

Racism, the White Power Structure, and the Tragic History of the Education of African American Children in the United States

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Abstract

In the United States today, African American children are unfortunately several years behind White children, on average, and are significantly more frequently suspended from school. These conditions are indicative of the tragic failure of this nation, from its inception, to effectively educate African American children. Under slavery, African American children received minimal, if any, education concerning literacy and other basic skills. At the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865, approximately 3% of African Americans were literate. In 1887, African American literacy was approximately 25%. The U.S. Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) established the legalization of separate school facilities for African American and White children (referred to as state-imposed segregation). The *Brown v. The Board of Education* Supreme Court case in 1954 and the *Brown v. The Board of Education* Supreme Court case in 1955 overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and ruled that separate schools by race were inherently unequal and needed to be abolished with all deliberate speed. However, it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that substantive desegregation in public schools occurred. As desegregation increased, so did the flight of White children to non-public schools—leaving many desegregated public school districts with minimal percentages of White children. The white power structure throughout the nation’s history played a major role in the events mentioned above, as did racism.

Keywords: education, African American children

Context

From police shootings of black men, to white supremacy rallies, to efforts to remove Confederate Civil War monuments, the nation has lurched from one racial [Black/White] controversy to another in recent years. The latest is blackface [originated in the 1830s]—in which someone darkens their face and adds bright red lipstick to create stereotypes and caricatures. The disclosures have angered and frustrated many black people, who say it is mocking and demeaning. (Williams, 2019, p. A2)

“It [blackface] reinforced and popularized the “stereotype of the dimwitted slave who was happy to be in the South” (Haygood, 2019, p. A23).

Racism has been a driving force in the tragic history of the ineffectiveness of educating African American children in the United States. The February 2019 admission of Virginia Governor, Ralph Northam, to having blackened his face when masquerading as Michael Jackson several decades ago has again disclosed racist behaviors—overt and covert—indicative of the white power structure in this country. A recent study by *USA Today* reviewed 900 college yearbooks from the 1970s and 1980s representing 120 schools. The study disclosed numerous “pictures of students dressed Ku Klux Klan robes and blackface, nooses and mock lynchings, displays of racism not hidden but memorialized as jokes to laugh about later” (Murphy, 2019, pp. A1, 4, & 5). This ongoing white power structure of racism toward African Americans has dramatically impeded the education of African American children for centuries.

Early Years of the Republic Through 1896

In the 1790s Thomas Jefferson mandated that, by the age of 10, African American boys of his slaves were to commence working in the nail factory at his Monticello Plantation in Virginia. Days in the nail factory for these African American children were long and arduous. If a child’s production fell below a predetermined level, he was *whipped* as an incentive to increase production (Stockton, 2017). Evidently Jefferson viewed these experiences for African American boys as “education” or on-the-job training for a vocation that would last until it was economically more advantageous for Jefferson to have many of them labor as field hands. Unfortunately, Jefferson’s approach to educating African American children was all too often the model used throughout the *slave states* during legalized slavery.

The few African American children who received education before the conclusion of the Civil War were often children of slaves who served as house servants. The general educational philosophy of the powers to be (Whites) toward African Americans in the slave states was that no education was critical to maintain slavery and counter any 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 advocated that African Americans were not to be educated. Conditions in the North were generally better, but “better” still meant minimal education for African American children.

Before the conclusion of the Civil War in April 1865; very few African American children could read, write, or proficiently perform arithmetic functions. In 1866, about 3% of the four million African American former slaves were literate (Anderson, 2016).

The Federal Freedmen’s Bureau (1865) initiated establishing schools for the newly freed (African American slaves) soon after the end of the Civil War (White, 2017). The Federal Freedmen’s Bureau was terminated in April 1866 with the expectation that the Freedmen’s Bureau Bill and the Civil Rights Act of 1866 would become laws. Congress passed these two laws only to have President Johnson veto them (White, 2017). Anderson (2016) indicates that President Johnson believed the economic conditions for African American ex-slaves were favorable and that President Johnson asserted that “blacks could build their own schools and buy their own land instead of waiting for a handout from the government” (p. 25). President Johnson’s vetoes of the Freedmen’s Bureau Bill and the Civil Rights Act of 1866 were overridden by Congress (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019).

The Black Code Laws of states in the South—the first enacted by Mississippi in the fall of 1865—simply changed “the form of slavery” for African Americans (White, 2017, p. 53).

“Black people would have a choice: work for white people or starve” (White, 2017, p. 53). U.S. Supreme Court Judge Ginsburg on February 20, 2019 typified the Black Codes as laws established by former confederate states to reduce recently freed African Americans to near slavery by creating huge fines for trivial offenses whose non-payment led to forced labor (Bravin, 2019). The Black Code Laws of states throughout the South essentially prevented African American children from being able to acquire basic skills such as reading, writing, and computing.

