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Educational Equity Issues in Chicago Public School Selective Enrollment Schools

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Abstract

On the surface, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) selective enrollment system seems to provide students with many opportunities and offers students access to a quality education at high-performing schools. Recently, however, both students and teachers have been speaking up about discrimination at these schools. This paper will evaluate the different types of discrimination that students experience within the top five selective enrollment schools and discuss possible solutions to ending discrimination. This paper specifically examines the question: How do students with marginalized identities experience educational equity, or the lack of equity, in selective enrollment schools, in particular in Chicago Public Schools? Qualitative methods were used to analyze the student experience at these schools. We collected data from Instagram posts from BIPOC Instagram pages from four of the five schools that were studied. Teacher interviews and local school council meetings were also used to gather information on the student experience at these schools. From these sources we found that racism and other forms of discrimination from teachers and staff members often can make students feel as if they are not wanted or do not belong at their high school. This paper also explores possible solutions for these issues of discrimination, which include anti-racist staff training, minority teacher recruitment/retention, listening to student input, anti-racist curriculum and creating an anti-racist culture at schools.

Introduction

The Chicago Public School (CPS) system, located in a city with a history of residential segregation is one of the largest public-school systems in the U.S. The segregated nature of the city of Chicago often left schools extremely segregated with schools in lower income communities of color also receiving less funds than schools located in higher income and predominantly White neighborhoods (Kryczka, 2019). The negative impact that this had on students was recognized over time as parents and students called for some type of reform along with greater access to high quality schools. As a result, CPS decided to create the selective enrollment high school system to promote educational equity, as well as diversity and academic excellence in the CPS school system (Quiroz & Lindsay, 2015). These application schools pushed students to compete with each other to gain a spot and encouraged applicants from low-income communities of color. Over time, these schools gained popularity and good reputations and attracted significant numbers of students of color.

On the surface, the CPS selective enrollment system seems to provide students with many opportunities and offers students of color access to a quality education that they may not normally get in their neighborhood schools. These schools are often much better off financially and are usually higher ranked, with five of these schools making up the top five schools in the state (Allensworth et al., 2016). With thousands of students applying to these schools, middle school students sacrifice their time, money, and energy to try to get into one of Chicago's most sought-after schools. Unfortunately, not all students have the resources to perfect their application. With Chicago being such a diverse city, many students from low-income communities have a more difficult time getting into these schools without the support that students from higher-income communities receive.

However, the struggle for low-income students of color in achieving educational equity does not end once they are accepted into one of these selective schools. Recently, students and teachers have been speaking out against inequality within these selective schools. During a time when there was notable focus and support for the Black Lives Matter Movement, several students from selective enrollment schools created public BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) Instagram pages where they shared their own stories of racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination that they experienced at these schools. These pages received significant attention from the schools and certain media sources because students were also calling out teachers and administrators for their discriminatory actions. These posts also noted that the overall culture of these schools was harmful to the students. The schools' curricula, rules, and other aspects appear to either promote or allow for discriminatory behavior to exist. All of this information from the BIPOC pages called attention to how these schools' function and deal with their diverse student population.

These issues call for further investigation into the research question driving this study: *How do students with marginalized identities actually experience educational equity, or the lack of equity, in selective enrollment schools, in particular in Chicago Public Schools?* I investigated this question through a literature review, as well as through a content analysis of the BIPOC Instagram pages. Given the attention this issue has received, and in the context of national conversations about racial equity, it is important to listen to student voices and learn from their experiences, which is why I specifically focused on the student Instagram pages, as they provide

a window into the experience of students who are part of marginalized groups. In this study, I focus on five¹ out of the eleven total selective enrollment schools overall in my study.

Through this work of public scholarship, this paper is intended to help inform and educate students and educators working in these schools by illustrating cross-school patterns and demonstrating large, system-wide issues. This paper examines issues in the CPS selective enrollment school community to find possible solutions for teachers and students to look further into. As a former student in this system, and having connected with students through the Instagram pages, I plan to share this work with my contacts in these schools. It is my hope that students and educators working to address issues of discrimination and inequity across these schools can use these findings and recommendations to help push for broader, more systemic reforms.

Literature Review

Prior to the creation of these selective enrollment schools around the 1960s, many Chicago public schools had been struggling academically, particularly schools in low-income neighborhoods with large percentages of students of color. This reality, along with the momentum of the civil rights movement, shifted the focus many Chicago parents had to ensuring educational equity for their children (Kryczka, 2019). As the opposition to the neighborhood school system grew, the public's attention shifted to the idea of school choice. Schools on the south side of the city were so overpopulated that they began to turn valuable resources like libraries into classrooms (Kryczka, 2019). The earlier desegregation movement led to the selective White flight of many Chicagoans to the suburbs or non-public school systems in Chicago which further highlighted the need to create some sort of system to add diversity to the schools (Kryczka, 2019). So, while students of color had the ability to attend schools with White students, selective White flight to certain neighborhoods- specifically wealthier predominantly White areas in the Northside- later resulted in a lack of diversity in neighborhoods and their schools.

