SEGREGATION, DESEGREGATION, AND RESEGREGATION OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN AMERICA

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Blacks and whites were separated for many decades after the end of the United States civil war. The Supreme Court played an important role by deciding that separate and equal facilities, including schools, were constitutional. The southern states took this to the extreme, while northern states' schools were segregated more de facto than de jure. "Separate and equal" was the law of the land until the 1950s, when the Supreme Court overturned their original decision about schools. It took roughly 15 years for schools to become integrated. Then in the 1990s, efforts to integrate schools stopped and public schools have very quickly become segregated once again, similar to the way northern schools were divided prior to the 1950s. Access to a good education is still minimal for many black men and women.

The de jure segregation of schools began in the late 1800s, not long after the 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution. On May 18, 1896, the Supreme Court decided the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson.*[1] The case regarded a man by the name of Homer Plessy, who had ridden in a white railroad car and thus was charged by the state of Louisiana for doing so. He challenged this charge because he was ⅞ white, but the court ultimately decided that as long as the state provided equal facilities for both blacks and whites, it was perfectly legal and integration was unnecessary. The state could decide to require that he only use facilities for blacks. This decision allowed for schools to be segregated just as it allowed for the segregation of restrooms, train cars, waiting rooms, etc. The government support drove segregation even more so than before.

Segregation and racism were portrayed quite differently in the North than in the southern states. In the North, schools were segregated more by where they lived than by race. There weren't laws dictating which school each race had to attend the same way that there were in the South, but they were still highly segregated due to class, because more blacks fell into the lower class. Southern schools were completely separated. Whites and blacks each had their own school

[1] *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).

to attend based solely on their race. Sometimes the nearest black school was miles away and the children had to commute there every day in order to attend. The schools were separate, but certainly not equal.

In Monroe, Louisiana, blacks had one school that included every grade from kindergarten through eleventh grade in the same building.[2] One student who attended that school in Monroe was a young man named Robert Joseph Pershing Foster. Robert's parents were both employed at the school; his mother taught seventh grade and his father was the principal. There was only one teacher per grade, so when Robert was in seventh grade, his mother was his teacher. Even with both parents working full time, the family had to sell fresh milk on the side to make ends meet,[3] because colored school teachers only made about one third the salary that white school teachers made for the same amount of work.[4] Similarly, colored schools received much less money from the government per student, sometimes as little as one tenth of the amount white schools received.[5] Since the government money went to white schools, there was no room in the budget for textbooks. They often took them out of the white schools' dumpsters after they'd received newer books.[6] The colored schools were behind in virtually every regard. Calling the white schools and black schools equal would be preposterous.

Colleges were segregated much like grade schools were. There were very few colleges that admitted blacks relative to the amount of white colleges, especially in the South. The lucky young black men and women who were able to go to college often had to move to another city, because there weren't any nearby colleges that admitted blacks. For example, a young man

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[2] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. (New York: Random House, 2010), 74.
[3] Ibid., 74
[4] Ibid., 85
[5] Ibid., 86
[6] Ibid., 86

named George Starling dreamed of earning a college degree. From a young age, he enjoyed learning and reading books. George was even Valedictorian of his graduating high school class, which would be impressive had more than six students made it to graduation day.[7] George went to Tallahassee and attended the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical State College for three semesters until his father demanded he return home so he could contribute to the family income.[8] He wanted so badly to return to school and finish his degree, but didn't have the money to do so since he'd have to return to Tallahassee. George even began doing extra work in his free time to save up money, but there weren't any colleges close by him that admitted black students.[9] Robert Foster also had to move to attend college because the nearby college didn't admit blacks.[10] He eventually went to Atlanta to attend Morehouse college, which had a reputation for being the best black college in the country.[11] George and Robert did not turn out similar in any way. Robert was able to graduate from Morehouse and he even continued on to medical school. His parents played a large role in his education, since they were educators themselves and were aware of the value an education. George never returned to school, but rather he worked an unskilled job his whole life. Had there been a closer college which allowed blacks and his parents been more supportive, George could've continued his studies and had a very different life.

