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The Promise Unfulfilled: Challenging School Segregation and Inequitable Education Post Brown vs. The Board of Education

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The Promise

The education system in the United States has historically reflected reform movements whose stated ‘intended’ goals were to “increase children’s chances of success by improving schools” (Jennings, 2012, p. 2). Arguably the most important type of school reform has been equity-based school reform. School reform aimed at creating equitable and just learning opportunities have been implemented to try and mitigate inequitable learning conditions that frequently underserve and under-educate students who have been historically marginalized because of race, gender, sexuality, and class (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2002).

Many of these school reforms have either been created from or supported by social movements. For example, a number of equity-based school reform efforts were spearheaded and supported by civil rights activists. Jennings (2012) notes that during the 1960s and 1970s, attempts to provide an equitable education for children who were, for example, minorities and poor, were much more successful than previous attempts. The success was, Jennings (2012) argues, largely attributed to the fact that “dominant domestic policy issues were expanding civil rights for African Americans and reducing poverty” (p.3). By drawing on resources and changes brought about by the civil rights movements, education reform witnessed progress that had not previously been experienced.

While there have been a number of equity-based school reform efforts that have attempted to provide equal learning opportunities for all students, Brown vs. The Board of Education remains one of the most significant cases

that have allowed children of color, specifically African Americans, the chance to receive adequate education. This landmark Supreme Court case is commonly viewed as one of the most pivotal moments in American history, particularly as it relates to education and school reform. In 1954, the Supreme Court issued a monumental ruling, stating that “separate but equal” schools for blacks and whites were unconstitutional. Not only was the Court’s decision an important step toward education equality, it became a catalyst for education reform throughout the nation. Additionally, the case created a ripple effect whereby citizens, especially minorities, began challenging discriminatory and segregationist laws in schools and beyond (The Leadership Education Coalition Fund, 2016).

As Van Delinder (2004) asserts, the declaration that separate schools are, in fact, unequal and unjust “brought racial issues into the forefront of the national consciousness as never before and forced Americans to confront a racially divided society and undemocratic social practices” (p. 143). As a result, public criticism of the ways in which schools and teaching practices strongly perpetuated systemic racism grew even stronger. With so much attention being given towards education and the debilitating outcomes of segregated schooling, school districts everywhere were forced to examine the various ways in which segregation was creating inadequate learning environments for black students, leaving black schools depleted with very little funding and resources, poorly trained teachers, and poor learning conditions.

As a result of the Supreme Court decision, the future of education for African Americans appeared to be more promising. The decision to integrate schools meant that blacks students now, unlike before, had the opportunity to receive the same educational opportunities their white peers had been privy to for many years. The historical decision offered hope and promises of better education because blacks students now had access to not only better materials and resources, but also better learning facilities. With the end of school segregation, African Americans could no longer be denied what was commonly viewed as the primary means of achieving a better social and economic life (Fairclough, 2000).

In a special edition of *Teaching Tolerance* devoted to revisiting the legacy of Brown vs. Board, Willoughby (2004) recalls several reactions to the case. He cites the excitement and feeling of hope that many felt

following the decision. According to Willoughby, the *Chicago Defender*, an African American newspaper devoted to sharing social and political issues facing African Americans, proudly released the statement, "Neither the atom bomb nor the hydrogen bomb will ever be as meaningful to our democracy as the unanimous declaration of the Supreme Court that racial segregation violates the spirit and the letter of our Constitution" (as cited in Willoughby, 2004). The exuberant celebration represented the hope and excitement that many African Americans felt after separate schools were ruled inherently unequal.

Promise Unfulfilled

While the *Brown vs. The Board of Education* decision initiated much-needed steps toward desegregating schools and providing education equality for all students, the Supreme Court decision neither eradicated school segregation nor resolved education inequality (Reardon & Owens (2014). Here is an example:

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/28/opinion/the-unmet-promise-of-equality.html?smid=fb-share>. In fact, many scholars questioned both the purpose of the decision, as well as the actual impact it had on desegregating schools and the ruling's ability to provide equitable opportunities for students of color to excel in school. Among those skeptical of the decision was a law scholar, Derrick Bell. Despite the potential benefits and seemingly positive outcomes of integrating schools, Bell was weary of the ruling's ability to promote social justice, specifically as it relates to education, because the case was influenced "not by intentional coalescing of a transforming social movement that reached across boundaries of race and economic class, but by the calculated convergence of interests between northern liberals, southern moderates, and blacks" (as cited in Guinier, 2004, p.94). Thus, Bell and many others felt that any potential promises the court's decision held, if actualized, were only temporary and reflective of interest convergence, rather than genuine desires to fully integrate schools and afford African Americans opportunities to have the same quality education as white students.

