

# Critical Education

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## A Return to Educational Apartheid? Introduction to a *Critical Education* Series

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Series Editors' introduction to the *Critical Education* series: *A Return to Educational Apartheid? Critical Examinations of Race, Schools, and Segregation*

### Abstract

*Series co-editors Renner and Selwyn introduce a special series of articles focusing on the articulation of race, schools, and segregation. Each of the articles in this series will analyze the extent to which schooling may or may not be returning to a state of educational apartheid.*



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On June 28, 2007, the Supreme Court of the United States voted by a 5-4 margin to overturn Jefferson County's four-decade-old desegregation plan. The Meredith case from Jefferson County in Louisville, Kentucky was joined by the Parents Involved in Community Schools case from Seattle, Washington, for which a group comprised primarily of white parents from two neighborhoods alleged some 200 students were not admitted to schools of their choice, based on "integration tie-breakers," which prevented many from attending facilities nearest to their homes.

In Chief Justice John G. Roberts plurality opinion, he argued, "The parties and their *amici* debate which side is more faithful to the heritage of *Brown* [*v. Board of Education*, 1954], but the position of the plaintiffs in *Brown* was spelled out in their brief and could not have been clearer: 'The Fourteenth Amendment prevents states from according differential treatment to American children on the basis of their color or race'. What do racial classifications at issue here do, if not accord differential treatment on the basis of race?" Chief Justice Roberts would add, "The way to stop discrimination based on race is to stop discrimination on the basis of race."

While it is probably too recent a decision to make any conclusions, definitively, the segregationist arc of the 20<sup>th</sup> century offers unfortunate momentum to this early 21<sup>st</sup> century verdict. Supreme Court decisions are made within the context of their times, and the Roberts court's recent decisions both reflect and lead a movement toward the resegregation of schools that has been ongoing for a decade or more. It is a goal of this special series of *Critical Education* not only to trace and illuminate some of this history while also understanding the extent to which the resegregation of public schools is happening across the country, but also to come to an appreciation of what it means for our students, families, communities, and the nation.

In 2003, with a different make-up, the Supreme Court foreshadowed this 2007 verdict by rendering a "split decision" regarding the University of Michigan's admission policies. In the *Gratz v. Bollinger* case, the Supreme Court decided 6-3 that the University of Michigan needed to modify their admission criteria, which assigned points based on race. However, in the *Grutter v. Bollinger* case, the Supreme Court decided 5-4 to uphold the University of Michigan Law School's ruling that race could be one of several factors when selecting students because it furthers "a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body."

Regarding the 2007 decision, more specifically, it took just a little over fifty years of monumental effort to bring a case to the Supreme Court to overturn *Plessey v. Ferguson*—finally declaring in 1954 that "separate is *not* equal" in the *Brown v. Board of Education* verdict. Noting a similar five decade time frame, has it taken just about the same amount of time to scale that decision back with the overturning of voluntary desegregation plans of Jefferson County Public Schools and Seattle School District 1?

Supreme Court decisions are neither the only conditional illustrations of the present nor perfect omens of the future, of course. Anyone who works in or on K-12 education has noted the continuing and/or advancing segregationist trends in schools and classrooms for some time. And, although progressive educators have been aware of these trends for decades, race and education have taken the spotlight vis-à-vis the No Child Left Behind Act because of its focus on the achievement gap. Additionally, in 2005, Jonathan Kozol offered a sobering profile of American education, a lamenting follow-up to his earlier work, *Savage Inequalities* (1992). In *Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, Kozol demonstrated the retrograde process many public school systems have undergone related to racial balance. His critique of this pre-Brown-like-segregation was balanced, ironically, by rather effusive praise of the Jefferson County system, which attempted to keep this balance in check. Does the 2007 decision remove this one shining example?

