

AMERICAN URBAN EDUCATION AND CHINESE RURAL EDUCATION: COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS

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A United Nations Children's Fund (1999) report concluded that "Education—more than any other single initiative—has the capacity to foster development, awaken talents, empower people, and protect their rights." Yet, in the decade since that report, children in many parts of the world are still not receiving an adequate education.

Education in urban settings in the United States presents a variety of challenges. The single biggest problem in American cities is that of poverty. Other challenges are due to ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity; scarce and inadequate resources; high school drop-out rates, and the challenge of recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers. Interestingly, education in rural China presents very similar challenges. It is the intent of this paper to examine some of the similarities and differences in American urban education and Chinese rural education.

Education in America's Cities

In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court declared segregated public schools unconstitutional. The ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* set public education on a course toward equality. Yet, more than five decades later, schools are not equal. Children, many if not most of whom are ethnic minorities, living in America's inner cities suffer disproportionately from a failing education system, with black and Hispanic students dropping out of public high schools at much higher rates than whites. Rothstein (1993, p xi) noted that "Overcrowded, underfunded, dysfunctional schools are most often seen in urban concentrations. Their size and diverse populations appear to be dictated by crowds of immigrants and the urban poor." Of course, all of these elements can be found in schools that are located in suburban and rural areas, however, the fact that schools in cities are all too often marked by these signs of decay makes such features defining characteristics of urban schools.

Many observers link the low academic performance of urban youth to both home and school environments that do not foster educational and economic success. In addition, many educators report on the growing challenges of educating urban youth who are increasingly faced with problems such as poverty, limited English proficiency, family instability, and poor

health. The conditions in many urban schools leave many students there floundering in decaying, violent environments with poor resources, teachers, and curricula, and with limited opportunities (NCES, n.d.).

Urban Poverty

Among the challenges faced by urban schools are those associated with, and a result of, insidious poverty. David Berliner, in describing its effects, went so far as to call poverty the 600 lb. gorilla in our classroom. The challenges associated with urban poverty include overcrowded classrooms, decaying physical plants, inadequate resources, under-qualified teachers, and a climate of failure. Urban children were more than twice as likely to be living in poverty, than were children living in suburban locations (30 percent compared with 13 percent in 1990). Meanwhile, 22 percent of rural children were considered to be living in poverty in 1990 (NCES, n.d.).

Likewise, urban students were more likely than suburban or rural students to receive free or reduced price lunch (38 percent compared with 16 and 28 percent, respectively). This leads to the obvious conclusion that urban children were more likely to be attending schools with high concentrations of low-income students. Forty percent of urban students attended these high-poverty schools (defined as schools with more than 40 percent of students receiving free or reduced price lunch), whereas 10 percent of suburban students and 25 percent of rural students attended high-poverty schools (NCES, n.d.). There is ample research that suggests that a high concentration of low income students in a school is related to significantly lower academic student performance (Mulvaney, Skolnik, Chung, & Iacovelli 2005).

Social factors associated with poverty create challenges for urban educators, but these factors can, in turn, lead to educational practices that are ill suited to educational achievement. In the introduction to his book, Stanley Rothstein (1993, pp. xii - xiii) observes.

Within urban schools themselves one finds two activities that never vary: an overly corrective pedagogy of inculcation and a bureaucratic impersonality that often deadens the curiosities of inquiring minds. Urban schools are involved in the production of replacement workers; their educational efforts are directed at reproducing the social relations of educational and economic production. They are responsible for sorting out and evaluating the merit of students and assigning them to various tracks in the educational system and, later, in the work force.

