



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2018 Volume I: An Introduction to Income Inequality in America: Economics, History, Law

Paths to Prosperity: African Americans in Search of the American Dream

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Introduction

I teach English Language Arts at Wilbur Cross High School, a large comprehensive high school in New Haven, Connecticut. Demographically, 52 percent of our students are economically disadvantaged. Around 53 percent of the students are Hispanic and 32 percent are African American. ¹ Our school is populated by a large majority of Hispanic and African American students who live in poverty. In this unit, I want to address some economic data that might help them as they step into their futures.

I would like to help my students understand the history of economic inequality, and in particular, how it is tied to race in the United States. How have unequal differences in income, wealth, and opportunity affected minorities in particular in the past, and why does it seem to persist despite changes in laws? I would like my students to gain perspective on their own ability to build economic success as they move forward into their futures. Many novels in American literature take place in the 20th century, and many of them follow the stories of characters who struggle with poverty. Is there a hopeful way to move forward? Do the narratives only reveal part of the story? This unit could be used with a number of different works, but *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry in particular has a set of issues that can be viewed through an economic lens.

Objectives and Rationale

The play is set in Chicago the 1950's, and follows the Younger family as they strive to participate in the American Dream. Walter wants to start a business. His mother, Lena, wants to buy a house in a good neighborhood, and Walter's sister, Beneatha, is attending medical school. When the play begins, they are a family of five living in a one-bedroom apartment where they share a bathroom in the hallway with other families. We quickly discover that Walter's wife Ruth is pregnant, and that the family has had a windfall in the form of a 10 thousand dollar life insurance check. Well? What would be the best investment of this money for the family in the 1950's that would serve to lift them and future generations from poverty? How might they

navigate their investments during the pre-Civil Rights era and overcome institutional racism? If we consider the characters in the play, what might the prospects be for medical school for an African American female, or becoming a business-owner for an African American male, or investing in a house, for the patriarch of the family in the mid-1950's? And, perhaps, are there other measurements of "wealth" that are not based solely on money or the American Dream?

This unit will also help teachers convey to students an economic historical perspective, addressing the following questions: What was the ratio of income and wealth inequality through time? Has America always been "the land of opportunity"? How and why is the 20th century an anomaly? How did the ratio of income inequality change over the century, up through the 2010's? What were some of the political, social, and legal changes that affected this fluctuation? Has poverty, based on race changed through the 20th century? What are some of the social causes of entrenched poverty, such as lack of access to wealth and lack of equality in justice, jobs, housing, education and health care? How does poverty damage our society as a whole? Is there a solution? After the passage of the Civil Rights laws in the 1960's why is poverty among minorities in America still entrenched? And, in the end, what constitutes well-being?

Economic well-being can be measured in different ways: By income, by wealth, by poverty levels. Not one of these measures tells the entire story, however. While there is a huge chasm in income in our country, laws have been passed that paved the way for greater access to prosperity for minorities since the 1950's. More people have moved out of the dire poverty of the Great Depression, social safety nets are in place, and schools have been forced to open their door to all. Housing, lending, and job discrimination is illegal. While we are far from being a society that is post-racism, there should be more hope than despair, and more determination to strive forward.

On March 14, 2018 my school in New Haven, Connecticut, like many others in America, participated in a walkout to protest continued government inaction to address school shootings and the endemic gun violence that relentlessly plagues urban communities. One student who spoke commented that young people in New Haven know how to dress for funerals more than they know how to dress for job interviews. The communal grief and numbing despair sinks in to all of us. How can we encourage our students to see that their futures might not be as dire as they sometimes seem. Economic facts about what makes someone prosperous might show them another way.

Later that month in the March for Our Lives rally in Washington, D.C., Edna Chavez, a teenage activist from South Los Angeles, reminded the world that her community doesn't need teachers with guns, it needs paid internships and job opportunities, mentors and restorative justice. Clearly, this dynamic, intelligent, articulate, thoughtful and righteous young Latina leader understands that the struggle for equal access to a safe and prosperous civilization also demands accountable economic justice. She ended her speech with "*la lucha sigue*."

In lecture at Yale University in April, 2018, Professor Yair Listokin, spoke eloquently of the great loss of human capital that is created in a society where more than half of its citizens are closed off from achieving their potential. More than income inequality, a chart that illustrated inequality of wealth is staggering: in the United States, those whose income is in the top 1 percent in earnings also possess about 40 percent of the wealth, while those in the bottom 50 percent of earnings possess only about 1 percent.³ These numbers are not broken down by race, although African Americans and Hispanics have poverty rates more than double that of whites.⁴ And, what happens to the true wealth of our country as we go forward, not in dollars, but in human potential, when creativity that blooms with equal opportunity, is starved?