In 2004, both *Teaching Tolerance* and *Rethinking Schools*, printed special issues about the *Brown vs. The Board of Education* Supreme Court decision and challenged the notion that the historical decision had somehow provided a solution to the many problems that segregated schools

created for African Americans. In *Teaching Tolerance*, Willoughby (2004) delineated the concerns many blacks held, before and after the decision, about the impact or amount of change that could be seen following the decision. In sharing the concerns of many African Americans, Willoughby asserts that many blacks feared that desegregation would, in reality, be a detriment to the black community. Blacks, he argued, would still be marginalized in a society that, despite the decision of the court, was still governed by longstanding racist structures that would make it difficult for African Americans to truly overcome years of racism, simply by integrating schools. Willoughby notes the belief many had that the Supreme Court decision “would do little to eliminate the racism in people’s hearts and minds” (2004, p.43).

Rethinking Schools issued a contemporary analysis of *Brown vs. The Board of Education* that proved previous sentiments explored in *Teaching Tolerance* to be correct. Just as many blacks had feared following the decision, systematic and structural racism all but voided the court’s ruling because while legally schools could not be segregated, covert segregationist policies upheld segregation and racial discrimination (Van Delinder, 2004; Bigelow et al., 2004). As stated in *Rethinking Schools*, the idea of equal education, even in a perceived ‘post-racial society,’ was a lofty goal because just about every legal mandate was “undermined by resistance from whites as well as the economic and social structures that continue to maintain white supremacy” (Bigelow et al., 2004, p.4). As a result, the promises that came with school integration went unfulfilled, as schools and districts worked to prevent equal education for all students.

Despite the Supreme Court’s unanimous decision that separate education was unequal, much of school today reflects segregated learning conditions that predate the landmark ruling (Vaught, 2011). Bigelow et al. (2004) note that even in neighborhoods and schools where the student population is considerably diverse, classrooms continue to reflect segregation policies that governed segregated schools. Classes today remain segregated because even in fairly diverse neighborhoods and schools, programs such as “tracking, special education procedures, and ‘gifted’ or ‘advanced placement’ programs too often disguise racial segregation and discrimination” (Bigelow et al., 2004, p. 4). As a result of education programs like those previously mentioned, minority and poor students continued to be robbed of the opportunities for adequate education

promised by Brown vs. The Board of Education.

The “Promise” and its Impact on Skyhill Schools

Given the current state of education equality, it is important to examine the ways in which the historic Supreme Court decision has impacted schools and education communities today. To do so, I will examine primary and secondary schools Skyhill, located in the Southeastern part of the United States, to demonstrate how local communities have been affected by Brown vs. The Board of Education, years later. Skyhill, like many other cities across the United States, is largely divided among racial and economic lines. For many who believe that America is in the midst of a post-racial society, they are unable to see the pervasive segregation that continues to divide neighborhoods, schools, and other public institutions by race. More troubling is the inability to recognize that often these segregated communities, which have tremendous impacts on education and economic resource distribution given to various schools, are created by white segregation.

The lack of critical examination and challenging of laws and practices that discriminate against people based on race gives credence to a hypocritical belief that makes it difficult for some people to recognize white segregation as something that exists and something that is an issue. Bonilla-Silva (2014) contends, “Whites do not interpret their hyper-segregation from blacks as a problem, because they do not interpret this as a racial phenomenon” (p.159). A lack of ability or willingness to decenter one’s own experiences as White makes it easier and, perhaps, more convenient to identify perceived black segregation as something that is problematic while simultaneously ignoring white segregation and its impact on various communities, schools, and other public institutions.

