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De Facto Segregation in Schools

William Tomlinson

Despite the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision ending legal racial segregation in educational institutions, the “separate but equal” ideology still permeates the education system. This phenomenon, known as “white flight”, occurs without Jim Crow laws or racial oppression. Because of the freedoms that Americans have to choose their educational institutions, de facto segregation has occurred, where white families flee schools heavily populated by African-Americans. David Sikkink and Michael Emerson, Allison Roda and Amy Wells, and Kelly Rapp and Suzanne Eckes all address the issue of “white flight” in their articles: “School Choice And Racial Segregation In US Schools: The Role Of Parents’ Education”, “School Choice Policies And Racial Segregation: Where White Parents’ Good Intentions, Anxiety, And Privilege Collide”, and “Dispelling The Myth Of ‘White Flight’: An Examination Of Minority Enrollment In Charter Schools” respectively. Though all authors agree that de facto segregation occurs in the educational system, they disagree on the manifestation, motive, and solution.

The concept of racial bias is not an old one. Racial prejudice will survive throughout all humanity, despite what well meaning, moral individuals attempt to extinguish it. Sikkink and Emerson, Roda and Wells, and Rapp and Eckes all realize that racial prejudice plays a role in education. Furthermore, all authors agree that, due to the actions of privileged, white families, segregation has taken root in education. However, Sikkink and Emerson and Roda and Wells disagree with Rapp and Eckes as to the method of segregation.

Sikkink and Emerson base their hypothesis on the assumption that schools are generally segregated. They claim, “Whites in general will be more likely to select alternative schooling for their children in areas with a higher percentage black” (Sikkink and Emerson 277). Thus, Sikkink and Emerson ultimately conclude that segregation occurs when white parents choose alternative (i.e., charter) schools to escape heavily populated African-American public schools. Roda

and Wells reach much of the same conclusions. They explain that white parents, because they dominate the educational institutions, will always have the ability to enroll their children in schools with good standing (Roda and Wells 264). Roda and Wells claim that much of this happens by the ability to found charter schools (264). Furthermore, they claim that although some schools may be integrated in enrollment they are still segregated across classrooms. Because of the variety of AP classes and special courses, Roda and Wells claim that even racially integrated schools face classroom segregation (266).

Rapp and Eckes, despite agreeing with the generalized hypothesis of de facto segregation, believe it occurs in a much different way. Rapp and Eckes refute the idea that the minority population remains in the public school system while privileged whites flee to charter schools. In fact, they conclude that in many states, there was almost no difference between the racial composition of public schools and charter schools (Rapp and Eckes 618). Furthermore, in some areas Rapp and Eckes reviewed studies from Green and the National Center for Educational Statistics and concluded, “On the contrary, many charter schools have disproportionately high percentages of racial minorities. For example, charter school data reveal that the percentage of Black students in charter schools is 20% higher than in traditional public schools” (617). Thus, Rapp and Eckes show that charter schools are not the vehicle for segregation. Despite these findings, they still conclude that white families avoid schools with a high percentage of African Americans (Rapp and Eckes 621). Finally, Rapp and Eckes reconcile these two facts with the assertion that white families opt for public education if charter schools contain a large minority population (621). Rapp and Eckes claim that although whites and blacks equally attend charter and public schools in the national sphere, segregation still occurs on a school-by-school basis.

Despite the author’s universal belief that schools are segregated, Sikkink and Emerson, Roda and Wells, and Rapp and Eckes fail to concur which motive drives segregation. Sikkink and Emerson take a more direct view of de facto segregation by claiming racial profiling fuels segregation. Sikkink and Emerson believe that racial

composition of schools shape the perception of those schools (271). They maintain that despite the actual quality of the school, heavily populated African-American schools receive a poor reputation because whites assume violence, drugs, and poor discipline prevail (Sikkink and Emerson 271). Sikkink and Emerson hold that these assumptions are especially prevalent among highly educated whites (277). Sikkink and Emerson claim that because highly educated whites want their children to have the best circumstances, they choose the schools that, in their view, provide the best education (270). Because of the false perception that heavily black schools inherently face discipline and drug problems, parents choose alternative schooling. Arguing for a slightly different motive, Roda and Wells affirm that although parents aspire for racially integrated schools, they naturally gravitate towards highly white and socioeconomically advantaged schools (266). Thus, while both sources claim race shapes individual's perceptions of schools, Sikkink and Emerson believe that people gravitate away from disproportionately African-American schools because of negative perceptions, and Roda and Wells maintain that individuals gravitate towards white, wealthy schools because of positive associations. Though Sikkink and Emerson and Roda and Wells support their view in slightly different ways, they both hold the foundational view that racial stereotypes shape perceptions of educational institutions.

Rapp and Eckes believe that academic quality is the driving motive behind racial segregation in education (620). However, they found that "socioeconomic status, race, and distance from home had powerful effects on parents' choices" (Rapp and Eckes 260). Unique to their article, Rapp and Eckes also take into account the geographic location of schools. Thus, Rapp and Eckes claim that the discrepancy of minority enrollment in different schools may be because of a geographical divide (620). Consequently, the driving force behind educational segregation is racially motivated housing choices, not school enrollment.

Though Sikkink and Emerson and Roda and Wells have largely been in agreement up to this point, they diverge on the solution of de facto segregation. First, Sikkink and Emerson and Rapp and Eckes share a passive view in dealing with racial segregation. Sikkink and Emerson do not doubt that school

choice policies in recent decades have allowed racial segregation to reemerge. Sikkink and Emerson conclude from data gathered by Orfield and Eaton, “Court decisions that open the door to greater segregation and grass roots efforts to reconnect schools and (highly segregated) neighbourhoods have opened the door to more segregated schools” (269). However, due to the alternative focus of their study, Sikkink and Emerson do not provide a solution for segregation. Rapp and Eckes largely agree with Sikkink and Emerson and actually claim that integration policies discourage true reconciliation. Rapp and Eckes point out that in twelve states without integration statutes, there was only a 3% difference in racial composition than in seven states with integration statutes (624). Concurring with Green, Rapp and Eckes point out that integration statutes might actually discourage the founding of charter schools, which could serve the need for minority students and ultimately enable further integration (623).

On the contrary, Roda and Wells believe the government should take a more active role in preventing racial segregation. Roda and Wells believe that “colorblind” policies, policies that promote competition between schools as opposed to racial integration, are to blame for segregation. According to Roda and Wells, such policies, many of which take funding away from the public school system and encourage the founding charter schools, are counterproductive and correlate with increased racial segregation in schools (262). To solve segregation, Roda and Wells advocate for school policies that specifically promote racial integration (261).

Sikkink and Emerson, Roda and Wells, and Rapp and Eckes lay out logical explanations as to how and why racial segregation occurs in the educational system. While Sikkink and Emerson do not present a solution to segregation, both Rapp and Eckes and Roda and Wells provide legitimate reasoning to support their solutions to segregation. While all the authors disagree on some level, they all provide excellent insight into the problem of racial segregation. The most important point of agreement between all three authors lies in the acknowledgement of racial suppression and segregation. Regardless of how or why it occurs, the acknowledgement of racial segregation is crucial to healing the divide between blacks and whites.

Works Cited

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