Selective enrollment schools were created to change the perception the public had of Chicago's schools as well as to attract people to the CPS district and diversify CPS schools (Quiroz & Lindsay, 2015). The district felt a sense of urgency to improve its academic reputation as parents began to push for the district to implement a new system (Quiroz & Lindsay, 2015; Kryczka, 2019). Because of the large amount of segregation in Chicago, adding the option of school choice would encourage students to attend schools from outside their neighborhoods therefore desegregating CPS schools. In order to create more diversity through desegregation within these selective enrollment and magnet schools, CPS and the federal government entered a Consent Decree in 1980 (Quick, 2016). The plan was revisited and modified in the early 2000s, defining an integrated school as a school with at least 15 percent to 35 percent of students enrolled being White (Quick, 2016). This was changed in 2009 when a federal judge canceled the agreement and CPS switched to using socioeconomic status (SES) instead of race as a way to ensure diversity (Quick, 2016).

These schools gained popularity and were praised for increasing diversity and academic rigor in the CPS school system. Proudly claiming to desegregate CPS schools, these selective programs also tended to have higher graduation rates and test scores, although this may be

¹ Northside College Prep, Walter Payton College Prep, Jones College Prep, Lane Technical High School, Whitney Young High School

partially due to selection bias (Allensworth et al., 2016). Overall, these selective schools were seen as a success and as an opportunity for low-income students of color to receive a better education. However, students at these selective enrollment CPS schools are still disproportionately White, and come from higher income families (Lauen, 2009), showing that perhaps these schools are not as accessible to as many low-income students of color as they thought. Furthermore, students from low-income neighborhoods benefit less from high school choice than students from higher-income neighborhoods (Lauen, 2009). So, while these schools perform well and provide great opportunities for Chicago students, these schools still disproportionately benefit White and more affluent students.

CPS schools tried to account for the potential race and class disparities in education during the application process by factoring in the neighborhood that students are from at the time of admission. This was somewhat effective until about 10 years ago when gentrification in Chicago led to more students from higher income families being accepted (Ahmed-Ullah, 2012). As a result, the racial and financial diversity among the student population in these selective enrollment schools has decreased. In addition, these high achieving schools have caught the attention of many high-income and White families, making the goal of achieving diversity in selective CPS schools more difficult (Quiroz and Lindsay, 2015). More recently, there has been increased discussion of whether these schools help solve the issue of educational equity or further exacerbate it (Ahmed-Ullah, 2012). Students from lower-income neighborhoods, who once had their disadvantages considered in the application process, are now being left behind because of gentrification. Access to high performing schools for students from low-income families is further restricted by the fact that, while many of these selective enrollment CPS schools are excelling, a larger majority of schools in Chicago are struggling and underfunded.

Other work suggests that students with marginalized identities in different school systems in other states experience similar equity issues, pointing to the systemic nature of discrimination in our schools. Hope, Skoog, and Jagers (2014) explored these issues in a qualitative study in the Harbor School District and Youngers School District in Southeastern Michigan. This study interviewed eight African American students and asked questions about their school experiences. In semi-structured interviews asking students about discrimination, students from every school district were able to note a time when they received unequal treatment by a teacher (Hope, Skoog, & Jagers, 2014). These students also expressed how these instances of discrimination not only were noticed by students but also hurt their overall educational experience (Hope, Skoog, & Jagers, 2014). Occurrences of discrimination thus may be common among students of color in different schools, raising the question of whether or not students with marginalized identities experience these types of discrimination at selective enrollment schools as well.

This possibility appeared as a reality in 2020 when several students from CPS selective enrollment schools created BIPOC Instagram pages to share their negative experiences at these schools and to express the impact of these schools' discriminatory practices. These pages discuss instances of interpersonal discrimination and systemic discrimination that students faced while at these schools. The pages have received a large amount of attention from these schools and have received a mixed response from staff. Administration at both Payton College Prep and Whitney Young seem to be alarmed by these instances of discrimination while the administration at Jones College Prep was concerned with the pages calling out specific teachers and possibly being "slanderous" (Kelly, 2020).

Because racism and other forms of discrimination do have an impact on the experience of students of color at these selective schools, it is important to analyze this discrimination through

sociological perspectives on race and related theories such as Critical Race Theory (CRT). Bonilla-Silva (1997) critiqued overly individual, idea-based models of racism and proposed a structural theory of racism. Bonilla-Silva discusses “racialized social systems” which place people into racial categories that later form hierarchies that determine social standing, political power, and economic wealth. This socialized system theory can be applicable to other identities as well (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). Developing out of legal scholarship on the impact of racism on the legal system, CRT builds on this concept by noting that legislation surrounding civil rights in education has still benefitted White people (Bell, 1980). Because White is viewed as the norm in this racialized society, everything else is seen in relation to it and much of society caters to White people (Ladson-Billings, 2010; Crenshaw, 1989) Critical Race Theory aligns with Bonilla’s model and argues that racism and inequality stem from deep rooted systemic issues rather than simple individual instances (Ladson-Billings, 2010; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). Despite the recent controversies over CRT in K-12 education, there is significant scholarship in education research that explores how education inequities are tied to systemic racism in society (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015).