There are causes our students can be inspired to fight: continued social injustices such as discrimination and lack of opportunity in jobs, education and housing; a lack of access to affordable medical care; unjust incarceration rates, injustices in policing, and the political causes of economic inequality. Can our students grow into leaders who will fight for a chance at the American Dream? *La lucha sigue*. But before the struggle begins, it is important to start with facts, as truth ultimately is always the most powerful weapon.

Presenting the Data: Economic Inequality in America

Awakening from the American Dream

In 1938, Carl Augustus Hansberry bought a house in Washington Park, a suburb of Chicago that was restricted to whites. Hansberry, a real estate broker who had moved from Mississippi to the North for better opportunities for him and his family, was issued an injunction by hostile white neighbors who wanted his African American family out of their neighborhood. He fought eviction and pressed his case to the United States Supreme Court, where, in 1940 in the case *Hansberry v. Lee*, the Court ruled unanimously in his favor, and against the kind of restrictive clause that was common in the North that prevented African Americans from buying homes.⁵ This certainly changed a lot for his ten-year-old daughter, Lorraine, who would go on to become one of America's most famous playwrights with her landmark work, *A Raisin in the Sun*. This case became precedent for landmark civil right legislation that was to follow. Hansberry's own experiences, and those of the Younger family in her play, provide a number of lessons in how to find personal and economic prosperity, despite legal racism and social inequalities of the time. These lessons still hold true today.

The United States was born with a full-blown aurora of Age of Enlightenment idealism, reflected in the lofty goals of the Declaration of Independence. America was to prove that a nation could shake off the shackles of the aristocracy and achieve a democratic society based not on birthright, but on merit. While this country still holds up these ideals in its founding documents, in the hearts and minds of many of its citizens, and in the blood of fallen soldiers who fought for our inalienable rights, in practice we perhaps have never really been a country of entirely equal opportunity. In 1789, eight of the thirteen colonies had legal slavery, including New York and New Jersey.⁶ The end of the Civil War brought on legalized discrimination both in the South and in the North, and it wasn't until the Civil Rights era that African Americans had any real hope of economic progress since prior to that time, laws walled them off from jobs, home ownership, and education. One might wonder if the American Dream was always simply that – an illusion more than a reality.

Historical Perspective

The year 1789 is also the year the French Revolution began. While this unit is not focusing on international economic inequity, it is an interesting parallel in discussing wealth inequality in general. In his acclaimed book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas Piketty makes the point in his introduction that when looking for economic data prior to the early parts of the 20th century, the United States is a difficult model because it allowed slavery and racial discrimination to have a disproportionate influence on a study of the population as a whole. In contrast, after the Revolution, France not only abolished slavery in its colonies, but established laws that guaranteed absolute equality of ownership for men.⁷ Yet, less than twenty years after this most bloody slaughter of the aristocratic class, by 1807, 79 percent of the wealth in France was owned by 10 percent of the population.⁸ This wealth disparity continued through Europe, and as the 19th century came

to a close, wealth inequality after the Civil War in the United States caught up. By the blossoming of the Gilded Age, in 1910, the richest 10 percent in the United States owned 80 percent of the wealth. In Europe's parallel Belle Époque, it was close to 90 percent.⁹

What has to be the most audacious graph in Piketty's book is a chart that begins in the year zero, mapping the high rate of return on capital versus the much lower economic growth rate for the entire world, ending in a dire future prediction in 2100.¹⁰ This means that over time, the wealthy become richer on yields from property and business, while laborers do not. This capital and power also tends to stay in families. While the parameters of the research necessary to plot this extraordinary chart seems staggering, the graph provides a starkly enlightening picture of an economic truth: The only time in human history where there was anything like wealth parity for *anyone* in the world was in the second half of the twentieth century – and it only took a devastating global plague, two world wars, a global economic crash, and the threat of world-wide nuclear annihilation to achieve a world where merit trumped privilege. Since 1980, however, global economic disparity has again widened, although less so in Europe than in the United States. In much of Europe, capitalistic democratic governments have supported progressively high taxes to provide government-sponsored programs such as health care, family leave, and child care. In the United States, tax cuts that began in the 1980's, along with the passage of laws that benefit corporations, continue to erode the political power of all but the very wealthy. In the United States in 2014, 10 percent of the population possessed 73 percent of the wealth, a statistic that in the current political environment will only continue to rise.¹¹

