

Prompt C: Education is both a social good and structurally unjust. Explain your understanding of this contradiction and ways it can be addressed.

The paradox of education is that it serves as both a social good and is structurally unjust. Throughout history, democratic societies have recognized the importance of an educated populace, which empowers the individual and progresses society. An educated citizenry has higher economic outputs, is more engaged in civic and social life, and tends toward higher levels of personal satisfaction. However, these education systems have long been biased, furthering socio-economic stratifications and thus perpetuating the paradox, as education is both a tool for social progress and a means to reinforce systemic injustices.

This is evident in the American education system. Our system favors students with educated parents, economic stability, and emotional stability and safety in their home environment over their marginalized peers, allowing them access to better resources for homework and extracurricular activities that supplement their in-class learning. Meanwhile, marginalized students grappling with food insecurity or limited access to resources are often unable to fully engage in the learning process, resulting in a persistent achievement gap that starts as early as elementary school and intensifies through high school. This only serves to widen generational socio-economic divides.

Moreover, the content and structure of educational materials, both historically and today, further the narratives of the oppressors. Schools are most often taught in the language of the oppressor and tell historical narratives that elevate the oppressors as the champions of history. This system strips students of their personal histories, languages, and cultures. It also molds children into members of a capitalist society, which defines personal success by means of economic output.

To combat these injustices, one must be aware of them and work to minimize them. In any classroom, this can be done by meeting students where they are and ensuring that the classroom is a safe environment for all, a prerequisite for any formal learning. By regularly checking in with students and showing empathy towards their personal struggles, educators can foster such an environment. When it comes time to teach material, educators, especially in social studies, must be aware of the prejudices of history. By teaching students to engage with history critically and identify and challenge biases, educators can best prepare them to engage with their world after graduation. This is also accomplished by implementing innovative teaching styles that engage all learners and promote a sense of ownership in one's own education. Such ownership can encourage students to view education not as a means to an end, but as an end in itself.

This important work demands humility on the part of the educator. Educators must recognize the necessity for collaborative learning and the need to establish a reciprocal relationship with students that transcends traditional power dynamics. By fostering an environment that encourages open dialogue, self-reflection, and inclusivity, educators can strive to mitigate the structural injustices within the education system, empowering students to become critical thinkers and active participants in shaping a more equitable society.