Poverty and Education

“Education tells us that the American Dream can work for everyone. It reassures us that we are, in fact, “created equal.” Unfortunately, education and opportunity is not divided equally. In today’s society, public education is a growing problem. What is arguably the most important aspect of society is being overlooked and sacrificed. The educational system lacks proper funding and resources in many areas. Unfortunately, the schools that are effected the most are within low-income neighborhoods. The children that grow up in poverty have a hard time overcoming it because of the flawed public educational system. Education is directly affected by poverty. Education in impoverished communities has a never-ending domino effect. The lack of supplies and resources leads to poor test scores. Poor test scores lead to less funding, which means lower salaries for teachers. Teachers then may become less enthusiastic, which impacts a child’s want to learn. With many more outside factors contributing to this cycle, education in impoverished communities is becoming worse and worse. Children attending schools in impoverished communities have difficulty achieving the same goals as those in more privileged schools. The lack of funding and resources makes it hard to supply the children with a proper education. Unequal opportunities, hardships at home, and a

decrease in teacher enthusiasm create a tough learning situation for children living in poverty.

Many low-income public schools do not have the proper funding that is needed in order to provide children with an effective education. With a lack of funding, the schools are unable to purchase the proper resources to supply their students with the best education possible. Due to the unequal spread of funds and the recent budget cuts, many impoverished public schools are forced to rid their campuses of many important aspects. Jonathan Kozol discusses the many flaws of the educational system in his novel, *The Shame of the Nation*. Within it, he states, “Libraries, once one of the glories of the New York City system, were either nonexistent or, at best, vestigial in large numbers of the elementary schools. Art and music programs had for the most part disappeared as well.”

Schools are being forced to cut subjects that are incredibly important to the well-rounded education that elementary schools are expected to give. Even a number of doctors that the students could visit have been drastically decreasing: “In 1970, when substantial numbers of white children still attended New York City’s schools, 400 doctors had been present to address the health needs of the children. By 1993, the number of doctors had been cut to 23, most of them part-time.” This drastic decrease in doctors is proof alone that impoverished schools are stripped from equal opportunities and resources compared to the students in a richer community. Children living in poverty have limited access to the help and security of facilities such as these.

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3 Kozol. Page 42.
Impoverished schools do not even have the supplies to be successful. The teachers and principles have to work twice as hard than those in privileged schools in order to receive the same resources: “Supplies were scarce. ‘Three of my classes don’t have textbooks,’ said the principle. ‘I have to fight and scratch for everything we get.’”

The basic necessities are not always met in a poor community, which makes it difficult for the students to succeed. In a perfect world, Kozol discusses how impoverished public schools would receive more funding than those that are already supplied with everything they could possibly need:

In a nation in which fairness was respected, children of the poorest and least educated mothers would receive the most extensive and most costly preschool preparation, not the least and cheapest, because children in these families need it so much more than those whose educated parents can deliver the same benefits of early learning to them in their homes.

The funding should be distributed based on how badly the school needs the money. Those that cannot afford help should not be punished. Instead, the government should supply them with equal funding so they are able to supply the students with a safe place to learn.

Some schools lack the resources to make the school into a comfortable learning environment. Impoverished communities tend to have overcrowded schools and not enough resources to supply the students with what they really need. Kozol states, “In another elementary school, which had been built to hold 1,000 children but was packed to bursting with some 1,500 boys and girls, the principal poured out his feelings to me in a room in which a plastic garbage bag had been attached somehow to cover part of the

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4 Kozol. Page 143.
5 Kozol. Page 54.
Impoverished schools do not have the ability to tend to the needs of their students when the school is overpopulated. Classes like the ones Kozol discusses about have around thirty students in each classroom: “‘If we had the money, ideal class size for these kids would be 15 to 20,’ said a teacher.” Schools in low-income neighborhoods cannot focus on thirty students at once. This overcrowding does not give students the opportunity to be treated as an individual, and receive the specific attention that they need. Many would like to believe that this individual attention can be acquired through life at home; unfortunately, this is not always the case.

Not only is the lack of funding hurting the amount of proper education that children living in poverty should receive, but life at home also effects a child’s education. As the quote at the beginning mentioned, education supposedly is the same for everyone and that “‘the path to achievement lies through individual effort and hard work, not blind luck or birth.’” Although that may be how many people view education, they have no idea what is going on in the homes within impoverished communities. Many parents living in poverty work throughout the day; sometimes holding two or three jobs at a time. They are not always home to help their children with their homework, or anything else they may need to do for school. It is common that the students going to impoverished schools do not even have parents to look out for them: “‘Many [children] are in foster care—their parents died from AIDS or are in jail.’” It is difficult to break the cycle of poverty when the students are not given the chance. They have no secure role models aside from their teachers, who often are not entirely thrilled to be there. Often times,

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6 Kozol. Page 41.
7 Kozol. Page 144.
9 Kozol. Page 144.
parents living in poverty are not well educated either, so it is difficult for their children to see the significance of an education. There is a lack of support at the home usually because the families have other important issues on their mind, like paying rent or buying food. Parents may not be able to afford childcare or preschool programs, which unfortunately leaves their child falling behind once kindergarten begins. In one of the schools in New York that Kozol visits, he states, “Thousands of children who receive no preschool opportunity at all.”\(^\text{10}\) For many children, preschool is a significant portion of their young lives and helps them succeed in the higher grades. A child’s home life in poverty restricts children from living up to their full educational potential and they will remain stuck in the continuing cycle of poverty. After being home in an unsupportive environment, it is disheartening to have these children attend schools in which the teachers have little to no desire to be there.

Today, we are lacking in the amount of teachers that actually want to teach. In order for teachers to be successful, they need to believe that they have the ability to make a difference in a child’s life. In Mike Rose’s article, *I Just Wanna Be Average*, the author talks to some of the students who live in impoverished communities and do not have the same opportunities that other children may have. One student says, “Mostly teachers had no idea how to engage the imaginations of us kids who were scuttling along the bottom of the pond.”\(^\text{11}\) A good teacher needs to be open and aware of what is going on in the community that they are teaching in. It is important that they are supportive and enthusiastic about coming to work each day because if they students think that the teacher does not want to be there, they will not want to be there either. John Taylor Gatto

\(^{10}\) Kozol. Page 50.

\(^{11}\) Rose, Mike. *Rereading America*. “I Just Wanna Be Average.” Page 160.
discusses the effect that “bored” teachers have on their students in his article Against School. He states, “They [the students] said teachers didn’t seem to know much about their subjects and clearly weren’t interested in learning more. And the kids were right: their teachers were every bit as bored as they were.” It is difficult for kids to find the motivation to learn when the people who are supposed to be guiding them are unmotivated to teach.

Children living in poverty have an extremely difficult time receiving a proper education. So many different aspects of an impoverished community influence the public educational system. The lack of supplies restricts children from reaching their full potential. There is not enough funding to support a reasonable amount of students, so when overcrowding is apparent, it is nearly impossible to give children the individual attention that is so crucial in the beginning grades. This individual attention is not even available at the homes of the students. Parents are often too busy, working, or not available by any means to give their children help with homework or a decent childhood. The problems at home do not always go away when the child returns to school to a teacher that would rather be any place else. Public education in impoverished communities is an issue that can no longer be ignored. Funding needs to be distributed equally throughout the state in order to give children living in poverty a decent chance to live a better life. We are losing great minds every day because this problem is not being addressed.

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