Globally, people are much better off today than they were fifty years ago. Health has improved, drastically in many cases. Economic conditions are vastly better for much of the world's population, allowing education and opportunity for many people.¹² But the downside is that, as fewer people gain a bigger slice of the economic pie, the more these few wield power. When this happens, there is a real threat to our democratic ideals if our society becomes plutocratic, not meritocratic, and the 90 percent who don't hold the reins on wealth have neither opportunity nor voice.¹³ The arc of the moral universe is indeed long, and it seems that we must take strong action to bend it towards justice.¹⁴

The African American Dream: Chasing Economic Prosperity

African Americans are relatively new to having the freedom to acquire wealth at all. When slavery ended in the South, many former slaves became sharecroppers on plantations. It is a terrible argument to say that the life of a share-cropper in the Antebellum South, plagued by terrorism from the Ku Klux Klan and shackled by Jim Crow laws was better than the life of a slave, but sharecroppers were free and could leave the South to follow jobs created by the Industrial Revolution in the North. While the Industrial Revolution led to greater economic disparity with the rise of monopolies in oil, railroads, and steel in the United States, the economic and technological growth also led to a slow rise in the overall prosperity and well-being of many, as industry and factories in the North needed labor. At the start of the 20th century, in one of the largest demographic movements in United States history, African Americans began to move to northern cities to get a toehold in the American Dream.

The Great Migration

Between the years 1910 and 1970, about six million African Americans went north seeking not only better jobs, but social justice and better education for children.¹⁵ During this time, the booming 1920's gave rise to prosperity for many African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance. New Deal reforms during the Depression opened the doors for working people to acquire wealth by instituting Social Security, by providing

government-supported jobs through various public works projects, and by opening the doors to home ownership by reforming banks and mortgage companies. The Progressive Era saw the rise of trade unions, which helped to protect workers' rights, and increased wages. Higher taxes on the wealthy, instituted in part to fund government programs to boost the economy and support workers, discouraged disparities in income levels. ¹⁶ African Americans benefitted from this prosperity, and the numbers of those heading north swelled during and after World War II, as industry boomed in an effort to supply the military. Government support of technology and education also increased as the United States entered the Cold War. In one estimate in 1940, an African American worker could make three times the salary of someone in the South. By 1970, African American men were earning 70 cents to the dollar of what whites were earning, up from 40 cents in 1940. ¹⁷ The booming economy of World War II and the GI Bill that gave college tuition and discounted loans for homes and businesses to returning veterans, led to a rising American middle class, and for white people, a real chance to see the American Dream become a reality. But for African Americans, prior to the enactment of federal civil rights laws in the 1960's, the picture was much different.

The Civil Rights Era

The effects World War II had on America were indeed seismic. In the years after the war, home ownership for working class white people skyrocketed, and vast neighborhoods, such as mine in Levittown, New York, mushroomed up in metropolitan areas across the United States, funded in part by mortgages for GI's that were not available to African American veterans. ¹⁸ Members of the white working class were sending their children to colleges subsidized by the government in unprecedented numbers, and were starting to accumulate wealth for the first time in human history. ¹⁹ When African American soldiers returned from fighting Nazi racism, they were not going to accept legal racial barriers back home that largely blocked their access to the American Dream, and the Civil Rights era began. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 would make racial discrimination in jobs, housing, voting, banking, and education – illegal and unconstitutional.

While the laws have changed, has economic advancement and opportunities for African Americans changed? As racial prejudices persist, and as America becomes more and more economically inequitable, what is the cost to our society, when we create a society that only offers opportunity and empowerment to the super-wealthy, who have no real need to work? Will we be faced with the danger of creating a class of dangerously powerful people who only exist to stoke their vanity, as Adam Smith ²⁰ warned, while the rest of our society stagnates and crumbles under their corruption? Since the 1950's, has the path to prosperity closed not only for African Americans, but for the rest of us? Where are the winnable battle fronts in the struggle to make American more economically equitable, more meritorious, and more politically just?

Race and Economic Opportunity

Lorraine Hansberry's father had come north in the Great Migration, and her play examines this and other economic pathways to the American Dream, including the value of home ownership, good neighborhoods, economic advancements through entrepreneurship and job opportunities, and economic and social advancement through education. While these elements help individuals achieve prosperity, supporting them also keeps a society dynamic and creative by reducing poverty and increasing wealth and opportunity for all.

