

CALL FOR PAPERS

A Workshop on Vulnerability and Education

April 24 - 25, 2015

Amherst College, Amherst, MA

This workshop explores public education through the lens of vulnerability theory. Public education is a foundational means whereby the state fulfills its responsibility to structure institutions responsive to human vulnerability and need for resilience. Yet the state seems to be withdrawing or lessening its commitment to public education, and there has been a steady growth in privatization over the past half century. Increased funding for charter schools and voucher programs, and the increased number of students in private education and homeschool settings have diverted and decreased the availability of funds for general public education.

Public education is not only essential for individuals, but also crucial to the effective operation of a democratic state. It is a primary and important component of the collective resources that give people the “resilience” necessary to both respond to challenges and take advantage of opportunities as they are presented throughout the life course. And it also promotes the educational and civic resources essential for maintaining democratic governance and generating a sense of “solidarity” in a diverse society. Yet public education has been perceived as failing to fulfill both these essential functions: its educational mandate for the individual student and societal aspirations in regard to our most pressing concerns of inequality, segregation, and social inclusion.

The kind of resilience provided by an educational setting primed to foster tolerance and respect for difference and democracy is particularly important for children. A child’s experiences with diverse positions and people occur at a time when he or she will be most open to acceptance and change. Segregation prevents all children from acquiring experience with those of different races, classes and backgrounds. In addition, as public schools have become increasingly segregated by race and class, schools are forced to provide higher levels of both educational and social services for ever more challenged students. The poorest schools with the fewest resources are often dealing with students whose problems are the most complex.

Recent studies show that the United States ranks well behind other industrialized nations in both literacy and math achievement -- this despite higher levels of spending per student. Deficiencies in education during childhood are extremely difficult to correct later. But the converse is also true: studies show that dollars invested in early childhood yield tremendous (and disproportionate) returns across the life-course. Education can compensate for or even negate disadvantages in other areas of life. A solid foundation, such as that provided by the pre-school program Head Start, may trump poverty as a predictor of success later in school, just as failure to gain that foundation may result in diminished opportunities and compromised abilities.

We invite a broad array of perspectives on education, resilience, inequality, and vulnerability.

The workshop is being convened by Martha Albertson Fineman, Kristin Bumiller, and Alice Hearst.

Vulnerability and Resilience Background Reading at:
<http://web.gs.emory.edu/vulnerability>

Submissions Procedure:

Email a proposal of several paragraphs as a Word or PDF document by January 19, 2015 to Rachel Ezrol, rezrol@emory.edu. Decisions will be made by February 2 and working paper drafts will be due April 6 so they can be duplicated and distributed prior to the Workshop.

Workshop Details:

The Workshop begins Friday at 4PM at Amherst College. Dinner follows Friday’s session. Panels continue on Saturday from 9 AM to 5 PM; breakfast and lunch will be provided.

Issues For Discussion May Include:

- How have attitudes and perceptions about public education changed over time?
- How does the structure and funding of public education in the US differ from those that exist in other industrialized liberal democracies?
- What are the diverse expectations placed upon public schools in the US and where do those expectations create tensions in schools’ missions?
- How should the responsibility for educating children as citizens be parsed between families and schools? Between federal, state, and local governments?
- How do schools interact with other public and private institutions, such as child welfare services and juvenile justice systems, to address the vulnerability of students?
- How can we understand the state’s control over education and contextualize the impact of federalism?
- What is the role of parental rights in framing questions of school choice? How might we conceptualize a child’s ‘right’ to a future as an educated adult?
- How should the state regulate private schools? Homeschooling?
- What are the effects of segregating students by race? By gender? By class? How does the law treat these different bases for segregation? How should it?
- What obligations do public schools have to children who have special educational needs, from physical, emotional or social differences? And to what extent have public schools met these obligations?
- What are the implications of the fact that the Supreme Court has ruled that there is no right to an equal education under the US Constitution?