



University
of Victoria

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

SUZANNE WOOD

Bachelor of Arts (Cum Laude) (Columbia University, 2015)
Associate of Arts (High Honors) (Santa Monica College, 2009)

**“Teachers’ Challenges Fostering Equitable Classrooms:
Why Students Who Need More Get Less”**

Department of Sociology

Monday, August 13, 2018
10:30am
Cornett Building
Room A317

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Garry Gray, Department of Sociology, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Martha McMahon, Department of Sociology, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Natalee Popadiuk, EPLS, University of Victoria

Chair of Oral Examination:

Dr. Maia Hoeberechts, Department of Computer Science, University of Victoria

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies

Abstract

Despite the common mantra of individual freedom, the United States is widely recognized as a country with a high degree of inequality. The public education system is organized into democracies that promise all children equal opportunities, yet the typical outcome is often a further reproduction of collective inequalities. Schools are one of few spaces where true potential for liberation exists, but despite the best intentions of many educators and administrators, function more as sites of oppression. These dynamics affect how teachers teach and students learn, culminating in unintended consequences at the individual level in the form of student learning outcomes, to the societal level, reflecting in further inequality.

Drawing on qualitative data from fourteen in-depth interviews with experienced elementary school teachers in Los Angeles, this thesis illustrates how teachers experience and navigate these conflicting tensions around the pursuit of equity in the classroom, and how institutional and systemic features affect this process. The idea that a teacher's teaching is not the sole determinant of student success is not new, many other factors and indicators have become widely recognized included but not limited to: family support and background, social skills, class, ethnicity and etcetera. Interviewing teachers at varying levels of socio economic status provided clear insight into many systemic barriers built into the structure of the institution of education. These barriers operate as hoops that both teachers and their students must jump through, in order to achieve overall success. Moreover, the hoops are not static, but change with every different group of kids entering every classroom. The lower a school's population gets in socio economic status, the more hoops appear and the higher they get. This thesis argues that in order to navigate these barriers teachers must be provided the necessarily leeway to assess each specific class and adapt their curriculum and strategies to meet the needs of those particular students. Unfortunately, in the current test-score driven system, schools with the lowest performing students are the ones whose administrations are under the most pressure to fix it. As such, the teachers that need this leeway the most are the ones whose administrations keep them on the tightest rein, further reducing their ability to truly utilize their knowledge to implement innovative and effective strategies in the classroom. The result is the self-perpetuating cycle of inequality reproduction that we can see across North America today.