Home Ownership and Neighborhoods

In a 2015 paper titled, *The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility*, Harvard researchers Raj

Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren found that when children move to a higher-income neighborhood from a lower-income neighborhood, the positive economic effects are dramatic, including increases in earnings as adults, increases in college attendance, and decreases in teen pregnancy when compared to their cohorts who did not move. The positive effects are more dramatic the younger a child is at the time of the move. For example, a child who moves at the age of nine can expect to earn a salary that is about 50 percent between the cohorts who stayed in the poverty neighborhood and the children who grew up permanently in better one. ²¹ For nine year olds who move, the coefficient change in college attendance is about 60 percent. ²²

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter Younger dreams of sending his son Travis to college and giving him a much more prosperous life. Moving from a poverty-stricken neighborhood to a prosperous one would have been very beneficial, especially since in the play, Travis is “about ten or eleven years old.” ²³ But what about home ownership itself? Does it add to family wealth? Why not consider the very house the Hansberry family moved into, located at 6150 S. Rhodes Avenue, in the Washington Park neighborhood in Chicago?

Unlike the Younger family, who are moving out of the South side of Chicago in the mid-1950’s, Carl Augustus Hansberry bought his home in 1937 in the South side, when the neighborhood was rapidly changing from one of immigrants, to one of mostly African American families. The neighborhood had seen race riots in 1919, and by 1930, about 93 percent of the neighborhood was non-white. In the 1950’s this neighborhood had declined, and in fact, was being cleared of blighted homes for non-residential use. It was the location for many infamous housing projects, including the Robert Taylor Homes, which were all demolished by 2007, with redevelopment already on the way. ²⁴

I am not sure what Mr. Hansberry paid for his home in 1937, but in 1951, a much larger home than theirs, built by “one of Chicago’s best builders” sold for \$14,500. ²⁵ According the United States Census, the median home value unadjusted for inflation in Illinois in 1950 was \$8,646. ²⁶ The Younger family in the play have inherited ten thousand dollars, and even if, as in the play, Lena used \$3,500 for the down payment, that would be about 24 percent of the cost of even the more expensive house. But would this have been a good value?

If the Younger family held onto their house, in the year 2000, the median home value in Illinois was \$130,800. This would mean that the Younger family’s descendants would inherit a home in 2000 worth about nine times what they paid for it. Even when adjusted for inflation, home ownership, according to the Census statistics, is a good value. When adjusted for inflation, the 1950’s median price of \$8,646 reflected in 2000-dollars was \$52,400, ²⁷ making their home about 2.5 times more valuable even when reflected in 2000-dollars. According to Zillo, the median home value in Chicago as of May, 2018 was \$227,300, with predictions that prices would continue to rise. ²⁸ This means that in the long run, even the housing bubble burst in 2007 certainly would not have affected the Younger family’s descendants.

Home ownership would give the Younger family not only a better neighborhood, but a solid credit rating that could be translated into access to other loans, and wealth that could be capitalized, as my family and many others have, to help send children to college, to deal with emergencies such as devastating medical bills, to re-invest in businesses, or to provide nursing home care without losing a footing in a family’s economic well-being.

But can demographic shifts ruin home value? It turns out that even with terrible demographic indicators in Washington Park in 2018, Mr. Hansberry’s house was worth \$317,122 dollars, perhaps mostly due to its historic significance. ²⁹ However, while the 2018 median household income in Washington Park was just above

\$22,000 ³⁰ and according to Zillo, a lot of neighborhood homes are foreclosed and decrepit, other well-kept houses have retained value and sell in the 200 – 300 thousand dollar range.

This certainly is taking a very long view. Many people perhaps do not keep a home in the family for eighty years, and many people would not want to risk their children's future by staying in a neighborhood that has declined. But according the Census, owning a home for even ten years earns value and builds equity, ³¹ enough perhaps to sell and move to a better neighborhood – or even a different state where housing costs are lower.