When analyzed through the lens of racialized social systems and CRT, the Instagram posts from students at multiple CPS selective enrollment schools show patterns of systemic discrimination in students experiences of racism and discrimination. For example, CRT scholars believe that instead of promoting social inequity, school desegregation efforts were catered only in ways that helped Whites (Bell, 1980; Ladson-Billings, 2010). This theory can be applied to how selective enrollment schools in Chicago still end up serving and benefitting more White students than students with marginalized identities (Lauen, 2009). Because of the racialized social systems in place within society, CPS selective enrollment schools still benefit White students with higher-income backgrounds compared to marginalized students despite being designed to help students of all identities. Considering these patterns of systemic discrimination allows for a better understanding of how these issues may also need to be addressed with CRT in mind and calls for further investigation into system wide solutions. There is currently a lack of research that investigates the experiences of different marginalized groups in these CPS selective enrollment schools. Much of the existing research in these schools deals with how issues of coming from a low-income family can affect a student’s academic performance. However, there is a gap in addressing how racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia impact students in these selective enrollment schools, sometimes with multiple acts of discrimination occurring at the same time.

Filling in this gap, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw introduced the theory of intersectionality in her 1989 paper, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", noting that without intersectionality, claims of lesser known forms of discrimination can go unnoticed because we are unable to see the complexity that holding several marginalized identities can have. The exclusion of Black women in Feminist theory is used as an example by Crenshaw to expose how multiple marginalized identities impact the experiences one may have in different spaces. The framework of “multiracial feminism” is brought up to not only draw attention to the diversity in women but also understand that it is important to understand race in order to understand gender (Zinn and Dill, 1996). Multiracial feminism notes that gender is comprised of many “interlocking inequalities” such as race that that are connected in systematic ways (Zinn and Dill, 1996). In this context, it is important to observe these student voices by evaluating how their intersectional identities may also impact their experiences in school. In

addition to intersectionality not being considered often in conversations of discrimination, student voices have largely been ignored in the creation of educational policy. While student voices have gone unnoticed, they can be extremely valuable in determining shared problems across schools which can lead to a deeper understanding of systemic issues in the education system. Because of this, this study will focus on analyzing systemic discrimination in Selective CPS schools particularly through student voices.

Methods

In order to identify and evaluate patterns of systemic discrimination in CPS schools as described in social media posts, this study took a qualitative approach using multiple data sources. The first method that I used was a background literature review looking at different sources that discussed either: 1) The history of selective enrollment schools in Chicago; 2) Issues of inequity in CPS schools/selective enrollment schools; or 3) Solutions on how to solve racial, gender, LGBTQ+, and class issues in schools. The literature review helped develop a better understanding of the CPS selective enrollment school system and how it was created. As this study is also geared towards exploring solutions to these problems, the literature review also involved finding research and articles that point towards how we can reform this system. When doing this, I specifically focused on anti-racist curriculum and resources, diversity hiring in staff, staff training, restorative justice programs for students, and other forms of possible educational reform. The literature review centered on these solutions in particular because they seemed to be the most supported and the most effective in helping stop discrimination in schools.

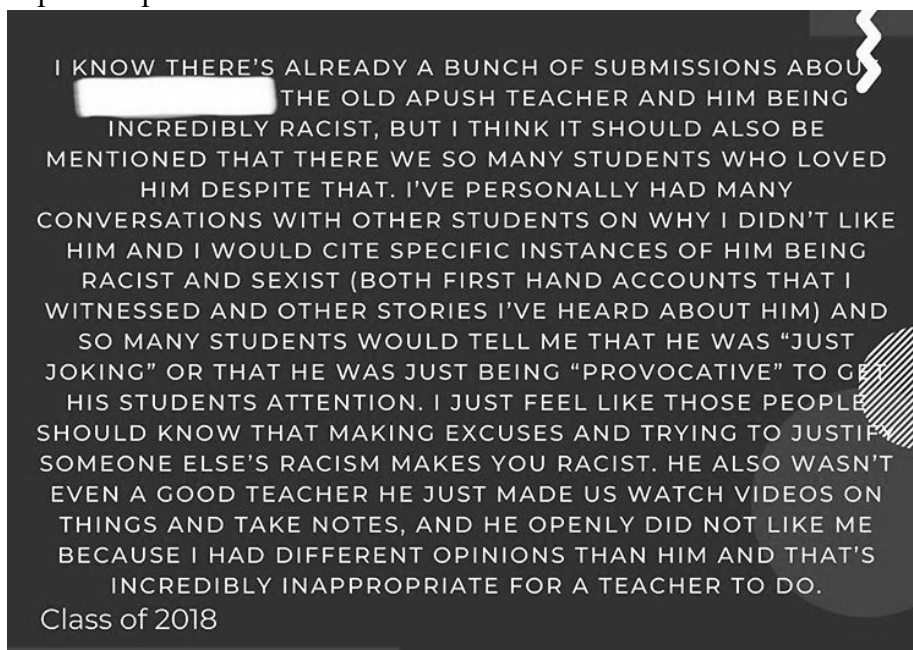
To further evaluate the systemic issues of discrimination in CPS selective enrollment schools as reported by students, I collected screenshots of Instagram posts from BIPOC pages of four selective enrollment high schools in Chicago² out of the eleven total in the city. I focused on five schools³ overall in my study because while these five were more diverse overall, they still had a large population of White students from higher-income backgrounds. These schools also differed from the selective enrollment schools that were not examined because they consistently were ranked in the top ten schools in the state. As a former student of one of these schools, I was aware of a perception in the selective enrollment student community that these issues were prevalent specifically in these five schools. While these schools do not necessarily represent the whole selective enrollment system, it is still important to evaluate the issues of discrimination in these schools because of their potential to spread further throughout the selective enrollment system and because these schools are prominent institutions in the system.