These activities can be seen more clearly in inner-city schools, where children attend state institutions that have a history and a culture of failure. But they are also found in the outer rings of the urban setting and in the suburbs, where urbanism has made significant inroads. In all of these state schools there are a similar organizational ethos and structure: bureaucratic and hierarchical lines of communication facilitate the reproductive functions of schooling in mass society. Urban schools bring together licensed teachers and educational buildings that belong to the state. Some of these schools are more successful than others, based on the class position of children who attend them. The more successful schools cater to middle-class students and organize themselves around college-bound curricula and standards of discipline. But urban schools are characterized by educational practices that are much less successful than their suburban counterparts: their locations in inner cities cause them to reflect some of the worst aspects of urban blight as it is developing in the United States at the end of the twentieth century.

The consequences of the conditions and practices in America's inner-city schools are not surprising. One of these consequences is the rate of graduation from high school. Urban schools are noted for significantly lower graduation rates, often due to higher drop-out rates, than suburban and rural schools.

Urban High School Graduation Rates

During the beginning of the twentieth century, each generation of Americans was more likely to graduate from high school than the preceding one. That trend seems to have been reversed.

According to Heckman & LaFontaine (2007 and 2008), the U.S. high school graduation rate peaked at around 80 percent in the late 1960s and, since then, it has declined by 4-5 percentage points. The decline in high school graduation rates is even more pronounced among ethnic minorities in large cities. About 65 percent of African-Americans and Hispanics leave school with a high school diploma.

An organization founded by retired Army General and former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, *America's Promise Alliance*, recently issued a report entitled "Cities in Crisis" (Swanson, 2008). In that report, they concluded that

Graduating from high school in the America's largest cities amounts, essentially, to a coin toss. Only about one-half (52 percent) of students in the principal

school systems of the 50 largest cities complete high school with a diploma. That rate is well below the national graduation rate of 70 percent. (Swanson, 2008, p. 8)

These low high school graduation rates have significant life consequences for dropouts. Adults without a high school diploma have substantially lower income prospects than adults who have graduated from high school. In fact, the wages of high school dropouts have declined since the early 1970s while those of more skilled workers have risen markedly (Autor, Katz, & Kearney, 2005).

The tragic irony is that, during a period when the financial rewards for being highly skilled have increased, the high school dropout rate in America is also increasing, especially among the urban poor. The result is greater social and economic polarization. While a higher proportion of American youth are going to college and graduating than ever before, at the same time, proportionately more are failing to complete high school.

Academic Achievement in American Urban Schools

Ample evidence indicates that, in many cases, America's public schools are not adequately serving their students. In 1988, only five percent of 17-year-old high school students in 1988 could read well enough to understand and use information found in technical materials, literary essays, historical documents, and college-level texts. This percentage has been falling since 1971 (Hood, 1993).

Since the passage of *No Child Left Behind*, there has been an increased emphasis on standardized testing as the basis for comparison among individuals and schools. As is, no doubt, the case in most countries, comparing scores on standardized tests reveals that some American students score very high, while other students score much lower. In fact, there is a significant and identifiable segment of the student population that scores well below comparable students from other industrialized countries.

According to McWayne, Fantuzzo, & McDermott (2004), living in a city increases the risk of educational failure for low-income children. Children living in poverty in urban centers demonstrate higher rates of school failure than poor children living in other settings. This risk for school failure can lead, as noted earlier, to a lower likelihood of completing high school.

Obviously, all urban school children, even those living in poverty, are not alike. There are high and low achievers in all schools, regardless of the location. However, the basis for comparison, despite standardized testing, is different. High achieving students in poor urban schools measure themselves against a much lower baseline than their counterparts in suburban or rural schools. This may account for some of the differences in relative achievement between urban and suburban school students, when poverty is controlled.

There are other factors that contribute to school success, or failure. For example, children who start their education well before their first day in kindergarten have a significant advantage over those children who come to kindergarten with no experience in a structured learning environment. McWayne, Fantuzzo, & McDermott (2004) point out that preschool classroom quality and neighborhood characteristics are two factors that are associated with educational attainment. Students who experience quality early childhood education adjust more readily and more smoothly into the school environment. Similarly, Campbell, Pungello, Miller-Johnson, Burchinal, & Ramey (2001) reported that early intervention programs produced significant increases in IQ for poor, minority children, and that those IQ gains were evident in later reading and mathematics achievement scores.

