Balance and Blend

The Benefits of Race and Socioeconomic Diversity

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Introduction:

On May 17th, 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States declared that separate schools for white and black children were “inherently unequal” during the *Brown v. Board of Education* case (Brown, 495). Sixty years later, on May 16th, 2016, a court ordered that the town of Cleveland, Mississippi must integrate their school corporation by combining their two local high schools, Cleveland High School, a school with an integrated student body, and East Side High School, a school with a 100 percent African American student body (“Order to Integrate Mississippi School”). It is difficult to believe that in 2016, deep, racial divides can form within communities like Cleveland, and even more difficult to believe that courts are still issuing desegregation plans that were once commonplace in the 1960’s. However, communities around the nation are experiencing similar divides. Within the last thirty years schools, have quietly regressed towards segregation once more, and students around the country, who once benefited from a diverse classroom, are now suffering from the negative effects of segregation. Socioeconomic and race diversity in kindergarten through high school education encourages the growth of students socially and economically; therefore, school corporations and state governments must take action to increase and protect diversity in schools.

Diversity is defined as the inclusion of people who are of different races, ethnicities, ages, and genders and who possess different religious, political, and ethical views. With globalization and increased immigration, the United States, an already diverse country, will become even more multicultural in the near future. Because of this, it is necessary for our nation to discuss and understand diversity, which is an important factor in every aspect of our society.

Issue: Resegregation of American Schools
Before 1954, all American schools were completely segregated. After 1954 and Brown v. the Board of Education, American public schools entered into a new age of integration. Integration programs such as bussing, a process where students are transported from around a city in order to diversify a school, were enacted, not without violent protests from parents and students. Despite these protests, the integration programs persevered and made much progress because court oversight was present. After the Brown decision, “the percentage of black students in majority white southern schools went from zero to a peak of 43.5 percent in 1988” (Breslow, et al.). However, since the peak in 1988, segregation has increased across the country. In 2011, the percentage of black students in majority white schools was 23.2 percent, a percentage lower than it was in 1968 (Breslow, et al.). This percentage will continue to fall if action is not taken.

There are many causes of this nationwide segregation, one of the most influential causes being the withdrawal of court action. Nearly half of the almost 500 school districts that were under court order to desegregate as of 1990 were released from judicial oversight during the last two decades, “resulting in a slow but steady resegregation, as compared with districts where judicial oversight continues” (Levine). In addition to this, during the 1991 Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell, the supreme court ruled that a school district can be free from desegregation plans if the school can prove that it will not return to its former ways of segregation (Childress, “How the Supreme Court Shaped School Segregation”). Once court oversight lessened and integration plans were deemphasized, many schools over time regressed back to segregation by ending busing and returning to neighborhood based school assignments.

Furthermore, even though the concept of neighborhood based schools is comforting and wholesome, some communities neighborhood schools can lead to segregation. The Civil Rights Project of the University of California, Los Angeles, states, “Segregation is typically segregation
by both race and poverty” (Orfield et al.). Neighborhoods in urban and suburban communities are often segregated by stark income and race differences. In addition, minorities are more concentrated in low-income neighborhoods. When school districts employ bussing, children from all different neighborhoods are transported to school in order to ensure diversity. When school districts employ neighborhood school systems, schools can more easily become segregated by both race and income. Some may view this as an unintentional consequence of neighborhood schools, but some schools purposely try to segregate through the neighborhood school system such as Central High School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Central High School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, was once a successfully integrated school, opening in 1979 under a court desegregation order. Every student of Central High was held under the same academic rigor and expectations, and student relations were peaceful. However, in 1999, the court released Central High School of its desegregation orders, stating that the plan was no longer necessary. The next year, the school corporation redrew the high school boundaries, and Central High School, formerly integrated, became 99% black (Karaim, 723). The school corporation reassigned the neighborhoods because of a fear of white flight, a phenomenon where white families leave schools because of large populations of black or Latino students.