I only collected Instagram information from four out of the five schools that were focused on because one of the schools (Northside College Prep) did not have any sort of BIPOC Instagram page. Instagram posts were specifically used as core data sources in my study because of its feasibility as a way to compare experiences across schools. The public nature of these accounts also made this method an accessible way to gather a large amount of student experiences. Social media can also serve as a powerful online community for people, especially students. By looking at what students are saying in communal online spaces, I am able to gain a deeper understanding into how students in the CPS selective enrollment community are saying about their schools. In total there were five Instagram pages evaluated that examined four of the

² Walter Payton College Prep, Jones College Prep, Lane Technical High School, Whitney Young High School

³ Northside College Prep, Walter Payton College Prep, Jones College Prep, Lane Technical High School, Whitney Young High School

selective enrollment schools studied (Whitney Young had two Instagram pages). These Instagram pages were selected as the main method of the study because they were able to clearly showcase students' perceptions and interpretations of experiences surrounding different types of discrimination at these schools. By examining what students choose to publicly share, we can better understand the experience of students with marginalized identities. I selected 35 posts from these pages, focusing in on posts that related to experiences of discrimination from authority figures or with respect to broader school culture. For this analysis, I did not include posts strictly about student-to-student discrimination as I was more interested in schoolwide issues. This is because I wanted to begin to establish patterns of behavior that could further indicate the systems and institutions that make up CPS selective enrollment schools. By focusing on more than just interpersonal discrimination between students, this study would also be able to more strongly establish that these issues need to be evaluated in a systemic way. One example of a post that I choose is shown below.



This post shows a student talking about sexism and racism from a teacher and how many other students excused his behavior. This post also implies that many other students had a problem with the teacher's racism and sexism which suggests there is a bigger problem with these issues at this school. This post was chosen because it clearly points to a larger problem with teachers and the school culture. I wanted to make sure that I was including posts that really reflected students' perceptions of the school's culture of racism. Because of this, I did not pick many posts that focused on individual or isolated cases of discriminatory behavior. An example of a post that was not picked was a post from a student at Jones saying "During my class my table was discussing race for some reason. There were four of us, two of which were White. I mentioned that I'm half White half Asian. The White boy at my table laughed and said my White Parent must have an Asian fetish. The other people at the table just sat there in awkward silence. It made me so uncomfortable and grossed out and he just sat there laughing at his own inappropriate joke." While this quote shows inappropriate behavior surrounding race, it is a more interpersonal instance of racism that does not provide as much information of the environment surrounding discrimination at Jones.

I used a process of constant comparative analysis (Straus & Corbin, 1990), coding information from different sources and going back and forth between these different sources to develop a theory explaining patterns in the data. The first step in my analysis was to use open coding procedures in which I wrote down all of the types of issues that these posts discussed by summarizing them in short phrases. Then I used refined coding and coded the posts based on if the issues involved racism, sexism, classism, or were anti-LGBTQ+. I also coded based off of how the school responded to the issue/how the issue was handled according to the students. In addition, I reached out to all of the Instagram pages to ask for permission to use the screenshots of their public posts. Once I received permission, I began to ask the students who ran the Instagram pages questions about how the school and others were responding to the page and how the account was run. This was done to both learn more about the situation at these schools and to ensure that these posts and claims that are being made were reliable.

There are some limitations with the method of pulling student opinions from social media. Because these Instagram posts are written by students expressing their own experiences, students could possibly exaggerate or fabricate stories of discrimination. With social media sometimes being a distortion of reality, it can be difficult to know what is accurate. In addition to this, because the posts were self-selected by students, the data gathered may be more biased due to those students potentially feeling more strongly about discrimination in their institutions. I try to manage these limitations through triangulation with other data sources. I was able to interview a teacher, attend an LSC meeting, and look at some news stories about discrimination in these schools in order to confirm and evaluate the statements students were making on the BIPOC Instagram pages.

I then had multiple interviews with a teacher of color who works at one of the selective enrollment schools. This teacher was selected in order to bring an inside view to the issues of discrimination within staff members in these selective enrollment schools. This teacher was selected based off of access and willingness to discuss issues of discrimination at these schools. Although it would have been ideal to include more teachers and administrators in this method, there was not enough opportunity to get in contact with teachers and administrators in these schools. Future studies could benefit from more staff representation in these interviews. I asked her questions about the school environment and how the administration typically handled these issues of discrimination in a broader sense. I asked these questions to gain a teacher's perspective in all of this and see how her counts aligned with what students reported. I then coded the interview to look at the types of issues that the teacher experienced or witnessed (e.g. race, gender issues, etc.).

