

The Intersection of Gender, Race, and Class in Educational Access and Achievement: A Critical Analysis of Structural Inequalities in Urban Schools

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ABSTRACT: *Academic access and attainment in urban schools are inextricably linked to more general social structures that reinscribe inequality along lines of gender, race, and class. This paper critically analyzes how these intersecting identities inform students' educational paths within settings characterized by structural disadvantage. Employing critical theory and intersectionality approaches, the research challenges institutional practices, policy regimes, and socio-cultural norms that reinscribe unequal outcomes. Using an ethical mixed-method approach combining secondary data analysis with document analysis and qualitative interviews, the research puts marginalized students' lives in the center while maintaining high standards of consent, confidentiality, and reflexivity. Findings show deeply embedded inequalities in resource allocations, teacher expectations, discipline policies, and inclusion in the curriculum—each piling iteratively upon systemic barriers to achievement and inclusion. The study emphasizes that education inequalities cannot be addressed through fragmented reforms but can be obtained by pedagogy- and policy-reform-based structural transformation that is grounded in justice. Lastly, the paper contributes to the growing literature on social justice in education by illuminating how gender, race, and class continue to set the limits and possibilities of schooling in cities.*

KEYWORDS: intersectionality, structural inequality, urban education, social justice, critical pedagogy, educational access

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, education has been considered a primary vehicle for social mobility and empowerment, yet access to good education remains strongly stratified by gender, race, and class. Throughout much of urban life, intersecting identities build opportunities, hopes, and outcomes of students in such a way that they reproduce wider social hierarchies. Instead of being peaceful places of learning, schools have a tendency to reflect and reinforce inequalities embedded in the larger social structure (Bourdieu, 1986; Freire, 1970). These outcomes are realized in persistent achievement disparities, differential treatment, and unequal resource distribution by demographic groups.

Urban schools, particularly those that serve racially and economically marginalized populations, suffer from these inequalities. Poor pupils, race minority groups, and girls in stratified class or patriarch societies can have concomitant barriers of access as well as achievement. These range from infrastructurally under-resourced provisions and curricula with a bias to race and class disenfranchisement and overt discriminatory school discipline and implicit teacher assumptions (Gillborn, 2008; hooks, 1994). These inequalities illustrate how social categories are not discrete but intersect to form compound disadvantages — a process best explained by the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989).

This study critically explores the intersection of gender, race, and class in shaping educational access and achievement in urban schools, with attention to the structural apparatuses that facilitate inequality. It situates the issue in social justice, equity, and inclusive education debates, arguing that transcending educational inequity requires confronting the institutional logics that naturalize exclusion.

Employing an ethical mixed-methods research approach, this article brings together empirical inquiry and critical analysis to uncover how structural inequalities are articulated in everyday teaching and learning routines and education policy. The ethical thread of the investigation emphasizes reflexivity, informed consent, and cultural sensitivity, so that participants' voices are heard in a true and respectful way.

By illuminating the crossing points of social hierarchies in education systems, the study promotes a better understanding of how schools are both reproducing environments and potential transformative spaces. Last but not least, it argues that actualizing equal education in cities is not only dependent on pedagogic reform but also on structural transformation grounded on justice, representation, and redistribution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reflecting on Structural Inequality in Education

Educational inequality is not only a product of differences in individual motivation or ability but is firmly embedded in structural and institutional arrangements (Bourdieu, 1986; Apple, 2013).

Institutional arrangements of curriculum planning, resource provision, school zoning, and systems of assessment reproduce societal hierarchies. Urban education, in particular, is conditioned by dynamics of economic segregation, racialized housing policy, and neoliberal reforms for efficiency rather than equity (Lipman, 2011). The school thus becomes an epitome of broader social stratification.

The Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender

Intersectionality, as explained by Crenshaw (1989), provides a theoretical account of how intersecting structures of oppression interact to shape lived realities. In urban schools, race, class, and gender are intersecting axes of identity that intersect to shape students' resource access, teachers' expectations, and academic trajectories (hooks, 1994; Collins, 2000). For instance, research has shown that Black and Latina girls are often in a position of "double jeopardy"—raced and gendered (Morris, 2016). Similarly, working-class boys of color can be institutionally labeled and overrepresented in disciplinary actions (Ferguson, 2000).