Another major cause of this segregation is the changing demographics of the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are more minority children enrolled in school than white children due to the increase of the Latino population (3). While black children are often segregated, Latino school children are the most affected by segregation (Orfield et al.). For all minorities, race and income are closely intertwined, and both contribute to segregation.
It is clear that the nation has regressed from the integration progress made after 1967, but the nation is not regressing to a pre-Brown state, only to a gray area imbetween. A fundamental question is whether action should be taken to reverse this segregation, and if diversity is beneficial. Action should be taken to desegregate schools because a diverse classroom benefits students of all kinds. A school can be diverse by having different race and socioeconomic representations in the classroom.

**Racial Diversity:**

Racial diversity in kindergarten through high school classrooms is shown to benefit children’s social interactions, overall learning, and citizenship.

In a diverse classroom, two different types of social interactions prosper: same-ethnic and cross-ethnic relationships. Friendships of all types are very important factors in building children and adolescents’ self esteem and identity. Same-ethnic and cross-ethnic friendships each have different functions and benefits. In a study conducted by the *Journal of Child Development*, middle school students who shared cross-ethnic relationships were evaluated and found to be more tolerant of including others and to possess stronger leadership skills, social competence, and positive attitudes compared to children of only same-ethnic relationships (Graham et al., 470). On the other hand, same-ethnic friendships serve to establish a sense of self and identity, especially for minority youth. By having a mixture of diverse friendships, children are able to communicate across boundaries and understand differences in others. Educating children to be comfortable with diversity and respectful of differences is vital in preparing youth for experiences later in life like college, the workforce, and traveling. A potential obstacle to racial integration is bullying. Across the news, reports of racial slurs being chanted and children being
attacked for differences are commonplace. However, racial bullying often occurs because of racial imbalance (Graham, et al., 471). When one racial group is in the majority, minority students can be targeted. However, if classrooms have an integrated racial balance and cross-ethnic friendships are formed, bullying can be prevented. Diverse friendships build students’ social skills and allow classrooms to grow and learn together.

Research also shows academic gains, such as test score improvement, for minority students in integrated schools (“The Benefits of Racial…”, ). Some people do not view school desegregation as the cause of this academic improvement however, such as Roger Clegg, a member of the general counsel for the Center for Equal Opportunity. Clegg believes that “black children do not need a certain number of white students in their classroom to learn,” and that forcing desegregation is not the best solution for aiding education (Karaim, 737). While opinions on the benefits of integration are subjective, research demonstrates that diversity has more benefits than segregated classrooms.

Most importantly, racial diversity nurtures children’s attitudes towards race relations and citizenship. When children grow and learn in an integrated environment, they are more likely to live integrated lives as adults, where they will have cross racial relations in work and home life. This integrated lifestyle can help the United States as a whole in diplomatic business with other countries and race relations within our borders. Our nation must fight to break the cycle of racial isolation, so that children can learn to respect differences and be comfortable with people of all races. Integrating schools is about “rethinking historical relationships” and providing a safer future for our nation where people do not fear differences (“The Benefits of Racial…”, ). This begins with our children.
Socioeconomic Diversity

In the 1960’s and 1970’s, integration was primarily race-based. Now, more focus has been placed on socioeconomic integration. Race and socioeconomic integration are closely entwined because minority students that are segregated by race are also often segregated by low-income. Regardless of race, children segregated in low income schools will struggle. Benefits of socioeconomic integration are increased academic motivation, higher college aspirations, and more successful wages in the future.

Children who are segregated in low-income neighborhoods and thus low-income schools, will face many obstacles that can hinder them from receiving a high school diploma. These students are less likely to attend a highly resourced high school, equip with the necessary tools for success such as college guidance counselors (Park and Denson, 16). They are also less likely to have stable adult networks and peers who are academically motivated (Karaim, 727). These factors can be detrimental to a student’s success and chance at attending a college or university.

