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Education Segregation Nation: How schools increase cultural segregation

Most societies today are indeed an amalgamation of diverse and multi-faceted cultures, all living in a defined geographic area. Schools have often been used as agents of cultural assimilation and homogenization by the society's dominant culture. Before this process can begin, segregation (separation) must be present to some degree, and if assimilation fails, it will be present afterwards. Segregation may not be malicious or even conscious, but it can come in many different forms and can be damaging to a society. Currently, most schools increase cultural segregation even though they have the ability to affect a decrease.

Cultural segregation comes from and in many different sources and forms which can affect access to and quality of education. Any culture can be marginalized or be dominant, depending on each individual set of circumstances (like geography). A culture's defining factors are what can cause friction or segregation between groups because they make each group different. Serra Salamé (2004) came to the conclusion that segregation (particularly in schools) stems from misunderstanding of these differences and can cause isolation, exclusion, and targeting, all of which can lead to more serious violence. For example, individuals who have emigrated from their home country to one with different cultural values could be isolated by the majority. Other shared experiences or cultural heritage different than the dominant group might also lead to segregation, like the Afrikaans' Dutch and African's native heritages were used by the politically dominant British culture to segregate them in education and everyday life, which Johnson (1982) examines during the South African apartheid. Income disparity could also cause a cultural divide, similar to the one Jones (2003)

examines between upper and lower classes' access to education in Britain in the twentieth century. Language is also a common sticking point, particularly between immigrants and a dominant language group. Spring (2001, p. 79-80) maintains that Mexican migrants' inability to speak English caused tensions in the United States, particularly in Texas and California farming communities, because they were "foreign in [their] thinking and attitudes." Here Spanish-speaking children were only kept in school for five hours a day, short of the minimum required by the government, so that they could help their parents in the fields. Serra Salamé (2004) interviewed Catalan students about Moroccan classmates and determined that language difference was an oft highlighted cause of tension. Factors which make a minority culture stand out, like clothing and skin color, can cause problems and lead to labelling. As Zine (2001) found with Muslim students in Canada, religion also makes students and cultural groups stand out, particularly in a largely homogeneous society. All of these factors can be and have been points of contention between dominant and minority cultures across the globe, leading to a variety of different forms of segregation. Segregation can cause violence in schools and comes from the factors which define and differentiate a culture, such as shared experiences, cultural heritage, income disparity, language, race, ethnicity, and religion.

Schools tend to exacerbate and increase cultural segregation, particularly if the system is not established specifically to prevent this divergence. According to Burgess and Wilson (2005), ethnic segregation has two main components: dissimilarity and isolation. Most school systems perpetuate these two ideals and Burgess and Wilson (2005) examine the inherent geographic reasons for this segregation. In Britain and the United states for example, a large portion of the population attends state schools, particularly those of ethnic minorities or in lower classes who cannot afford fee-paying institutions. Most of these state- or locally-run schools take students from small geographic areas and sometimes, particularly in the case of large cities, neighborhoods. Many neighborhoods prove to host clusters of similar ethnic or

cultural groups, especially capitals and those cities which housed immigration centers for their country, such as New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Miami, and London. Oftentimes these cities have entire areas named “Chinatown” or “Little Havana” because of their cultural concentrations. In any largely homogeneous area, whether in the heart of a metropolitan ethnic enclave surrounded by a particular ethnicity in the heart of the countryside surrounded by cows, there is very little exposure to other cultures. Schools in these areas that segregate large swathes of the school-going population due to geographic factors often perpetuate segregation through misunderstanding. Government programs which affect schools, regardless of their intentions, can also increase segregation. Johnson (1982) examines the South African government’s apartheid policies and their effects on education, which the government used to control the vast African population and keep them subservient to the Whites. Johnson (1982, p. 215) determined that “apartheid myths, norms, and values [were] incorporated in individual attitudes toward education” and that only “radically altering the structure and content of existing education” could create an “egalitarian nonracial, democratic society” without segregation. In 1849, Massachusetts saw “one of the first separate-but-equal rulings in American judicial history” which Spring (2001, p. 44) maintains perpetuated the Black segregation in society until 1855 when a law was signed into effect stating that “no child be denied admission to a public school on the basis of race or religious opinions.” Unfortunately, the United States as a whole took over 100 years, a civil war, and a hard-fought civil rights battle to do the same; government programs can cause many problems with cultural segregation. Achievement gaps are created by school segregation, particularly in the areas of financial background, primary language spoken, and race. According to Darling-Hammond and Post (2000, p. 141), they perpetuate cultural segregation because of “unequal access to educational opportunities.” These students may find it more difficult to continue past the compulsory age of education due to lack of preparation or financial problems, and as