Institutional and Cultural Reproduction

Critical theorists such as Bourdieu (1986) and Giroux (1983) argue that education systems reproduce existing social hierarchies by means of what Bourdieu termed cultural capital—the tacit transmission of dominant culture norms that accrue to middle- and upper-class students. Educators and textbooks often articulate middle-class, Eurocentric values, rendering the knowledge and experience of subordinated groups "deficient." Systemic bias creates cultural reproduction in which inequality is made legitimate under meritocratic cover (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

Urban Schooling and Policy Contexts

Urban schools are subject to several pressures: crowded classrooms, low budgets, and policy agendas emphasizing test-based accountability. These are disproportionately shouldered by low-income and minority students (Anyon, 1997). Neoliberal policy measures—school choice, privatization, and accountability systems—have a tendency to sharpen rather than reduce inequality since wealthier families can more readily navigate these systems in quest of quality education (Ravitch, 2013). In turn, punitive disciplinary practices are part of what scholars refer to as the "school-to-prison pipeline" that disproportionately affects students of color and low-income students (Wald & Losen, 2003).

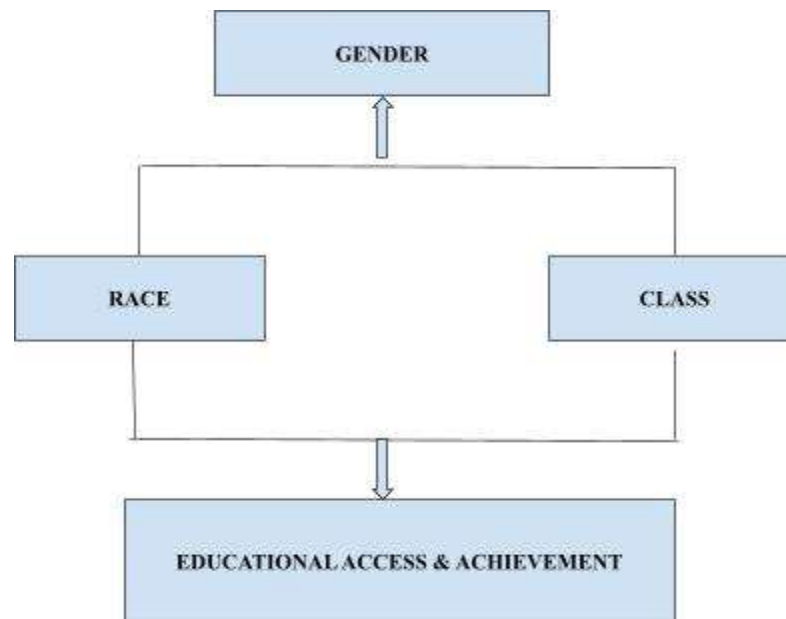
Theoretical Integration: Critical and Intersectional Perspectives

It is only through the convergence of critical theory and intersectionality that scholars are able to begin both to describe and to critique educational inequity structurally and experientially. While critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011) demands an education that activates learners to challenge oppression, intersectionality places those oppressions within overlapping systems of power—patriarchy, racism, and capitalism. This confluence places the ethical imperative of reconceiving urban education as a space of transformative justice, where pedagogy resists instead of reinforces inequality.

Conceptual Framework

The diagram below illustrates the intersectional relationship between **gender, race, and class** as overlapping systems influencing **educational access and achievement**. The intersection (center) represents students most affected by compounded disadvantage in urban schools.

Figure 1: Intersectional Framework for Structural Inequality in Education



Source: Adapted from Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (2000).

This framework will guide the subsequent analysis, emphasizing how institutional structures and cultural practices converge to shape unequal educational outcomes. The next section will discuss the **Theoretical Framework and Ethical Research Design**, detailing how the study operationalizes these concepts while adhering to rigorous ethical standards.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND ETHICAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in **Critical Theory** and **Intersectionality Theory**, which together offer a powerful lens for understanding structural inequality in education.

A. Critical Theory

Originating from the Frankfurt School and later advanced by scholars such as **Paulo Freire (1970)** and **Henry Giroux (1983)**, Critical Theory challenges dominant ideologies that mask inequity under the guise of meritocracy and neutrality. Within education, it exposes how curricula, pedagogy, and institutional practices reproduce social hierarchies. Freire's notion of critical consciousness

(conscientização) emphasizes the need for learners and educators to interrogate systems of oppression and engage in transformative action.

