

Segregation, Desegregation, and the Integration of Public Schools for African American Children¹

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Abstract

From colonial times to the present, African American children have experienced an ongoing struggle to experience an adequate and equitable public education. At times, no education was available for Black children. Because of state laws and oppressive Jim Crow practices, segregation of Black and White children was the norm in the South even after the *Brown* (1954, 1955) Supreme Court cases made state-imposed segregation illegal. Large scale desegregation in public schools did not begin until the early 1970s. Even in many desegregated schools today, integration of Black and White children has considerable room for improvement. Allport's contact theory and Schofield's application of intergroup dynamics and interpersonal relations are useful tools for enhancing the integration of Black and White children in biracial schools.

Keywords: segregation, desegregation, integration, contact theory, intergroup relations

Context

This article focuses on the history of public-school segregation, desegregation, and integration in Southern colonies and states primarily because of slavery and its insidious vestiges even after the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, and the passage of 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1865. Conditions for Blacks in geographical areas composing Northern and Western states often had many commonalities with Southern colonies and states.

Today approximately 40% of Black children attend public schools that have a 90% or more minority population (Rosiek, 2019, p. 9). This 40% figure for Black children in predominantly minority enrollment schools is the same number as in 1974 (Rosiek, 2019). According to Rosiek (2019), "Our schools are more racially segregated by some measures now than they were in 1968" (p. 8). New York City Mayor de Blasio recently termed the racial composition of the city's eight

most select high schools as *massive segregation* (as cited in Riley, 2019). While Blacks comprise 26% of the enrollment in the New York City District Public Schools, only 4% were chosen for admission to the eight most select high schools. “At Stuyvesant High, the most selective school, a mere seven of the 895 seats were offered to black students” (Riley, 2019, p. A17).

Background²

Before the Civil War’s Conclusion

Before the conclusion of the Civil War, the few African American children who received an education were often children of slaves who served as house servants. The general educational philosophy of members of the white power structure toward African Americans in the slave states was that no education was essential to maintaining slavery and countering any possible organized uprisings by slaves. While laws prohibiting the education of African Americans did exist, there was minimal need for such laws because the white power structure believed that African Americans should not be educated (Bartz & Kritsonis, 2019). North Carolina’s law prohibiting the education of African Americans was typical of state laws during this time period:

That any free person, who shall hereafter teach, or attempt to teach, any slave within the State to read or write, the use of figures expected, or shall give or sell to such slave or slaves any books or pamphlets, shall be liable to indictment in any court of record in this State having jurisdiction thereof, and upon conviction, shall, at the discretion of the court, if a white man or woman, be fined not less than one hundred dollars, nor more than two hundred dollars, or imprisoned; and if a free person of color, shall be fined, imprisoned, or whipped, at the discretion of the court, not exceeding thirty nine lashes, or nor less than twenty lashes. (North Carolina, 1831, par. 1)

For all the practical purposes, education in reading and writing was non-existent for Blacks at this time. Teaching slaves basic counting skills was allowed if such skills aided them in performing work more effectively. Slavery, itself, was total racial segregation with virtually no opportunity for Blacks to get an education.

End of Reconstruction to the *Plessy* (1896) Case

After the end of the Civil War in April 1865, Reconstruction (1865-1877) in the South (states that seceded from the Union) prompted some progress in public education for Black children. One estimate made ten years after the end of the Reconstruction (1887) indicated that 25% of African Americans in the South were literate. Holistically, though, Reconstruction was a failure, as White (2017) notes:

The task after the [civil] war was to regularize and clarify the status of freed-people [ex-slaves] and force southern states to accept that new status. Reconstruction, from 1865-1877, failed to accomplish the aforementioned and it failed to establish on-going, effective schools for African American children. (p. 24)

The public schools that Blacks attended during Reconstruction were, for all practical purposes, segregated.

The Blair Bill (1887) was an attempt to use federal legislation to improve literacy throughout the country that could have had a significantly positive impact on the education of Black children. “The Blair Education Bill [1887] aimed to reduce the high rate of illiteracy in the United States, particularly in the South, and to rectify the failure to fund Southern common schools adequately” (White, 2017, p. 586). The Blair Education Bill never became law because many of its opponents—which included most southerners—viewed it as likely to be “a federal intervention aimed at [for] Black people” (White, 2017, p. 587). The defeat of the Blair Education Bill was very detrimental to improving Black children’s access to a quality education.