Reconstruction (1865-1877) in the South (states that seceded from the Union) prompted some progress of public education for African American children. One estimate made ten years after (1887) the end of Reconstruction 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 Jim Crow laws and social, political, and economic Jim Crow sanctions by white power structures in the South swung into full gear immediately after Reconstruction and stifled education for many African American children. “The century after Reconstruction, segregation was not the worst possible outcome for black people. There was also *exclusion*—not separate schools but no schools—[for blacks]” (Goodman, 2019, p. 2). Regarding Reconstruction, Alexander (2012) notes:

The backlash against the gains of African Americans in the Reconstruction Era was swift and severe. As African Americans obtained political power and began the long march toward greater social and economic equality, Whites reacted with panic and outrage. Southern conservatives vowed to reverse Reconstruction. (p. 30)

The Jim Crow laws and sanctions that enforced racial segregation in the South—and the North—took their name from a character played by the blackface performer, Thomas Dartmouth Rice [in the 1830s]. He said his act “Jump, Jim Crow” (or “Jumping Jim Crow”) was inspired by a slave he saw (Williams, 2019, p. A2). “Lynching and Jim Crow were, as White Southerners saw it, the centerpiece of southern reform and race relations” in the post-Civil War era (White, 2017, p. 740).

The Blair Bill (1887) was an attempt at federal legislation to improve literacy throughout the country that would have had a significantly positive impact on the education of African American children. “The Blair Education Bill [1887] aimed to reduce the high rate of illiteracy in the United States, particularly in the South, and 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 access to quality education for African American children.

**Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) to Brown v.
The Board of Education (1954 and 1955)**

“Separate institutions were never equal. For more than half a century *Plessy* would provide the legal foundation for the system of racial inequality known as Jim Crow” (Foner, 2019, p. 3).

Homer Plessy, an octoroon (1/8 African American), challenged the state-imposed segregative practices of railroad facilities and passenger train cars in Louisiana. The *one-drop rule* followed by southern states meant that any African ancestry—one drop of blood—labeled an individual African American (White, 2017). As White (2017) notes: “In 1890 Louisiana had imposed Jim Crow with a Separate Car Act, which segregated railroad cars by race” (p. 740). African Americans viewed the law as an attack on their citizenship rights and a significant setback from the intent of Reconstruction (Luxemberg, 2019).

The results of Mr. Plessy’s challenge communicated through *Plessy v. Ferguson’s* (1896) legal ruling was that “the U.S. Supreme Court sanctioned and endorsed segregation in the form of unequal access to public facilities, including schools, by indicating that *separate but equal* was permissible” (Bartz, 1984, p. 139). The Court indicated that, if African Americans viewed separate public facilities inferior, it was because African Americans chose to do so. In essence, the inferiority was only due to the perceptions of African Americans.

White’s (2017) summary of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) is:

The Supreme Court upheld the distinction between legal equality and social equality. The judges appealed to a set of precedents used to justify the separation of blacks and whites in schools. Blacks and whites, the court argued, were biologically different, with the skin colors designating dissimilar temperaments. This was established by nature, not law, and the prejudice against black people was so deeply rooted and popularly held that no law could change it. The state could not force white people to associate with black people, but it could and must ensure that the facilities offered to both races were equal. It thus established the separate-but-equal doctrine, enshrining Jim Crow for generations to come. (p. 741)

During the late 1800s and the first half of the 20th Century, Davis (2006) observed, “The South won the ‘ideological Civil War’ by winning command over a policy of segregation based on the ardent belief of White supremacy” (p. 327).

Plessy v. Ferguson provided the *legal basis* for segregated schools by race (i.e., African American and White) commencing in 1896 until *Brown v. The Board of Education* in 1954 and 1955. During this time period, school districts (1896-1954) with two sets of schools—one for African American children and another for White children—were referred to as having a *dual system* of education (Bartz, 1984). In that era, the educational resources provided to African American children were often inferior to those received by White children. While there were many outstanding all Black schools during state-imposed segregation, there would have been so many more if ample resources had existed (Heller, 2019).

Brown v. The Board of Education (1954) and Its Aftermath¹

Thomas (1979) describes the situation of the named plaintiff, Linda Brown, under the state-imposed segregation in Topeka, Kansas:

Linda Carol Brown, eight years of age, was a black student in an all-black public school in Topeka, Kansas. Each school day morning Linda got up, walked across a railroad yard, and caught a bus that carried her 21 blocks to school. The bus arrived 30 minutes before the school's opening; and often Linda was left standing outside in the cold. Oliver Brown, Linda's father, concluded that something was wrong with a system that bused his child past another elementary school just five blocks from their home. (p. 110)

In *Brown v. The Board of Education* (1954) and *Brown v. The Board of Education* (1955), the Supreme Court struck down the *separate but equal* principle established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) by prohibiting segregation of public schools imposed by state laws. Specifically, the Court indicated that separate but equal educational facilities are *inherently unequal*. (Not only were educational facilities inferior for African American students, but textbooks, school supplies, and general school funding were substandard.) States no longer could require the assignment of children to schools according to race for the intentional purpose of separating Blacks and Whites (Graglia, 1980).