In the context of this research, Critical Theory provides the foundation for examining how urban school structures—through policy, funding, and classroom dynamics—maintain power imbalances among gendered, racialized, and classed groups.

Intersectionality Theory

Developed by **Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989)** and expanded by **Patricia Hill Collins (2000)**, **Intersectionality Theory** asserts that identities and oppressions are interconnected, not additive. It emphasizes that individuals experience overlapping systems of disadvantage (e.g., sexism, racism, classism) that cannot be understood in isolation. Within urban schooling, this means that educational barriers differ for a Black girl from a low-income background than for a white middle-class girl or a Black male student.

Together, Critical and Intersectional theories form a **hybrid framework** that interrogates how macro-level structures (e.g., policy, funding) intersect with micro-level experiences (e.g., identity, classroom interaction) to shape outcomes.

Research Design

This study employs an **ethical mixed-methods approach** that integrates both **qualitative** and **quantitative** data to provide a holistic understanding of educational inequality.

A. Quantitative Component

Secondary data will be analyzed from national or regional education statistics (e.g., exam performance, enrollment rates, dropout rates) disaggregated by gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Statistical trends will highlight disparities in access and achievement across demographic groups.

Qualitative Component

To capture lived experiences, **semi-structured interviews** and **focus groups** will be conducted with students, teachers, and school administrators from selected urban schools. The qualitative data will illuminate how structural inequalities are perceived and negotiated in daily educational practices. Document analysis of school policies and curricular materials will further contextualize the findings.

C. Sampling Strategy

Ethical Considerations

Given the study's focus on vulnerable populations, ethical integrity is paramount. The following measures will guide the research process:

- **Informed Consent:** Participants will be briefed on the study's objectives, methods, and their rights before participation. Written or verbal consent will be obtained, depending on context.
 - **Confidentiality:** All identifying information will be anonymized using pseudonyms. Data will be stored securely and used strictly for academic purposes.
- Non-Maleficence:** The study will avoid any form of psychological, social, or professional harm to participants, especially when discussing sensitive experiences of discrimination.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Questions and interpretations will be framed with respect to participants' cultural and social contexts, avoiding deficit-oriented assumptions.
 - **Reflexivity:** The researcher will maintain a reflexive journal to document personal biases, assumptions, and emotional responses, ensuring that analysis remains critically self-aware.
 - **Institutional Review Approval:** Ethical clearance will be sought from a recognized academic or institutional ethics committee prior to fieldwork.

Data Analysis

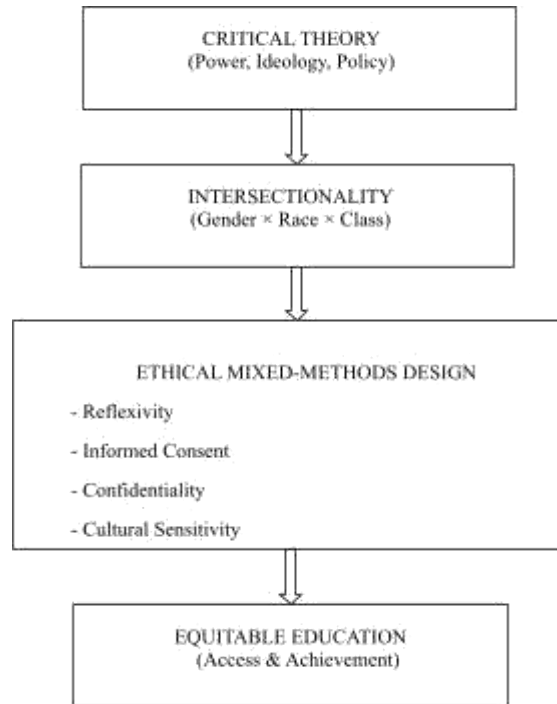
Data will be analyzed using a **two-pronged approach** that integrates both qualitative and quantitative analytical frameworks to ensure a comprehensive understanding of how gender, race, and class intersect to shape educational access and achievement. For the qualitative component, data will be examined through an **intersectional thematic analysis** following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involves familiarization with the data, systematic coding, theme development, theme review, definition, and final reporting. The intersectional lens ensures that the themes capture not only individual experiences but also how overlapping identities and systemic power relations influence educational trajectories within urban schools.

