



2020

## Educational Inequalities and the Teacher Perspective

McKenzie J. Mann-Wood  
Santa Clara University, [mmannwood@scu.edu](mailto:mmannwood@scu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications>



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mann-Wood, McKenzie J. (2020) "Educational Inequalities and the Teacher Perspective," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 48.

Available at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/48>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Macksey Journal by an authorized editor of The Johns Hopkins University Macksey Journal.

---

## Educational Inequalities and the Teacher Perspective

### Cover Page Footnote

I thank Dr. Barbara O'Brien, my faculty sponsor, and the entire Child Studies Department at Santa Clara University for their help, support, and kindness as I worked on this project. I also thank Chi Ngo, Blanca Moncada, and Absaroka Mann-Wood for always lending an ear to my research-fueled rants at the education system. Lastly, I thank my parents, John Wood and Penny Mann, for pushing me to consider other perspectives.

# Educational Inequalities and the Teacher Perspective

McKenzie J. Mann-Wood

*Santa Clara University*

---

## **Abstract**

Heckman (2006) introduced the importance of investing in education and the economics of childhood development by reviewing a landmark study of the skill formation of young people. The importance of investing in education cannot be understated. Heckman (2006) asserts that children who fall behind in the education system may never catch up. This means that they are discounted by society and are unable to advance from their current situation. Heckman (2006) argues that there is still time to work against these educational inequities. Essentially, interventions need to happen early to be effectual. However, Heckman also stipulates that for solutions to have long-term results, they need to be paired with long-term support. Developing more comprehensive teacher certification standards can ensure early interventions. For teachers to maintain long-term support for students, educational policymakers must create more comprehensive standards involving teachers' sociopolitical development (SPD) and diverse student populations. This review will analyze accreditation standards, sociopolitical development, teacher quality, and educational interventions and the impact they hold on opportunity gaps in education.

*Keywords:* Education reform, inequality, inequity

---

## **Introduction**

In a 2006 study, Heckman asserted the importance of investing in early education. Most importantly, Heckman (2006) stipulated that children who fall behind in the education system may never catch back up. This sets students at a distinct disadvantage that will impact them for the rest of their lives. However, Heckman (2006) argues that there is still time to fix this system. Early interventions are the most effective, but these interventions need to be paired with long-term support in order to generate results. One early intervention is to develop more comprehensive teacher certification standards to ensure that classrooms are staffed with the highest quality teachers. For long-term support, educational policymakers must address teachers' sociopolitical development (SPD) and diverse student populations. This review will analyze accreditation standards, sociopolitical development, teacher quality, and educational interventions, and their impact on opportunity gaps in education.

The phrase “opportunity gaps” refers to how systems of power show up and disadvantage students on the basis of socioeconomic status (SES), race, and ethnicity within school systems. These gaps were previously known as “achievement gaps” to reference how these students tend to achieve lower scores on standardized exams and other markers of educational advancement (Heckman, 2006). However, this pushes the blame onto the students, when in actuality these gaps occur as a result of systematic oppression. Another term that is often referenced in educational research is sociopolitical development. SPD refers to the process that occurs as people gain more knowledge, skills, and emotional capacities to enact change against systems of oppression. A large part of SPD occurs through reflection on one's positionality within these systems, and the various identities that both oppress and advantage an individual (Zion, Allen & Jean, 2015).

## **Teacher Education**

### Accreditation Diversity Standards

Akiba, Cockrell, Simmons, Han, and Agarwal (2010) designed a study to conduct a content analysis of teacher certification and accreditation standards in the United States. Researchers analyzed these standards in all 50 states and Washington, DC. Researchers coded each standard to organize them within five different categories: 1) teaching the exceptional and culturally different, 2) human relations, 3) single-group studies, 4) multicultural education, and 5) education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist (Akiba et al., 2010). They identified the last two categories as the ideal; if a standard fit into these categories, it was seen as the best example of diversity education. The study consisted of three stages. The first stage included Internet searches to attain state education standards. Researchers then reached out to state officials with a survey. Lastly, researchers followed-up with the state officials to collect any missing documents or data. The content analysis included counting the number of sentences that each standard devoted to diversity specifically. Researchers also used a system of open coding to identify concepts within the data.

The results showed that a majority of teacher education standards had diversity standards that were either vague, or assimilation focused. Vague standards are followed by confusion and are unlikely to be communicated effectively to teachers (Akiba et al., 2010). Assimilation-focused standards are those which focus on absorbing a minoritized culture into the culture of the majority. Within the 50 states and Washington, DC, only five states followed a social reconstructionist approach in their standards. Social reconstructionist approaches were identified by researchers as the most advanced in terms of diversity. Social reconstructionist approaches address social justice, equality, and structural concerns (Akiba et al., 2010).

