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Christine Dickason
University of Mississippi

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America's Schools: Separate and Unequal

Christine Dickason, University of Mississippi

Abstract

This paper explores how various philosophers contribute to the discussion of the racial integration of public schools. I assert that racial integration is a moral necessity, and the government should create policy to ensure the successful integration of our public schools. To support this claim, I will first expand upon the context of the issue. I will then address libertarians, who would counter my thesis with a focus on the freedom of individuals. I will use utilitarian ideas to demonstrate that racially diverse public schools maximize the good in society; however, utilitarianism fails to explain what I believe is the crux of the problem. Therefore, I will draw on theories of democracy, the individual, and justice in the writings of Dewey, Kant, and Rawls to address the components of racial segregation that disrespect the inherent worth of human beings. Aristotelian ideas on what it means to be a flourishing human being will support my claim that segregated schooling is irrational, immoral, and contradicts the purpose of education. Finally, I will argue that civic virtue calls for unity and solidarity, which are vital to the optimal functioning of society and which are threatened when schools are racially separated.

America's Schools: Separate and Unequal

"There must be a recognition that we still live under a social contract in this country. In spite of the progress we have made, there are still too many people who are getting left out... We must work at the elimination of the remaining barriers that divide us as a people."

-Former Mississippi Governor William Winter

Over fifty years after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was handed down by the Supreme Court, public schools in the United States are experiencing an alarming pattern of "re-segregation," or the separation of races. The isolation of races has several consequences for students attending these schools—economically, academically, and socially. In this paper, I will argue that the perpetuation of racial segregation in the public school system is unethical and government policy should directly address the problem. To support this claim, I will explore the writings of Dewey, Kant, Rawls, Aristotle, and others to conclude that integrated public schools: (1) benefit the least advantaged; (2) are necessary to truly respect humanity; and, (3) are key to building and encouraging a unified democratic society.

According to a 2012 report by the UCLA Civil Rights Project, "80% of Latino students and 74% of black students attend majority nonwhite schools," and "the typical white student attends a school where three-quarters of their peers are white" (Orfield 2012). Minority students are more likely to attend an economically disadvantaged school: "The vast majority (79 percent) of white students attend schools where less than half the student body is poor, compared with 37 percent of black students and 36 percent of Hispanics" (Jost). Academically, students "who attend integrated schools are more likely to

score higher on mathematics achievement tests compared to those who attend racially segregated minority schools" (Mickleson 2013). Numerous studies have tried to quantify the effects of desegregation in public schools. A study in the *American Economic Review* suggested that desegregation during the 1970s actually reduced the dropout rate among African American students by nearly three percentage points (Guryan). Another study indicated, "...for blacks, school desegregation significantly increased educational attainment and adult earnings, reduced the probability of incarceration, and improved adult health status" (Johnson). So what occurs when resegregation begins creeping into schools? The *Quarterly Journal of Economics* asserted that the end of busing in one community in North Carolina "widened racial inequality" (Billings).

Given these facts, should the government pass policy to racially diversify public schools? Libertarians might argue that despite possible consequences of segregation the government still has no right to interfere with the free will of individuals. An example in the political sphere is Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas). He asserted his opposition to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, claiming that the legislation "undermine[d] the concept of liberty" (Bassett). In this view, students should not be forced to participate in government-ordered integration strategies because these policies undermine the freedom of the individual. However, could the harm principle apply in this case? The harm principle states that one can only limit liberty when an individual (who is not consenting) is being harmed by another's actions (Feinberg 25). There are four main concepts of harm: offense, invasion of an interest, harm vs. hurt, and non-benefit (Feinberg 26-30). In the case of racial segregation, there seems to be a harm done to the students who are attending these schools, some of which were described earlier. Would this not be a sufficient reason for the government to intervene in these cases, in order to protect the students from suffering harms that they did not consent to or had no control over? Yet, Feinberg states, "We harm a man when we deny or deprive him of something he needs; we fail to benefit him (merely) when we deny or deprive him of some good he does not need" (Feinberg 30). The burden of proof would be on the proponent of government intervention to prove that segregated schooling actually denies the students of a need, rather than simply a good.

