

STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

LESSON THREE



CASCADING LIVES
DIGITAL TOOLKIT





Lesson 3: Structural Inequality

Everyone faces obstacles, but the type and severity of the challenges we face depends a lot on where we grow up. In this section, students will read two biographical stories and investigate how place matters in our lives with particular attention to the ways that unequal education systems can produce advantages and obstacles. This section introduces students to the ideas of structural inequality and intergenerational mobility and encourages them to see how blocked chances and additional burdens build up through the course of a life and over generations.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify several systems of historical and structural inequality - especially those linked to education systems - and be able to recognize them in the context of an individual story
- Apply a variety of tools to examine and compare particular school districts and think about how past inequalities shape lives today
- Distinguish between systems and personal experience and consider how structural inequalities can *feel* like personal issues. Identify how people make choices (e.g. to continue going to school, to take a particular job, to get married or not) in the face of structural inequalities

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What does structural inequality look like in and across schools in the U.S.?
- How do individual people experience and make sense of structural inequality in their own lives?

MATERIALS

- Biographical stories for Deborah and Tonya
- Flossie Jones Oral History: <https://album.atlantahistorycenter.com/digital/collection/LAohr/id/121>
- Opportunity Atlas: <https://www.opportunityatlas.org>
- Money, Race, and Success: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/04/29/upshot/money-race-and-success-how-your-school-district-compares.html>

CONCEPTS

- Intergenerational mobility: The movement of a child into a different socioeconomic position from their parents. The American Dream is a story of upward intergenerational mobility. In the United States, parents' level of education is a strong predictor of their children's socioeconomic position. Many economic and social forces influence how this happens.
- Structural inequalities: The historical and current systems that result in different life opportunities and pathways for people.



ACTIVITY 1: LIVING THROUGH STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

Looking back on the story of someone's life, the challenges that individuals face can feel to a reader like they are the result of bad decisions or bad luck. But we know that obstacles and challenges are more likely to be felt in some places than others. The durable way that systems treat people inequitably is called structural inequality. This happens in different ways in different places, from health care to housing markets. Education is one of the core systems that creates lopsided opportunities for people. In this section we will examine how experiences in education can narrow or expand one's options as they grow up.

Every school is different. Years of policies and decisions have led some places to have more money and more resources in their school districts than others. Money isn't everything, but it goes a long way towards enabling schools to educate students in effective ways. Other things can help students succeed too, like caring school officials, involved community members and creative teachers.

Have students read two biographical stories and pay attention to the systems that the people went through, particularly schools, as well as housing, work, and health. Discuss the obstacles and opportunities each person faced and the options that were available to them. What were the different ways that the person benefited or was held back by the systems that surrounded them? What could they control and what couldn't they?

Most people don't talk about their lives using terms like "structural inequality." What words do the people in the stories use to talk about the barriers they face? (e.g. Personal responsibility? Gaming the system? Self-actualization? Bootstrapping?)

ACTIVITY 2: SCHOOLS AND INEQUALITY

In order to understand how personal stories fit into larger structures of inequality, it is useful to think about the ways that obstacles and advantages are spread out unevenly. We can start by comparing places - towns, cities, schools - where there are more resources or fewer. Then, we can see how the lives of the people in those places look different as a result.

For this activity, split students into three groups and have them examine the ways that schools have historically and presently structured opportunities and obstacles in one state, Georgia.

- One group will listen to an oral history interview with Flossie Jones, who was a teacher in 1924 at an African American high school in Atlanta. Start the clip at -45:30, when she describes the first day at Booker T. Washington School. What was her experience like?
- A second group should open the Money, Race, and Success website. Have them familiarize themselves with the chart. Then, look up two school districts: Atlanta Public Schools, GA and Forsyth County, GA. What are the differences between the two school districts?
- The third group should open the Opportunity Atlas, which is a website that we can use to understand how the place where a person grows up impacts their life further down the line. Look up two zip codes: 30314 and 30024. Spend some time comparing and contrasting the outcomes, particularly for education.



ACTIVITY 2: SCHOOLS AND INEQUALITY CONTINUED

After each group has had time to discuss their assignment, bring the class back together for a discussion guided by these questions:

1. What did students learn about schooling?
2. What are some of the things that make schooling more or less unequal?
3. How might past obstacles to education still matter today?
4. What are some of the obstacles that are in the way of student learning?
5. What are the things that help students and schools overcome those obstacles?

BONUS ACTIVITY:

What was school like for the adults in students' lives? Work with students to write a list of questions to ask adults, for example: What resources did their schools have? What size were the classes? What did most students do when they graduated? What happened to the most successful students? Once students have asked the adults, have students compare and contrast their answers to the same questions.



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

- Minimum Wage: <https://www.bls.gov/opro/reports/minimum-wage/2019/home.htm>
- More Than One Job: <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/06/about-thirteen-million-united-states-workers-have-more-than-one-job.html>

SUGGESTED ANCHOR TEXTS

- *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry
- *The Outsiders*, S.E. Hinton
- *I, Too, Am America*, Langston Hughes

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We invite you to visit our website, www.brandeis.edu/cascading-lives, to access the full Cascading Lives Digital Toolkit. There, you can also find additional resources produced by the Cascading Lives Project.