The *Plessy* (1896) Case to the *Brown* (1954, 1955) Cases

An essential point in the history of public school segregation for Black children is the 1896 Supreme Court case, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, because it established that separate but equal public facilities (e.g., schools) imposed by state laws are permissible under the U.S. Constitution. The Citizen's Committee in New Orleans, the organization initiating the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, believed that its legal challenge to the Louisiana Railroad Car Act—which provided for separate passenger cars by race—would prevail and end the Jim Crow post-Civil War segregative laws in Southern states regarding public facilities. At the time of the *Plessy* case, public schools that did exist in the South were segregated. The Citizen's Committee not only failed to prevail, but the results of its efforts were 58 years of legal state-imposed segregation of public schools throughout the South that created separate schools for Black and White children.

***Brown* (1954, 1955) Cases to the Present**

The Supreme Court cases of *Brown I* (1954) and *Brown II* (1955), along with the *Green* (1968) and *Swann* (1971) cases, ushered in significant Federal Court-ordered desegregation plans in public schools. In 1968 nearly 80% of Black children were in public schools for which their race was in the majority (i.e., 50 % or more; Rosiek, 2019, p. 9). By 1982, about 60% of Black children attended such schools. While the 1982 figure of 60% is high, the decrease from nearly 80% in 1968 regarding Black children in a 50% or more student racial composition school was encouraging. Today about 80% of Black children attend schools that are at least 50% minority (Rosiek, 2019, p. 9).

Integration

Segregation means the separation of Black and White children in a public school system. When this separation is purposefully or intentionally caused by laws, such as in school districts in the South under the separate but equal doctrine of *Plessy* [and even after the *Brown* cases in 1954 and 1955]; it is called *de jure*. According to Bartz, “De facto segregation, in contrast to de jure segregation, is caused by factors such as housing and residential patterns, with no purposeful or intentional government actions causing the segregation” (as cited in Bartz & Maehr, 1984, p. 140). *Desegregation* is simply eliminating the “separation” caused by segregating so that Black and White children attend public schools together.

Integration means Black and White children attending public schools together *and*

creates a sense of “oneness” between the races through interactions within the school at-large, specific classes, and extracurricular activities. Positive interactions between Black and White children in less structured settings such as the cafeteria, hallways, and areas where the children gather before and after school are also crucial to establishing integration. The elimination of segregation—de jure or de facto—does not mean integration will automatically occur. According to Pettigrew, “Integration is beyond mere physical desegregation to the formation of a viable social system which incorporates and accommodates desegregated groups [Black and White children]” (as cited in Sagar & Schofield, 1984, p. 203). According to Sagar and Schofield, (as cited in Bartz & Maehr, 1984, p. 203), educational equity is also a premise of integration.

Integration in biracial Black/White schools often is hampered by race and social class issues and perceptions that make integration elusive and problematic, at best. Just as misunderstandings and fears divide the American public, these factors also impinge upon meaningful integration in biracial public schools for Black and White children. Prejudices of students often impede meaningful integration.

Prejudice³

According to Macionis (2012), *prejudice* is a rigid and unfair generalization about an entire group or category of people (e.g., a White student toward a Black student). In its purest form, prejudice means to *prejudge*. Regarding prejudice, Tatum (2017) states: “I assume we [e.g., Blacks and Whites] all have prejudices not because we want them but simply because we are so continually exposed to misinformation about others” (p. 85). Tatum continues:

If we live in an environment in which we are bombarded with stereotypical images in the media, are frequently exposed to the ethnic jokes of friends and family members, and are rarely informed of the accomplishment of oppressed groups, we will develop the negative categorization of those groups that form the basis of prejudices. (p. 86)

Interestingly, Tatum notes that “even a member of the stereotyped group may internalize the stereotypical categories about his or her own group to some degree. In fact, this process happens so frequently that it has a name, *internalized oppression*” (p. 86).

Macionis (2012) explains that *stereotyping* is a specific form of prejudice that is a simplified description attached to each person from a group of people (e.g., African Americans). Prejudices and stereotypes represent attitudes, while *discrimination* is prejudices displayed through actual behavior and actions.

Allport’s (1954) contact theory and Schofield’s intergroup relations theory are two methods for reducing prejudices and enhancing integration in desegregated schools. These two theories, at times, may have differing perspectives.