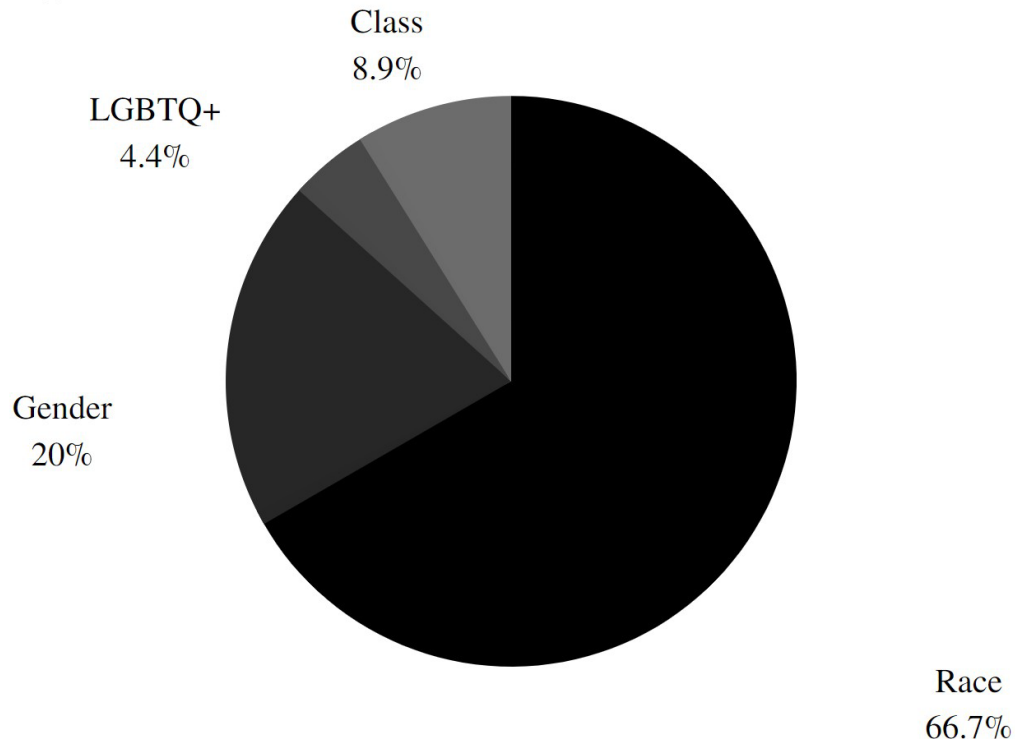
I also attended an online, public LSC meeting (Local School Council meeting) and took notes. I attended the meeting to look at how the school was responding to these equity issues and how the school was presenting these issues in front of students and parents. I coded the meeting the same way that I coded the interviews with the teacher. This helped me better understand how the school was handling the issues that I was observing. I also searched online for news coverage of issues with discrimination at participating schools in order to gather more information and explore the more prevalent issues in these schools. I looked up terms like "CPS selective enrollment school discrimination" and "Chicago selective enrollment school racism" to find news articles. In this search, I was able to find several different news stories that discuss issues with discrimination in these school including the Chicago Sun-Times discussing the BIPOC Instagram pages from Jones, Whitney-Young, and Payton and providing more perspective on how students are experiencing harm in selective enrollment schools and feel unsupported by the

administration at their schools (Kelly, 2020). Other news stories have touched on problematic behavior from staff members such as Payton's administration's lack of action when a Black student was experiencing racial harassment or the lack of response that parents felt Principal Powers had on race and equity issues at Jones (Karp, 2019; Golden, 2022). The use of triangulated data across these sources in my constant comparative analysis allowed for me to view these issues that were happening at CPS schools from different perspectives and look for patterns across multiple sources.

Findings

This qualitative study allowed for a deeper analysis into the discrimination students often faced during their time at a CPS selective enrollment school. This study not only offered insight into the types of discrimination students faced but also the noticeable patterns of discrimination that manifested in these schools. Looking at these patterns of discrimination, it was found that many of the issues that were observed often happened together with each other, with multiple posts discussing more than one type of discrimination. Because students at these schools hold many diverse identities that are intersectional, it is important to also understand how the discrimination in these schools affects different identities at the same time. Using the Instagram posts, the interviews, and the LSC meetings, many important patterns of discrimination in these schools emerged. In particular, issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia were discussed, both in terms of teacher/student interactions and the general school culture and curricula. Instances of racism were the most common making 66.7% of the specific mentions of discrimination observed in the Instagram pages. Gender was the next most common issue with 20% followed by class (socio-economic status) at 8.9% and then LGBTQ+ at 4.4%.

Types of Discrimination Most Commonly Reported at CPS Selective Enrollment Schools



Racism and Issues Intersectional with Racism

Racism from teachers and staff. According to posts from many students, some teachers at these schools seemed too often be extremely biased and faced no consequences when students complained about their behavior. A student at Whitney Young noted that a teacher clearly had a bias toward Black students and told her student not to “talk Black.” Another student at Payton described a time they felt discriminated against by a teacher when a teacher said, “Your kind of people don’t belong here.” These two posts from the students - and many more similar posts - indicate that students feel discriminated against by teachers and experienced clear microaggressions or discriminatory behavior from teachers. The interview with the teacher from Jones supported this idea. The teacher specifically recounted a time when a teacher questioned if it was really racist to mix up the names of students of color. This pattern of racist behavior was not uncommon according to the teacher. In addition to this, several news stories have touched on instances of racism in selective enrollment schools including students saying racial slurs in a zoom class at Payton and Lane Tech (Jones, 2016; Kelly 2020). These claims are further validated by CPS’s Office of Equity working with selective enrollment schools to investigate the discrimination taking place (Kelly, 2020). Based on the teacher and student experiences, racism from staff towards other staff members and students seems normalized. While this might be blamed on individual teachers, the common experience across multiple students from several schools suggests a larger institutional problem.

