

Invisible Fences: Privatizing Public Education

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Abstract: Public education in the United States is increasingly shaped by structural inequities that function as “invisible fences,” reinforcing segregation and limiting equitable access to a sound basic education. We examine how policy, local control, and socio-economic stratification contribute to *de facto* privatization of public schooling, particularly in New York State. We draw on course-based student research, community-based inquiry, and interdisciplinary scholarship to situate contemporary educational inequities within broader historical, legal, and sociological frameworks. Findings suggest while preservice teachers perceive themselves as socially aware, they lack familiarity with longitudinal data, foundational scholarship, and structural explanations of inequality. We highlight the role of information literacy and archival engagement in developing critical consciousness among preservice teachers. Implications for teacher education, curriculum design, and policy reform emphasize the need for historically grounded and data-informed approaches to understanding and counteracting educational inequity.

Public education in the United States has long been positioned as a mechanism for democratic participation and social mobility. However, scholars have consistently demonstrated that access to educational opportunities remains deeply unequal, shaped by race, class, and geography (Kozol, 1991; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Reardon, 2011). Inequalities often persist through mechanisms that are not formally codified in law but are embedded in institutional structures and policy frameworks. We conceptualize institutional mechanisms supportive of bias as “invisible fences” or structural barriers that maintain segregation and inequality without explicit legal enforcement. Through integration of student research, community inquiry, and policy analysis, we explore how suburbanization, rural isolation, and urban restructuring contribute to the fragmentation — and effective privatization — of public education.

Explaining Persistent Educational Inequality

Building on theories of social reproduction of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976) and spatial inequality/segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993), we examine how educational systems in New York State reflect broader patterns of stratification that silently support neoliberal agendas for privatization of public education.

Social Reproduction and Cultural Capital: Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of cultural capital provides a framework for understanding how educational systems reproduce existing social hierarchies. Schools often reward linguistic practices, knowledge, and dispositions of dominant groups, disadvantaging students from marginalized backgrounds. Similarly, Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that schooling functions to reproduce labor market inequalities, aligning educational outcomes with class structures. Through a concerted effort to educate culturally responsive learners, Teacher Education programs have tried for the last twenty years to address the persistent achievement gap between underrepresented, economically marginalized, and English Language acquisition learners and their peers from higher socio-economic status (Banks, 2013; Zimmerman, 2004). Yet the recruitment process for educators has identified two reproducing factors. First, teaching has become identified as a “female, middle class, white,

suburban” profession. Second, financial compensation of teachers often excludes economically marginalized communities through fiscal barriers in the education process (unpaid student teaching, self-financing transportation, expensive certification exams, costly background checks). Recently implemented “grow your own” strategies are another attempt to diversify teacher recruitment, but hiring processes still tend to favor familial or referential connections and many Teacher Education students would like to return to a similar school from which they graduated, most likely in a suburban school district. To make matters worse, Labaree (2006) notes education is often considered an “entry way” profession, and is held in low esteem.

Spatial Inequality and Segregation: Residential segregation remains a key driver of educational inequality. Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton (1993) demonstrate how spatial segregation concentrates poverty and limits access to resources. School district boundaries, often aligned with segregated residential patterns, reinforce disparities (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). In New York State, the 2025-2026 schoolyear report card indicates the following demographic data for public schools: 730 Districts (note, New York City is divided into localized districts) encompassing 4,394 public schools. Harkay (2026) reported “New York state’s traditional public schools are among the most segregated in the nation” State laws in New York criminalize attempts by families to utilize services offered by districts other than the one in which they live. Thus, residency defines access to educational services. DeRoche (2020) exposed how red lining — a bank practice, now illegal but still informally followed, originating with federal housing policy during the post-World War II era on which residential neighborhoods are reserved for certain races/ethnicities and not others — has persistently allowed racial segregation to continue. The real estate market, in addition to news media and the state government present information concerning evaluations of local schools. Newspapers and web-based reports compile test results and graduation rates with the intent of creating content which “ranks” public schools.

