TEACHER SYMPOSIUM

The Politics and Pedagogy of Economic Inequality

Introduction

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> "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education." — Thomas Jefferson (1820/2009, 162)

Education has long been viewed as essential for democracy. Indeed, American public education was founded on the ideal of a literate citizenry prepared to participate in vital discussions and democratic deliberation. If today's youth are to become participants in political decision making, schools must ensure that they are sufficiently well-informed to do so effectively. Basic skills such as literacy and numeracy are, perhaps, the first step towards that goal. But although these skills may be important prerequisites for civic and political participation, they are not enough. An education that fosters the kind of citizen engagement that a well-functioning democracy requires includes not only minimal skills but also familiarity with democratic processes and institutions. It also nurtures a willingness and capacity to critically engage multiple perspectives around important social and political issues.

One such issue—and the focus of this symposium—is economic inequality and its emergence as a central concern in American social, political, and economic life. Scholars from a broad array of disciplines have already produced an impressive body of work that examines the scope, causes, and consequences of economic inequality, and some of this work also suggests possible remedies (Carter and Reardon 2014; Duncan and Murnane 2011; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012; Stiglitz 2012; 2015). Moreover, inequality has become a major topic of discussion and debate not only for researchers and theorists but also for the broader public. Publications as diverse as the *New York Times* and *Science* have run series or created special issues examining inequality. Questions about the growing gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots" have figured prominently in local, state, and national elections. And even as the din of popular media turns the public gaze towards political spectacle, the topic of growing economic inequality continues to make its way into the mainstream through documentaries, viral videos, comedic television, and popular music.[1]

At the same time that economic inequality has become a topic of scholarly study, public conversation, and political debate, little is known about how often these conversations are taking place among students and teachers in American schools. Yet the frequency and quality of such conversations are consequential both for individual students and for the broader polity. Young people are not only objects of economic and social forces; they also are potential civic agents. As adults, they will be called on to make social policy choices about taxation and the distribution of public resources, and to weigh in on a host of issues that shape and are shaped by economic inequality. Their understanding is essential for informed civic engagement—including participation in public debates, electoral politics, policy formation, and community mobilization. Despite the clear significance of these issues, however, little attention has been focused on whether or how schools address economic inequality as a subject of study.

THE CASE FOR ATTENDING TO ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Recent scholarship on economic inequality has highlighted its profound magnitude, its growth, and, of particular relevance for this symposium, its deleterious effects on many ideals associated with the way a democratic society should function. First, economic inequality in the United States has risen dramatically over recent decades (Saez 2016; Credit Suisse 2014). The top 1% now garners more than a fifth of all income, controls more than a third of the nation's wealth, and holds roughly half of all investment capital. Although this represents the highest level of inequality since the Great Depression, it tells only part of the story. If we look at the top 0.1%, we find that their combined wealth is now equal to the combined wealth of the bottom 90% of the country (Saez and Zucman 2014). In fact, a recent Oxfam study found that the eight wealthiest people in the world, six of whom are American, own as much combined wealth as the poorest half of the planet (Hardoon 2017). Meanwhile, more than 43 million

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Americans live below the poverty line (Kotler 2015). Three and a half million Americans (including more than two million children) are homeless each year (Caliendo 2015). Nearly half of American households are "liquid asset poor," meaning they lack the money to live for three months if their main source of income were lost (Brooks et al. 2014).

When considered one by one, each category of negative impact described above can be ruinous to individuals, families, and broader ideals of American democracy. Yet for those most affected by economic inequality, these impacts frequently combine: poverty is tied to inadequate access to health care; inadequate health care is tied to an inability to earn a livable wage which both limits access to food and shelter and diminishes political voice and access to power; at the same time, inadequate political voice leads to diminishing access to basic human services such as healthcare, food, and shelter. If one is poor, it is that much more difficult to secure a top-quality education at the same time that lack of access to education is linked to poverty, diminished political voice, adverse health outcomes, and so on (Orr and Rogers 2010).

A 2004 report from the APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy found that society's most privileged members participated in the political process more than other citizens and that public officials were far more responsive to the affluent than to average citizens.

Despite these disturbing statistics, the impact of inequality is not solely economic. For example, income inequality has a profound impact on political participation and power (Stigletz 2012; Bartels 2008). A 2004 report from the APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy found that society's most privileged members participated in the political process more than other citizens and that public officials were far more responsive to the affluent than to average citizens. Low- and moderate-income citizens, the report concluded, "speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government, while the advantaged roar with the clarity and consistency that policymakers readily heed" (1).