Reardon and Galindo (2009) point out, minority students have unequal representation in higher education as a whole. Essentially, achievement gaps severely limit the upward mobility of those who are underprivileged or of a minority, thus continuing and even exacerbating segregation. Schools can create and increase cultural segregation because of geographic factors, government policy, and achievement gaps.

While most schools increase cultural segregation, it is certainly possible for them to decrease it as well. As Serra Salamé (2004) points out, the biggest factor that perpetuates segregation is misunderstanding and the lack of discussion surrounding particularly racist thoughts. According to him, the way to stop this racism and segregation is through information and personal relationships, which stop stereotypes. One of the biggest things a school can do is promote multicultural education and discussion of more sensitive topics. This is important to stop the spread of misinformation and to increase understanding and acceptance of different cultures, ethnicities, religions, and minority groups. Also, Robinson (2008) proved that appropriate curricula and utilizing ability groups can decrease achievement gaps and increase educational opportunity, particularly among minorities. There are several practical limitations to implementing these programs, particularly in regards to the amount of resources and time necessary to affect real change in a school population and community. A school would also need dedicated and skilled teachers and an administration committed to the goal of decreasing cultural segregation in order to make an impact. Unfortunately, the schools which need the most help in decreasing cultural segregation are often the schools most lacking the resources and well-trained teachers required to implement the policies. Strong-willed students can also help break down the barriers between cultures because of their ability to break stereotypes and forge personal relationships with those from other cultures, as Zine (2001) shows with her study on Muslim students in Canada. There are several school community groups which often inhibit the desegregation of cultures,

particularly local administrators, existing political figures, the parents of the dominant culture's students, and the government ("Fight School Segregation!"). While these groups may not be vocal about their disapproval, their indifference or obtuseness may cause just as many problems, if not more. Universities can adopt affirmative-action policies, but according to Bibbings (2006), this can lead to positive discrimination and an increased desire for segregation. While it is possible for schools to decrease cultural segregation through multicultural education and community influence, the schools that need these measures the most often are the ones which lack the resources and trained personnel to do so.

Schools of all levels can have a profound effect on cultural segregation in a society. This segregation can also impact schools by increasing school violence and decreasing the students' ability to learn. Each culture's unique blend of heritage, economic status, language, ethnic background, and appearance can cause friction with others as the dominant group or groups choose to isolate or exclude based on these differences. Schools tend to exacerbate these problems due to a wide range of factors. Since many schools take students from a relatively small geographic area, they are more likely to perpetuate the values and beliefs of the dominant culture in that area, which could lead to a lack of educational opportunity and increased segregation. Government policies, particularly those dedicated to social control, and achievement gaps, the lower ends of which are generally located in socio-economically troubled areas, limit upward mobility and can increase cultural segregation. Programs like affirmative action, ability groups, and multicultural education can lead to decreased cultural segregation, but unfortunately many schools lack the resources to implement these policies and they can even worsen segregation and racial sentiments. While schools have the ability to decrease cultural segregation, they tend to increase it if not properly and purposefully carrying out programs designed to combat it.

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