Minimal access to education was a major reason many blacks were uneducated. Many kids were forced to drop out of school when they were old enough to work, which is why George's graduating class was so small.[12] Black families normally couldn't afford to allow their

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[7] Ibid., 66.
[8] Ibid., 67
[9] Ibid., 106
[10] Ibid., 115
[11] Ibid., 115
[12] Ibid., 66

children to go to school, because they needed the money. In other cases, kids would go to school for only a few months a year when it was off season from picking/planting cotton.[13] This meant school would only be in session for 5-6 months, but even when the kids were in school they weren't taught effectively. There was a single classroom in which first through eighth grade was taught together in Chickasaw County.[14] As a result, very few blacks ended up with a decent education. After just three semesters of college, George Starling was known to be one of the most educated people in his town.[15] It was simply too difficult to work and go to school in another city, and many people felt that there was no value in an education, since those that had an education rarely benefitted from it and it was difficult to come up with the tuition.

In the 1950s, progress was making way for a change. People were beginning to notice that blacks were not incapable of learning or living the same way as whites, though it was certainly not a popular point of view yet. On average, the children of migrants who had moved to the North went to better schools than the African American children in the South, which meant that they surpassed southern blacks in many regards. As early as the 1930s, it was black migrants who were recognized as performing as well as both northern-born blacks and whites in school. Psychologists believed that northern environments were responsible for this. Intelligence studies such as these were used in the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Otto Klineberg's studies were most important. He found that on average, the longer children had been in the North, the higher their IQ was tested to be.[16] This data proved that black children and white children were the same intellectually, and that access to good education makes all the difference.

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[13] Ibid., 24
[14] Ibid., 25
[15] Ibid., 107
[16] Ibid., 536

The case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*[17] was argued on December 9, 1952, reargued on December 8, 1953, and finally decided on May 17, 1954. The case actually combined 5 cases in which African American parents had filed law suits against school districts in order to gain entry to white schools into one case, which happened to be called *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. The case was assembled by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP. It was perhaps named after Oliver Brown, since he was the only male in a group of nearly 200 plaintiffs. The Supreme Court ultimately decided that separate facilities based on race alone were "inherently unequal," thus overruling the decision made in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. It is important to note that this was not the first time that separate school facilities had been challenged, but rather it was the first time such a case was ruled in their favor[18]. Unfortunately, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision really didn't change anything, so the next year, 1955, the Supreme Court ordered school boards around the country to desegregate their schools "with all deliberate speed."[19]

Desegregation was a very slow and difficult process, but it began immediately after the Supreme Court decision. There was an immense amount of opposition toward the integration of schools. In 1957 after the Supreme Court had ruled in their favor, nine black students enrolled in school with white students in Little Rock, Arkansas. White troops blocked them from entering the school.[20] Similarly, a young girl by the name of Dorothy Counts was taunted and abused as she entered the white high school for the first time on September 4, 1957. The photograph taken of her that morning, fig. 1, made international news. She held her head high as she walked in the

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[17] *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
[18] Brown Foundation, "Myths vs. Truths," http://brownvboard.org/content/myths-vs-truths
[19] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. (New York: Random House, 2010), 436.
[20] Ibid., 378

school doors, spit soaking her brand new dress.[21] The picture showcases the absurdity of black students entering white schools. The students surrounding Dorothy in the photo are staring at her and grinning to each other. It is likely they are laughing and teasing and taunting her. This sort of behavior was common in such situations and continued for several years. It wasn't until the year 1970 that African Americans could enter white schools without riots, threats or the need for government protection.[22]

The North was changing at the same time that the integration of schools were occurring in the South. Between 1960 and the late 1970s, the size of the black middle classed greatly increased. As more blacks could afford to do so, they began to move into the suburbs similar to the ways whites had been for decades, the difference being that they weren't trying to get away from migrant blacks; they were leaving in search of better lives - in particular, better schools - for their children. It was the hopes of many black parents to give their children what they never had - a good education. People saw the white-picket fence vision of suburbia and dreamed of giving their children that life. Real estate tactics such as blockbusting kept blacks out of white suburban neighborhoods as much as possible, thus also keeping them out of certain schools, but that didn't stop all of them from living a suburban life.[23] After blacks were allowed to enroll in white schools, whites fled from cities into suburbs even more so than they already were, in the hopes of reacquiring their perceived-to-be safe school environment without black students. An epitome of this would be the city of Dearborn, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. Whites fled there

[21] Don Sturkey, *Dorothy Counts at Harding High*, September 4, 1957. The Charlotte Observer, Charlotte, 2007.
[22] Ibid., 413
[23] Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, "Suburban Segregation," p. 577; accessed at www.historian.cc.