More recently, Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page (2014) found that money—but not traditional forms of political participation—influenced outcomes of legislative debates and policy choices. They estimated that the opinions of the bottom 90% of income earners were completely ignored by legislative bodies. "The preferences of the average American," they found, "appear to have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact upon public policy" (575). Economic elites and business interests, on the other hand, hold outsized influence. In return for campaign donations, elected policy makers pass laws that favor their biggest contributors. Since Gilens and Page also found that two-thirds of political donations come from only 0.2% of Americans, the result is a political system that gives voice to the policy preferences of a very small but wealthy group while simultaneously disadvantaging the poor.

Finally, economic inequality also influences social outcomes across a number of public policy domains including levels of educational attainment, mental and physical health, and well-being (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). In his 2017 book, *The Broken Ladder: How Inequality Affects How We Think, Live And Die*, social psychologist Keith Payne details the ways in which inequality now predicts outcomes previously associated only with poverty, including lower life expectancies, higher infant mortality rates, and higher rates of obesity. Because these outcomes are, in turn, associated with lower earnings, the gap between the politically influential and the politically invisible is reinforced in a vicious circle of escalating inequality.

Moreover, the causes and effects of economic inequality as well as appropriate strategies for remedying it are also deeply connected to other structures of inequality such as race, ethnicity, and gender. Although the focus of this symposium is on teaching and learning about economic inequality, attending to such issues will often require intersectional analysis (see Bedolla and Andrade and Ladson-Billings in this issue). For example, focusing attention on issues of the racial wealth gap highlights the historical underpinnings of contemporary economic inequality (Asante-Muhammad et al. 2016; Shapiro 2013; Rothstein 2017). Intersections of gender and economic inequality have also been well-documented (for example, Blau et al. 2013; Perrons 2015). The strategies chosen when teaching about economic inequality must necessarily consider the intertwined and reinforcing nature of these and similar structural dynamics.

TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Schooling is frequently heralded as a key to addressing persistent inequality and stimulating social mobility. A vital part of the enduring American dream is that anyone can shed meager circumstances and compete on the level playing field of public education to strive for a better life. Yet, increasing inequality in recent decades has created more communities and more schools of concentrated wealth and concentrated poverty (Reardon and Bischoff 2011; Fry and Taylor 2012; Reardon and Owens 2014; Coley and Baker 2013). As schools in high poverty communities experience greater needs and receive less funding than those in affluent communities, dramatic "opportunity gaps" ensue (Baker and Corcoran 2012; Carter and Welner 2012). Further compounding these school-based inequalities, the difference between what the richest and poorest families spend on each child has tripled in the

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last four decades, even as the poorest families exert far greater effort relative to their income (Kornrich and Furstenberg 2013).

In short, a growing body of research has illuminated the ways inequality shapes young people's learning opportunities, development, and educational achievement (Duncan and Murnane 2011). Yet, what young people are taught about poverty or economic inequality and what youth believe should be done to address economic inequality receives little practical or scholarly attention.

This symposium, accordingly, is concerned with the politics and pedagogy of education about economic inequality. We bring together scholars from a variety of disciplines including political science, education, sociology, law, government, and public affairs to consider the following questions: (1) How, when, where, and towards what ends should students learn about economic inequality in school? (2) Are students today learning the kinds of lessons that would make them civically and politically literate about economic inequality? (3) What political, ideological, and economic assumptions are embedded in current efforts to educate children, youth, and young adults about economic inequality? Notably, in addressing these questions, the symposium authors combine attention to curricular content (knowledge goals and outcomes) with thoughtful considerations of pedagogical practices that might achieve those ends.

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The first article by John Rogers and Joel Westheimer reports on the first large-scale empirical study of what American high school social studies teachers currently do to prepare youth to understand various perspectives on economic inequality. Drawing on a statistically representative national sample of 685 social studies teachers in 293 public high schools, they report on survey data and follow-up interviews that explore classroom instruction about economic inequality across diverse settings. Their discussion draws particular attention to the relationship between teachers' political ideology and civic and political engagement and what, how often, and why they teach about economic inequality. They find, for example, that teachers' political identity does not determine how often teachers teach about economic inequality in their classes. But, their level of political engagement (regardless of whether they lean liberal or conservative, ideologically), *is* strongly correlated with the frequency with which they involve their students in discussion and debate about economic inequality.