This research is consistent with the contextual systematic oppression in opportunity gaps. Given that a majority of teacher certification and program accreditation standards in the 50 states and Washington, DC are vague or assimilation-based in response to diversity, it leads me to ask: Do these educational policies support sociopolitical development in teachers, and are they disadvantaging students?

### Sociopolitical Development

Zion, Allen, and Jean (2015) conducted a study to analyze the effect of sociopolitical education on educators. Five educators volunteered to participate in a yearlong critical civic inquiry (CCI) that emphasized sociopolitical development. The course offered support for these educators in implementing social justice initiatives in their classrooms. With support through a two-semester graduate course, participants were guided through classroom activities, discussions with peers, and observations of different teaching styles. Throughout the course, participants implemented a CCI unit and an action project within their own classrooms. These were documented by notes, reflection activities, and student artifacts (Zion et al., 2015). At the end of the course, participants wrote an autobiographical reflection on their positionality within various systems of oppression. The five participants were white educators at urban schools. They had a very different background than their students, and a large part of the CCI program was devoted to understanding the cultural and political influences that shaped each perspective. This is a large part of sociopolitical development. By understanding this different perspective, people with advanced SPD are encouraged and empowered to take action against oppression.

This study included a document review, in-person interviews, and a content analysis. The document review was specific to the artifacts created and used in participants' classrooms. These documents included lesson plans and activity sheets (Zion et al., 2015). Interviews helped to fill

in the gaps from the other research. These interviews also provided useful background information for each educator, such as how they decided to participate in the CCI course and why they wanted to be a teacher in the first place (Zion et al., 2015). Researchers conducted the content analysis by reading each teachers' documents in the order that they were written. They were then categorized within three core elements: 1) exploring own identity, 2) understanding broader social systems, and 3) developing skills to make changes within systems (Zion et al., 2015).

Results of this study showed that the participants experienced an advancement of their sociopolitical development. By the end of the CCI course, participants were able to understand the oppression that their students faced in a more concrete manner. Additionally, all of the participants developed a deeper understanding of the systems of oppression, and how these impact people differently based on a variety of identities. Participants also reflected extensively on their own identities and how these identities influence their worldview (Zion et al., 2015).

Although this study showed promising results for teachers' sociopolitical development, it also had limitations. The study ran for only 18 months, which is quite short given the length of a usual teaching career. Researchers identified that it would be powerful to extend the interactions with the participants. This would create a longitudinal study and would potentially identify long-term benefits of sociopolitical development for teachers. Lastly, the participants all volunteered for the study. This puts them in a powerful position of having initial commitment to sharing power with their students (Zion et al., 2015). Given these limitations, researchers cited hesitancy to assume that participating in a single year-long CCI course will have substantial effects on sociopolitical development. However, researchers also speculated that CCI programs implemented as a core aspect of teacher certification programs could lead to teacher populations

who are both interested in disabling systems of oppression and able to take action within education systems (Zion et al., 2015). Comprehensive teacher education standards, with explicit emphasis on enacting social change, will better allow teachers to provide long-term support for students. This begs the question: Does additional education have widespread effects on opportunity gaps?

### Teacher Quality and Opportunity Gaps

Luschei and Jeong (2018) found large-scale results to suggest that teacher quality and opportunity gaps are related. Researchers collected data from the 2013 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Teaching and Learning International Survey (OECD's TALIS) to conduct a statistical analysis of these findings. Researchers only included public schools in their analysis, which made the sample size 98,625 teachers who responded to the survey (Luschei & Jeong, 2018). The researchers were specifically looking into teacher sorting. This occurs when more experienced teachers self-select into schools with a higher SES (cross-school sorting), or when they self-select into classrooms with students with higher SES (within-school sorting). Then, inexperienced teachers self-select into schools or classrooms with students from lower SES backgrounds. This occurs globally on different scales, but there is also hope that policy interventions can disrupt this trend.

Cross-school sorting occurs when teachers have agency in selecting the specific school where they work (like in the US). Within-school sorting occurs when teachers do not have agency in where they work (like South Korea), but they can select which classes to teach. Both cross- and within-school sorting are a result of autonomy and social capital. For students, teacher sorting leads to massive inequities in resources. When students receive lower-quality teachers, paired with an inequity in resources, their education suffers. Additionally, inexperienced



teachers--who tend to be more sensitive to workplace conditions than experienced teachers--may leave the field of education entirely (Luschei & Jeong, 2018).

Obviously, this is a multifaceted issue. One seemingly obvious solution is to introduce educational policy similar to policies found in South Korea. This entails requiring teachers to change schools every five years, and a constant shuffling of teachers. Because it is mandated by the state, both experienced and inexperienced teachers spend the same amount of time in schools that are perceived as being more difficult to teach (Luschei & Jeong, 2018). Although this solves cross-school sorting, within-school sorting becomes more prevalent. The inverse of this occurs when teachers are given agency in choosing the schools where they teach. A solution proposed by Luschei and Jeong is the centralization of teacher placement. Currently, teacher placements occur at a district level, but Luschei and Jeong suggest that appointing supradistrict entities with a larger-picture view of educational needs will help to combat this particular education inequality. I propose another solution: educational interventions.