Bonilla-Silva (2014) describes this type of “selective color-blind vision,” as I prefer to call it, as something that exists due to homogeneous thinking that categorizes race as a concept “that only racial minorities have” (p.163). Therefore, as Bonilla-Silva (2014) delineates, some whites become temporarily blinded to the reality of race when it comes to identifying their own race and the privilege that comes with being white. Yet, when it comes to blackness or other racial categories, many whites are then able to recognize race and the consequences that are associated with racialized

people. Not until blackness is viewed does race begin to represent a social construct. Once the presence of blackness or any other race is visible, then, and only then, does race become a recognizable concept. At the point of black recognition, race then is viewed as different, deviant, or “other” than a perceived standard, whiteness.

I include this argument of white segregation to help frame the current understanding of schools located in the southeastern part of the country. In thinking about the promise of *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, one could easily argue that the court ruling was never truly upheld and that the promise, consequently, has not yet been fulfilled. Additionally, Bonilla-Silva’s (2014) work on white segregation helps understand the inability of some to see how integrated schools in Skyhill, a city located in close to a large university in the Southeast, still remain segregated. The school segregation seen throughout Skyhill schools are results of deliberate practices and policies and not, as some might assume, *de facto* segregation. To examine the ways in which contemporary school segregation still exists, I look at two specific schools: Booker T. Washington Middle School and Skyhill High School. Both of these institutions offer a unique understanding of modern school segregation and provides a framework from which the “promise” can be analyzed in order to determine if it has, in fact, been fulfilled.

Perhaps the most fascinating institution of the two is Booker T. Washington. It was a surprise to learn that Booker T. Washington Middle School has an enormous amount of history that was and continues to be shaped by the Supreme Court decision, *Brown vs. The Board of Education*. According to local historians), what is now known today as Booker T. Washington Middle school was once Booker T. Washington High School (BTWHS). Then Booker T. Washington High School was as segregated high school, specifically for African American students from the local Skyhill community. Like a number of schools during the 1950s and 1960s, in addition to serving as a high school, BTWHS could also be described as a community school. While its primary purpose was to educate high school students, it also served as a local institution for the larger community. According to White (2012), Booker T. Washington High School housed many of the community’s local events, from concerts, to plays, and athletic events. The school represented a place where local African Americans could and did convene for both social and scholastic events.

In response to national changes in policy and laws related to school segregation, BTWHS and other local schools also began to integrate, creating schools where students from both East Skyhill, predominately African American, and West Skyhill (mostly white and affluent), would attend together. As Francischine (2013) delineates, in 1969, the County School board approved changing Booker T. Washington High School into a vocational center. This change, prompted by the federal mandate to desegregate schools, meant that schools would transition to integrated schools. What was before an all-black school would now be an integrated vocational center that would serve the vocational needs of both white and black students. This change meant that African American students who previously attended Booker T. would now attend either President's Community High School or the newly created integrated school, Skyhill High School. Eventually the vocational center, Booker T. Vocational Center, would go on to become what is currently known as Booker T. Washington Middle School. Skyhill High School still remains today as the same name.

As alluded to in *Teaching Tolerance* and *Rethinking Schools*, several members of the Skyhill community, both black and white, did not welcome the change, nor did they view school integration as a reflection of the "promise" being fulfilled. White's (2012) younger brother described Booker T. Washington High School as the epicenter, or heartbeat of the larger African American. To him and many others, desegregating Booker T. and forcing students to disperse among other local schools meant that one of the integral pieces of the community was being destroyed. For those who did not agree with the county's decision to desegregate the schools, integrating schools meant dismantling an important piece to holding the community together.

This historical information regarding how both current day Booker T. Washington Middle and Skyhill High School came into existence provides critical foundation for understanding the current state of both these local schools. As was the case with *Brown vs. The Board of Education* and the decision to desegregate schools, the intended purpose was to ensure that schools would be integrated, thereby promising that both African American and Caucasian students would have equal access and opportunity to quality education. However, as has been shown in several other instances, the intended changes were never truly achieved. The promises of better and more equitable education for students at both Booker T. Washington

Middle and Skyhill High School remain unachieved.