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CONTACT US

EMAIL:

cascading@brandeis.edu

PHONE:

781-736-2651

MAIL:

Cascading Lives Project
Karen V. Hansen
Department of Sociology
MS 071
Brandeis University
415 South St.
Waltham, MA 02452



Lesson 3: Structural Inequality Stories

DEBORAH: IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR

Deborah is a 58-year-old Black woman who lives in the Atlanta area with her husband of 36 years. She works full-time as a medical coder in the radiation oncology department of a major hospital. In addition, for more than 20 years she has run a successful full-service event planning business.

Deborah was born in Miami, Florida where her father was working on his PhD in Psychology and her mother was training to be a Registered Nurse (RN). Her grandmother lived nearby and helped to take care of Deborah and her brother when their parents were working and studying.

When Deborah was 10, her father was offered a faculty position at Tulane University, and the family moved to New Orleans. Five years later, they moved again, this time to Atlanta, Georgia when he took a job at Georgia State University. As an RN, her mother was able to find work each time they moved.

When they lived in Miami, Deborah and her brother went to a private Catholic school. Later in New Orleans and then in Atlanta they went to public schools. Deborah was a good student who enjoyed her classes. In high school, with the encouragement of her parents, she took advanced level classes and ended up skipping a grade and graduating a year early.

Growing up, Deborah believed that she wanted a career like those of her parents: "My parents were my role models. First, I said I wanted to be a nurse like mom. And then once I was in high school I started thinking about all the biology and chemistry I would have to go through for nursing. I was like, 'Oh no, I don't want to be a nurse.' So, then it was teaching, like my dad." Deborah went on to college and graduated with a bachelor's degree in education. Soon after college, she met and married her husband, and started teaching fifth grade at a public elementary school.

When she was seven months pregnant with her first child, tragedy struck. Her mother and her

younger brother were in a devastating car accident. Her brother survived but her mother was killed. Deborah was heartbroken: "I cried and cried. I went down to 95 pounds. I could not eat. And the doctor was worried about the baby. This was the most difficult time for me in my life. My mother was a mother but also like a best friend, a sister to me. A part of me was gone."

As she had in the past, Deborah's grandmother stepped in to support her. She moved in with Deborah and her husband to take care of the baby while Deborah recovered and went back to work. She lived with them for two years and then moved back to Florida. When Deborah became pregnant for the second and third times, her grandmother again moved in with them, caring for the children. For Deborah, her grandmother, family, and the church community, in which she and her husband have been active for many years, are important anchors of support.

Back in the classroom, Deborah soon felt discouraged about her work. She liked teaching but the pay was low and she had become frustrated by the unruly behavior and seemingly insurmountable personal problems of the students. When she worked a summer job at the telephone company (AT&T), she realized that she was better paid and less stressed there. She decided to leave teaching and work full-time at AT&T.

After working there for 18 years, Deborah was laid off during a period of corporate restructuring. Although it was a difficult time emotionally for Deborah, she never worried about being unable to pay bills or provide for the family's necessities. Her husband maintained his job and she received severance pay from AT&T. After taking online classes to become certified as a medical coder, she found a job coding medical records at a major Atlanta hospital.

Deborah has worked at the hospital for 22 years, mostly happily, although she has experienced prejudice from a couple of her white supervisors over the years. "They would help promote the white workers and do nothing for us, for the



Black workers. Although we had been working much longer and actually trained some of these people who were now the managers." In her work, she doesn't seek friendship, but she does hope to be respected and treated fairly.

In addition to her full-time job as a medical coder, Deborah also has a full-service event planning business. She plans birthday parties, weddings, anniversaries, and other celebrations. Her services include helping to choose and send the invitations, arranging for the venue, catering, decorations, entertainment, and clean-up. While Deborah runs the business and keeps the calendar, it has become a family business in the sense that her two adult daughters often help her with set up and serving during events. Even her husband pitches in, using his photography skills to document the event. About a year ago, Deborah and her husband built their "dream home" - a ranch-style house with a basement utility room that holds the equipment she uses, such as tables, chairs, and linens. They make matching t-shirts to wear as they work these occasions. In colors that coordinate with the wedding theme, the t-shirts say: "It's a family affair."

Until the early months of 2020, Deborah was doing two or three events per week. Once the pandemic hit, her business came to an abrupt halt. People stopped having events and gatherings and her earnings plummeted. Occasionally she would erect a balloon archway in someone's driveway to celebrate a birthday, but many events were canceled or postponed.

TONYA : SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

Tonya is an African American woman in her 40s who lives in the Atlanta area with her teenage daughter. She works part-time as a customer service agent, a certified notary public, and a tax preparer. She is also an entrepreneur with an online beauty boutique.

When she was five years old, Tonya's father moved out of the family home in Providence, Rhode Island, leaving Tonya's mother as the sole

As the restrictions on in-person gatherings eased in 2021, she happily started to see her business pick up.

