) student-centeredness, (b) interactiveness, (c) the encouragement of real intellectual work, (d) the welcoming of controversy, (e) the path to reform, (f) time and teaching load (1995, pp. 54-58; see also Butcher 2012b; Kozol 1991; Ayers et all 1998; Lowen 1995; Winck 2005 for additional discussion).

Perceived Educational Inequity in America

America is viewed by many as an enlightened society, probably the best in the world. And in many ways, that is a legitimate and correct perception. But that should not constitute a blinder to the necessity for reassessing or reexamining the pieces of information that are employed in classrooms to educate America's students. The reason is that in some cases, certain pieces of information perpetuate unfairness. In many ways, the manifestations of educational inequities and injustices occur in the public schools and classroom practices on purpose. For instance, certain textbooks are made to tell the story of only the "winners" at the expense of the voice of the "losers." This is not an exclusive American issue because it happens all over the world where victors tend to solely dictate the agenda, and by so doing construct a system that serves only their own purposes.

As one reflects on these anomalies, important questions loudly beg for attention: Can enlightened authorities (including Federal, State, County or District school boards) approve a book, especially a textbook that does not tell the truth on some issues? Can a school district today approve and supply such textbooks to students and why? What motivates some authors to withhold accurate information and tell half-truths in their publications?

Some of these queries gave serious concern to James W. Loewen, Bill Bigelow and their students (see Levine et al 1995, p. 61), as well as Howard Zinn and Donaldo Macedo (2005), R. Billington, C. Hill, A. Johnston II, C. Mowat, and C. Mullett (1966). Despite a five-decade debate on these issues, what we see in some of the textbooks used in our school districts appears troubling and baffling.

Some scholars have traced the historical roots of perceived imbalance in the US society and its portrayal in textbooks to the relationships that existed among different groups in the early days of the founding of America. Loewen, for example, begins by chronicling the pervading influence of the Black-White relationship in all important events of this country from inception. He uses the life of John Brown to illustrate his point about anti-racism, racial idealism or equalitarianism. He subsequently agrees with Studs Terkel that race is indeed the "American obsession" (Loewen 1995, p. 119). He alleges that almost everything in America rises and falls on Black-White relations. Kicked off originally by slavery, lots and lots of by-products have emerged across the few centuries of the American life as a nation. The "twin legacies" of slavery, Loewen writes, is "the social and economic inferiority it conferred upon Blacks and the cultural racism it instilled in Whites" (p. 119). This is clearly witnessed in the schooling arrangements where white schools are presented and treated as excellent centers of learning while urban (black, Hispanic, immigrant or minority) schools are dubbed as accesses to

mediocrities. According to Loewen, "The superstructure of racism has long outlived the social structure of slavery that generated it. The very essence of what we have inherited from slavery is the idea that it is appropriate, even "natural" for Whites to be on top, Blacks on the bottom" (1995, p. 119). In addition, he continues, "In its core our culture tells us—tells all of us, including African Americans—that Europe's domination of the world came about because Europeans were smarter. In their core, many Whites and some people of color believe this" (Loewen 1995, p. 119). He concludes that, unfortunately, many efforts have been made by some interest groups, though not openly, to keep things that way.

My response to Loewen and other education activists in this regard is that while we should not minimize the events of the past in the history of this nation, it is not accurate *today* to insist that "everything" rises and falls on the issue of race. Having arrived the United States over ten years ago, the America I read in the history books is different from the America that I am a part of today in the 21st century. Granted that some issues will linger among a few individuals that may choose to maintain an antiquated "tradition," but the fact remains that the United States of today is a country that has tried sincerely to atone for past errors. America is not perfect, and no country on earth is. But the United States leads the world in the area of positive change. Inaccuracies can be corrected but not every past inaccuracy originated in racism. So, our textbooks and teachings should be focused not on the injustices of the past but on the continuing efforts to perfect the union of a nation conceived in good faith.

Textual Controversies

American public school textbooks such as *The American Tradition; The American Adventure; Triumph of the American Nation; American History; The American Way; Land of*

Promise; Discovering American History; and *The American Pageant* were among materials that have been examined. Out of twelve books, critics point out that only five lists the terms racial prejudice and racism. Even at that, only two textbooks give very brief attention to possible causes of racism. The allegation is that the textbooks left the impression that the owners of four million slaves in America were unidentifiable. This is seen as another attempt to sweep the dirt under the carpet. Students are therefore left hanging in their understanding. This is believed to have led to two conclusions. Loewen's conclusion here is two-fold: Many White students conclude that every society on earth is racist in one way or the other; therefore, racism practiced in America was right. And many Black students conclude that all Whites must naturally be racist; therefore, it is all right to be anti-White (Loewen 1995, pp. 120-124). None of the above positions is right. But the confusion has not shown any signs of abating as our schooling and classroom practices have perpetuated such myths in subtle ways.