In its decision in *Brown v. The Board of Education* (1955), the Supreme Court directed the federal district courts to enforce its decree *with all deliberate speed* regarding dismantling segregated schools caused by state actions. However, the Supreme Court did not furnish any guidance regarding a timeline for "deliberate speed." In a practical sense, minimal desegregation continued to occur for African Americans children after *Brown* until the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In *Green v. New Kent County, Virginia* (1968), the Court ruled that racial discrimination by a school district must be eliminated *root and branch* (Graglia, 1980). The Court also indicated that with all deliberate speed meant *now* (National Institute of Education, 1978). In *Green* (1968), the Court emphasized that *Brown* meant that a dual system of separate schools for Blacks and Whites must be dismantled and converted to a unitary one. By this, the Court meant that the school district must eliminate "White" schools and "Black" schools and just have "schools" (Graglia, 1980). In *Green v. New Kent County, Virginia* (1968), the Court established six criteria for determining if African American children were truly receiving an equitable education: (1) student assignments, (2) teacher assignments, (3) assignment of supportive staff, (4) facilities, (5) extra-curricular activities, and (6) transportation (Allen & Daugherty, 2012; Dayton, 2012).

The *Green* case had a positive impact on the education of African American children because more children were likely to be educated in a desegregated environment. While the white power structure in many communities continued to oppose their children being educated with African American children, African American children were more likely to receive a quality education than they did before *Brown*.

The Supreme Court's decision in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenberg Board of Education* (1971) is generally known for the sanctioning of busing as a means of establishing desegregated schools (Wilkinson, 1979). The good news for African Americans regarding this case was that more children would be educated in a desegregated environment and likely receive a higher

quality education because of improved resources. The results of the *Green v. New Kent County, Virginia* (1968) case combined with the *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenberg Board of Education* (1971) case, resulted in a backlash from the white power structures in many communities via the withdrawal of White children from the public schools. This *White Flight* phenomenon continued for decades, resulting in many desegregated school districts being left with very small percentages of White students. In the South, White Flight represented the establishment of many private schools that were virtually all White. These private schools were established to avoid White children from being educated with African American children.

In the *Bradley v. Milliken*, 460 F. Supp. 299 (E.D. Mich. 1978) case, the Supreme Court: (1) sanctioned the use of compensatory education programs to remediate the harms of segregated schools on African American children within the Detroit district and (2) approved the state of Michigan paying for a substantial portion of compensatory education programs (Hudgins & Vacca, 1979). The Supreme Court's support of compensatory educational programs in academic areas such as reading and mathematics, and affective areas such as social and psychological development, was ultimately extremely positive for the education of African American children in court-ordered desegregated districts.

Black/White Achievement Gap

Coleman's landmark 1966 study entitled *Equality of Educational Opportunity* indicated that, in some instances, African American children on average were five years behind Whites (Coleman et al., 1966). Miksic (2014) found the Black/White achievement gap to be about four years. Steinberg and Lacoé (2017) noted that African American children were four times more likely than White students to receive multiple out-of-school suspensions. Unfortunately, these statistics are indicative of the tragic history of the failures of this nation to educate many African American children.

Closing Thoughts

Today African American children are, on average, significantly behind their White counterparts by several years concerning academic achievement. African American children are also likely to be suspended from school at much higher rates than their White counterparts.

The history of the U.S. in effectively educating African American children is a tragic legacy. White power structures played, and still play, a critical role in shaping this history through governmental, social, and economic entities. In recent decades, power structures have become "less-white" and more racially and ethnically diverse, especially in governmental entities. In Virginia, for example, the 21 member Legislative Black Caucus (all Democrats), according to Kendall and Adamy (2019), "Shaped the party's [Democratic] response of the state's political turmoil. This is in a state that went much of the 20th Century without any black representation in the capitol [Richmond]" (p. A3). Yet, there continue to be places such as Wall Street that epitomize the white power structure.

Unfortunately, racism in this nation continues to exist, and Black/White race relations have much room for improvement. As Eliqon (2019) notes: "Unless one increases their conscious awareness of U.S. racist history and connects the historical dots to the continued, present-day effects of our social order, one cannot even begin to understand, much less address,

the issues of racism in America” (p. SR6).

Throughout the world, there is a concern for the widening gap between *the haves*, and *the have nots*. While this gap is basically defined economically through income and standard of living, it also exists politically and socially. Is it possible that as the white power structures lose strength in the U.S., the *haves* and *have nots* is becoming more of the issue and impeding the school success of African American children?

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- ¹Bartz, D. E. (1984). Remediating social and psychological harm resulting from segregative acts. In D. E. Bartz & M. L. Maehr (Eds.), *Advances in motivation and achievement: The effects of school desegregation on motivation and achievement (Volume 1)*; pp. 137-172). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.