Because of the difficulty of proving this, most libertarians would still emphasize the importance of the freedom of the individual, and thus, deny the right of the government to intervene in public schools to ensure racial integration. Utilitarian theory, on the other hand, would offer a very different perspective on the topic. Utilitarianism focuses on maximizing the good in a society. In some cases, this means that individual preferences are less important than the "bigger picture." To decide where utilitarians fall on this issue, one must weigh the good and the suffering caused by racial segregation in schools. If schools were more diverse, several goods would be produced. Students would perform at higher levels, thus creating more knowledgeable, well-equipped citizens for the workforce and society. For example, a study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* concluded, "Exposure to concentrated disadvantage in Chicago appears to have had detrimental and long-lasting consequences for black children's cognitive ability, rivaling in magnitude the effects of missing 1 year of schooling" (Sampson 852). Moreover, the inequalities present in the system would be reduced, creating utility for many students. Some suffering might be caused to racial purists by the reduction of racially segregated schools, as policies of integration run directly contrary to their beliefs. Yet, overall, the good produced by racially integrated schools far outweighs any suffering caused.

However, utilitarianism only touches on some of the problems of segregation and, in my view, leaves out an important piece of the puzzle. By only looking at the totals for both good and suffering produced, it ignores the effects of integration on an individual level. I believe Kant can contribute in some meaningful ways to understand the individual aspect of integration. Kant argued that before one seeks to pass his will, he must test the will to see if it could be universalized (Sandel 120). Let's test this

maxim in the case of racial segregation in schools: Could you will that every school be composed of only people of the same race? There are several cases in which this law could not apply. Imagine a case of the last remaining member of a race. There would be no way in which this individual could attend a school with only others from his own race. Or consider bi-racial students. Would they have to choose the race of one of their parents over the other? Because the maxim cannot be applied universally, there is something about it that lacks rationality, according to Kant.

In addition, to Kant, it would be irrational to perpetuate racial segregation. Kant strongly believed in respecting the inherent value of each human being and viewing humans as ends in and of themselves (Sandel 109). Segregated schooling does not achieve the fulfillment of this ideal. The notion that schools can remain segregated reinforces an idea that some people are inferior or less valuable than others due to their skin color. To view others as less worthy or separate from you is a contradiction in will because you are failing to see and respect the humanity in others.

Another philosophical test to use in the case of racial segregation is Rawls's veil of ignorance (Rawls 569). Imagine you are behind a veil of ignorance, meaning that you did not know anything about yourself—your race, social status, or economic wellbeing. If asked to create an ideal world in this position, a person would tend towards a society in which everyone was equal—or, at the very least, one in which even the lowest position in society would not be unbearable. In this idea of true justice, race would not be a factor. The only allowance of differences between individuals would be in cases when the differences would actually help the individuals who are struggling the most (Rawls 571). Thus, racial isolation is contrary to the equality that anyone behind a veil of ignorance would promote.

Rawls's political conception of justice can also contribute to this discussion. Rawls notes that "fair opportunities for all citizens (especially in education and training)" are key in societies that embrace this conception of justice (Wenar 4). Segregated school systems do not provide these fair opportunities of which Rawls speaks, especially as the disparities between majority minority schools and overwhelmingly white schools continues to widen. These disparities have tangible results: the national average ACT score in 2012 for African American students was 17.0, compared to 22.4 for white students ("National Score Trends").