Culture of Racism. Upon looking at the Instagram posts, there also appears to be a culture of White supremacy in these schools. As shared by a student who attended Jones College

Prep, "...the curriculum of this White institution itself is racist. History classes, especially, are a safe space for racist students to share their opinions freely, and topics such as the ongoing genocide of indigenous people are seen as two-sided topics open for debate." As demonstrated through this post, some students believe that Jones consistently allows for racism to occur in classrooms and does not discipline their students for racist behavior. This post also shows how White supremacy seems to be embedded in the curriculum through teachers allowing debates that often invalidate the identities and experiences of students of color. Similar posts supported this concern and student perspective, suggesting a culture that centers White voices while refusing to accommodate students of color.

The interview with the teacher at one of the selective enrollment schools corroborated this by supporting the idea that her school is a place that allows for White supremacy to occur. The teacher specifically noted that she thought the school has many characteristics of White supremacy including hoarding information that impedes the school's ability to complete anti-racist work. The lack of work on preventing racism at the school suggests that the administration does not care for stopping the current culture of White supremacy there. As shared in the teacher interview, this culture of White supremacy was also seen when teachers were found to be discriminating against an applicant with an Arabic sounding last name for no reason when that teacher was applying for a teaching position. According to the teacher, it was later revealed that school administrators used these discriminatory practices when deciding whether to hire certain teachers.

Lack of accountability. Part of what feeds into the overall culture of White supremacy and racism seems to be the fact that many of these selective schools don't appear to hold people accountable for acts of discrimination and racism. This is seen in a statement made by a student at Payton College Prep on the BIPOC Instagram page that noted, "Over my past three years at Payton, I've felt that Payton has never really cared about the students, just about how they look to the outside world." Students felt like the schools often ignored the issues that students face and were more concerned with public image. This is further supported by another student at Payton stating that "Our administration constantly sweeps incidents of racism, sexism, homophobia, and sexual assault under the rug." According to students, this behavior of ignoring issues seems to be common not only for issues concerning racism but any type of discrimination. Based on the student accounts, administration at these schools is perceived to value their reputation over the well-being of their students.

The teacher interview further supports this when she noted that students were begging for anti-racist training for the teachers but were being ignored by administration. She also noted that the administration has a policy of "assuming everyone has the best intentions" which leads to a culture of people being dismissed whenever they bring up injustice and discrimination. She described that administrators often made it so teachers of color had to "dance around the feelings" of their White counterparts, valuing how White teachers feel about being called out on their discriminatory behavior instead of the people of color who experienced that behavior.

Intersectional Issues with Race

Lack of awareness of student struggles. In addition to the issue of racial discrimination, students also reported that these selective schools often don't consider all of the other struggles that their students face, particularly around issues of socioeconomic status. It is a common belief that these schools don't think about how their students come from different backgrounds and have different access to resources, leaving these schools unaware of the issues that their students face. A student from Payton explained her struggle to gain support from her school saying that

“Payton’s counselors, administration all suck when it comes to ensuring low income students, especially Black students, know what their resources are. I was a low income Black girl from Englewood. Nobody told me what my resources were.” In the Jones LSC meeting, the student representative also brought up that many students felt like teachers didn’t consider that students come from different areas with different available resources when they create assignments. While these schools pride themselves on the great amount of diversity they have, it appears that they often do not make a conscious effort to support their diverse student body.

Culture of Assimilation. Racism from teachers and staff members often made students feel as if they did not belong at their high school and left students of color feeling isolated. A student from Payton described how isolated they felt due to their race, writing, “I just feel like if I was White, more people would want to be friends with me.” Another student at Jones described similar feelings saying “I’ve felt like I had to hide my culture because I was too scared White people wouldn’t like me...I feel ashamed of myself.” These sentiments from students show that students of color can feel isolated and alone at these schools. This pattern of feelings from students is concerning because it shows us how the overall high school experience for students of color is not very positive and affirming. This negative feeling among students is potentially a factor in the declining enrollment of Black students at Jones. At the Jones LSC meeting, the principal mentioned that the enrollment of Black students declined from 17% to 11% from 2016 to 2020 and that the enrollment was at 25% in 2010. This dramatic drop in Black student enrollment may very well reflect how students at these schools often feel unwelcome.

This feeling appears to be common among teachers as well according to the teacher interview, which revealed that the teaching environment at Jones was unwelcoming towards Black teachers. Both these teacher and student experiences show that people of color at selective enrollment schools often feel like outsiders.

Similar to how students feel about facing racism, students from lower income households also faced pressure to blend in and were left feeling like outsiders. At the LSC meeting, the student representative mentioned that students would rather miss an assignment than talk to teachers about resource constraints that prevent them from doing work, demonstrating that students felt like they could not bring up any issues that they face. Many students at these selective schools feel the need to blend in with their peers who come from higher income families, resulting in them sometimes feeling like they have to hide some of the struggles they experience. This culture of assimilation and the student feedback critiquing it shows how these schools have also created an environment where students do not feel welcome to share their struggles and feedback to these schools. This discomfort the student felt is directly a result of the pressure students of color feel to conform to the way their White peers act and look like. The student noted that this feeling was not just limited to race but also how they felt pressured to dress and act in a way that ends up disproportionately affecting low-income students of color.

