

Throughout my four years of study at EMU, I have basically learned three things: 1) the environmental and social problems in our world are overwhelming 2) most of these are caused by unjust systems and 3) I, as an affluent American, benefit from these systems.

Our political, social, and economic systems are structured to benefit the powerful and take from the powerless.

In the face of such overwhelming injustice, what can we do?

Ten minutes is not nearly enough time to address this question and I will not attempt to. Instead, I would like to focus on a case study. A quick look at the US education system may give us some insight into the larger issue of structural violence.

To begin, what exactly is structural violence?

Johan Galtung, a peace theorist, defined violence as the 'avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs'. The key here is Galtung's use of the word avoidable. If the fulfillment of a need is possible, but not realized, it is avoidable and considered to be violence.

Structural violence occurs when the perpetrators of an avoidable violence are not easily identifiable. Galtung writes 'The violence is built into the structure and shows up as...unequal life chances.' A singular person is not to blame instead the structure is the problem.

But where did the structure come from? Who created it? Paul Farmer's work, *Pathologies of Power*, argues that people in power create the structures and in doing so stack the deck in their favor. In this view, structural violence is caused by the uneven distribution of power. More simply, it means that those who make the rules win, and those who don't, lose.

Structural violence, then, is a) 'the avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs' b) caused by an indirect source and c) created and maintained by those in power.

Does the inequality in the US education system fit into this three-fold definition of structural violence?

First, is it 'an avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs'? The Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes education as a fundamental human right (Article 26). But is it avoidable? Can we give every kid in the US an excellent

education? Sweden, the Netherlands and Finland have consistently ranked higher than the US in language, math and science proficiency. Yet they spend less per student and have a lower per capita income.

As the wealthiest nation in the world, resource scarcity is not the problem. We have the tools to equip every child, but we don't. At West Philadelphia High School, in the city of Philadelphia 95% of eleventh graders fail to pass basic math and reading exams. There is a discrepancy between the potential and actual fulfillment of the right to education. This discrepancy in the education system is violence.

But who is blame when a child fails a proficiency exam? The ill-equipped teacher? The overworked single mother? The 'stupid' child? To say 'yes' to any of these would be too easy and far too simplistic. The less-than-comfortable answer is that the real culprit is the system.

Although funding alone cannot solve inequality, the fact remains that our school system is equipping children inequitably. Schools in Pennsylvania are funded primarily by property taxes. Different communities have, of course, different property values that allow for different levels of taxation. Because of this system, wealthy communities have access to more money for education than poor communities do. In many cases, funding is not shared with surrounding communities so over a small geographical area there can be big differences in funding and performance.

Lower Merion High School is just 6.2 miles from West Philadelphia High School. Yet close to 90% of their students are consider proficient or higher in math and reading. Vastly different from the 5% of students achieving proficiency at West Philadelphia.

As you may have guessed Lower Merion is a wealthier community. Only 7% of students are considered low income and the school board is able to spend upwards of \$20,000 per student per year. Compare that to West Philadelphia, where 92% of students are considered low income and about \$12,000 is spent per student per year (Inquirer School Profiles).

Suburban kids, like those at Lower Merion, have access to the best resources and the most experienced teachers, so of course they succeed at higher rates than kids without these tools. It's all about resource distribution. The current system distributes resources unevenly.

Who created this unjust system and who maintains it? In most cases, school boards, county commissioners and local elected officials decide who gets what money. The vast majority of these people are wealthy. They have both political and economic power. Naturally they use this power to give their kids access to excellent resources. But this is where the powerless end up with the short end of the stick. West Philadelphia does not have the political or economic resources to give their kids an

excellent education. As long as power is concentrated in wealthy, suburban communities, our education system will continue to exacerbate inequality.

In my experience working with kids in both traditional and alternative learning programs, I have seen this inequity first-hand. Some kids are simply not given the tools to succeed and then are punished for 'not behaving'.

As a Christian, I am outraged by the injustice of the education system and believe that faith can and should inform our response to structural violence. For me it comes back to the command to love my neighbor. What course of action is most loving? There are two possibilities I would like to highlight.

The first is based on the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke chapter 10. We're all familiar with the plot; a man is robbed and beaten. A priest and a Levite ignore him, but a Samaritan stops to help. He cleans the man up, puts him on his donkey and takes him to an inn. The Samaritan pays the innkeeper to care for the man. In other words, he gives of the resources that he has received.

As Christians who take seriously the command to love our neighbors, we must give of the resources that we have been given. In terms of education, what does this look like? Other than financial, the resources we have to offer personally are primarily knowledge and time. We can give of these resources by teaching or volunteering in a community with limited resources. Lots of programs, including City Year and Mission Year, connect qualified individuals with service opportunities in education.

Since the creation of alternative service programs in the mid-twentieth century, Mennonites have been leaders in the field of domestic and international service. We are comfortable with the ideas and philosophies behind volunteerism and self-sacrifice. But is this enough? I would argue that service only addresses the effects of an unjust education system and not the cause.

The cause, in this case, is unequal distribution of power in the education system. By lobbying for a different funding system, we can prevent injustice.

Mennonites are not accustomed to challenging and changing systems. Historically, we have avoided lobbying and advocating, although this has changed dramatically in the last 30 years.

The fact is that creating systemic change increases conflict in the short term. Few residents of Lower Merion are going to take kindly to the suggestion that we redistribute the power and resources from their community to West Philadelphia. In this way, working to end systemic violence may necessitate deliberate agitation of conflict.

Good Schools Pennsylvania is an organization that is advocating for equitable school funding. They've only been around since 2001, but already have some major successes. Just last year, the funding formula was altered to include parameters such as poverty. Basically it means that schools that have fewer local resources are getting more federal funding to remedy inequality.

This year West Philadelphia High School received twice as much federal funding per student per year than Lower Merion High School. It's a small but important step towards an equitable system.

These examples show that there are two effective ways to combat our unjust education system 1) give of the resources we have received through service and volunteerism and 2) lobby and advocate for equitable funding of school systems.

Can these two simple conclusions lead us to broad conclusions about combating structural violence more generally? I would propose that both service and advocating for change can be effective strategies. The former is working within the system to address short-term injustice and the latter is focused on long-term prevention.

Simultaneously working within and against the system may seem contradictory. But they are in fact two necessary and interdependent efforts. There is tension between them, but it is a constructive paradox that builds on the resources of each other.

If we are to do true peacebuilding, we must address structural violence. Service and individual change is needed, but without advocacy it is short-sighted. As Christians, we must continue to serve those around us, but must also embrace the role of advocacy in building a more just world.

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