John Dewey, drawing on many of the already mentioned philosophers, directly addressed the importance of education in his writings. His ideas on a democratic society further strengthen the argument in favor of integrating education systems. Dewey wrote, "Belief in the common man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. That belief is without basis and significance save as it means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth, family, of material or cultural wealth" (Creative Democracy 341). He also asserts that one of the primary goals of education is to prepare people "for intelligent organization, so that they can unite with each other in a common struggle against poverty, disease, ignorance, credulity, and low standards of appreciation and enjoyment" (Stack 21). Education is a cornerstone of democracy and allows individuals to understand the need to work together in creative ways to combat the aforementioned plagues on our nation. Discrimination based on race is "treason to the democratic way of life" and serves as only a barrier to creating the unity necessary for a democracy to properly function (Creative Democracy 342).

Dewey touches on what I believe to be the most important aspect of the debate: the idea of community. One of the most devastating effects of segregated schools is the fostering of apathy or prejudice towards the "other group." A report by the National Academy of Education concluded, "The weight of the research evidence supports the conclusion that there are long-term benefits of desegregation in elementary and secondary schools. Under some circumstances and over the long term,

experience in desegregated schools increases the likelihood of greater tolerance and better intergroup relations among adults of different racial groups" (Linn 2). When students are racially separated, homogenous communities are fostered, which lead to feelings of exclusivity. If the feeling of solidarity within a town or country is missing, then people lose any sense of shared responsibility toward common goals. Not only does this fail to prepare students for encounters with diversity in the real world, but it also creates a dangerous "us vs. them" mentality. As these divides deepen across the United States, the individual towns "cannot rightly be called a city, but many. They are at war with themselves, and thereby undermine their own potential" (Weber).

In segregated schooling, a sense of shared responsibility fades, as people begin to see those who are different from them as the "out group." Dewey writes, "We shall foster habits of group loyalty, feelings of solidarity, which shall bind us together by such close ties that no social group which has not cultivated like feelings through caring for all its members, will be able to withstand us" (Evolution and Ethics 327). There are evolutionary benefits to caring for others. A loss of unity threatens our democratic institutions and our capacity to truly care about the human beings who inhabit the same world as us.

Many of these ideas are deeply Aristotelian. Aristotle believed that for a city to prosper, there must be successful political interaction, for we are political animals (Skultety). These interactions can only happen in a place where everyone is involved in the political process. In Aristotle's ideal city, every individual is political; to deny others to be active in politics is to encourage people to not be rational.

How does this translate into the education system? Minority schools tend to also be economically disadvantaged schools (Jost). With lower levels of resources available to the schools, they often struggle to adequately prepare their students for post-graduation, whether that path involves post-secondary education or an immediate entry into the workforce. This leaves an entire group of the population struggling to fully participate in society after high school graduation—if they even reach that point. To be a political citizen, education is key. When education is lacking, then society is failing to encourage human beings to flourish.

Aristotle also strongly believed in the importance of habits in forming and refining certain virtuous characteristics (LaFollette 48). In Aristotle's views, one must feel emotions in an appropriate way and be able to articulate those feelings in a comprehensive manner. When differences arise in the expression of these emotions, it is due to improper habits. If you ignore the importance of education, then you are undervaluing peoples' habits, which are often developed in the school setting. Proper habits—which stem from a proper education—lead to individual's ability to land on the golden mean, or the ideal between two extremes (LaFollette 50).

Modern philosophers have also contributed to the discussion over integration in public schools. Elizabeth Anderson, the John Rawls Collegiate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, argues that racial segregation is a fundamental cause of social inequality, and thus, integration is a moral imperative. In her book, The Imperative of Integration, she asserts, "...integration of racial, ethnic, and other groups that mark significant lines of social inequality is a vital ideal for a democratic society, necessary for its basic institutions to function successfully" (Anderson, Preface X). She argues that there has been a shift "from socioeconomic equality to equality of respect and esteem for identities and cultures," which creates a myth that a society can be separated along racial lines, yet still fulfill the goals of equality (Anderson).