In 2016, many schools across the United States are just as segregated as they were before segregated schools were ruled unconstitutional (Vaught, 2011; Bigelow et al., 2004). Booker T. Middle and Skyhill High, unfortunately, are perfect examples of just how segregated schools still remain today. Booker T. is one of many middle schools located in Skyhill. Because of its location and proximity within and around black neighborhoods and communities, the largest demographic of students attending the school are African American. Given its previous history as a predominately black school and the district's desire to make schools integrated, the Promising Scholars Program (PSP) was created. The Promising Scholars Program was created as an advanced magnet program. While in theory, it was intended to serve academically gifted and advanced students, in reality it was created and strategically housed at Booker T. Washington Middle in order to integrate the campus. By placing the program at Booker T., the district would be able to ensure that students from white and affluent backgrounds, who would otherwise attend a different school, would attend Booker T., therefore making it more racially diverse.

The program eerily reflects efforts decades earlier to increase racial diversity at BTWHS. Despite the intended outcomes, what resulted was a school within a school that ended up magnifying and exacerbating an already existing problem. While the Promising Scholars Program was theoretically a great idea, realistically it was not because creating such programs only meant that students were further segregated. Not only that, the segregation was magnified because it was confined within a microcosmic space. Despite the fact that the program brought in more white and affluent students, doing so did not solve the issue of segregation because those students remained divided by programs. So even though students from racially and economically different neighborhoods attend the same school, classes still remain largely segregated by race.

Contributing to the in-school segregation is a number of factors. One major factor is that the Promising Scholars Programs and others like them typically require placement based on testing and other set criteria. These set of standards often always mean that students of color and those from low socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to gain admissions into the

program. Furthermore, for those who do, not as much academic and social support is provided to ensure retention of those from minorities backgrounds. Another factor that perpetuates the in-school segregation is the fact that the Promising Scholars Program is physically separated from the larger school community. The physical and academic separation of students in the PSP and Main program ensures that there is very little interaction between the various groups. Compounding the negative impacts of modern school segregation is the connotations and labeling that are frequently associated with the various programs within Booker T. The area of the school designated for the Promising Scholars Program is referred to as “Harvard Hall,” while the part assigned to students not a part of the program is called “Main Hall.” These two very different names for the two different programs send very clear messages to the students about which group is valued and considered promising students.

When considering the segregation that largely defines Booker T. Washington Middle School, it can clearly be seen that the promises of *Brown vs. The Board of Education* have not yet been achieved. While the addition of the Promising Scholars Program may have increased the enrollment of white, affluent students, it did very little in terms of overall educational achievement for minorities and other students of color who attend the school. In fact, the integration of the school by adding academic programs catered toward white and affluent students, has likely done more damage than what was already done. African American students are arguably still underserved and the school, because of its programs, continue to demonstrate that separate schooling, in its various forms, are unequal.

Based on the nature of Booker T. Washington Middle School, one can see why Skyhill High School, the school created to integrate what was previously Booker T. High, is racially constructed in the way that it is. Despite its construction in the 1960s as a means of integrating schools, Skyhill, with some exception, is as racially divided as previous Booker T. Washington High School was and Booker T. Washington Middle currently is. Like Booker T. Middle, Skyhill has a magnet program that is intended to serve some of Skyhill’s most academically gifted and talented students. Established in the late 1980s, the magnet program was created at Skyhill to help facilitate integration and bring in students from more affluent communities in Skyhill. Like the PSP at Booker T. Washington Middle, Skyhill continues to be segregated and only reinforces the issues and

problems that the magnet program was intended to solve. One of the major reasons for this continued school segregation and student separation, which in many ways is based on race and class, is because the Promising Scholars Program is often a feeder program into Skyhill's magnet program. Therefore, the issues of school segregation that define Booker T. continue on into high school at Skyhill. As a result, much like Booker T., the promise of this local county's mandate to desegregate Booker T. and create an integrated Skyhill High continues to go unfulfilled.

Praxis

Both *Teaching Tolerance* and *Rethinking Schools* offer critical perspectives for teachers to help students understand and interpret Brown vs. The Board of Education and provide steps that educators can take to ensure their own classrooms are equitable. In *Teaching Tolerance*, Willoughby (2004) encourages teachers to help students view the case and the larger fight for education equity as a series of collective efforts that contributed to a better education for students after the 1960s. Willoughby's (2004) alternate interpretation of the case challenges teachers to help students view the decision as a monumental change that would not be possible without the effort and fight of a number of people (and a fight that must take place beyond the classroom walls). His message reflects Gorski's (2013) call for recognition of one's own sphere of influence and to examine ways in which individuals can make both mitigative and transformative changes.