### **Educational Interventions for Teachers**

#### Graduate School Programs

Zion, Allen, and Jean (2015) discuss the role that teacher preparation programs play in opportunity gaps. The article discusses how a year of the CCI program left teachers feeling better prepared to discuss issues of oppression with their students, and how reflection on a person's positionality is crucial for sociopolitical development. Additionally, the article discusses how one year of intervention can have lasting effects on the teachers. For example, two of the teachers went on to bring activities they learned within the CCI program into their classes, and one began political grassroots organizing.

As mentioned before, comprehensive teacher education standards, with explicit emphasis on enacting social change will better allow teachers to provide long-term support for students. However, this also has implications for the teachers as well. Luschei and Jeong asserted that underprepared teachers are more likely to leave the field of education when they perceive their classrooms as an unfair or more difficult assignment. Stricter educational policy in regard to teacher certification will lead to a more prepared mass of teachers entering a diverse and difficult workplace. Zion, Allen, and Jean (2015) demonstrated the effects of a single year-long CCI course in the short term. More research is needed to extrapolate these results and their long-term effects; however, I argue that the future is promising. By incorporating CCI courses and critical pedagogy throughout all teacher education and certification programs, teachers will be better prepared to enter the diverse field of education.

#### Alternative Teacher Programs

Consuegra, Engels, and Struyven (2014) outline the difficulties that arise from alternative teacher certification programs. The study seeks to define the gap between education theory and workplace learning. Additionally, researchers attempted to quantify the necessity behind teacher education programs. For alternative teacher education programs to be effective, they need to actively combat melt-off. Melt-off occurs when teachers, underprepared for the transition from theory to practice in the classroom, leave the workplace and seek careers in other fields. To combat this, programs must be explicitly teacher-focused and personal. Additionally, it requires a strong mentor-mentee relationship between the teacher-in-training and an experienced teacher.

Researchers conducted a study with both a qualitative and quantitative design. To begin, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 participants in an early entry teacher certification program from one university (Consuegra et al., 2014). Then, researchers designed

and implemented an online survey. This survey was sent to 83 student teachers from universities in Flanders. The survey was used to examine if the results from the interviews could be extrapolated to a larger population of teachers-in-training (Consuegra et al., 2014).

Results of the study showed that teachers-in-training are often entrusted with a level of responsibility that is not consistent with the level of understanding and readiness experienced by the teachers-in-training. Additionally, mentors solely focus on the beginning teachers' concerns for surviving the school environment (Consuegra et al., 2014). This does not foster a sustainable teacher, or a sustainable training environment. Consuegra et al. (2014) assert that the current teacher-in-training model needs to be restructured to provide more specific and explicit support. This study was conducted in Belgium, so the study would need to be replicated within the United States to ensure that these results are relevant cross-culturally.

If, however, we assume that these results can be extrapolated to an international audience, these results are consistent with my thesis. Workplace learning alone is not enough for teachers, nor is it a sustainable practice. Teachers need comprehensive education standards, and they need explicit instruction on their sociopolitical development. Without these, both teachers and their students will suffer.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

This analysis of current teacher education practices shows a large gap in educational policy. Because there is not an explicit dedication to diversity requirements in educational standards, opportunity gaps in education are still present. These can be lessened through further advancement in educational policies that include sociopolitical development in teachers and centralized policies to dissuade teacher sorting. There are many proposed solutions for opportunity gaps, but without action there is no hope for effect. Despite gaps in current literature,

dedicated policymakers can work towards lessening opportunity gaps by addressing the teachers' impact on educational inequities.

Works Cited

- Akiba, M., Cockrell, K. S., Simmons, J. C., Han, S., & Agarwal, G. (2010). Preparing Teachers for Diversity: Examination of Teacher Certification and Program Accreditation Standards in the 50 States and Washington, DC. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 43(4), 446–462. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2010.510048>
- Consuegra, E., Engels, N., & Struyven, K. (2014). Beginning teachers' experience of the workplace learning environment in alternative teacher certification programs: A mixed methods approach. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 42, 79–88. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.05.001>
- James J. Heckman. (2006). Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children. *Science*, 312(5782), 1900.
- Luschei, T. F., & Jeong, D. W. (2018). Is teacher sorting a global phenomenon? Cross-national evidence on the nature and correlates of teacher quality opportunity gaps. *Educational Researcher*, 47(9), 556–576. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X18794401>
- Zion, S., Allen, C. D., & Jean, C. (2015). Enacting a critical pedagogy, influencing teachers' sociopolitical development. *The Urban Review*, 47(5), 914–933. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-015-0340-y>