The Chetty study also includes a chart that illustrates improved economic outcomes for lower-income people who live in better regions of the country. ³² It could be that chasing the American Dream involves another kind of Great Migration. Or, that it requires investment in building more affordable housing, or in improving schools and homes in poverty-stricken neighborhoods. Perhaps it means fighting to understand why home ownership has fallen in the past fifty years for African Americans. ³³ In 2015 under the Obama administration, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) issued new rules to gather data on why discrimination in housing persists, despite laws such as the Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974. Currently, the Trump administration is seeking to delay the implication of these rules, with the Ben Carson, HUD's secretary, actively criticizing them as "mandated social engineering." ³⁴

Business and Employment Opportunities

In the play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter dreams of financial success, which he imagines he will achieve by owning his own liquor store. He works as a chauffeur, while his wife and mother work as domestic servants. They all work for wealthy white people, a typical employment scenario in America in the 1950's. In a desperate moment, Walter observes rich white men, sitting in expensive restaurants, who "turn deals worth millions of dollars" ³⁵ but jobs like theirs would have been unavailable in mid-1950 for an African American male. In 2018, as of writing this paper, African American unemployment has reached an all-time low of 6.8 percent, yet, unemployment for whites is at 3.7 percent. ³⁶ And, according to the Pew Research Group, poverty rates have fallen in the 50 years since Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty program began. In 1966, 41.8 percent of African Americans lived in poverty compared to 27.2 percent in 2012. ³⁷

This isn't to say that the jobs are at all well-paying and that near-poverty still take a toll. Even with record low unemployment, in a recent report issued by The United Way, 43 percent of American families cannot afford basic food and rent. ³⁸ According to the Economic Policy Institute, in 2013, proportionally, poverty rates for African American adults are more than two times that of whites. For children under eighteen, the number is three times more. ³⁹ Poverty rates run higher for female-run single family households.

In addition, while earning potential over time for African American females has been going up, the earning power of African American males has been decreasing, with African American males less likely to earn as much as their parents. ⁴⁰ The gap in wage earnings potential between African Americans and white males is tragic. Researchers Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren suggest that racism and the absence of African American fathers in the community are possible reasons for this loss of potential. In integrated communities where there are male role models present, African American boys fare better. ⁴¹ The unjustly high incarceration rate of African American males, and the notorious discrimination by police against African American males, are obviously contributing to the failure of African American boys to thrive economically, and emotionally. ⁴² Fighting this racism would have measurable effects on the outcomes of African American

males.

In the play, Walter Lee Younger is a devoted father and husband. However, he is also an intelligent and ambitious man living in a racist world of limited opportunities for him to support his family. Nonetheless, according to the research above, his son Travis would have had a better chance in life due to his presence, if racism and despair don't push him to make choices worse than those that happen in the play. Indeed, Walter's awareness that he will probably need to bribe someone to get a liquor license might have resulted in his incarceration. If his friend had not stolen the money instead, perhaps Walter's family would have become another sad statistic.

Hansberry's play illustrates another choice for success in a race-biased labor market: entrepreneurship. Walter aspires to own a liquor store. According to statistics published from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, the rate of alcohol consumption in America saw a steady increase for beer, wine and spirits from 1955 – 1985. Declines followed, only to resume a climb at around the turn of the millennium.⁴³ Had Walter Lee opened this store in Chicago in the 1950's, considering it would have been well-managed, he probably would have had a profitable business, earning a middle-class salary. According to statistics published by the industry, starting a liquor store has high overhead and licensing requirements, and Walter probably would have needed most of his mother's ten thousand dollar inheritance.

In many ways, starting one's own business is the epitome of the American Dream, incorporating the spirit of creativity, independence and initiative. For African Americans in the 1950's, it was a way to circumvent racism. Indeed, throughout American history, African American entrepreneurship provided many services to African Americans during the years of segregation.⁴⁴ More recently, according to Census data, from 2002 to 2007, the number of black-owned businesses increased by 60.5 percent, more than triple the national rate. Census Bureau Deputy Director Thomas Mesenbourg said, "Black-owned businesses continued to be one of the fastest growing segments of our economy, showing rapid growth in both the number of businesses and total sales during this time period."⁴⁵ More recent statistics show a continuation of this trend.⁴⁶

While a lot of statistics show dire news for the earning potential of African American males, entrepreneurship is a bright note in the picture. Programs that encourage entrepreneurship that are mentored by African American male role models can really make a difference in individual outcomes. If more programs were sponsored by federal or local governments, perhaps the reach would be more widespread, and this disturbing downward trend for African American males could be reversed.

Education

In 1955, the Chicago Medical School graduated Agnes Lattimer, an African American woman who would go on to become the first African American woman in the country to head a major hospital. In 1986, she became the director of Cook County Hospital. Dr. Lattimer passed away in 2018, at age 89.⁴⁷ In 1955, the cost of going to the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, likely comparable to Chicago Medical School, was 950 dollars, including fees.⁴⁸ If we translate that into 2018 dollars, it comes to just under 9,000 dollars per year.

