

Segregation in Education: Then and Now

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Author's Note: I pledge that I did not receive any unauthorized aid on this assignment.

Since Africans were brought over into the Americas in the 1600s, people of color—more specifically blacks—have fought to be equals to their white oppressors. From the workforce to the classroom this equality has been a challenge. Oprah Winfrey said it best when she stated, “Education is the key to unlocking the world, a passport to freedom.” Almost any African American you cross paths with today will stress the importance of receiving a “good education”. They realize that despite the oppression that has been going on since the beginning of time, something people can never chain is your mind. The fight for equality in the education field began a long time ago, but it is far from over. Schools today are still segregated.

This research paper will examine what education was like before *Brown v. Board of Education*, two major court cases that impacted schools around America, the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education*, present day education issues, and a few things to consider. These analyses allow me to arrive at the conclusion that schools today, despite minor progress, are still segregated.

Review of Literature

The sources used in this paper contain both quantitative and qualitative data. While many are web sources, there are a few print sources that serve as foundational evidence to support my claim. All sources that are utilized come from credible publications. Furthermore, many of the sources used referenced prior studies or interviews to support their claim. This support has allowed for the reemphasis of their credibility.

In a book by Heather Andrea Williams (2005) primary sources and prior studies are applied to capture the struggle for education during slavery. The sources and the studies allow for a timeline of education from slavery to freedom to be formed. A timeline strategy can also be

found in the sources from uscourts.gov (n.d.) and tolerance.org (2004). These sources allow for one to easily see a breakdown of cases and events preceding and following *Brown v. Board* and a small explanation of each. Sheryl Denbo and Lynson Moore Beaulieu (2002) also utilize explanations to explain the flaws in today's education systems. The book, which is divided into sections, utilizes headings and bullet points to organize the information. Thandeka Chapman (2013) also used headings to organize information on whether students of color receive equal treatment in predominantly white schools. Worokya Duncan also embedded headings into her journal to separate the case studies from their analyses on Eurocentric curriculum being taught in KIPP: STAR College Preparatory Charter School. Although there are many other sources utilized in this paper, they all use similar tactics to the one listed above.

Before Brown v. Board of Education

During times of slavery in America, learning was forbidden for African Americans (hence forth A.A) both free and enslaved. Any A.A caught trying to learn was punished, and if a white person was caught teaching them they were punished as well. The A.A were usually punished by being whipped, imprisoned, their dominant hand was cut off for trying to learn to write, and in the most severe cases they were hung "as examples". Whites on the other hand generally didn't receive harsh punishments; they were fined a certain amount of money which varied based on the state in which they resided (Williams, 2005). Due to these punishments, learning was pursued in secrecy. It was obvious to the A.A that if they became educated they could be a threat to the whites. Once an enslaved A.A became literate, not only could they learn of abolitionist activities, but in some cases, they could write themselves a pass to freedom. In a book by Heather Andrea Williams entitled *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (2005), one finds that slaves were willing to do whatever it took to become

educated. From listening to their masters' conversations to "pit schools," every piece of information seemed to put them slightly closer to freedom. When listening to their masters' conversations, the slaves would learn about different events that could impact them. Often, they would share this information with others during their times in the pit schools because they were in the woods far from where the master could hear or see them. Williams (2005) noted that, "During the transition from slavery to freedom, many [A.A] simultaneously attempted to satisfy material needs with intellectual longing." Any books they could get access to would be hidden under their hats or in their pockets for the rare occasions that they would encounter people willing to teach them. They would use these interactions to gain knowledge that would be more beneficial when they were freed.

When slavery ended in the United States, A.A still had to fight for their freedom. There were amendments and civil rights acts passed to assist the freed A.A, but many were just reversed by other Supreme Court decisions. Many A.A freed slaves began to operate their own schools to ensure that their people were "properly educated". Williams (2005) emphasizes that the A.A community was passionate about learning. The children would go to school and then share the information with their parents at home. This system would allow the information to spread quickly, and thus educating generations at a time through a single outlet.

Supreme Court Cases

When slavery ended in the United States, A.A still had to fight for their freedom. There were amendments and civil rights acts passed to assist the freed African Americans, but many were just reversed by other Supreme Court decisions. In fact, "The same Congress that passed the Fourteenth Amendment had passed legislation to segregate D.C. schools" (Lain, 2016). There are two cases that need to be addressed when considering the equality of schools today. These

cases caused drastic changes in the lives of both A.A and whites. One case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, was designed to reinforce white supremacy through the legitimizing of segregation, while the other case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, was designed to reverse the laws that were originally seen as constitutional per *Plessy v. Ferguson* through a change in approach by the plaintiff.