Deborah missed her event planning work, which she enjoys a lot, during the pandemic slowdown. The loss of income from it was inconvenient but never economically threatening to her. Even though she works on her event planning almost full-time, she sees it as a side business that is an "extra" for family luxuries. It's also a form of financial insurance, a safety net that can become important if she or her husband lose their job. "The event planning gives me bonus money, to pay for vacations, extras, things, like that. And I always say you should have something to fall back on. Like if I got laid off from the hospital, I have my business to fall back on."

Deborah hopes to retire from her hospital job someday, but she will continue with her event planning business because it gives her pleasure as well as a source of income. She also wants to travel and spend time with her family. The new house that she and her husband have built is located close to her father and her three adult children. Deborah is proud of the life that she has built over the years, a life that has always been "a family affair."

provider for Tonya and her younger brother.

Tonya's mother worked as an after-school caregiver and a legal secretary before becoming a certified nursing assistant (CNA). Struggling to pay the bills on just one income, she moved with her two young children into subsidized public housing.

Growing up, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins were a big part of Tonya's life. They lived



close by and were an important support for Tonya, her mom, and her little brother. In contrast to the ever-present money problems in Tonya's house, many of these family members were secure in their livelihood and finances. At the center of the family were Tonya's grandparents. Her grandfather was a successful doctor and her grandmother a homemaker who was deeply involved in the local Black church. Every Sunday Tonya's extended family gathered for dinner at her grandparents' home.

As a little girl, Tonya dreamed of someday working in medical care like her mother and grandfather, maybe as an emergency medical technician or EMT. She entered school eagerly. Thanks to the financial support and encouragement of her grandfather, Tonya and her brother both attended private elementary schools. Her grandfather wanted to provide his grandchildren with access to better educational resources than those available in the dilapidated and under-resourced public schools attended largely by children of color in Tonya's low-income neighborhood. The largely white private schools could provide them, he felt, with a good education that would enable them to go on to college and ultimately lead them to professional careers.

Tonya remembers the private elementary school as "mostly Caucasian. I was one of a few African Americans and I felt like the oddball. I mean it was good academically and they gave me a lot of extra academic support which was good but embarrassing. I got pulled out of class for remedial math and reading, which made me feel even more different from the other kids."

As early as second grade, Tonya became aware that her mother had less money than many of her classmates' parents. She was increasingly self-conscious about her clothes and appearance and how they were different from her classmates. Desperate to fit in, to appear sophisticated and cool, she started borrowing some of her mom's clothes and jewelry to wear to school. "A teacher noticed that I wasn't wearing clothes that fit me right. And I was wearing my mother's jewelry which probably looked strange. She pulled me

aside and asked me about it. She started giving me clothes to wear. She was nice, trying to help, but I felt embarrassed."

When it came time for middle school, Tonya wanted to be with her friends from the neighborhood, teens of color like herself, and against the wishes of her family she opted to go to the local public school.

Today, in retrospect, Tonya regrets her decision: "Education-wise, the public school was totally different from where I had been before. I got no attention from the teachers or help with the lessons. I thought I could adjust to the difference, but that was just me being silly and immature. I was focused on seeing friends and hanging out with them."

By the time she entered high school, Tonya had lost interest in her classes. She often just hid out in the basement at home instead of going to school. When Tonya was seventeen, the principal called her into the office. "He said I wasn't doing OK in my classes and that I should just drop out. I trusted him to give me, you know, the right decision. I didn't really know anything better than to just go along with him. He asked me to meet with my mother. We had another meeting and that's the day when I absolutely stopped going to school. My mother agreed to have me withdraw. She didn't know what to do with me and she trusted the principal too. It was like, if the principal is recommending this, it must be the right thing to do."

After withdrawing from school, Tonya felt adrift. Five months later, her grandfather passed away. "My grandpa was always the one who pushed me, to stay in school, finish my GED certificate, take classes...to make something of myself. But shortly after I dropped out he started getting sick and passed away."

A few years later, after a failed relationship with a man and the birth of her son, Tonya moved to Georgia, joining her mother who had moved there a few years earlier. In Georgia, Tonya held many different jobs over the years, as a cashier, a cleaner, a caretaker and a medical transportation worker. She took training courses and worked



hard to improve her skills.

Currently Tonya has a part-time job as a customer service representative for which she is getting additional training in order to expand her position. She is a certified tax preparer and a notary public who certifies the authenticity of signatures on official documents. And she is an entrepreneur with a website that sells accessories, clothing and beauty products, some of which she makes herself. She dreams of her business taking off in the next five years.

Tonya cobbles together a living and tries to take advantage of available opportunities. She is constantly strategizing on how to improve her circumstances: "I'm always trying to make money and make ends meet. I'm super-independent. I always try to have a back-up plan. I try to take advantage of any little opportunity. I have to work at many different things to be able to have a decent income."

Still, Tonya makes barely enough to support herself and her teenage daughter and she worries that she does not have savings or assets to cushion her during emergencies. In fact, she went through a period of crisis in 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. With her income reduced due to business closures, she found herself turning to local state and church assistance programs for help with electricity and gas bills. Since then, Tonya's earnings have improved, but her quest for economic security continues. "I don't know," she says. "I work hard, but still I feel like I'm always swimming against the tide."