The evolution of education has not been televised: Educational inequalities and the impact of change

Andree Robinson-Neal, Azusa Pacific University
THE EVOLUTION OF EDUCATION HAS NOT BEEN TELEVISIONED: 
Educational Inequalities and the Impact of Change

Andree Robinson-Neal
Fielding Graduate University
U. S. A.

ABSTRACT: The historical evolution of education and impact of its inequalities have not been televised. The world is more often exposed to “overcomology” — society’s assertion that oppressed peoples or so-called minorities have overcome past injustices and are now able to access the same educational opportunities as so-called majority groups. This paper provides a Gil Scott-Heron-esque review of the effects of inequalities on this key social institution.

Introduction

In 1970, Gil Scott-Heron released The Revolution Will Not Be Televised, an exposition on the hypocrisy of the modern world in which social change will occur without announcement by media that exist to disguise inequalities. The evolution of educational systems and the impact of their innate inequalities in this same light have also not been televised. Rather, the public is more often exposed to an ideology of “educational overcomology”1 — dominant society’s assertion that oppressed peoples, so-called minority groups, have overcome past injustices and are now able to access the same educational opportunities as so-called majority groups. This paper provides a Heron-esque review of the effects of inequalities in primary education and ultimately higher education.

Oral Education

You will no longer be able to tell the story, brother.
You will not be honored or revered because the evolution of education will not be televised.

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Each culture has a history of oral literature; the spoken word serves as the platform upon which a particular culture’s past is built. Traditionally an individual is chosen to serve as the information-holder; storytellers such as the West African griot, the Irish seanachai, and the Japanese gaito kamishibaiya kept the history, provided commentary at the campfire when questions about the history were asked, and passed the history down to the next generation. Griots are still an integral part of West African culture; these walking history books sometimes are holders of a thousand years of information, which is usually shared in song (Harp of History, 2004). Ireland holds festivals where seanachais are featured. Early in the country’s history these storytellers traveled to different villages to share folklore; they became holders of the history, especially after the systematic suppression of the Gaelic tradition (Seanachai, n. d.). While the tradition of storytelling has existed for centuries in Japan, kamishibai, or paper drama, made a resurgence during the Great Depression of the 1920s; unemployed men were able to find work as storytellers, or gato kamishibaiya (Sheppard, 2004).

Oral literature was also important to African and American Native slaves; both groups experienced brutal treatment and oppression designed not only to promote servitude but to eliminate dependence on original languages. The loss of oral history has possibly led to the development of what Dunbar-Ortiz (2003) calls “the origin myth,” which can be defined as how a people reinvent their history to explain their position in society. She further suggests that the United States origin myth diminishes the position of American Natives, Blacks, and other immigrants and promotes the importance of European settlers; the institution of slavery and its practices led to the devaluation of the slave’s origin and contribution to the development of the country, replacing it with a new history based in part on actions attributed to the “master” race. Once slavery was abolished, provisions were made for the education of freed slaves, who by 1865 were predominantly Black. However, original languages and oral histories had for most of these individuals been lost; by the start of the desegregation process in the United States, there was an acceptance of the origin myth and an unwilling acceptance of these new “citizens” (Martinez, 1996, para. 24).

The Power of Desegregation?

The evolution of education will not be televised.
The evolution of education will not be brought to you by Brown or the Board of Education.

Current school desegregation discussions often involve an element of educational overcomology; there is a sense of wanting to make everyone at ease through talk centering on progress and how much improved the educational climate has become. However, desegregation was a source of discomfort to both persons of color and members of the so-called majority group.

During the Civil Rights Movement, as schools were desegregated, neither Whites nor Blacks were particularly comfortable going to the same educational institutions; many Whites were not supportive of Black access to education while

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many Blacks did not trust Whites to provide equal education. Today, we are not necessarily surprised to see racially diverse groups of children riding a bus to the same elementary school or instructors from diverse racial backgrounds standing at the front of a high school or university classroom. Our private educational institutions have also to some extent been desegregated; freedom to choose a school dictates that if we can pay the tuition, our children can attend.

The history is complex: on the one hand desegregation led to the loss of large numbers of Black teachers and administrators; teachers and administrators who stood up for equal educational rights were often threatened with violence or at minimum the loss of employment, and their departure left vacancies which, when filled with White teachers, was a way that White America showed that schools were being “mixed” or desegregated. As people of color stopped teaching and managing the previously all-Black schools, students of color were no longer able to culturally relate to these new and different instructors and administrators, which led to the loss of some cultural traditions (Lowe, 2004). On the other hand, narratives of educational overcomology suggest that we are all much better off than we were in the days before desegregation. The very existence of mixed-race classroom populations, diverse teaching and administrative staff populations, and freedom of educational choice for people of all races “proves” that the world of education has changed for the better for everyone. Educational overcomology overlooks the importance and value of social justice in the evolution of education; the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has been described as a twenty-first century attempt to address educational inequality. However, NCLB is structured in ways that will hurt poor students and students of color. Its over-reliance on high-stakes testing ignores educational research that has found those tests to be inaccurate assessments of student learning in general, and inaccurate in particular, when it comes to measuring the achievement of non-white and low-income students. NCLB’s sanctions for low-performing schools serve to further impoverish already poor schools by forcing them to divert district dollars out of the classroom and put them into transportation and tutoring. Meanwhile NCLB threatens whole-school restructuring under the guidance of private companies if schools can’t meet their Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals in high-stakes test scores. NCLB’s robot-like refrain of “test and penalize” does not represent a policy that engenders educational equality (Au, 2004).