There are a number of astounding economic elements to these facts. First, in the play *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter's sister Beneatha aspires to be a doctor. Yet, in the play her family members are suffering from very limited economic opportunity. And still, even before the Civil Rights era, there were a few American medical schools that had opened their doors to African Americans, and to women.⁴⁹ But who could afford to go? If we consider, then, the cost of medical school in 2018 dollars – \$9,000 a year is far less than what students pay for

most undergraduate universities today. Had Beneatha's father not left the family a very provident ten thousand dollar life insurance policy, her dreams of going to college and medical school might not have been dashed. In today's terms, \$9,000 dollars a year is about what a family of four spends on groceries, and is basically what you could earn a year working part-time at minimum wage. In terms of college affordability, it would seem that 1955 was far more meritorious than our world is in 2018, where costs of college have skyrocketed almost out of reach of most low-income people.

While clearly earning a medical degree is a path towards prosperity, simply earning a bachelor's degree makes a marked difference in income potential. According to research by The Equality of Opportunity Project, a college education is a good path to income equality, and a good way to raise the earnings of children from low-income backgrounds significantly. A study done by this group, called *Mobility Report Card: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility*, reveals that while Ivy League schools have a very high rate of success in raising students whose parents are from the bottom fifth income level to the top tier income levels, other less selective schools who accept more low-income students are more successful in raising these students to the top fifth income level. Some of the best school rated by mobility of income over generations include Cal State University - LA, Pace University, and SUNY - Stony Brook. What is unfortunate is that their study shows a significant decline in enrollment of students whose parents are low-income from 2000 - 2010, a trend they attribute to rising college costs.⁵⁰

There has recently been a stagnation in enrollment and completion of college over the past decade for lower-income students, with a rise of only 0.5 percent in the lowest income group born between 1970 and 1980.⁵¹ In a country where high-wage jobs demand a college degree, this is a terrible consequence of income inequality and subsequent declines in local public schools and neighborhoods, creating a cycle of unemployment, lost hopes, lost lives, and a shameful loss of human potential for our country.

Continuation of the Struggle for Equity and Economic Justice

Perhaps Lorraine Hansberry did not consciously set out to write a guideline for building intergenerational prosperity for African American families when she wrote *A Raisin in the Sun*, but the play offers key elements to economic parity: home ownership in good neighborhoods, college education, and entrepreneurship. It also is a reminder, however, that the pursuit of money is secondary to basic virtues of justice, fortitude, prudence, courage - and faith, hope and love. Without these, the pursuit of money becomes pointless, its acquisition a frivolity rather than bearing meaning. When Walter allows greed to possess him, and he loses two-thirds of the money pursuing an illegal bribe, it also seems all hope is lost. But the family rallies. Despite the offer of more money by the home association determined to keep black families out of their white neighborhood, Walter stands up for himself, his race, and his family. Instead of allowing anger and despair to splinter them, Mama, Ruth, Walter and Beneatha are determined instead to work hard to pay the mortgage, and perhaps save up to pursue the rest of their dreams. All it takes is money, invested wisely in human potential - and the strength to stand against injustice and fight for righteous inclusion and equal opportunity. That is a struggle that continues.

Teaching Strategies and Classroom Activities

Lecture: Power Point Presentation

This unit will help students explore data-based ways to achieve prosperity in a society that does not always offer equal opportunity to the poor or to minorities. It will connect to the themes presented in Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, but could be used in English Language Arts classrooms with a number of other literature books that depict disenfranchised people struggling to achieve the American Dream. The unit will begin with a Power Point presentation that will introduce data regarding prospects for the Younger family, based on the data above. One of the points to make here would be to teach students a bit about inflation, and how to assess the relative value of a home or college education in modern dollars.

My real question for students is, what about today? Can one's life still be improved by moving to find a better job, better education, and a more just environment? What are the economic benefits of buying a home, going to college, or starting a business? The Power Point will be shared with students on my classroom blog and will include a number of websites students can later use for research, such as The Equality of Opportunity Project and the United States Census Bureau, among others. (See Resources.)

The Great Migration Series by Jacob Lawrence

Students will begin by learning more about The Great Migration. Lorraine Hansberry's father was part of this migration, as are the older generation in *A Raisin in the Sun*. In the play, Lena Younger and her husband, Big Walter, moved away from lynching and racial violence in the South to give their children a better life. Can moving to a better town, with better, more equitable opportunities still make a difference?