"Facing Facts" by Ben Bowyer and Joe Kahne takes as a starting point the notion that democratic processes will be both more functional and more legitimate if those involved on different sides of contentious policy issues agree when it comes to basic facts. Evidence indicates, however, that beliefs about "facts" are shaped by one's opinions as much as one's opinions are shaped by the facts. As a result, disagreement on basic facts is common and there are reasons to believe that this problem is getting worse. Their analysis considers whether schools can address this problem. Specifically, they consider whether those students who experience lessons about economic inequality are more likely to agree on factual matters related to the topic. Drawing on analysis of a nationally representative survey of high school students, they find that, while discussions of economic inequality in schools are relatively rare, when they do occur, such lessons increase students' factual knowledge regardless of partisan leaning. As a result, such lessons make it significantly more likely that those with differing policy perspectives will agree on basic facts related to the topic.

Lisa García Bedolla and Jessica Andrade consider the ways that inequality is addressed in US high school social studies textbooks. The textbooks they examine adopt a pluralist view of American politics, and, as a result, downplay the force of structural inequality in shaping political outcomes. Inequality, the authors argue, is presented as a natural and inevitable feature of social life, rather than the product of political struggle and hence amenable to political transformation.

Too often discussions about education assume that once we agree on what to teach, that teachers will easily do so effectively. Several of the articles in the symposium highlight pedagogical strategies as well as educational priorities. This is especially true of "Promoting Elementary School-Age Children's Understanding of Wealth, Poverty, and Civic Engagement" by Rashmita Mistry, Lindsey Nenadal, Taylor Hazelbaker, Katherine Griffin, and Elizabeth S. White. Their contribution to the symposium takes us into the elementary school classroom to examine the successes and challenges faced by a team of kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers as they design and implement a curriculum unit focused on poverty and inequality using a student-centered inquiry-based learning approach.

James Galbraith's essay highlights the complexities of measuring economic inequality. Many seemingly straightforward measures of inequality may distort our understanding of how much inequality exists or how much it has grown over time. Learning about inequality, Galbraith concludes,

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requires both a nuanced sense of what kinds of measures matter and why, and a clear-eyed view of the relationship between concentrated money and power.

In addition to the full-length articles, we also include a roundtable consisting of shorter contributions. We asked nine thoughtful educators from a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives to write short responses to the question "What should every student know about economic inequality by the time they graduate from high school?" The results are as interesting for their commonalities as for their differences.

SCHOOL REFORM, ECONOMIC INEQUALITY, AND DEMOCRATIC GOALS

Together, the articles and roundtable that make up this symposium draw on conceptual, theoretical, and empirical work to explore classroom-based teaching and learning about economic inequality, locally, nationally, and globally. We should highlight, however, that the teaching and learning described in the articles that follow do not appear in a vacuum. To the extent that students learn about economic inequality, they do so in a school reform context that has stripped from the curriculum many civic and social aims. The goals of K–16 education have been shifting steadily away from preparing active and engaged public citizens and toward more narrow goals of career preparation and individual economic gain (Hursh 2007; 2016; Giroux 2014; Schrecker 2010; Westheimer 2015). Pressures from policy makers, business groups, philanthropic foundations, and parents, and a broad cultural shift in educational priorities have resulted in US public schools being seen primarily as conduits for individual success and, increasingly, lessons aimed at exploring democratic responsibilities have been crowded out. Much of current education reform limits the kinds of teaching and learning that can develop the attitudes, skills, knowledge, and habits necessary for a democratic society to flourish (Berliner 2011; Kohn 2004).

In many school districts and states, ever more narrow curriculum frameworks emphasize preparing students for standardized assessments in math and literacy at the same time that they shortchange the social studies, history, and even basic citizenship education. Moreover, higher-achieving students, generally from wealthier neighborhoods, are receiving a disproportionate share of the kinds of citizenship education that sharpen students' thinking about issues of public debate and concern. This demographic divide—what some scholars have called the "civic opportunity gap"—results in unequal distribution of opportunities to practice democratic engagement (Kahne and Middaugh 2008). In other words, to the extent that robust civic education opportunities are provided, increasing economic inequality has resulted in educational opportunity that is itself inequitably distributed.

The limitations and consequences of this reform context, though beyond the scope of this symposium, is important to note if for no other reason than to remind readers of the challenges faced by the teachers featured in the research. ■

NOTE

1. For examples of documentaries, see: http://inequalityforall.com; for examples of viral videos, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsM; for examples of comedic television, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfgSEwjAeno; and for examples of popular music, see: http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/the_music_club/features/2013/music_club_2013/kanye_west_s_blood_on_the_leaves_it_was_a_searing_political_indictment.html.

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