from Detroit as more and more African Americans arrived in the city. To this day, only around 1% of the city's population is black.[24]

Integration of schools was unpopular for majority of Americans. When the school boards were ordered to desegregate, the states found ways around it. They funded private schools for whites only. Some districts chose to close all their schools so they wouldn't have to desegregate.[25] One school superintendent even chose to commit suicide rather than face the challenges and horrors of desegregation.[26] It wasn't only the school boards and authority figures that found ways to push back against desegregation. Many white families sent their children to private whites-only schools whether they could afford it or not. Sometimes the parents had to get multiple jobs to afford the steep tuition costs, but they would still rather be set back financially than have their children in school with African Americans. In 1971 Mississippi, roughly 25% of white students attended private schools.[27] Ironically, even some blacks were against desegregation of schools.[28]

As expected, many fights broke out between black and white students in the newly integrated schools. In one specific fight that occurred in a school in Lake County, Florida, the assistant principal sided with the white student even though he had started the fight. The assistant principal had been the principal of the black high school prior to the integration and had been made the assistant principal of the integrated school. He likely sided with the white student to avoid being accused of "reverse favoritism." Black parents were upset by this decision. Some

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[24] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. (New York: Random House, 2010), 378.
[25] Ibid., 436
[26] Ibid., 437
[27] Ibid., p.437
[28] Ibid., p.436

even protested in subsequent fights when similar decisions were made, but nothing ever came about the protests.[29]

It took about 15 years for desegregation to actually occur. For example, desegregated schools didn't come to Chickasaw County until the fall of 1970. The only reason integrated schools occurred in that year was because of a court order in Mississippi that provided a deadline for integration - February 1970. This deadline was extended even further in some counties.[30] A man named Billy Joe Evans was only a preteen at the time of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision. He never thought twice about the decision, nor about being separated from the white students. He attended a segregated high school and then received an undergraduate degree from Morehouse College. As was common, southern states offered to pay the difference between their tuition and the tuition of northern graduate schools so that black students would go north for graduate degrees. This method kept higher levels of study more segregated.[31] This tactic allowed Billy to earn a graduate degree in chemistry.

As the new millennium approached, schools were no longer separated by race, but rather by socioeconomic status. Richer neighborhoods inherently have richer schools, and poorer neighborhoods have poorer schools. Black, Latino, and other minority students are more likely to be born into poorer families and thus attend poorer schools. Therefore, socioeconomic status correlates highly with race. As a result, public schools end up highly segregated even still.[32] Between 1964 and 1970, the South's school districts became highly integrated. Then in the 1974 Supreme Court case known as *Milliken v. Bradley*, the court ruled that school districts couldn't include suburbs when desegregating urban - and therefore, minority-ruled - areas. Northern

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[29] Ibid., p.438
[30] Ibid., p.437
[31] Deborah Meyers Greene, *Billy Joe Evans*, (The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2004)
[32] Sarah Childress, "Separate and Unequal: Does Integration Still Matter in Public Schools?", *PBS.org*, July 15, 2014

school districts follow city borders, which also happen to divide neighborhoods segregated by housing. Thus, resegregation got its start. By the 1990s, the Supreme Court had ruled to undo desegregation agendas.[33] Access to education remains an issue today as a result.

Overall, schools of all levels were separate for blacks and whites for many years. The Supreme Court ruled that states could require them to attend different schools. In the South, this meant that schools were precisely for blacks or for whites. In the North, schools were separated not by race but by the neighborhoods in which students lived, and thus by economic class. As a result, schools were segregated but not to the extreme of the southern states. Schools began to become integrated in the 1950s when the Supreme Court overruled their original decision and declared that separate schools were unequal. 15 years later, integration was finally achieved. As efforts to keep schools desegregated were decreased, schools have become highly segregated once again. School zones are based on location, like they have been for decades in the North. On average, blacks often fall into the lower classes and thus attend poorer schools. Resegregation has essentially occurred, which maintains the issue of access to a good education for many minority students.

[33] Amelia Lester, "Still Separate After All These Years?", *Harvard Ed.*, May 1, 2004

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1

Don Sturkey, *Dorothy Counts at Harding High*, September 4, 1957. The Charlotte Observer, Charlotte, 2007.

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