A nice way of learning about this historic migration is by viewing and analyzing panels from Jacob Lawrence's *Migration* series. The Museum of Modern Art in New York has an excellent website that includes not only the panels, but related primary documents, photographs, songs and poems that can enrich learning. (See Resources.) Analyzing complementary works of art in conjunction with language arts meets The Common Core English Language Arts standard, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, and is a good way to convey the emotional impact of this journey to students – especially students who are low-level readers or English language learners.

Students can first view the entire series and gather facts about why people moved. Graphic organizers can be useful for students as they choose three particular panels to view and assess. Students first should objectively list the details of each the panel, then explain what the image tells them about the Great Migration, using the details to explain why the image conveys a message in a powerful way. Many African American students, especially those who live in the North, might also have family history that ties them to this migration, and should be encouraged to interview family members about their memories and share them with the class.

After assessing the information from the panels regarding jobs, housing and better education for children, students will research statistics that illustrate gains that African Americans experienced in this migration. They will also see that racism and discrimination persisted in the North, and that the migration was just one part of the journey, and that the struggle for greater economic equality still continues.

Can changing neighborhoods still make a difference? Students will continue their research to find graphs that illustrate the positive economic and social effects on children of moving to a better neighborhood and a better

school. Students should also be encouraged to share their own family histories of parents struggling to move to find a better life. This would also include children of immigrants from other countries. Certainly many of my students have parents who took incredible risks to make their lives better. What are their stories?

Case Studies both Literary and Personal: College, Business, Home Ownership?

In the play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, a windfall of ten thousand dollars will potentially change the lives of the Younger family. However, by the end of the play, two thirds of that money is lost. What does remain are different dreams of prosperity and a relentless ambition to strive. Lena and Ruth Younger want a home in a better neighborhood. Walter Younger wants to start his own liquor store. Beneatha Younger has dreams of becoming a doctor. Are these viable means of achieving economic prosperity today?

For this part of the unit, I envision asking students to form groups that would research one of these paths and share their findings. Students should follow data over a span of about thirty years, which would include the recent Great Recession. For the demographics of my students, I would ask them to research data on minorities and discuss some of the barriers that still persist for them, including rising costs of college, discrimination in justice, housing and jobs, and neighborhoods plagued by violence, crime and bad schools. Can they succeed in their own lives?

Entrepreneurship and Business Ownership

Some of the key questions to pose to students for this section would be: Have minority-owned businesses overall been successful over the past three decades? What particular kinds of businesses have been the most promising? Where are successful businesses located in the United States? How much money does it take to start a particular kind of business? Where do people get money to start a business? What is necessary for a business to be successful? What are some of the reasons that minority-owned businesses often don't thrive as strongly as white-owned businesses? ⁵²

Students can be asked to narrow their research by choosing a particular kind of business that they might want to start, and find relevant data. Their presentation ideally should include either a family member or a member of the community who is a business owner, something teachers can help facilitate.

Home Ownership and Neighborhood

This group would be researching housing prices in a particular neighborhood in our community over the past thirty years, including what happened when housing prices plummeted during the Great Recession. Depending on how ambitious students are, they could access town real estate records to find out how much a particular house sold for over the thirty-year scope of the project. The United States Census Bureau also lists median home prices in particular areas over time. Is buying a home still a good investment? In which neighborhoods do homes gain most value over time? How much money do you need to purchase a home? Where do people get this money? What other benefits are there to home ownership, such as mortgage interest tax deductions, improvements in credit scores, monthly savings over renting, and refinancing to access capital investment in the home?

In the play, Walter longs for not only his own success, but success for his young son Travis. Students in this group would also consider how neighborhoods and good schools have an economic impact on young children. Ideally, their presentation should also include a parent or community member who has come from a poor background and has moved on to home ownership to talk about his or her own experiences and challenges.

College or Post-Secondary Education

Of all these paths to prosperity, perhaps the one most challenging today not only for my students, but for all middle-class students, is the soaring cost of college education. It is becoming increasingly difficult for many of my students to see the value in a college education – or in many cases, to find the means to go to college at all. Many of my students will graduate high school without the education necessary to succeed in college, and indeed, many of my students struggle in their day-to-day lives and are not particularly academically motivated. In the play, Beneatha is striving to become a doctor, and certainly for academically-gifted students with ambition, becoming a doctor would be a path to economic prosperity. But what about other students? Is an undergraduate degree still a good choice? What about post-secondary training for the building trades, or for service or technical industries?

