

Slide 1

Hi folks, my name is Aurora Turmelle and today I am going to be talking about Tracking and It's Inequitable Roots. My faculty sponsor for this project was Elyse Pratt-Ronco, so let's get started:

Slide 2:

Key terms today are: Tracking, maximally maintained inequality, effectively maintained inequality, deficiency view, structural view, and equity literacy.

Slide 3-4:

So the idea that education is the great equalizer has been floating around for years, and the thought process behind it is that anyone, regardless of their background, will be able to learn the skills needed to be successful later in life, however, that's not true

Slide 5:

In Maine, economic barriers are something we see across the state, and today I'm going to be looking at four counties: Aroostook, Washington, Kennebec and York County.

Slide 6:

So here's a map of the geographic locations of the four counties that I'm talking about today.

Slide 7:

And let's get into their economic breakdown a little bit. So today the median household income for the United States is \$60,294. In Maine the median income is \$55,425. And when you break that down even further, Aroostook's median income is \$39,824, Washington's is \$41,384, Kennebec's is \$52,929, and York county's is \$65,539.

Slide 8:

So going further to look at poverty rates, today the percentage of people in the United States of \$25,100 median income is 14.1%. In Maine, the percentage of people living below the poverty line is 12.5%. When you look at the counties we're talking about, Aroostook county's poverty rate is 17.2%, Washington county's is 18.5%, Kennebec county's is 13.3%, and York county's is 8.4%.

Slide 9:

So here is a graphic that I've made. I'll be comparing four schools today, one from each of the counties. Starting with Aroostook County, we're talking about Northern High School which has a student population of 536 students, median income of \$39,824, and a county poverty rate of 17.2%. In Washington County we have Eastern High School with a student population of 78 students, median income of \$41,384, and a county poverty rate of 18.5%. In Kennebec county we have Central High School with a student population of 438 students, median income of \$52,929 and a county poverty rate of 13.3%. Then, lastly in York county we have Southern High School with a student population of 557 students, median income of \$65,539 and a county poverty rate of 8.4%.

Slide 10:

So now that I've shared that info about the state, I want to hit you guys with this important fact: 22% of children and 47 million people in the United States today live in poverty.

Slide 11:

So let's ask ourselves, what does that mean for these students and their families?

Slide 12:

Well, there are many obstacles that families will face, including limited or no access to living wage jobs (which causes parents to work multiple jobs with no access to paid leave), transportation, medical care, child care, or community programs.

Slide 13:

Because parents are working to survive, they can't be present in school. Because of this, people have adopted the idea that if parents cared about their child's academic success, they would be actively involved in the school setting;

Slide 14:

But that's toxic. These beliefs are biases held by people who don't understand the impact that socioeconomic status on student success and families' ability to participate within the school setting,

Slide 15.

Another obstacle that families face is funding. Schools are largely funded by property tax, which directly affects students' access to AP and Honors courses, teacher quality, and their access to and quality of resources. Because funding is tied to property taxes, this becomes a socially acceptable way to prevent students living in poorer neighborhoods from receiving an equal education to their wealthier peers.

Slide 16:

Maximally maintained inequality is where a person in positions of privilege strive to pass on their advantages to their offspring (Gamoran, 2008). What this can look like is sending students home with fundraising packets. Though it seems small, these packets can demonstrate how privileged classes are better positioned to grasp new opportunities than their disadvantaged counterparts (Gamoran) and causes families to repeatedly demonstrate their poverty.

Slide 17:

Effectively maintained inequality is the process where "socially advantage actors secure for themselves and their families some degree of advantage whenever advantages are commonly possible" (Lucas, 2001). In education, this means economically advantaged parents actively pursue opportunities that allow their children to have "the best of the best". This can look like moving to highly funded school districts with veteran teachers, but it can also look like fundraising on behalf of the school, and advocating that their child be placed into higher level

courses. Forcing these placements means that their child receives the best, while everyone else (primarily low income students) are left to be assigned to whatever courses are left open after the AP and honors courses have been filled by economically advantaged students.

Slide 18:

So whether it's intended or not, socioeconomics influence a child's academic trajectory.

Slide 19-20:

So what is tracking? Tracking is the practice of dividing students into various classes based on perceived academic ability, and has created a tournament style of academic success. Though they're portrayed as the same, subtle differences in tracked classes implicitly suggest that students from lower class backgrounds are "unfit" to learn things beyond a practical curriculum. Further, there is seldom a chance for these students to go up to the next level of classes within a tracked system.

Slide 21:

So how is placement decided in a tracked system? The two most common ways are through standardized testing scores, and subjective teacher recommendations. I have this quote "If teacher recommendations... were used for admitting students into higher tracks that ordinarily would not be, then they might serve to reduce inequality in course taking among students from different social class backgrounds... In practice though, teacher recommendations are frequently used additively, to *reduce* the amount of entry into high-track courses [by low income students]" (Kelly, 2008). So this further plays into maximally maintained inequality as teacher biases that low income students are incapable of handling rigor because they "need the basics... are lazy... don't know anything about anything". That's a quote from Anyon, 2008, quoting teachers and what they've actually said about their low income students.