Although the low academic performance in urban schools can be traced to the effects of poverty, it is not just family poverty that produces low academic achievement in American urban schools. Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn (2003) point out that neighborhood poverty, by itself, is thought to have a harmful effect on child development, particularly in large urban centers. It is not just the dire circumstances of the individual poor family that hinders children's academic progress. There are societal influences in poor urban areas that negatively affect the performance of children in these communities. Among the factors that have been identified (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003) are the rate of male unemployment, the concentration of affluence, and the racial composition of communities. When these factors are considered, indications are that a student from a neighborhood with these attributes will be at risk for school failure. The influence of these factors on school performance is not direct, but rather the harmful consequences of living in a poor urban neighborhood, with high male unemployment result in lower performances by many urban pupils.

Teacher Shortages in American Urban Schools

The shortage of competent, caring professionals who see themselves as urban educators has long been recognized as a problem (Leland & Harste, 2005). In a recent speech to the Hispanic American Chamber of Commerce, President Barack Obama referred to this problem when he stated:

America's future depends on its teachers. And so today, I'm calling on a new generation of Americans to step forward and serve our country in our classrooms. If you want to make a difference in the life of our nation, if you want to make the most of your talents and dedication, if you want to make your mark with a legacy that will endure -- then join the teaching profession. America needs you. We need you in our suburbs. We need you in our small towns. We especially need you in our inner cities (Obama, 2009).

Several national studies have shown that minority and poor children are the more likely than their white counterparts to be taught by under-qualified teachers (Berry, 2001; Haycock, 2000). This shortage of qualified teachers is due to several factors.

One cause of the shortage of qualified teachers in American cities stems from the fact that the majority of undergraduate teacher education students is white, from middle class families, and reside in suburban or small town/rural areas. Many universities note that the majority of these teacher education candidates come into their teacher preparation program with the expectation that they would do their fieldwork and student teaching in communities that were similar to the ones from which they came (Leland & Harste, 2005). Thus, a large proportion of teacher education students are predisposed to seek experiences and employment outside of large urban centers.

Many teachers will resist working in urban schools, despite the fact that there are often better employment prospects there. In some suburban school districts it is not uncommon to have a thousand applicants for every one teaching position that opens each year. Brown (2002) speculates that many pre-service teachers avoid applying for urban teaching positions due to unfounded fears about children, adolescents, and the families that live in cities.

Teacher supply is not evenly distributed across schools, districts, regions, and subject, or grade assignments. For example, a suburban district may have a surplus of teachers while its nearby urban neighbor may struggle to fill job openings. Similarly, in the same district, a school with a good reputation may draw hundreds of applications for one position while a school identified as "failing" may generate little interest among teacher candidates. Therefore, while some communities or regions of the country experience frequent teacher shortages, others operate with relatively full staffing and without the difficulties and added expenses associated with chronic teacher shortages (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, (2005).

Regardless of the reason, it is clear that the majority of new teachers seek employment in settings other than large, urban centers.

A second factor contributing to the shortage of qualified teachers in urban centers is the high turnover rate among teachers who initially choose to teach in cities. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), at the end of the 2003-2004 school year, 17 percent of the elementary and secondary teacher workforce (or 621,000 teachers) left the public and private schools where they had been teaching. The turnover rate for high-poverty schools was greater than for low-poverty schools during this period (21 vs. 14 percent). A decade ago Crosby noted that

Teacher turnover rate in the urban schools is much higher than in the suburban schools. ... The result is that urban schools, especially those in the inner cities, are often staffed by newly hired or uncertified teachers. These teachers, who were trained to teach students from middle class families and who often come from middle class families themselves, now find themselves engulfed by minority students, immigrants, and other students from low income families - students whose values and experiences are very different from their own. Teacher training institutions have not placed sufficient emphasis on preparing new teachers to work in schools that serve minority students. (Crosby, 1999, p. 302)

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), it is estimated that 10% of teachers leave during their first year of employment and another 25%-50% resign during their first three years of teaching.