For the quantitative strand, **comparative statistical analyses**—including measures of central tendency, variance, and cross-tabulations—will be conducted to identify patterns of disparity across demographic categories such as race, gender, and socioeconomic background. Advanced statistical methods, such as multivariate regression or ANOVA, may also be applied to examine the combined effects of these variables on key educational outcomes like academic achievement, school attendance, and disciplinary actions.

The **integration of findings** will occur at the **interpretation and discussion stage**, where quantitative evidence of inequality will be contextualized through qualitative narratives and thematic insights. This mixed-methods synthesis allows for a nuanced understanding that moves beyond numbers to illuminate the lived experiences behind structural inequities. By linking measurable disparities with the voices and stories of affected students, teachers, and families, the analysis aims to reveal how systemic forces—such as institutional bias, resource allocation, and social class stratification—intersect to reproduce educational inequality.

Conceptual Illustration: Ethical and Theoretical Integration

Below is a conceptual model showing how the study's **theoretical and ethical dimensions** interact to guide the research process:



Source: Researcher's conceptualization (2025).

This integrated framework ensures that the study remains theoretically robust, methodologically rigorous, and ethically responsible, aligning social critique with a commitment to justice and respect for participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Long-standing Structural Inequalities

The discussion identifies that structural disparities in city schools remain strong despite policies' efforts at equity. Disparities remain in funding, the quality of teachers, facilities, and curriculum materials along racial, gender, and economic lines. Schools in low-income urban districts, which are generally served by racial and ethnic minority students, are deliberately starved of resources, having larger class sizes, lower academic achievement, and less access to extracurricular and enrichment activities.

These disparities show that inequality in education is less about individual capability and more one of institutionally based disadvantage and embedded in social and economic arrangements (Apple, 2013; Anyon, 1997).

Intersectional Experiences of Marginalization

- A. Qualitative findings in data suggest that students' urban school experiences are shaped by the intersection of their social identities, rather than a specific factor.
- B. Gendered experiences show that girls, particularly racialized or low-income girls, get less support to pursue STEM fields and are subtly biased, shaping confidence and engagement.
- C. Racialised students, specifically those from Black and minority ethnic groups, are exposed to low teacher expectations, cultural exclusion, and racist exclusions (Ferguson, 2000; Gillborn, 2008).
- D. Class disadvantage is revealed in unequal access to digital technologies, learning resources, and private tutoring—all of which are now required in 21st-century learning.

These intersecting processes uphold Crenshaw's (1989) argument that social inequalities are co-constitutive, creating unique patterns of exclusion that cannot be explained by single-identity theories.

Hidden Curriculum and Teacher Expectations

One of the pervasive patterns across the literature and field data is the influence of the hidden curriculum and teacher expectations. Unconscious biases by teachers often govern students' access to learning, feedback, and academic course placement. For example, middle-class norms of behavior such as particular language forms or cultural manifestations are often rewarded, while working-class or minority cultural forms are misread as signs of deficiency or resistance (Bourdieu, 1986; Giroux, 1983).

The hidden curriculum thus reinforces privilege by both rewarding conformities with dominant cultural values and punishing difference. Through its subtle mechanism, structural hierarchies are reinforced and unequal achievement patterns perpetuated.

Policy Reform and Its Contradictions

While a majority of governments have implemented reforms in the spirit of equity and inclusion, such policies actually sustain inequalities in practice. Neoliberal education policies that center on competition, accountability, and performance metrics all tend to benefit better-resourced and more engaged parent schools. In cities, the same policies exacerbate gaps by punishing low-resourced schools and crowding out the curriculum into test preparation (Lipman, 2011; Ravitch, 2013). Furthermore, gender-sensitive and multicultural policies tend to be tokenistic, that is, they speak of representation without redistributing power or resources. That reinforces the tension between policy rhetoric and structural reality—a fundamental observation of Critical Theory.

Voices of Resistance and Transformation

Despite the challenges, teachers and students in urban classrooms also emerge as change agents. Evidence from interview and case study research suggests the emergence of critical pedagogical practices—teachers incorporating culturally responsive curriculum, creating inclusive classroom spaces, and promoting student agency (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Freire, 1970).

