

Chapter 9

Revisiting Equity, Equality, and Reform in Contemporary Public Education

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ABSTRACT

Equity, equality, and reform were intended to level the playing field, so to speak, for children who have been marginalized since the idea of public education was introduced. The beginning stages of a structured, formal education system was not inclusive; in fact, the one-size-fits-all mindset of public education set a standard by which children of color, children with disabilities, and poor children received nothing more than a substandard education, if they received an education at all. This new idea of a free public education was reserved for the majority, unattainable for children who were perceived to fall outside the notion of a traditional student model. This chapter revisits equity, equality, and reform in public education.

INTRODUCTION

Equity, equality and reform were intended to level the playing field, so to speak, for children who have been marginalized since the idea of public education was introduced. The beginning stages of a structured, formal education system was not inclusive (Pitre, 2013); in fact, the one-size-fits-all mindset of public education set a standard by which children of color, children with disabilities, and poor children received nothing more than a substandard education, if they received an education at all. This new idea of a free public education was reserved for the majority (Pitre, 2013), unattainable for children who were perceived to fall outside the notion of a traditional student model.

Preferential treatment was given to children of White children who lived at least a modest middle-class existence and of at least average intelligence. Everyone else, those who did not fit the model of the traditional student, were educated in settings that were often structures that were overcrowded, unkempt, and barely inhabitable; where Black children received a menial education, were given the poorest quality of resources (Virginia Museum of History & Culture, n.d.), and had few opportunities or possibilities of a postsecondary education.

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If nothing else, segregation had been a stark reminder of racial superiority and inferiority (Clark & Clark, 1950) that had been solidly established by slavery, when the first boat unloaded hundreds of Africans onto American shores. Segregation was the direct descendant of slavery in that it kept Black people locked into oppression. It also set a standard by which black children understood their place in society, which was anything but equal.

Kenneth and Mamie Clark, both of whom were psychologists during the period of segregation, conducted a study examining the impact that segregation had on the psyche of Black children (NAACP, 2020). In what became known as the Doll Test, the Clarks presented Black children between three and seven years old with four dolls and asked them to pick which doll they preferred. The only noted difference between the dolls was color; most of the participating children chose the white doll, describing it in positive terms while the Black dolls were seen as unattractive (NAACP, 2020). The Clarks (1950) concluded that by the age of five, black children had already developed a complete understanding that the color of their skin was equated to inferiority in American society. The results of their study was used as supporting evidence in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case, with the conclusion that segregation had a devastating affect on Black children (American Psychological Association, 2020). In fact, the Supreme Court cited the findings of the Clarks in its decision, solidifying the significance of the Doll Test in exposing the psychological damage that Black children suffered from school-supported racism (NAACP, 2020).

Even as history was being made, as in *Brown*, there were still reservations. Many in the Black community saw desegregation as a problematic effort to force racial intergration without actually confronting and eradicating racism. For example, Haney (1978), pointed out that the task of desegregating schools would have a negative impact on educators of color who taught in schools for Black children. Desegregation was a major reform effort that targeted over a century of discrimination against African American children, but did not explore how Black teachers would factor into the quest for equality. Opposers of desegregation had been very vocal about their desire to keep the races separate, so there was a high degree of certainty that Black teachers would not be employed in an integrated school where White students were in attendance (Haney, 1978). Leaders in the Black community were more interested in creating more sustainable conditions in Black schools rather than the prospect of integration (Organization of American Historians, 2017, para. 4).

Despite reservations within both the Black and White communities, Thurgood Marshall pursued and subsequently won his battle to end segregation (Organization of American Historians, 2017). Marshall had been a relentless advocate for civil rights and social justice, seeking to end discriminatory practices in public education long before his victory in the *Brown* case. Marshall, influenced by his mentor and former professor had began waging war against segregation. He had won many cases that questioned the continued practice of race-based exclusion, and he was motivated to continue his fight.

After the *Brown* verdict was announced, systematic change would take another two decades as school systems across struggled for various reasons (Georgetown Law Library, 2020) that included financially funding desegregation, interpreting what integration would look like and, in many cases, not wanting to let go of being separated by race. In fact, we have only to look at George Wallace's (1963) impassioned declaration in defiance of any actions otherwise, "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever" (Rothstein, 2013a).

According to Melnick (2020), the court in *Brown* did not create a plan as to how districts would start the process of desegregation; nor was there, as Melnick wrote (2020), a specific argument against state-sponsored segregation. Perhaps, although ruling that segregation was unconstitutional, the Court deferred giving a desegregation plan of action realizing that it would be a monumentally complicated

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