Neoliberalism and Privatization: Neoliberal education reform has introduced market-based mechanisms into public schooling, including school choice, charter schools, and accountability systems (Harvey, 2005; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2013). Neoliberal reforms often exacerbate inequality by privileging families with greater resources and information. Starting in 1989, the New York State Education Department, as required by its legislature, yearly issues lists with schools grouped by performance measures included in the “Schools Under Registration Review” protocols (Vittrirri & Kosor, 2001). Following the requirements of No Child Left Behind, the State publishes lists of Schools in Need of Improvement, Corrective Action, or Restructuring. During Race to the Top, the State produced a list of “Persistently Low Achieving” or the “worst performing” schools in the State. The federal Every Student Succeeds Act passed in 2015, which essentially extended policies similar to No Child Left Behind, requires accountability based on performance, and schools are listed as Targeted, Comprehensive, or Receivership, meaning a “targeted, etc.” school’s performance will require outside assistance from other, contiguous districts. Socially mobile people tend to move to local communities that offer the best combination of public services and taxes for their personal preferences, a phenomenon known as the Tiebout effect (Fischel, 2001). Thus, many districts become economically segregated, and families that cannot move to another district are “stuck” wanting a better educational experience but unable to “buy in” to opportunities presented in areas with more expensive housing options.

Teacher Education and Student Body Diversity

Our study is situated within a culturally responsive Teacher Education course at a regional private university in the Rust Belt section of Upstate New York. The student population is largely homogeneous, predominantly white, middle-class, and locally rooted, reflecting broader demographic patterns in the region. Of the students enrolled in our two, semester-long classes, (n= 39), 28 are local to the region served by the university, three originated in the “downstate” metro area of New York, three from the Greater Capital region (Albany metro), one from Canada, and four from the Hudson Valley region of the State. Five of the students identified as members of underrepresented populations. Of the 39 students, only 10 identified as male. Course sections were academically mixed, representing Elementary and Secondary Education majors, with further concentrations clustered into Secondary English, and Secondary Social Studies. The course is designated a 300-level, sophomore-junior year experience. No field work component is required. The course design intentionally meets the New York State Education Department’s (NYSED) standards for Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education (CRSE). In an effort to improve educational opportunities for the 2.4 million public school students in New York State, the Board of Regents has enacted CRSE standards to address achievement gaps as measured on State assessment data reported to the Federal Department of Education. The NYSED 2025 report card describes the racial makeup of New York State’s population of students: 39% of students identify as white, 31% identify as Hispanic, 15% as black or African American, 11% Asian/Pacific islander, and 4% multiracial. According to EdTrust NY (2025) 75% of educators in New York State identify as white, 9% identify as black, 7% as Hispanic, and 4% Asian. Demographically, the teaching workforce does not mirror the student population.

Preservice teachers often begin their study of Teacher Education with limited exposure to diverse communities and structural analyses of inequality (Sleeter, 2001; Milner, 2010). Without intentional intervention, limited experience with racial groups other than their own can persist in professional practice, shaping classroom expectations and instructional decisions. Most teaching candidates are white, female, and middle class (Schaffer, 2024). Further, the majority of educators are recruited from suburban districts, and the majority of preservice candidates would like to teach in their home district, or one similar demographically (Rhinesmith et al, 2023). Facing a teacher recruiting and retention crisis, New York State has focused on policy initiatives to increase diversity in its teacher workforce. Initiatives have focused on Grow Your Own strategies, increasing support to overcome barriers to entry into Teacher Education programs and increasing mentoring at school; but recruitment and retention policies are complicated, requiring multiple points of implementation (Swisher, 2023). In addition, one of the greatest hurdles to recruiting underrepresented teachers is the ever-present mandate of unpaid student teaching (Jakubowski, 2020).

Comparing One’s Own Experience to the Experiences of Others

Our study employs a qualitative, practice-based research design drawing on student research projects, reflective assignments, and community-based archival inquiry. Utilizing self-reflections on their own educational experiences, class discussions with our students examined access to curriculum, school lunch menus, extra-curricular activities, and personal observations about their own and surrounding school districts. Students investigated the concept of a “sound basic education,” a legal standard rooted in New York State court decisions (Campaign for Fiscal Equity v. State of New York, 2006). We and our students examined the idea of sound basic education through discussion of what had been observed in their own experiences, what they

were observing in pre-student teaching field observation, and comparisons with classmates' or friends' experience. Second, students were asked in an end of term project to examine the New York State report card for their home school district and compare their former district to a nearby urban school system. Faculty guidance and library research support was provided to find data and conduct an initial interpretation. In district-level data, attention was paid to demographic information by responding to these prompts:

What was the district's percentage of enrollment by race/ethnicity?