The public face of American educational overcomology conveys to people of color, “Be of good cheer; you have overcome oppression! You can go to school and learn like everyone else and if you don’t, it is no one’s fault but your own. The test scores say so.” Overcomology has a private face as well, which communicates that “we, the members of the educational privileged (i.e. those of
us who benefit the most from choice, such as participants in ultra-private institutions and exclusive homeschooling organizations), are able to be advocates for educational freedom because we are not limited by history or income.\textsuperscript{3}

Educational inequality is not exclusively a U.S. phenomenon.

- The Bantu Education Act of 1952 limited education access for persons of color in South Africa. The end of apartheid in 1994 did little to change practice; people of color are still less economically stable than most of the nation’s Whites and are therefore statistically less able to afford to pay for a higher quality of education (Ocampo, 2004).

- Over 40 percent of all Australians were either born somewhere else or have at least one parent who was born overseas; over 190 languages are spoken on the continent. One of the groups to experience issues of oppression has been the indigenous peoples; despite the passing of the 1967 Constitutional Referendum on Aboriginal Rights which gave these peoples the right to vote and to have a voice in their own educational policies and practices, there is still a disparity between their quality of education and that of white Australians. (International Anti-Racism Approaches, n.d.).

- Black, Natali, and Skinner (2005) found that inequality is an international phenomenon and occurs often for migrant families\textsuperscript{4}.

### Does Educational Oppression Really Exist?

The evolution of education will not be televised.  
The evolution of education will not be brought to you  
by Public Broadcasting, Blues Clues, or Davey and Goliath.  
The evolution of education may not make you book-smart  
but it will give you knowledge, because the evolution of education will not be televised.

Educational inequalities based on class differences as well as socioeconomic and racial differences are intrinsically issues of social justice.

Undoing racism is a macro concept aimed at changing old organizations and creating new organizations and systems which impact people and lead toward transformation. This differs from concepts which focus only on descriptors of race and /or racial attitudes or perceptions which lead to a focus on individual change. (Cramer & McElveen, 2003)

Social justice can be defined as a perspective of society that recognizes there are differences between persons; that the differences can be ethnic, racial,
sexual, age-related, ability-related, language-related, or nationality-related; and that these differences can lead to power inequalities (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2002). Students at all stages of learning, as well as instructors, bring their personal experiences into the classroom. It can be difficult for a student who is privileged and healthy to fully comprehend the experience of a student who has physical limitations or is coming from a financially distressed home. Instructors bring biases, opinions, and feelings into the classroom; they are impacting their students while being impacted by their students. These opinions and biases can be internalized. Bryant, Bryant, and Crumel (2006) suggest that internalized oppression affect four distinct attitudes:

1. attitudes toward self
2. attitudes toward others in your particular “category” (i.e. racial, national, sexual group)
3. attitudes toward those in other “categories”
4. attitudes toward the so-called majority (or group that is currently perceived as not oppressed)

An increase in the emphasis on multiculturalism in in-service and teacher training programs can help move national and international educational systems closer to an equitable level by helping instructors to recognize their own biases and how those biases translate into classroom practice. Curricula can directly provide instruction about differences (in class, race, sex, age, nationality, religious practice, and so forth) so that students can understand, relate to, and critically analyze in order to add more perspective knowledge to the paradigm (National Association of Multicultural Education, 2003).

Educational Inequality in Higher Education

The evolution of education will not be right back after a message about gaps in primary education, Scholastic Assessment Tests (SATs), or first-year cohorts. The evolution of education will not go easier with remedial education. The evolution of education will not be televised.

The term “underrepresented minority groups” is used to describe Blacks, Alaskan and American Natives, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans (McBay, 2003). Members of these groups have been “underrepresented” at all educational stages. While more and more students of color are enrolling at colleges and universities, they often need pre-college level coursework in English and mathematics because of entrance examination scores that show weaknesses in these areas. As these students do their part to improve their educational standing by enrolling in colleges and universities in larger numbers, remaining in classes and graduating, attending in continuing education and graduate programs, and entering careers considered non-traditional for these groups, administrators must strive for educational equity by fighting re-segregation.
(McBay, 2003, p. 79). Re-segregation is not just a racial issue and can be viewed in different ways:

- Privileged families can afford to have their children educated at private institutions; schools such as Harvard University have tried to fight the re-segregation trend by offering full scholarships to so-called minority students or underprivileged students.