Students in this group would research data on salary levels of people who graduated from college and technical training schools, and compare these to salary levels for people who have only a high school degree, or did not complete high school. How have these statistics changed over thirty years? Is completing high school and college more important now than it was in the past? Which colleges do best in raising salaries for low-income people, based on the cost of the college? What kinds of grades, test scores and recommendations do you need to be accepted to college or technical training schools? How much do colleges cost, and what are some ways of getting money to go to college?

I teach across the hall from our school's woodshop and auto repair classes. Almost every week I overhear these teachers discussing how many jobs are currently available in the building trades, technology, and service industries. Students in this group will be asked to find statistics about employment needs in these fields. They will also research local schools that offer training, and research the costs of these programs, as well as admission requirements.

As with the others, this group's presentation should include someone to come and talk about his or her own experiences. In my school, guidance counselors meet with students to discuss college or post-secondary schools. This might be a good opportunity for guidance counselors to come to initiate that discussion. Family members or former students can be enlisted to come and tell their own stories. One of my former students recently took her nursing exams. Her story included two years at a community college in order to earn a scholarship at a four-year school, which gained her admission to a master's program to prepare her for her boards. She beat the statistics and was on her way up out of poverty with a rewarding job and good future prospects.

How to Succeed Economically

The final part of this unit would be simply to ask students to write down and then discuss what they've learned about paths to economic success. What do they think are barriers to their own success? How might they work to overcome these barriers, both personally, and politically? What are the benefits of fighting for better schools, better neighborhoods, better job opportunities, and better training? What are the benefits of supporting and participating in school programs that offer mentorships and apprenticeships – or of being a mentor or good role model to others?

Conclusion

At the end of the play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter Lee Younger has foolishly lost the bulk of his father's life insurance money and the family is once again facing a dire future of being stuck in poverty. But Ruth, who had previously contemplated ending her pregnancy with an illegal abortion, gains new determination to move into the house Lena has put a down payment on. She declares that she will "strap the baby on my back if I have to and scrub all the floors in America" ⁵³ to make this important move. Lena Younger urges her daughter Beneatha not to turn against her brother, but to love him and support him in his darkest moment. And in the climax of the play, when they are offered more money than the down payment by a racist organization intent on keeping the family out of their nice white neighborhood, Walter turns the money down, even though this means temporarily at least, deferring his own dream of owning a liquor store. Here, Hansberry is disproving another economic myth: you don't necessarily need money to make money. Nor is money itself a source of happiness. Money, contrary to Walter's first theory is in fact *not* "life" – other things matter much more.

What is the point in fighting income inequality? It is not so that all of us can become millionaires, or so that other people don't become millionaires. All of us want to have lives that are healthy and safe, lives where we have equal opportunities to follow our dreams, live productively, and feel assured that our children's lives will be equally enriched. This is not only a struggle for more money, but a political struggle calling for a return to meritocracy and an end to favoritism for the wealthy. It means fighting first against racism. It also means fighting for affordable health care, early childhood education, support for primary and secondary schools in impoverished areas, and for government subsidies for college and training schools. It means working hard to make safe neighborhoods, to assure affordable housing, and a livable minimum wage. It means that we stand up for ourselves, our families, and all of our neighbors, and fight against socio-economic injustices that are now threatening all but the very rich.

Other Applicable Texts for This Unit

Historical and economic data can enrich many students' understanding of novels that deal with poverty and race. Rather than leaving poverty-stricken students feeling bleak and overcome by negative statistics, economic data can reveal that individually, they can have a path to success. After teaching in a poverty-stricken urban school for twenty years, I have seen many examples of students who break the odds and succeed.

Here are some suggestions for books commonly taught in high schools: *Not without Laughter* , by Langston Hughes. *The Color Purple* , by Alice Walker. *The Women of Brewster Place* , by Gloria Naylor. *A Lesson before Dying* , by Ernest J. Gaines. *Under the Feet of Jesus* , by Helena Maria Viramontes. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* , by Sherman Alexie. *The Glass Castle* , by Jeannette Walls. *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago, and *Fences* , by August Wilson.

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Appendix: Implementing District and Common Core Standards

This unit on the effects of income inequality complements a New Haven School District's curriculum unit for grades 9-10, which asks students to evaluate social injustice in our society. Lessons include assignments that meet Common Core Standards for English Language Arts ⁵⁴ in gathering evidence and analyzing text, in integrating knowledge and ideas from economic data, history and law, in assessing character in literature, and in crafting narratives based on personal or imagined experiences. Analysis will include interpretation of a variety of sources, including economic graphs, legal documents, newspaper articles, literature, poetry, visual images, film and music.

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