By sharing the examples cited by Willoughby (2004), many of which were of young students, teachers help share with their students the belief that they, as young students, have power and the ability to stand up against social injustices. More importantly, by referring to these examples, students are able to recognize that through collaboration and working within social movements, they are able to bring about social change in both their communities and their schools. In doing so, schools represent not only sites of academic learning but also political resistance to discrimination and inequality.

In *Rethinking Schools*, Bigelow et al. (2004) offer a stern critique of teachers and educators who believe that social justice and social equity cannot be achieved. Rather than maintain attitudes of defeat and

perspectives that reflect an inability for social change to occur, the editors challenge teachers to instead, “rebuild an even broader social movement to dismantle the policies and practices that sustain white supremacy” (Bigelow et al, 2004, p. 5). As teachers, they assert, educators have a civic responsibility to challenge current systems and inequitable conditions through which students are educated. Considering the political and social influences that teachers have, it is essential that we do not remain quiet and complicit in the continuing desegregation and inequitable education of students. We must make use of our collective power and influence to seek changes within educational policies and reform. Teachers are encouraged to join both educational and political conversations and articulate the belief that a “profoundly more equitable society is both desirable and attainable” (Bigelow et al., 2004, p.5). It is not merely enough to recognize that changes need to occur. Teachers must also actively seek ways to redress issues that negatively impact the way historically marginalized students are educated.

One of the primary goals of education, Bigelow et al. (2004) argue, is to consider the type of society we perpetuate through our pedagogical practices. In this sense, Bigelow et al. (2004) challenge educators to view, much like Willoughby (2004), education as a site of resistance where teachers provide students with the necessary academic and political knowledge to change that which is unjust in society. Every teacher and school program has the unique opportunity to promote social justice through everyday teaching practices. Educators have the ability to create curriculum that is culturally relevant, pushes students toward social action, and provides them with academic tools and resources that increase their chances of becoming successful learners and productive citizens in the struggle for social justice. In doing so, teachers not only work within their spheres of influences to enact social change, they also recommit themselves to the “goals of equality and justice that have inspired such extraordinary activism throughout our country’s history” (Bigelow et al., 2004, p.6). Once these social actions have occurred, the promises of Brown vs. The Board of Education will have been successfully achieved and students, no matter their race, socio-economic status, gender, or sexuality will have the privilege of an equity-based education.

Praxis in Skyhill Community

In addition to the suggestions for critical action provided by Bigelow et al. (2004) and Willoughby's (2004), the city of Skyhill and Skyhill county can take some steps to ensure that all students, no matter race, socio-economic status, or community, have access to equitable education experiences. I believe the first step is educating the community about the history of Brown vs. The Board of Education and its impact on local schools in Skyhill. Many people are unaware of the fact that these schools were structured in a way that was intended to mitigate the problems of segregation, yet they only continue to segregate students. Through education of the city's and schools' history, community leaders and stakeholders will be able to understand how the current structure of several schools are reinforcing school segregation.

Another form of praxis, or critical reflection and action, can be to organize in large numbers and speak with local school board administrators. Through collective powers, local citizens can pressure authorities into examining current practices that perpetuate school segregation. Groups and community leaders can demand that structural changes take place so that students are not continually segregated in school. As Bonilla-Silva (2014) states, it is not merely enough to simply cohabitate in schools. Cohabitation does not automatically mean true integration is taken place. Unfortunately, what is happening throughout schools in Skyhill is that students are cohabiting under one school but still remaining desegregated within those same institutions. By implementing structural changes that dismantle the current division of students, often based on race and socio-economic status, the promise of the Brown vs. The Board of Education would become close to actually being fulfilled.

Given that in-school segregation and other similar trends have been found across the United States, other communities and school districts could and should engage in similar praxis efforts. School districts can incorporate their local history within their curriculum. Many school districts have unique and profound histories that are largely unknown to the students who attend school within those districts. Unfortunately, students can progress through school and remain completely unaware of how the racial demographics of their institutions came to be. Additionally, academic programs that perpetuate in school segregation exist within a

number of schools, yet not enough is done to challenge how and why these programs were created. Community efforts can be created to examine both the history of current programs and begin assessing the equity of school programs and the racial and educational disparities that stem from these types of programs.

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