- There are often communities who self-segregate (the “Little Italy” or “Chinatown” communities in some large cities, for example). Occasionally there is self-segregation on college campuses (i.e., students with similar cultural backgrounds sit together in the student union).

- Neighborhood schools can fuel re-segregation efforts (Lane, 2004)

Educational imbalances occur with re-segregation; a study of schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, suggests that “an unequal educational system—one based on wealth and cutting across racial lines…[creates] a skills gap between white and minority students” (Drew, 2004).

Disparities in educational achievement are a national issue; studies of graduate program enrollment in the United States indicate that there is an “us versus them” mentality when it comes to who gains admission and how. Many graduate schools, specifically those that offer science or technical degree programs, have seen a progressively larger population of international or foreign-born students enrolling and a progressively smaller US-born “minority” (Black and Hispanic) enrollment. Hamilton (2005) suggests that while the issue of educational injustice should be addressed globally, the United States in particular must substantively invest in its so-called minority students so as to remain economically competitive. Since there remains a lack of equal access to programs and scholarship opportunities for Black and Hispanic students at numerous higher learning institutions in the United States, researchers, federal legislators, and state officials have been urged to lobby for broad-stroke changes in higher education, including alternate assessments in admissions-testing; stronger enrollment management programs that support the success and retention of so-called minority students; and improved recruitment and support efforts for persons of color in student, staff, faculty, and administrative areas (Healy, 1995).

Community colleges tend to attract more students of color and more students from lower socioeconomic households; this attraction could be due to the variety of student support programs, workplace training programs, and more flexible course schedules. It appears that community colleges provide a possible avenue for educationally oppressed populations to improve their chances for economic advancement (Ayers, 2005). Some inequality issues are evident in community college systems, including the difficulty some economically disadvantaged
community college students have in transferring to four-year colleges or universities; financial aid restrictions and requirements make transfer and degree completion a cumbersome process (Boswell, 2004). It is interesting to note that current studies on transferability do not find significant differences across race and sex; Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) found that economic class has the biggest impact on transferability.

**Conclusion**

*The evolution of education will not be televised.*

*The evolution of education will not be a repeat of past practice, brother; The evolution of education must be live.*

We have reviewed how inequality has impacted educational access; the following points provide some suggestions as to how colleges and universities can effect change.

- Use student discourse in the evaluation process to determine the impact of diversity programs and courses (Roper, 2004); student comments can help the institution better understand student perspectives and can help guide the institution in its development of a comprehensive diversity statement for strategic planning purposes.

- Support students' academic and social advancement by maintaining desegregated campuses (Gurin, P., Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, G., 2002). As noted earlier, skills gaps may occur in re-segregated environments; institutions that strive to maintain equal opportunities for entry, such as more flexibility in requirements (i.e., test scores, transferability, etc.), provide more diverse campuses.

- Improve and make mandatory on-campus occupational counseling, such as that offered through Title III programming, in order to help disadvantaged, international, and foreign language students connect current and future educational pursuits to economic success (Huang & Cervero, 1992).

- Staff, faculty, and administrators must adjust current practice to take into account not only student outcomes such as grades and post-graduation employment but the social impact on students based on cultural standards as well (Ambler, 2005). It is important for colleges and universities to recognize that students are bringing their cultural norms, which may differ from the instructor's or institution's culture, into the classroom and that they may react and interact based on their norms.
Endnotes

1. “Overcomology” is a term created by the author; it is used to characterize the notion that oppressed peoples, so-called minorities, or underrepresented groups have prevailed (or “overcome”), despite potentially overwhelming circumstances.

2. In the United States the persons of color were usually Black (those with African ancestry) and the members of the so-called majority were White, so for the purposes of this discussion let us use these terms to refer to the two groups. It must further be recognized that such treatment has occurred in other countries as well, and around the world other groups—including Asian people, Latino/a populations, and indigenous peoples—have experienced varying levels of acceptance into mainstream society.

3. Read Gryphon & Meyer’s 2003 article for more about the impact of school choice and Orfield & Lee’s 2005 report for Harvard University’s Civil Rights Project for more about the impact of “poverty schools.”

4. Migrant families are defined as those who move from one location to another, seeking better opportunities.

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Mrs. Andree’ Robinson-Neal, Manager of Institutional Research, Planning, and Development in Salem Community College, New Jersey, is currently a doctoral student in Fielding Graduate University’s Educational Leadership & Change Program. (Contact this author at arobinson.neal@gmail.com; contact the editors of EMME at emme@eastern.edu.)

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