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
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).

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
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 2013). 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 (Hurst 2007; 2016; Giroux 2014; Schrecker 2010; Westheimer 2013). 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 “civil 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=QPKKQnjsnM; for examples of comedic television, see: https://www.

REFERENCES


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