In the words of another historian, some of the textbooks used in our schools are "the propaganda of the winners" (Levine 1995, p. 62). If this is true, yet another writer argues, it "gives credence to Hitler's proposition that the effectiveness of any propaganda machine depends largely on big lies rather than small ones" (Zinn & Macedo 2005, p. 6). The reason this is significant is because a lie in a textbook used by students in our classrooms carries great consequences for the future of a country and for academic credibility. This is one of the most effective ways of fostering inequity and injustice. It even becomes more shocking when teachers and other members of the educated class buy into such *scholarly lies* (permit the coinage) and disseminate same uncritically. Macedo laments that this is happening among people that should know better: "These lies and contradictions are more readily embraced by the educated class to the degree that the more educated and specialized individuals become, the more interest they

have invested in the system that provides them with special privileges and rewards." This may be true with some people because even the most enlightened can sometimes be blinded by the pressure to please those that sign their checks. "For this reason," Macedo proceeds, "we often see people whose consciousness has not been totally atrophied, yet they fail, sometimes willfully, to read reality critically and they often side with hypocrisy. In most cases, these individuals begin to believe the lies, and in their roles as functionaries of the state, they propagate these same lies" (Zinn & Macedo 2005, pp. 5,6).

The problem with the above situation is that it "represents yet another example that supports the contention that more education does not necessarily entail greater ability to read reality critically and accurately." This shows that academic institutions can sometimes become indoctrination centers rather than learning centers where critical thinking is promoted: "The indoctrination that students receive in schools is acknowledged by the Trilateral Commission, whose members—among them former President Jimmy Carter—state that schools should be designed 'for imposing obedience, for blocking the possibility of independent thought, and they play an institutional role in a system of control and coercion'" (Zinn & Macedo 2005, pp. 5,6).

Bill Bigelow uses an example of a textbook that credits Christopher Columbus as the person that "discovered" America to illustrate how a word (like "discovery") can be used by conquerors to hide or slant some facts at the expense of those conquered, and promote some other ideas in the interest of the winners. The idea that a man like Columbus—who, according to Bigelow, took undue advantage of a people, massacred them, enslaved the survivors, stole their land, renamed it, erased the memories of previous activities in the area, and rewrote events to his own advantage—can be turned into a saint, a hero, and a great leader in textbooks, is something that makes a group of people angry and another group proud.

If that is true, it is what I call an excruciating pain in the conscience of history. It is a "doctrinal system" that effectively imposes "the necessary ideological blinders that makes it possible to selectively see or not see the obvious contradictions and lies" (Zinn & Macedo 2005, p. 2). And for such history to be recounted in the classroom with audacity and be given a pride of place is to add salt to injury, especially for the children of the native groups that were "victims" of Columbus' actions. Yet, that seems to be the nature of the manifestation so visible in the class materials and dominant pedagogy of contemporary education in the United States.

After Bigelow gave his students what he believed was a more accurate picture of what Christopher Columbus did in the process of "discovering" America and challenged them to take a critical look at the evidence, one of his students called Josh wrote the following: "I still wonder…If we can't believe what our first-grade teacher told us, why should we believe you? If they lied to us, why wouldn't you? If one book is wrong, why isn't another? What is your purpose in telling us about how awful Chris was? What interest do you have in telling us the truth? What is it you want from us?" (Levine 1995, p. 68).

Expectedly, not everyone will agree on the importance of confronting all perceived distortion of records. Speaking for her people, the Native Americans, Suzan Shown Harjo (president and director of the Morning Star Foundation) points out that one who benefits from the oppression of other people will not see a problem with how things are. To such a person, it is better to allow the sleeping dog to rest because waking it up means calling for a change (Levine 1995, pp. 69-73). After all, David Barsamian says, "it's the defeated who are tried and not the victors" (*The Progressive,* May 2004, p. 37, in Zinn & Macedo 2005, p. 11).

Conclusion

Educational equity can only be achieved when potholes are filled up to the level of the asphalt on the street. This includes using textbooks that contain accurate and comprehensive information. When a textbook is accused of containing *lies,* it does raise many questions. But some may see the *lies* simply as *perspectives* of writers or what appeared as *truth* to them at the time of writing. When some people write stories of events that they are a part of, they tend to emphasize and possibly elevate the roles they or their people played. This is because they believe in the superiority of the cause for which they fought. But when a historian deliberately permits false or inaccurate information in an effort to deceive readers, it undermines a book. While the debate over truths and untruths in textbooks will not go away soon, the need for equity is an urgent one. Educational equity should never be viewed as a racial or ethnic issue because there are disadvantaged individuals among every race and every ethnicity. It is our duty as educators to level the playing field for every learner in order to achieve academic excellence.

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