Though the passageway to educational apartheid may not be pre-destined, what is the likelihood that a path of least resistance will lead toward (further) racial separation? How does the lingering legacy of residential segregation complicate this issue? What connections can we draw to and/or how might further racial segregation exacerbate issues of poverty or unemployment? Moreover, where do race and class collide? And, where is a more distinct analysis necessary? Finally, what can we surmise about the ongoing achievement gap if, in fact, apartheid schooling is afoot?

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At worst, this 2007 decision could presage the death of a waning democracy. Without a compelling public education that helps all our children become critical consumers and citizens, what kind of society might we imagine for ourselves? At best, though, this decision could marshal the sensibilities of a critical cadre of educators, social workers, health care workers, activists, attorneys, business leaders, etc. to stand in resistance to the injustice that is becoming (or continues to be?) our nation's public school system.

In a *Los Angeles Times* opinion piece a few days before the 2007 decision, Edward Lazarus (2007) argued, "Although they may have disagreed about Brown's parameters, most Americans coalesced around the decision as a national symbol for our belated rejection of racism and bigotry. Using Brown as a sword to outlaw affirmative action of any kind would destroy that worthy consensus and transform it into just another mirror reflecting a legal and political culture still deeply fractured over race." Allan Johnson (2006) argues there can be no healing until the wounding stops. Likewise, paraphrasing Malcolm X's provocation about so-called progress, he reminded us that although the knife in the back of African-Americans may once have been nine inches deep, that it has only been removed a few inches does not indicate progress. What do these early 21<sup>st</sup> century decisions of the Supreme Court, the No Child Left Behind Act, and continued housing segregation do to X's metaphorical knife?

In its infancy, *Critical Education* has already offered a tantalizing mix of scholarship that enhances academic discussions as well as deepens the work on the ground in classrooms and in communities. *Critical Education* also offers readers two different series of thematic articles to consider over the next couple of years. The first, "The Lure of the Animal," edited by Abraham DeLeon, examines "the representations of nonhuman animals [and] provides opportunities to explore ideology, discourse, and the ways in which the construction of nonhumans mirrors the representation of the human *Other* in contemporary and historical contexts." The second, this series on educational apartheid, offers another location to explore the disturbing trends in K-12 spaces.

Interestingly, Selwyn and Renner have been intimately connected to the two locations cited in the 2007 Supreme Court decision: Selwyn, a K-12 teacher and university professor in Seattle and Renner, a university professor in Louisville. More recently, Selwyn has moved to a teacher education program in upstate New York and Renner has returned to the K-12 classroom to teach math in a public high school in San Francisco, CA. A forthcoming article from the co-editors of this series will illuminate their experiences in these earlier locations as well as what they have experienced in their new high school classroom and teacher education program.

Turning our attention to this first essay in the series, Erica Frankenberg and Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, both affiliated at one time with the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, offer an examination of not only the segregation of students in the US, but also the segregation of teachers. In part, their argument is premised upon the fact that students who attend diverse schools are more likely to attend integrated colleges, live in integrated neighborhoods, and have cross-racial friendships, among other outcomes. Thus, more *segregated* schooling experiences lead to more *segregated* outcomes later in life. And, if race and class are strongly correlated, the future economic impact of segregated schooling for non-White students is remarkable. Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley, though, also want to point our attention toward the segregation of US teachers and highlight the fact that schools with fewer students of color have fewer teachers of color. And, so, the critical dialogue can begin: Based upon the evidence that Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley provide, should it be a priority to not only keep our eyes on the segregation of students, but also the segregation of our teaching force? What opportunities might arise from a more integrated teaching staff? What, if any, is the future economic impact of our nation's students with a segregated teaching force? What other issues are of equal importance or should complement such an integration? Can a segregated schooling experience still be of some benefit to non-White students, taught by non-White teachers?

We know that you will find this opening essay in the series compelling. We invite your feedback and reflections. We also invite you to consider submitting your own research and/or theorizing on the issue of educational apartheid, as we would like to consider it for publication later in the series.

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