After the Civil War, some states began creating separate but equal facilities to divide A.A and whites. In the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Homer Plessy fought against Judge John H. Ferguson to prove that forcing him to sit in a Jim Crow car on the railroad was a violation of both the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments (Foner & Garraty, 2009). Plessy also felt that separate facilities left room to say the A.A were inferior to their white counterparts. However, the Supreme Court did not agree with him; they ruled that separate but equal facilities were constitutional. This ruling opened the doors to intensify segregation. “Strict laws were passed to forcibly separate blacks from whites in every sector of the society including education, restrooms, hotels, public transportation, sports, hospitals, prisons, and even cemeteries (Johnson, n.d.)” The impact the case had on A.A students and educators was sickening. “[After *Plessy* and] prior to *Brown v. Board of Education* and the lifting of restrictive covenants, students in Black schools had caring teachers who lived and interacted in the community” (Lash & Ratcliff, 2014, p.335). Despite the obvious gap in learning facilities and materials caused by *Plessy*, African American students were often empowered when they were taught by community figures. When the person who was instructing could relate to the students’ environments, they could personalize the lessons and better meet the needs of each student, so they could succeed. The educators also often had a personal relationship with each student or their family. Without this personal connection, sometimes there was a loss of communication which negatively impacted

the students. The problems caused would not be successfully addressed until 1954 during *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, Kansas, was “the name given to five separate cases that were heard by the U.S. Supreme Court concerning the issue of segregation in public schools. These cases were *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, *Briggs v. Elliot*, *Davis v. Board of Education of Prince Edward County (VA.)*, *Boiling v. Sharpe*, and *Gebhart v. Ethel* (History, n.d.).” “[*Brown* was] the culmination of a twenty-year strategic effort to overturn *Plessy*” (Greene, 2015). The argument, like many presented before, was separate facilities were a violation of the fourteenth amendment, but what they added was a psychological approach which showed that “segregated school systems tended to make black children feel inferior to white children, and thus such a system should not be legally permissible (History, n.d.).” The Supreme Court was originally divided on the issue. However, after the installation of Court Justice Earl Warren, the decision was unanimous. Decided in 1954, “[It] marked a dramatic capstone to a series of lawsuits challenging the concept of ‘separate but equal’...” (Mckeown, 2015). This case proved that the ruling from *Plessy v. Ferguson* could not be constitutional because “segregated schools insured that African Americans would have an inferior education that would handicap their ability to function in American society (Johnson, n.d.).” The downside was that the Supreme Court did not give any directions on how to implement the ruling. All they stated was that schools had to be desegregated with “all deliberate speed” (History, n.d.). This meant that the states that were trying to prolong the process could and would be penalized. The Supreme Court clarified this in the case of *Cooper v. Aaron* in which they ruled “that fear of social unrest or violence, whether real or constructed by those wishing to oppose integration, does not excuse state governments from complying with *Brown* (Brown, 2004).”

Aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education*

“Between 1955 and 1960, federal judges [held] more than 200 school desegregation hearings (Brown 2004).” These cases ranged from being forced to reopening schools to general admission of A.A students. The government seemed as though they were really trying to correct their wrongs. Per Lash and Ratcliff, “The case produced many positive changes (2014, p.328).” Students were finally on a path where they might be able to receive an “equal education” as their white counterparts. However, it wouldn’t be a smooth transition. “The Brown decision provided no direction on how the process of integration was to occur, nor did it address what would happen to [A.A] schools, [A.A] teachers, and [A.A] administrators once it was implemented” (Lash & Ratcliff, 2014, p.328). Everything after the case was based off a series of trial and error. “The reactions to the...decision were mild at first, but they soon turned to violent protests in towns and cities throughout the nation (Johnson, n.d.)” The national guard and federal marshals were even giving escorts to protect some A.A students from violent protestors. This is evident in both the case of Ruby Bridges, the first African American to attend a white, public elementary school in the South, and the Little Rock Nine, the group of African American students who attended Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas only three years after the Brown ruling. Although the integration of schools did not happen overnight, the changes in the years to follow the ruling were evident.

Present Day Education

One may be happy about all the progress made throughout history with the desegregation of schools. After all, things are a lot different now than they were during times of Jim Crow and the beginnings of *Brown*. However, one must not become complacent and ignore the things still being done in America’s present day educational systems. Several school systems are using

Eurocentric curriculums, different methods of tracking, colorblind approaches, and unequal funding and resources to cause schools to remain segregated. These things are unacceptable and must be exposed for the damage they are causing.

The Eurocentric curriculum being taught today does not demonstrate the desegregation America claims to have achieved. “Eurocentrism is the implicit assumption that all relevant modern concepts, practices, technologies, and capacities are essentially European” (Duncan, 2012). This leaves out most of African American History. It almost assumes the position that African Americans have not contributed anything to society since slavery. This method of teaching reinforces the systematic oppression, and it falls over into standardized testing. “Black students have scored disproportionately lower on assessments of higher order thinking skills, such as standardized social studies examinations, due to cultural insensitivity in instruction, poor instruction, minimally qualified teachers, and weak literacy instruction” (Duncan, 2012). It has been proven that “[t]hey, [standardized tests], do not provide a complete picture of student performances, particularly for those students whose knowledge and abilities are not accurately measured by tests; they may not be aligned with the curriculum, especially for those students tracked into lower ability classes (Denbo, 2002, p.14).” Thus, this Eurocentric method of teaching has not benefitted very many African Americans, if any.