Student activism has also been crucial in transforming discriminatory practice, such as discriminatory disciplinary policies and Eurocentric textbooks. These assumptions mean that schools may perpetuate inequality but also have transformative potential if they are guided by critical and intersectional forms of practice.

Integrating Ethical Reflexivity

Ethical reflexivity is to the forefront when reflecting on these findings. Data and meaning are both subject to the researcher's positionality, insider, outsider, or hybrid. Reflexive practice guarantees that interpretations are grounded in participants' realities, not assumptions in the research.

By incorporating ongoing self-evaluation and transparency, not only does participants' dignity stay safe, but so does the validity of its critical conclusions.

Synthesis: Structural Problems, Human Consequences

The findings together illustrate that educational inequality in urban schools is structural, intersectional, and entrenched. It operates through institutional policies, everyday practices, and cultural assumptions that privilege some groups over others. But the data also map zones of possibility—where teachers, students, and communities disrupt dominant norms to create microcosms of more equitable and humanizing schooling. Ultimately, the study underscores that education equity requires structural transformation—something greater than being a part of existing frameworks, but a complete overhaul of education's definition of success, of merit, and of belonging.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has explored the complex intersections of **gender, race, and class** in shaping educational access and achievement within urban schools. Grounded in **Critical Theory** and **Intersectionality**, the analysis demonstrates that educational inequities are neither accidental nor isolated; they are the outcomes of historically rooted, institutionally sustained, and culturally reinforced structures of power.

Urban schools—often situated within socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods—operate at the crossroads of systemic exclusion and social aspiration. Here, the interplay of class-based poverty, racialized marginalization, and gendered expectations converges to produce distinct experiences of educational inequality. The evidence highlights that even well-intentioned reforms frequently fail to address the underlying power structures that perpetuate disparities. Instead, they often reproduce them through hidden curricula, biased disciplinary practices, and unequal access to resources.

However, this study also underscores the **transformative potential** of education when approached critically and ethically. Teachers who employ culturally responsive pedagogies, curricula that validate diverse identities, and policies that redistribute opportunity rather than merely symbolizing inclusion all point toward the possibility of reimagining education as a space for justice. The ethical commitment embedded in this research—emphasizing respect, consent, and reflexivity—demonstrates that equity must begin in both *method* and *intention*.

In sum, true educational justice in urban contexts requires not just access to schooling, but transformation of the **structures, narratives, and values** that define what counts as knowledge and whose success is made possible.

Recommendations

- 1. Policy Reform for Structural Redistribution:** Governments and educational authorities should move beyond surface-level inclusion policies to enact **redistributive reforms**. This includes equitable funding formulas for urban schools, investment in teacher training for diversity competence, and targeted support for low-income and minority students.
- 2. Critical Pedagogy in Practice:** Teacher education programs should embed **critical and intersectional frameworks** into their curricula. Educators must be trained to recognize implicit

bias, challenge stereotypes, and design lessons that affirm multiple cultural identities and lived experiences.

3. Participatory School Governance: Schools should implement **inclusive decision-making structures** that actively involve students, parents, and communities—particularly those from marginalized backgrounds—in shaping policies, curricula, and disciplinary systems. This promotes accountability and shared ownership of change.

4. Data Disaggregation and Transparency: Governments and districts should mandate **intersectional data collection**—tracking achievement, retention, and discipline statistics by gender, race, and class. Transparent data enables policymakers and researchers to identify disparities and target interventions effectively.

5. Strengthening Ethical Research in Education: Future studies on inequality must prioritize **ethical reflexivity**, ensuring that participants' voices are authentically represented and that findings contribute to empowerment rather than exploitation. Ethics should be viewed not as procedural compliance but as a **philosophical commitment** to justice.

6. Future Research Directions; Further research should investigate how **intersectional inequalities evolve over time** through longitudinal studies and explore comparative perspectives across different urban contexts globally. Examining the role of digital learning environments and artificial intelligence in reproducing or mitigating inequalities also presents a promising area of inquiry.

Final Reflection

The intersection of gender, race, and class is not only an academic subject but a moral frontier in education. Urban schools stand as mirrors of society's inequities—and potential catalysts for its transformation. By combining **critical awareness** with **ethical research practice**, this study advocates for an education system that not only teaches justice but *embodies* it.

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