However, when low-income students are placed in classrooms with low, middle, and upper class students, academic and career aspirations are heightened (“The Benefits of Racial…”, ). Richard Kahlenberg, a senior executive at the Century Foundation in Washington, D.C., an organization that studies the effects of segregation in schools, highlights the positive effects attending a mixed income school has for impoverished children (Childress, “Does Integration Still Matter in Public Schools”).

“It is always that low-income students of all races do better in an economically mixed environment. … Their classmates have parents with higher education levels, which is
related to higher aspirations. [Middle class] parents usually have more flexible jobs so they can volunteer in the classrooms. They have cars to get to PTA meetings.”

Furthermore, by introducing lower income students to middle class resources and networking systems, navigating school, college applications, and jobs searches becomes easier, and expectations become higher. In a study conducted by Rucker Johnson at the University of California, researchers concluded that the average effect of socioeconomic integration on minority students was a 15 percent increase in wages (Breslow, et al.) Johnson’s studies also concluded that “for every year a minority student attended an economically integrated school, their likelihood of graduating went up 2 percentage points” (Breslow, et al.). This data can be attributed to financial resources. Economically and racially integrated schools often receive more funding, especially if the school is under court desegregation (Karaim, 727). This funding provides schools with qualified teachers and resources. Overall, lower-income white and minority students’ odds at attending college and entering a well paying job are increased with socioeconomic integration.

While lower income students will undoubtedly benefit from the positive effects of an integrated classroom, many wonder if middle or upper class students will benefit as well. Research done by the Association for the Study of Higher Education concludes that a school with more socioeconomic diversity, will in turn have more racial interaction (Park and Denson, 16). This engagement between people of different economic and racial backgrounds also encourages co-curricular diversity activities, and creates a positive diversity atmosphere in a school, thus benefitting all students.
However, while evidence shows that economically integrated schools have successful students, some parents have strong concerns. Parents in the Baton Rouge school corporation wish to break off from the financially struggling district and form their own school corporation focusing on better education (Childress, “School Segregation is Back 60 Years After ‘Brown’”). The new school corporation would be less diverse and more affluent. Advocates claim the breakoff is not about race or income but for the purpose of better education. This breakoff is not a solution for a struggling school. By segregating the lower income students into the financially struggling schools, the students will not prosper. A more appropriate action would be to embrace integration of different socioeconomic backgrounds, and redistribute funds in order to establish a strong school.

**How to Achieve Diversity In Classrooms**

Diversity is difficult to obtain, but possible for many schools, through more court oversight and busing. Even though schools are not becoming completely segregated, when looking at data, it is clear that if “...you draw a straight line from what’s happening [segregation], it is going to get worse and worse” (Orfield et al.). Action must be taken to reap the benefits of diversity.

Stanford Researchers concluded that segregation grows much greater without court oversight (Levine). When schools are pressured to integrate, school corporations will better fund their schools and will work to ensure each student receives equal education. Through more aggressive court oversight, the United States of America can return to its successful integrated schools once prevalent in the 1980’s.
In addition to court action, busing should be used in order to create a beneficial economic and racial balance. Even though the concept of neighborhood schools is wholesome, such schools can cause deep segregation according to Kahlenberg (Childress, “Does Integration Still Matter in Public Schools”).

“Seventy-five percent [of school children] still attend the physically closest public school, and our neighborhoods are highly segregated by race [and] by socioeconomic status. So to the extent that students attend neighborhood schools, they are likely to attend schools that reflect the residential segregation, which is hugely problematic.”

Dennis Parker, a director at the American Civil Liberties Union, agrees that neighborhood school districts present a problem (Karaim, 737).

“Arguments that segregated schools are the benign result of personal housing choices are wrong and dangerous. The legal ban on segregation does not change the powerful forces that continue to segregate students by race and ethnicity and isolate students of color from equal educational opportunity.”