Another way schools are being segregated is through a method called tracking. “Tracking [is] assigning students to schools, programs, or classes based on their achievement levels” (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). It can take many forms, but the most common is ability tracking, per Heubert and Hauser, which people are grouped together based on their “ability”. This is harmful to students because it sets them aside and practically handicaps them from being able to succeed. Marianne Modica (2015) discussed in a paper that “students in high-track classes ‘had

significantly more positive attitudes about themselves and had higher educational aspirations than did students in low-track classes' (Modica, 2015, p.77).” This is most likely the result of the A.A students in higher tracks finally gaining a sense of accomplishment that had been denied to them before. It has been discovered that “members of some minority groups, English-language learners, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are overrepresented in lower-track classes...” (Heubert & Hauser, 1999). These students are implicitly reminded every day of their inferiority to their white peers, and studies have found that tracking does not even benefit low-ability students (Modica, 2015, p.77). It is almost like babying them, and not pushing them to where they need to be to succeed. “The select few A.A students who make it into higher level classes are often forced to pick an identity, either “‘ghetto’ or ‘Oreo’ (Modica, 2015, p.77).” Identifying as “ghetto” means that one must act out and risk being in the higher track to fit in with the other A.A or one can identify as an “Oreo” and pretend to be privileged and conform to the white way of life despite their skin tone. Tracking is another tool used to reinforce systematic oppression. Not only are A.A students separated from the whites, but they are often divided from each other. African American students who have not been exposed to certain experiences are said to have a lesser ability, but that assumption denies that every student learns differently and that socioeconomic levels do not play a role in one’s educational opportunities. It is as if meeting the status quo determines intelligence.

Some schools are taking a different route and placing every student on the same level by using a colorblind approach. This approach is awful, because it ignores the real impact that race has in society by preferring the flawed argument that speaking of race makes one "racist." Thandeka Chapman (2013) says, “[c]olorblindness is a false premise because the conscious avoidance of the topic of race, and the unconscious actions based on race, contradicts the notion

of racial blindness [, and] [t]he insidious nature of colorblindness designs barriers to student learning and growth, which speaks more to the institutionalization of racism (p.614).” It is a chain reaction. Ignoring the issue doesn’t make it go away, which is why it needs to be addressed. The students of color must continue to ask questions and not take a change of subject for an answer, and the educators must educate themselves on more than the Eurocentric views. The act of not acting does more damage than people often assume. The slaves would have never achieved freedom if everyone sat around waiting on the next person to act, and *Brown v. Board* would have never occurred if the people involved in the five cases decided to quit when they were turned down by the state. Every time the background of A.A students is not addressed, they receive an indirect reminder that they are inferior to their white counterparts. While this impacts them psychologically because they began to cultivate a mindset of internalized racism, it is no excuse. Within classrooms of schools around the nation, the colorblind approach maintains the system of authority otherwise known as “white supremacy” that must be changed.

Another common thing that segregates schools is the lack of equal funding and resources. “[A.A] students suffer from a lack of educationally related resources and inferior facilities, resulting in larger class sizes, less qualified teachers, inferior buildings, science equipment and labs, libraries and library materials, computers, textbooks, and other resources (Denbo, 2002, p.14).” One must think of this when tracking students. How can one do as well if not better than their white counterparts if they are not even given access to the same materials? Also, with class sizes being large, it is hard for teachers to really develop a relationship with their students which makes it even harder for teachers to keep track of everyone. Since they are unable to ensure if the students are grasping the concepts many predominantly A.A schools teach to the test. To make matters worse, the school boards are barely investing into schools with high minority rates.

“[S]chools with 90 percent or more students of color spend a full \$733 less per student per year than schools with 90 percent or more white students” (Spatig-Amerikaner, 2012, p.4). If more money went into the predominantly black schools, not only could they afford better materials, but they could also afford to hire better teachers. This is not to say money would fix everything, but it would allow for the conditions of schools, if they are going to remain as segregated as they currently are, to be better for the students who attend.

A Few Things to Consider

“The children in today’s schools are the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the descendants of the policy mandates such as cross-town busing, open enrollment, inter-district enrollment, charter schools, voucher schools, comprehensive reform orders, tax levies, and multicultural education (Chapman, 2013, p. 615). These students do not need to relive history. They should not have to sneak around to gain a great education like the slaves did with pit schools by going to tutors and outside sources to gain information that could have been taught in the classroom. There needs to be funds allocated to predominantly minority schools so that the students do not relive *Plessy* where schools are both separate and unequal due to the conditions of the materials, building, and teachers. The students of today deserve to reap the full benefits of *Brown v. Board*, but unfortunately schools are still segregated. They are using Eurocentric curriculums that ignore that A.A contributed anything to society, different methods of tracking that disadvantage A.A through unequal learning opportunities, colorblind approaches that ignore the true impact of race on society, and unequal funding and resources that automatically set A.A because the quality of the education is unfair. It is obvious that the education system in America needs to be reformed, but it is not just up to the politicians.

People in America must open their eyes and speak up about the injustices being done towards

A.A students all around the nation.

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