Contact Theory—An Intervention Schools Can Use to Nurture Integration⁴

Intergroup contact (contact theory) between Black and White children helps reduce prejudices and, thus, fosters biracial interactions. Results from Pettigrew’s and Tropp’s (2006) exhaustive meta-analysis study of 713 independent samples from 515 studies “provides substantial evidence that intergroup contact can contribute meaningfully to reductions in prejudice across

abroad range of contexts” (p. 766). Such contact also applies to racial and ethnic samples in Pettigrew’s and Tropp’s meta-analysis.

The classic endeavor of the effects of intergroup contact is Gordon Allport’s (1954) book entitled *Nature of Prejudice*. He identified four factors necessary for the reduction of prejudices between groups (e.g., Blacks and Whites) through the contact theory: (1) equal status, (2) intergroup cooperation (non-competitive environment), (3) common goals, and (4) institutional support. From their meta-analysis, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) concluded that, while Allport’s four factors were not always essential for positive intergroup contact resulted in prejudice reduction, “carefully structured contact resulting in higher mean effect size [result] than did other samples” (p. 766). It is important to note that Allport’s four factors work in concert with each other and maximize the effects that each has for a collective benefit.

The contact theory is applied in many Black/White biracial public schools to enhance Blacks’ and Whites’ perceptions of each other, reduce prejudices, and enhance integration. From their massive study, coupled with expertise with the contact theory, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) conclude that: (a) interactions reduce prejudice because familiarity breeds liking one another; (b) the phenomenon of increased liking of others is not limited to Allport’s four factors; (c) this increase in liking others by exposure through contact and interaction can be generalized to greater liking for unknown individuals from the *outgroup* (i.e., the group other than one’s own, which is the *ingroup*); and (d) interactions reduce anxieties which result in increasing the degree of liking of outgroup members. For example, familiarity through contact of Whites with Blacks causes an increase of liking Blacks in general by Whites, and vice-versa.

Pettigrew (1998) and Everett (2013) postulate that the contact theory causes change through four processes: (1) learning about the outgroup and its members; (2) a mindset change toward outgroup members resulting in positive behavioral adjustments toward them; (3) generating effective linkages through reduction of negative emotions, an increase in positive emotions (e.g., empathy), reducing anxiety, and establishing friendships; and (4) ingroup reappraisal—reflecting and adjusting how one thinks about beliefs and perceptions.

Werner’s (2016) approach to applying the contact theory for reducing prejudice is depicted in Figure 1.

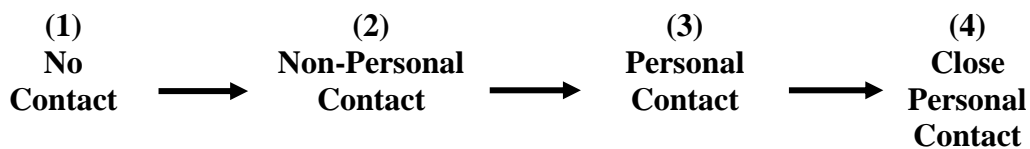


Figure 1. Applying the contact theory for reducing prejudice.

Werner utilizes a continuum of four forms of intergroup contact (refer to Figure 1).

- **No Contact (1)** leaves the reduction of prejudices of students totally to chance regarding the variables that cause the present conditions of prejudice.
- **Non-Personal Contact (2)** is students experiencing exposure to information and knowledge about outgroups (e.g., Blacks toward Whites and Whites toward Blacks). It is optimal to use a multicultural educational approach that emphasizes understanding of members of outgroups and teaching critical thinking skills to analyze and determine how to apply the information. Werner (2016) believes that “Education reduces negative outgroup attitudes [prejudices]” and notes that, “Where there is little information about

- another group [outgroup], there is more likely to be more prejudice” (p.3). In essence, knowledge about outgroups decreases negative attitudes about them and prejudices toward their members.
- **Personal Contact (3)** is most effective in reducing the prejudices of students, if Allport’s four conditions are present: (1) common goals, (2) equal status between groups, (3) cooperative environment (non-competitive), and (4) institutional support (e.g., school’s vision and mission). Close and authentic positive interaction that involves disclosure (e.g., sharing of feelings) is most beneficial among Black and White children. It is important to have a positive classroom culture that fosters *social trust* through students feeling good about their classmates and classroom activities, and a teacher that nurtures the reduction of prejudice toward outgroup members (Werner, 2016).
 - **Close Personal Contact (4)** is best exemplified through meaningful intergroup (e.g., White/Black) friendships. This one-to-one bonding through an association with an outgroup member can result in generalized positive feelings to all outgroup members and reduced prejudices. These reduced prejudices to other outgroup members are called the Secondary Transfer Effect (Werner, 2016). Other ingroup students (e.g., Whites) who know that a member of their ingroup has a friendship with an outgroup member (e.g., Blacks) are often prompted to have more positive attitudes toward outgroup members and to reduce their prejudices (Levy, Rosenthal, & Herrera-Alcazar as cited in Chin, 2010).