What percentage of district enrollment was socio-economically disadvantaged?

How did your home district compare demographically to the larger, urban district near your home ?

Conduct independent research using data garnered by local historical societies to construct a place-based understanding of educational inequities.

In initial reflection papers, written as a slightly deeper dive than class discussion into concepts of equality, accessibility, and opportunity (introduced in the first five weeks of the semester), students were "academic" in their understanding of concepts covered. Students were asked to utilize a series of readings which included the New York State Education Department's guides for Social Studies grades K-12, and NYSED's Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education standards (NYSED, 2014 & 2018). Students considered six phases of cultural understanding, beginning at Cultural Destruction, and moving through to a better understanding stages of Cultural Incapacity, Blindness, Pre-competence, Competency, and, finally, Proficiency (Cross et al., 1989). Students were also asked to examine the concept of microaggression — acts, statements, or perceptions that are intentionally or unintentionally hurtful towards an individual (Pierce, 1970). The class examined and reflected in writing on the concept of a "hidden curriculum," a set of rules, understandings, and expectations not explicitly taught in public education but designed to ensure that middle class expectations are intentionally transmitted from schools to students to identify an "in group" of school culture and to exclude others from school achievement (Portelli, 1993). The final topic of class discussion was curriculum choices (traditional resources) versus the windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors recommended by McNair & Edwards (2021). Mirrors are published representations of an individual's own culture. Windows allow for individuals to "see into" experiences of other groups. Sliding glass doors allow a person to "walk into" an unfamiliar cultural context.

Eliminating the Possibility of an Educational Life Unexamined

As we assessed student work some themes emerged.

Perception vs. Structural Understanding: Students demonstrated a perceived awareness of diversity but lacked structural understanding of its sources (Milner, 2010). Assignments for our class likely provided a first opportunity for some, if not many students to question the lived realities of their own lives, and the lives of others. As the class discussed their lived experiences, many were aware, in the abstract, of changes diversity brings to American schools; but did not understand the genuine lack of diversity in their home districts outside of metro centers. New York State public schooling is extremely segregated outside of its metro-based school systems (Kuceria and Orfield, 2014). Ignorance of diversity among teacher candidates finds tacit support in State requirements for teacher certification. As state requirements drive many of the academic programs for Education majors an emphasis on practical, application-based training has

emerged. Absence of diversity training from teacher certification programs reflects broader challenges in teacher education, where emphasis on practice can overshadow theoretical grounding (Zeichner, 2010). A second, anti-diversity development in teacher education has been changes to courses outside of Education that teaching candidates are expected to master as undergraduates. In some instances, students are not exposed to humanities or social sciences as in depth as in the past, which is especially evident in decreased numbers of 100 level survey courses and outside of academic major requirements for degrees. Providing students opportunity to take coursework across multiple disciplines lets students learn to take a variety of perspectives on the world. While the transition away from intellectualism in education has deep roots, there has been a continued view that teachers are underqualified to serve as the leaders of America's youth (Rousmarine, 2013).

Erasure of Local History: The absence of local history from Teacher Education curricula contributes to a fragmented understanding of inequality. Place-based education is crucial for developing civic engagement and critical consciousness (Gruenewald, 2003). Students did not remember, because they had not been exposed to, the impact of redlining, restrictive covenants, and other discriminatory policies that created their suburban enclaves. While mention of discriminatory practices/concepts does exist in New York State Social Studies frameworks, meaningful discussions of social bias are often avoided or presented only in abstract fashion as a way to ensure local sensibilities are not infringed (Percy, 2020). Educational inequality in the United States is deeply shaped by legal and policy frameworks. A pivotal moment occurred in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), which limited desegregation efforts to within-district boundaries, a decision that effectively insulated suburban districts from integration mandates, reinforcing patterns of segregation. In New York State, the tradition of local control of schools further exacerbates disparities. With over 700 school districts, funding and resources vary significantly, often reflecting local property wealth (Baker et al., 2018). The growing income-based achievement gap, which now exceeds racial achievement gaps in many contexts, underscores the increasing importance of socio-economic status in shaping educational outcomes (Reardon, 2011).