Slide 22:

Another thing that low income families face is ridicule and blame. It's commonplace to place blame on low income families for their living situation and for their students' academic performance. It's become a battle between educators and families— an "us versus them"— *those people* living in poverty are responsible for their child's academic standing.

Slide 23:

Because of this perception there is a degree of ostracization that happens between families, teachers and the school system as a whole. This process of looking down on low income families and making them responsible for the "gaps" in their education has been labeled as a Deficiency View (Gorksi, 2018).

Slide 24:

It's important to understand the deficiency view, and to "...reframe the debate from focusing on individuals and personalities and instead focus on restructuring a broken system."

Understanding the unfair distribution of resources, opportunity and access is called a Structural

View. Examples can include tax funding for neighboring schools in the same district, and how out of school factors affect parents ability to be present.

Slide 25:

So when working with impoverished students and their families, it's important to "reconsider data humbly, responsibility, and collaboratively. Data shows that low income students perform at lower levels than their wealthier peers, so understanding why (food insecurity, working to help support their family, caring for their siblings, not having access to private tutors, etc) can inform teaching practices and teachers ability to form positive relationships with their students and families.

Slide 26:

So let's get back to tracking in the Maine high school that we've been talking about.

Slide 27:

Oftentimes there are four levels of placement that students can be put into: Advanced Placement, Honors, College Placement, and Applied (which is the lowest level of classes that a student can enroll in, and the title varies from school to school.

Slide 28:

So starting with Southern High School in York County with 557 students, I've highlighted descriptive language that states requirements and skills developed in the course. G9 English stresses the basic literacy skill development and avoids the use of content-specific language. Honors, on the other hand, uses heavy amounts of content-specific language, and stresses the course requires sophisticated ability, and begins by explicitly saying that this is a Pre-AP course. This language in the course description can imply that low income students aren't capable of taking this course because they don't have the same level of academic experience as their wealthier peers.

Slide 29:

Now looking at Northern High School in Aroostook County with 536 students, the course description length of English 1 is four lines while the honors equivalent is eight lines. This demonstrates that more attention was given when writing the honors course description, and further implies the curriculum isn't equal because more is covered in honors than in the regular course.

Slide 30:

Lastly, in Eastern High School in Washington County with a student population of 78 students, the only English class available to students in grade 9 is English 9. Recalling that Washington County's poverty rate is 18.5%, this suggests that the school does not have the resources available to them to offer multiple levels of courses, nor the opportunity to provide professional development so that teachers may develop their skills so that they may be able to teach higher level courses.

Slide 31:

So an important note about this research is that it's missing a lot of data. Unfortunately, during the research phase of this project I didn't have an opportunity to meet with anyone from the four high schools in focus, so I don't have a complete picture as to what goes into designing and therefore writing descriptions of these courses. Further, there was no opportunity to travel to or virtually observe these classes in the four high schools. So therefore, due to these limitations, a large portion of this paper is being made through inferences, and speculation of learning Maine state standards.

Slide 32:

So where do we go from here?

Slide 33:

There is no one right way of working with low income students, but the Equity Literacy Institute describes five abilities that makes it a lot easier. So these five abilities are: Recognize, the ability to recognize even the subtlest bias and inequities. Respond, the ability to respond skillfully and equitably to bias in the immediate term. Redress, the ability to redress biases and inequities by understanding and addressing them at their institutional roots. Actively Cultivate, the ability to actively cultivate equity by applying an equity commitment to every decision, and Sustain, the ability to sustain equity efforts even in the face of discomfort and resistance (Equity Literacy Institute, 2020).

Slide 34:

So digging deeper, educators should actively look for and recognize instances of bias in course descriptions and the effects it has on low income students. Further, administrators should look into course trajectory for students and examine ways in which students are blocked from shifting up in course level or down. Responding should be done within a person's sphere of influence, as it's impossible for one person to make a systemic change. Further, using sphere of influence, educators should look for and advocate for wrap around services that would fill gaps that low socioeconomic families face.

Slide 35:

Redressing means that educators should understand the impact that bias has on low income students and their families, and should use this understanding to advocate against inequitable practices and to make apparent the connection between small scale inequity (such as fundraising packets) and larger systemic issues. Cultivating means educators work towards eradicating inequitable practices and prioritize the interests of their students by examining all practices with an equity lens by default.

Slide 36:

So sustaining equity efforts is more challenging than folks realize, but it's important that educators understand, are ready for, and are equipped to deal with backlash from individuals (primarily parents) that are accustomed to a disproportionate share of resources. A quote from

Paul Gorski that I love is “there is no path to educational equity that does not involve a redistribution of access and opportunity [and resources].

Slide 37:

So, thank you so much for your time, and what questions are there?