Clearly, some attrition is inevitable. Teachers retire, leave for a number of personal reasons, and a few are dismissed from their jobs. However, nearly half of all teachers who enter the teaching profession, leave it within five years, and the schools most significantly affected by this high attrition are those in high-poverty or high-minority communities. Students in such schools are in desperate need of expert, high-quality teachers if there is to be any hope of improving academic achievement. Yet urban schools are almost twice as likely as suburban and rural schools to have beginning, and therefore inexperienced, teachers (Alliance for Excellence of Education, 2005).

A reasonable question to ask is: why do teachers leave the profession that they have worked so hard to enter? Among the reasons that teachers cite are a lack of support and poor working conditions.

Johnson, Kardos, Kauffman, Liu, and Donaldson (2004) compared the experiences of teachers working in low-income schools with those working in high-income schools. They concluded that teachers working in low-income schools “receive significant less assistance in the key areas of hiring, mentoring, and curriculum” than their colleagues working in the high-income schools and referred to this disparity as the “support gap” (p.2). In another study, Strunk, & Robinson (2006) used a theoretical framework based on occupational wage theory and social identity theory. They found that teachers are more likely to leave if (1) they are specialized instructors (especially in a foreign language); (2) they have a probationary teaching certificate; (3) they are less experienced; (4) the racial composition of the students is heavily minority; (5) the students racial composition is less matched to their own race/ethnicity; and, for teachers of some races, (6) the teaching staff’s racial composition is more matched to their own race/ethnicity.

In a study that examined the phenomenon of attrition among urban teachers, Alkins, Banks-Santili, Guttenberg, & Kamii (2006) suggested that urban teachers’ reasons for leaving the profession early include poor working conditions, increased pressure to conform to federal and state mandates, lack of professional work environment, and inadequate school-based and district-based support. These authors also suggest that we should examine more closely the role that higher education can play in providing beginning teachers with the tools, skills, and abilities to be more successful in urban settings. This might include a critical examination of how issues of race, socioeconomic status, language, and culture are embedded in one’s teaching philosophy and, as a result can affect virtually every decision that a teacher makes.

What Can Be Done to Address the Challenges of Urban Schools?

The challenges faced by schools in America’s cities are not just school problems. These problems are not simply those of too few teachers, under-qualified teachers, large classes, or inadequate resources. Those factors are indeed problems, but unquestionably, there is more to the problem both in and out of the schools. The first step must be to acknowledge that we have problems within our society and begin to construct ways to fix our communities and all of our institutions, including our educational structures. Such changes will help all school children, and especially those in urban settings. We need the support and commitment of our entire society, including those affiliated with and served by poor urban schools and those in higher performing schools in suburban communities, if we are serious about addressing these

problems. Only then will we be able to begin to repair the gap in academic achievement and in life outcomes that exists between students from urban schools and those students outside of our inner cities.

Education in Rural China

China educates the world's largest school population, some 300 million children. Educational policies are formulated by the Ministry of Education of the central government, and implemented in provinces, cities, towns, and villages. Educational reform, instituted after 1976, invigorated education, especially in urban centers. But in less-developed rural areas, many schools still fail to meet national standards for basic facilities. Meanwhile, in the United States, educators at the national, state, and local level struggle to make sure that no child is left behind.

As in many American urban schools, the pressures on rural children in China to leave school are significant. There is a large gap between education and employment opportunities—when there are few jobs requiring education, there is less incentive to get an education. In addition, both in China and in the US, a significantly large portion of the financial burden for supporting schools falls to the local level, where financial resources are often very limited.

Many doors remain unopened to poor, rural children in China, as they do to poor, urban children in America.

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