Suburbanization as Privatization: Suburban districts often function as *de facto* private systems, leveraging property taxes to maintain high levels of funding and exclusivity (Owens, 2018). Wealthy districts benefit from historical patterns of exclusion, enforced by redlining and zoning policies. Students expressed considerable wonder about the differences in educational opportunities when comparing their home district with a neighboring community in terms of curriculum, instruction, and outcomes. One student exclaimed during a presentation that her uneducated belief had been that all students had the opportunity to travel in middle school to Washington, D.C. or New York City. A different student, from a poorly funded community, revealed to the class that their school assigned chrome book computers in high school. A student from an affluent community said that they and their classmates received a chrome book computer starting in 4th grade.

Rural Communities: Forty per cent of school districts in New York State are classified as rural by the National Center for Educational Statistics (Rhinesmith, et al. 2023). Significant advances have recently occurred in correcting the deficit narrative gripping research into rural schooling. As Guenther et al (2023) noted, far too often nonrural researchers continue deficit-centric analysis of rural education systems. By contrast, the National Rural Education Association (2022) has centered rural research on opportunities for beginning teachers, creating a stronger

recruitment and retention pipeline for educators, aligning rural efforts with what urban reformers have stated for decades. Rural educator retention strongly emphasizes that place-conscious knowledge will assist in better outcomes for educators and their students. One strategy to attract and retain teachers involved characterizing the district as opportunity rich. Districts are offering multiple college-level courses through distance learning with local colleges. Opportunities for extracurricular activities are leveraged via shared services agreements through the local Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) or agreements between districts for sports, academic, career and technical education, and other varieties of study. Rural districts support low student-teacher ratios and have funded positions which allow for smaller class sizes than suburban or urban areas. One of the benefits the COVID-19 relief funding brought to many small schools was field trip/enrichment opportunities. However, after the pandemic subsided, funding has not kept pace with needs; and rural schools face distinct challenges, including declining enrollment, limited resources, and geographic isolation (Monk, 2007). Suburban and urban students in our class were surprised that students in rural districts had the same teacher multiple times, through multiple grades. Some of the students also expressed concerns that teaching in rural areas would place their non-work lives under scrutiny. (Brenner, et al 2020).

Comprehending Urbanity: A final theme that emerged from our students' reflection papers, research papers, and presentations in class was a lack of understanding of urbanity. For most of the students, the identification of urban areas nearby their home schools indicated that for many, their rural, small town, or suburban upbringings had not exposed them to large cities and metropolitan areas. Students originating from Central New York-Mohawk Valley selected Utica (65,000) or Rome (32,000) as the large urban district. Except for one student from the Onondaga County area, who selected Syracuse (148,000), no other central New York resident thought of larger cities. Two students from Long Island were instructed to not use New York City due to its overwhelming size. One chose Hempstead (5,600), a "suburban minority- majority" school district with long term academic and socio-economic issues. The second student chose Wyandanch (2,500), a district that is also classified as "suburban minority-majority." Hudson Valley students chose Poughkeepsie (31,000) or Kingston City (24,000) School District. Students from the Greater Capital region selected Schenectady (67,000) as the comparison district/community. Every single student conveyed surprise at finding their home school district, mostly suburbia, was not as diverse as the urban areas selected for comparison. Students were also surprised at how different were the academic achievement levels, as measured by graduation rates and results on Advanced Placement tests and Regents exams, between their home districts and the urban districts they studied.

Information Literacy and the Role of Libraries

In order to ensure students had access to information needed to complete assignments, it was essential to collaborate with the university's librarians and introduce resources to students, including databases for peer-reviewed articles, newspapers, and the State Education Department (for school accountability data). Information literacy is a critical but often overlooked component of educational equity. Students' reliance on digital sources, combined with limited archival skill, constrains their ability to conduct comprehensive research (Head & Eisenberg, 2010). Libraries play a vital role in addressing access to information gaps by providing access to primary sources and datasets, teaching research methodologies, and supporting critical evaluation of information. The research paper for our class inculcated information literacy because the project demanded the use of information not available in the databases the university subscribes to. Most

information literacy instruction we provide focuses on scholarly materials available at the university's library, but to complete assignments for our class students needed government data only available through the New York State Education Department (NYSED). To this end, the librarian instructing the students demonstrated the use of the NYSED data site to show students how to look up and compare student demographic information from their home district to the same data describing a nearby, large city district. Students were also given opportunity to look up information from sites run by local municipalities and historical societies to find contact information for anyone who might be able to assist with looking at demographics from a more historical perspective. Developing a historical perspective fits in well with the sixth frame of the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL's) *Framework for Information Literacy*: searching as strategic exploration, particularly the point regarding determining interested parties that are producing information, and how to access relevant information when needed.