Derrick Bell, a NAACP Legal Defense Fund Lawyer, counters that racial integration is not of vital importance; instead, policy should work to improve schools, regardless of racial diversity ("Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma" 518). He promotes the idea that segregated

schools can still function effectively and be successful in preparing students for post-graduation college or career paths. I think these conclusions stem from what Bell believes to be a realistic assessment of the current state of race relations in the United States. While perhaps not ideal, segregated schools can still provide a great education to students, he argues. In essence, it seems Bell is resisting this tendency to draw on lofty, idealistic notions about how the world should be, and rather, focuses on how the world actually is. His view that the *Brown* decision failed to create this promised integrated education system leads him to conclude that the courts should have emphasized that schools be equal, but not necessarily integrated (*Silent Covenants*).

Yet, research repeatedly has shown that integrated classrooms tend to yield higher results. A study conducted by the National Academy of Education's Committee on Social Science Research Evidence on Racial Diversity in Schools concluded, "Racial diversity per se does not guarantee such positive outcomes, but it provides the necessary conditions under which other educational policies can facilitate improved academic achievement, improved intergroup relations, and positive long-term outcomes" (Linn 3). The report argues that diverse school environments are necessary conditions to reach the goal of truly successful schools. To take a line directly from the *Brown v. Board* decision: "...in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (*Brown v. Board of Education*).

Then, how can we reconcile these ideas with seemingly successful examples, such as KIPP schools, that are majority minority schools? First, I would assert that these cases are anomalies, and their success stems from the resources the schools have due to their status as charter schools. But, more importantly, I believe that this argument, along with Bell's assessment of the problem and his proposed solutions, fails to adequately address what the purpose of education is and what it means for a school to be successful. Are test scores the only indicator of a school's achievements? Although we live in the age of standardized testing, I would say no. A school's success can be measured in other, perhaps more subtle ways, such as the societal contributions its graduates make. While KIPP students might score well on state tests, does this mean they have been able to interact in meaningful ways with a diverse set of peers?

It is difficult to concisely identify the purpose of education. Yet, I think Janet W. Schofield, a professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburg, nicely sums it up: "Education in a democratic society serves three basic purposes. It provides students with workforce skills, prepares them to function as thoughtful and informed citizens in a cohesive country and enriches their lives by awakening them to new knowledge, perspectives and possibilities" (Jost). A school should not only seek for its students to achieve high test scores. Instead, it should instill certain values in students, one of which must be racial harmony and inclusion. In segregated schools, this value is absent and forgotten. In addition, students confined to interactions with people of their own race will be unprepared to enter work environments that contain people from various races and diverse backgrounds. They may react negatively to these new encounters, or simply be ill equipped to socially interact with people who are different from themselves. More significantly, they may be lacking in awareness of and respect for other cultures or backgrounds because they were not exposed to them as a child.

Our country can never reach its full potential if we continue to allow our children to be separated based on race. Former Governor of Mississippi William Winter, in a 2004 speech at George Washington University, referenced this lack of adequate results:

"...But now fifty years after Brown we still have not overcome the difficulties of the past. Across the South there remain too many underfunded and ill-managed schools, which are not producing satisfactory results. When we permit this to happen, we are killing the dream that so

many have had of a society where nobody gets left out...That remains a major challenge that still faces us today, and until and unless we solve it we shall fall short as a competitive nation in the future" (Winter 125).

We cannot continue to allow the color of someone's skin to be a barrier to success in life. If we do, we will fail to advance on a global scale.

But quantitative statistics fail to capture the full picture of harm that results from racially segregated schools. We cannot expect to prosper as a nation if we are promoting the distinction between groups of people from a very young age. The strong sense of community that is vital to our nation's strength is lost as we continue to allow students to grow up separated and isolated, "on the other side of the tracks." The *Brown* decision was a valiant attempt to remedy this plague on our nation. But it was not enough, and its effects are being reversed across the country every day due to changes in policy, legislation, and court cases. As one report notes, "There is a substantial amount of inequality that cannot be remedied because the court refuses to acknowledge structural inequality and the continuing effects of past discrimination" (Powell 177). The government must intervene to ensure that America's children attend school together, in diverse, accepting environments that teach them the inherent value that every person, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or background, has to offer the world.

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