Gender and Sexuality Discrimination

Sexual harassment by teachers and staff. Along with student posts discussing how classism was a prevalent issue at these schools, several students reported dealing with sexism. There were several posts from students and one teacher that discussed incidents of sexual harassment from staff. In an Instagram post a former Payton faculty member described being harassed by another teacher and their disappointment in how administration handled the entire situation. The former staff member specifically recalled having to apologize for defending themselves stating “He complained to our principal and department chair, and I was forced to apologize to him for ‘lashing out’ A few years later, he would finally be forced out of CPS but

how many students had to be harassed, violated, and gaslighted over the years for this to finally happen?” A student at Payton noted several times when a security guard had made inappropriate comments about what she was wearing and eating. Despite these staff members committing sexual harassment, there seemed to be no sort of punishment for them.

According to students, these schools also don't seem to take these sexual harassment claims seriously and don't seem to take any action to support the victims. A student at Jones discussed their frustration with how the school handled their abuse saying “Jones faculty does not care about their students...Students and teachers knew I was in an abusive relationship with another student and after things came out about it, people gossiped... Only after fighting with the school and legal action was taken, was anything done. And when I asked for the video footage for legal purposes, they wouldn't give it to me. He has nothing on his record and with ease is going to college.” In this case, the student felt like the school did not value their input and ignored issues they faced, and similar posts suggested that this was not an isolated, individual case. Both this and the posts discussing sexual harassment indicated that students and even some staff members did not feel like their voices matter.

Culture of Homophobia. Similar to other types of discrimination, there also appears to be a culture of homophobia within these schools. A student at Payton revealed that there was a clear issue of students being casually homophobic stating “In the 2024 Discord server there's a channel called 'Dark Humor' where I've seen countless racist, homophobic, and overall xenophobic memes. In the discord server rules it states that there is 'no hate speech allowed' even though there clearly is.” This first-hand account shows how homophobia is present in these schools with little obvious consequence. This comment also notes other types of discrimination present in this instance, which showcases how these different types of discrimination often are intertwined. The teacher interview revealed that a teacher was making homophobic comments about another teacher, thus homophobia may not just be a problem among students but also teachers as well.

Discussion

These findings reveal that students are often very aware of the discrimination going on at their schools and are significantly impacted by these instances of discrimination. Other work supports this idea further by noting that students are capable of seeing the inequality within their education and understand that they are experiencing unfair treatment from their schools (Hope, Skoog, and Jagers 2014). Because teachers can have such an impact on their students, it is extremely important to work on making schools anti-racist. Because students in high school are still young and are still forming their identities, instances of discrimination can leave a lasting effect on them (Hope, Skoog, & Jagers, 2014).

The patterns of discrimination and lack of educational equity revealed in this study in these selective enrollment schools appear in places other than just Chicago. Not only has there been a rise of BIPOC social media pages for private schools in Chicago, but these BIPOC pages have also appeared in several selective colleges, such as @blackatmichigan and @bipoc.syracuse, as well as in certain corporations. The @blackatmichigan and @bipoc.syracuse Instagram pages both feature several student stories of racism and discrimination that they experienced during their time at these prominent universities. This shows that these issues are not just local but national issues, and that people of color are turning to social media to publicly tell their stories with less risk of punishment. Not only are these issues very common, but these negative experiences can also take a toll on someone and can impair their ability to work well in these environments. These Instagram posts also appear to

show that many students experiencing discrimination are ignored when they report these incidents, suggesting that these issues are larger and deeper than discrimination happening between a small group of people. In addition, newspaper coverage reveals that in addition to the harm being done to students, the district is facing bad publicity, potential lawsuits, an investigation by the CPS Office of Equity, and more. This attention from prominent news sources helps show the growing urgency to address these solutions.

When looking at the issues of discrimination through a CRT and racialized social system, CPS selective enrollment schools are hierarchical in the sense that White students from higher-income backgrounds are able to benefit more than other students with marginalized identities. The fact that the CPS selective enrollment schools are being investigated by the CPS Office of Equity and concerns are being brought up by parents shows that these issues are not just instances of interpersonal discrimination or racism. Looking at how Bonilla-Silva describes racialized social systems, we can see that discrimination has impacted student and teacher interactions, how these issues are handled in these schools, and other factors that come together to form the environment of these schools.

Possible Solutions

Because these issues are larger than just discrimination between a small amount of people, solutions will require a large amount of dedication and resources. There are several possible solutions that schools can use such as anti-racist staff training, minority teacher recruitment/retention, listening to student input, anti-racist curriculum and creating an anti-racist culture at schools. Because there are so many possible solutions, it is difficult to take an in depth look at all of them. This section will focus on anti-racist staff training, minority teacher recruitment/retention, anti-racist curriculum, and listening to student voices because these solutions seem to have the most potential for attention and impact.

One extremely important measure that can be taken to stop discrimination at these schools is that we can listen to student voices. However, student voices are often ignored in school settings. Several Instagram posts note how they felt like their voices were not valued enough by the administration. Students can often provide a unique perspective on how schools handle discrimination issues. These students are the ones who are the most affected by discrimination and should have a say in how it is handled. By centering student voices, many schools will gain a better sense of what approach they need to take in order to stop discrimination. Because each school is different and has different problems, listening to student voices will help schools see the specific problems that exist within the school. This can be done in several ways including creating a student diversity, equity, and inclusion council or sending out anonymous surveys and forms for students to discuss their experiences as a student with a marginalized identity.