Schools attempting to enforce busing may face legal backlash. In 2007, the Supreme court ruled in the Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1, that it is unconstitutional to force students to attend certain schools, based solely on race, when a court has not determined the district segregated (Childress, “How the Supreme Court Shaped School Segregation). This ruling hinders some schools, but it also reiterates the point that integration is more than just about race. One school corporation that is able to integrate schools successfully under this ruling is the Louisville school coporation.
The Louisville, Kentucky School Corporation has been working to establish diversity since the 1970’s. After schools began to resegregate in the 1990’s, the school civic leaders did not want to turn back on their progress, so in 2007, Louisville enacted a new integration plan that bused students from around the city to create racial balance in schools. However, the Supreme Court rejected their plan because it placed students solely upon race. The corporation persevered and created a new busing plan that took into account race, income, and parent educational attainment. This plan has resulted in successful integration that is not perfect but improving each year. Some parents complain about the long bus rides for children, and in answer to this, the corporation redrew schools lines so that younger children could still attend elementary school close to home. Overall, this integration has created a safe environment in the community “for addressing race in an effective way” (Karaim, 734).

In addition, time on schools buses is very beneficial for children and their attendance habits. Kindergarten students who ride the bus “in the first year of formal education are absent less often and have lower odds of being chronically absent- a key indicator of future academic success” (Adams). This is called the “School Bus Effect” which can extend to subsequent grades after kindergarten. Riding a school bus creates stability and routine for all parents and children regardless of race or income. This is a benefit of busing.

**How to Manage Diversity in Classrooms**

Once diversity is established, it can be just as difficult managing the diverse students in order to ensure a positive environment for learning. Managing differences though is beneficial for administrators and schools because “efficient diversity management in organizational and professional life gives way to increased productivity competition and job satisfaction” among
employees and students (Saylik, et al., 8). These administrators should strive to create a climate where all members can be aware of their individual contributions, benefit from advantages of diversity, and cooperate with maximum performance (Saylik, et al., 8). One way to achieve this climate is by examining the tolerance and understanding of teachers.

When students are culturally, linguistically, or economically different, teachers need to be aware of these differences so that they can be accommodating and flexible. According to Carla Amaro-Jiminez, an elementary teacher who works with diverse students, teacher flexibility and perceptiveness to differences is vital because “[a teacher’s] teaching practices and approach to teaching are related to the success of the school and students from diverse backgrounds” (2). Teachers themselves need to have respect for diversity in order to teach students the importance of respect and human rights in all aspects of society.

Unfortunately, while student diversity is growing due to changing demographics of the nation, the teacher force is not as diverse. In 2008, only 16 percent of teachers were culturally and linguistically diverse (National Center for Education Statistics, 2). While more strides should be made to integrate the teaching force, non culturally or linguistically diverse teachers whose life experience may differ from students’, can still create an atmosphere for positive learning. Amaro-Jiminez suggests that teachers “give children time to think and reflect on their own… [and] help children connect new and existing information to understand new knowledge” (3). By encouraging the acceptance of differences, diverse classrooms can thrive.

Conclusion:

The purpose of education is not only to teach children reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also to teach children respect for others. Respect is a combination of two attitudes: tolerance
of dignity and tolerance of diversity (Saylik, et al., 8). When an individual is tolerant of dignity, they accept that every person deserves to have equal rights, and when an individual is tolerant of diversity, they accept that every person has differences. Diversity in classrooms is teaching our young children and adolescents respect everyday - respect for each other, respect for themselves, and respect for human rights. In order for our country to accept and not fear different people of all walks of life, desegregation must become a more essential issue, and we must desegregate other aspects of our society (Karaim, 739). By incorporating diversity into kindergarten through high school classrooms, we can produce respectful American citizens. By beginning with our children, we can change the future of the United States of America.


"Order to integrate Mississippi School." *CBS This Morning*. CBS. 18 May 2016. Web. 21 May 2016.
