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Underrepresented Race: The Effects of a Quality Education

In the book, “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,” by Rebecca Skloot, the author covers the issues that show how a lack of educational opportunity for African Americans and their families, in specific the Lacks family, has led to an ongoing socioeconomic gap that is only just starting to narrow. In the book we see many examples of where an increased education would have benefitted the Lackses. When visiting her doctor, we saw an example of how Henrietta’s lack of education eventually affected her health: “For Henrietta, walking into Hopkins was like entering a foreign country where she didn’t speak the language. She knew about harvesting tobacco and butchering a pig, but she’d never heard the words *cervix* or *biopsy*” (16). Due to Henrietta’s lack of vocabulary that would have otherwise been learnt through education, she was unable to understand what many would consider basic medical language. As a result, Henrietta felt deterred from returning for future check-ups, which could’ve potentially helped prevent her future health problems. Another example we see was, the need for the Lacks children to drop out of school to work for the family in order to make ends meet. The family had no choice but to pull their children out of school in order to ensure the tobacco fields were maintained sufficiently and profits flowed. “Like most young Lackses, Day didn’t finish school: he stopped in the fourth grade because the family needed him to work in the fields” (20). As a

result of the families need for immediate income, the children's academic future was compromised and therefore lead them to living their lives relatively uneducated. As time went on, it became apparent that in order to get the best shot at a successful and healthy life, the children's education needed to become much more of a priority. Henrietta's children were urged by their family members, mostly their sister-in-law, to pursue their education. She stressed to the children, "I don't care what you do, but you get an education, cause that's your only hope" (116). The harsh reality of the effects of growing up uneducated had finally begun to set in, and the fear of creating another uneducated generation became a more and more likely reality. These problems are certainly not incidental and have been present for many years. Some authors argue that the lack of educational opportunities for African Americans has been a contributing factor to the socioeconomic gap that has and still exists to this day. Whilst I do agree with them, I argue that the real problem lies within the quality and the cost of the education that is available to many African Americans. This issue is important for us as a society to address, because by working to create equality, we are addressing the moral issue of giving all people, no matter what race or religion, an equal opportunity at obtaining a quality education.

Some authors argue that the lack of educational opportunities for African Americans has been a contributing factor to the socioeconomic gap that has and still exists to this day. In their article, "The Upside of Income Inequality," authors Gary S. Becker and Kevin M. Murphy show us the tremendous gain that higher education has had on reducing this socioeconomic gap, stating that "The upward trend in the returns to education is not limited to one segment of the population. Education premiums for women and African Americans have increased as much as, or more than, the premium for all workers" (583). They present a graph showing the

complementary correlation between higher education and higher wages and also shows the effect higher education has on the financial premiums of African Americans. Their research also shows the effects that increased opportunity to study had on women within the African American communities stating that “The proportion of black women who attend college and universities jumped from 24 percent to 43 percent between 1974 and 2003” (585), showing that once given the opportunity, the chance at a higher education was taken with both hands amongst women in the African American community. The Pew Research Team complements Becker and Murphy’s claims in their article, “King’s Dream Remains and Elusive Goal; Many Americans See Racial Disparities,” showing how the focus of education has shifted to much more of a priority. When referring to college completion rates they claim that “The black completion rate as a percentage of the white rate has improved from 42% then to 62% now” (633). This again shows the direct correlation between opportunity at education and seizing this opportunity.

Whilst I do agree that there has been noticeable progression in the opportunity for African Americans to obtain an education, I argue that it is the quality and cost of the education available to African Americans, not the opportunity itself. In their article, “King’s Dream Remains an Elusive Goal,” The Pew Research Team also highlight the fact that “black households earn about 59% of what white households earn” (632). If African Americans are earning significantly less than whites, then they are already at a disadvantage when it comes to the quality of their education. With less money to spend, African American families have no option but to settle for an education that they can afford, not an education they deserve. But there is more evidence to suggest that African Americans cannot afford a higher education. In her article, “Segregation and the Underrepresentation of Blacks and Hispanics in Gifted Education: Social Inequality and

Deficit Paradigms,” the author Donna Y. Ford addresses the underrepresentation of African American students in gifted education as opposed to public school education. In the article, Ford reveals startling figures claiming that “African Americans should represent at minimal 15% of students in gifted education. Nationally, the percentage is 10%.” These figures suggest a 5% gap in the minimum African American students that should be represented in gifted education. With these figures in mind, it is almost impossible to ignore the underlying issue of income inequality that is clearly affecting the opportunity for these African Americans, whether families or students, to afford the perks of a “gifted education”. With the increased cost of quality education paired with a significantly lower access to wealth across the demographic of an entire race, it is easy to see how and why a significant number of the African American community are finding themselves undereducated and as a result, underpaid.

It is important for us as a society to address this issue, because by working to create equality, we are addressing the moral issue of giving all people, no matter what race or religion, an equal opportunity at obtaining a quality education. In “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,” we see the effects on those African Americans who were unable to attain a quality education and how it creates a socioeconomic gap in our society. Becker and Murphy may claim that “Higher returns to education will accelerate growth in living standards as existing investments have a higher return” (586), but this is only true if everybody is exposed to the same quality of education. Until this area of concern is addressed we will continue to see the socioeconomic gap between blacks and whites widen, and move further away from equality.

Works Cited

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