In the Instagram posts, many students indicated that they specifically experienced discrimination from teachers and other staff members. Because of this, it is extremely important that the staff at these schools take some kind of anti-racist training that teaches them how to prevent discrimination in a school setting. The article “Anti-racist staff training: Anti-racist school leadership: making ‘race’ count in leadership preparation and development” specifically emphasizes that teachers have the ability to greatly influence race relations at schools (Miller, 2020). In this piece, Miller specifically notes that this anti-racist training must make teachers understand the history of structural racism as they also reflect on their own biases. This training must not only address interpersonal racism but also structural institutional racism because the racism that impacts these students is not limited to interpersonal racism (Miller, 2020).

One of the nation's leading organizations promoting anti-racist education, Learning for Justice, notes that anti-racist training must be ongoing and must value the experiences of people of color (Mcgeehan, 2018). These types of anti-racist training must also force White teachers and educators out of their comfort zones (Mcgeehan, 2018). The teacher interview revealed that a lot of the training that was done protected the feelings of White teachers, preventing them from achieving true growth. Because of this, anti-racist training must push teachers to reflect on their actions and how they may harm students. One important thing to note is that there is not a lot of concrete evidence that evaluates the effectiveness of anti-racist curriculum. Because anti-racist curriculum is a newer concept, there is still not much research on it. Along with listening to student voices and anti-racist training in schools, another solution that should be implemented in schools is minority teacher recruitment and retention. Despite the nation having a 37% minority population and a 44% minority elementary and secondary student population, only 17.3% of elementary and secondary teachers were minority members (Ingersoll et al. 2016). This disparity, when viewed along with data from sources like the Instagram posts, shows the need for a more diverse workplace in school settings. Ingersoll et al. (2016) also notes that recruitment efforts have been put in place in the past and have been effective in increasing the minority teacher force. Having more minority teachers stay at schools for longer allows for teachers to create deeper connections with their students which would benefit students of color greatly. We can increase the amount of minority teachers by focusing on recruiting minority teachers and evaluating our hiring practices to ensure that there is no discrimination going on.

At Jones specifically, a teacher noted that there were instances of discrimination when people were applying for a teaching position. It is thus important to reevaluate the practices that are used to hire teachers for any potential discrimination in order to help improve diversity in the workplace. Recently, several teachers sued CPS for the discriminatory practices that they believed led to a large number of Black teachers being fired (Dudek, 2021). From 2006 to 2017 the percentage of Black teachers dropped from 33% to 21% which is believed to be mostly due to discriminatory factors used to decide which teachers would be fired (Dudek, 2021). This large drop in Black teachers further shows the need to reevaluate how CPS is treating their teachers of color and what factors are considered with hiring/firing staff. To combat low minority teacher representation, there must be an approach that focuses on improving the conditions that are driving these teachers away. This includes creating better teacher salaries, reducing class sizes and creating a positive class environment that makes minority teachers want to stay. There should also be more of an effort to include BIPOC students in Education undergraduate and graduate programs, which would add diversity to the teaching force.

Along with listening to student voices and increasing the amount of minority teachers, creating an anti-racist curriculum is extremely important in addressing different forms of discrimination in schools. Anti-racist work requires us to acknowledge that racist beliefs and behavior is prevalent in all aspects of our lives and has been in the past (Torres, 2020). This requires us to actively fight against racism rather than passively oppose it. The article notes that this can be done by sharing stories of people of color and LGBTQ+ which will benefit both White and non-White students. These stories should be diverse and should also help empower minority students. Providing students with diverse perspectives will force them to expand their understanding of different identities. The article "Culturally Responsive, Antiracist, or Anti-oppressive? How language matters for School Change Efforts" further supports this, noting that anti-racist education must include teaching about White privilege/oppression, critiquing inequalities in structures, addressing racism, and focusing on student experience (Galloway,

Callin, James, Vimegnon, & McCall, 2019). All of these aspects of antiracist curriculum are extremely important because they would help address the many issues that are caused by White supremacy and other forms of discrimination.

Conclusion

Chicago's selective enrollment schools were designed to achieve greater educational equality and diversity within the CPS school system. While these schools provided many students of color from lower-income backgrounds with important educational opportunities, many of these students also faced discrimination. According to many Instagram BIPOC pages, there is a culture of White supremacy that allows discrimination from teachers and the school curriculum itself. In addition to the issue of White supremacy, students also report that these selective schools often don't consider other struggles that their students face when it comes to socioeconomic struggles. Many students also felt like their schools did not support them when they faced sexual harassment in these schools. All of these types of discrimination lead to a culture of discrimination where students felt like their concerns are being ignored by the school.

As these issues of discrimination appear to be deeply rooted in the selective enrollment school system, solutions need to be at the systems level as well. Some solutions that could help with these issues of discrimination are anti-racist staff training, minority teacher recruitment/retention, anti-racist curriculum, and listening to student voices. Both anti-racist staff training and minority teacher recruitment/retention can be helpful in creating a staff that is better equipped to teach a diverse student body. Creating an anti-racist curriculum would help many of these schools address the structural issues that they have and increase and improve dialogue around race within the school community. Listening to student voices is essential because these students have a unique perspective on the discrimination they face. By approaching the issue of discrimination with a multidimensional approach, CPS selective enrollment schools are viewed as racialized social system that requires systematic solutions.

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