Use of freely available information also answers a point made by Hare and Evanson (2018) about information privilege: What will students do post-graduation when access to university-provided databases ends? Students need to have an idea of where to go for freely available, trustworthy information, and our assignments were a rare opportunity to introduce a resource our students will likely use throughout their careers as educators. On a broader scale, information literacy instruction like this is valuable because it not only provides opportunity for faculty-librarian collaboration, but also for getting students into the library and giving them a chance to meet their subject librarian. Yevelson-Sorsher and Bronstein (2018) note the need for improved communication and collaboration on information literacy between faculty and librarians, quoting interviews where faculty mentioned preferring having librarians teach information literacy and librarians mentioned that information literacy instruction should be integrated with course content. For students, Yevelson-Sorsher and Bronstein cite multiple interviews with students expressing fear of the library or being seen as asking stupid questions. Having students go to the library and interact with librarians allays fears and makes it easier for students to initiate further, academically meaningful interactions. Finally, integration of library instruction into teacher education also aligns with broader calls for data-informed practice and evidence-based decision-making (Mandinach & Gummer, 2016).

Invisible Fences Made Tangible

The concept of invisible fences highlights subtle yet powerful mechanisms that sustain educational inequality. Fences are not accidental but are produced through the interaction of policy, history, and socio-economic status. Dissonance between increasing student diversity and continued teacher recruitment that reproduces white, middle class, and suburban female teachers means the teaching workforce will no longer resemble students, nor provide adequate representation in the future. At a curricular level in public education, K-12, students are not grappling with sociological issues. The Social Studies curriculum is focused on grand history, with graduation-level History divided into two years of World History, one year of US History and Government, and a half-year of economics and participation in government. Some larger districts, with more resources, may offer electives, but often are limited to psychology, or film study, or a history of art. Almost no district school board or school administrator desires the firestorm of controversy that a sociological course would raise. As it is, any sort of deviation from the "cannon" [sic] of resources, or what can be interpreted as "woke" is not acceptable in many schools (Adejumo, 2025). In undergraduate education, a significant issue, especially with history, political science, economics, and sociology has emerged. Students are not retaining base

level knowledge, nor are they applying social scientific concepts to their own lives. The phrase “check your privilege” has emerged, designed to signal that a statement had been made that was “privileged” and did not take into account every person’s experiences (Rankine, 2019). The rise of anti-woke rhetoric in national politics aimed at controlling and limiting higher education and K-12 schooling, alike, has perpetrated and perpetuated the trivialization of history in schools, and, sadly, in some colleges and universities. Students are subjected to demands to remember names, dates, locations (who, what, when, where) but do not receive enough instruction in the why and how of the past to understand how past events continue to echo in the present.

If we want change in the classroom, and in society, the teaching profession must ensure that students preparing for roles as educators are equipped with the ability to examine underlying assumptions of their day-to-day existence. Teacher educators are reliant on subject-matter instructors for courses in the general college experience (often up to 50% of a Bachelor’s degree) and an additional 25% in the form of a content area major. But if General Education courses and courses in academic majors are still utilizing multiple-choice, low-level recall questions, then higher education is engaging in expensive trivial pursuit. Ongoing changes to the structure of higher education are fundamentally damaging the idea of citizenship in the United States by removing criticality from study of society. Reform must happen quickly. Invisible fences continue to mar the landscape of public education, limiting access and reinforcing inequality. Only by examining social dynamics, as we and our students have in our place-based study of public schooling in New York State, can Education contribute to critical consciousness of students expressed in a growing body of research exposing hidden aspects of the privatization and fragmentation of public schooling. Future efforts at producing critically-minded teachers must prioritize historically informed, data-driven approaches to understanding education, ensuring that all students have access to a truly equitable educational system.

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