Black/White Children’s Intergroup Relationships in the Context of Fostering Integration

Regarding interactions between Black and White students, Schofield (1989) advocates that intergroup behaviors can increase and become more positive, even though general perceptions of the “other group” may not change. This means that while holistic attitudes toward the other group (i.e., Whites toward Blacks and Blacks toward Whites) may still be negatively stereotyped, attitudes toward individual members of the other group may be positive. Schofield explains this phenomenon

as students come to know each other more as individuals who can be differentiated from others in the same racial group, their behavior may come more under the influence of their interpersonal attitudes and less under the influence of their intergroup attitudes. (p. 215)

Intergroup attitudes become less relevant to the interactions of specific students who *get to know each other well*. *Getting to know each other well* supports Allport’s (1954) and Pettigrew’s and Tropp’s (2006) contact theory application for enhancing integration of Black and White students in desegregated schools. When students get to know each other well, they judge each other on personal merits as opposed to making inferences about a group’s stereotypes.

According to Schofield (1989), Black and White students—in the context of intergroup relationships—can view the same situation nearly opposite at times because the standard used to evaluate the situation differs. He explains:

For example, one recent student found that whereas black children rated black and white peers whom they consider close friends very similarly on a variety of personality

dimensions, white children, in contrast, rated their close friends who were white more positively than close friends who were black. Thus the statement that one has a close friend of the other race appears to mean something rather different to white and black children. (pp. 215-216)

Assuming that students' experiences and their race significantly influence perceptions, school staff adhering to the *color-blind theory*—not allowing a student's race to impede how one interprets a situation about students—are adhering to a misleading perspective. This misleading perspective will cause the staff member to often misinterpret both Black and White student's perspectives and thus fail to understand the basis for the differing viewpoints by race. Schofield (1989) summarizes the aforementioned:

For example, educators who believe they understand the nature of intergroup relations after talking primarily with students of one race may be oblivious to problems that seem very real to members of the other group or take inappropriate action to deal with perceived problems. (p. 216)

Intergroup relations between Black and White children often vary by topic or issue. Racial attitudes of both Black and White children cannot be categorized for given students as consistently positive, negative, or neutral. Schofield (1989) notes that “educators need to be aware that practices purported to increase positive interactions among black and white students will not necessarily decrease negative interaction” (p. 217). Different strategies are often needed to minimize negative behaviors than are strategies to increase positive Black/White interactions. Further, some aspects of Black/White intergroup relations appear unrelated to school practices, while others are clearly linked to factors over which school personnel have some control.

Closing Thoughts

Today 40% of Black children are enrolled in public schools which are 90% or more minority. White flight from public schools to private schools over the past 50 years is a contributing factor to this situation. Integration of Black and White children can have tremendous benefits to both groups because of the interpersonal and intergroup skills learned about effectively interacting together presently and, hopefully, later in adult life.

On average, Black children are several years behind their White counterparts academically and are suspended from school much more frequently (Bartz & Kritsonis, 2019). Academic achievement must improve drastically—and quickly—for Black children, whether the public schools attended are segregated or integrated, and their suspensions from school must significantly decrease. Holistically the history of Black children's educational opportunities in public schools is tragic. We must focus on making the future of public education for Black children optimistic through aggressive and meaningful change.

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Footnotes

¹The terms African American and Black are used interchangeably.

²Based in part on Bartz, D. E., & Kritsonis, W. A. (2019). Racism, the white power structure, and the tragic history of the education of African American children in the United States. *Schooling*, 10(1), 1-9.

³Based in part on Bartz, D. E. (2018). Bias—The enemy of diversity and objectivity for educational leaders. *American International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4(1), 1-6.

⁴Based in part on Bartz, D. E. (2018). Racism—The enemy of diversity in PreK-12 schools. *National Forum of Teacher Education Journal*, 28(3), 1-12.