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Global Education Inequities: A Comparative Study of the United States and South Africa

Abstract

Access to quality education for all children is a common mantra for countless national and world organizations, such as the UN and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This paper examines the struggle within two nations who continue to move beyond the impact of racial segregation in the United States (US) and *apartheid* in South Africa (SA) to achieve equitable access to quality education for all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, language, or socio-economic status (SES). The paper begins with an overview of the historical paths both nations followed in their slow evolution away from harsh segregation and *apartheid* governance designed to provide unequal educational opportunities for its youth. Beyond these historical sketches is a brief review of theoretical perspectives help to explain how unequal systems of education are maintained and how they can be transformed into agents of positive social change. This is followed by an examination of factors in both the US and SA that are capable of sustaining unequitable access to quality education while providing disproportional levels of negativity such as suspensions or dropping out (or being "pushed out") of school based on a child's race, gender, ethnicity or SES. The paper concludes by asking (at least in the US case), whether the "way forward" may be guided by examples of the past, such as the quality of education provided to Black children in the era of legally segregated Black schools in America's South.

Keywords: *apartheid*, segregation, South Africa, United States

Introduction

This paper analyzes the struggles experienced by the United States (US) and South Africa (SA) as they attempt to move beyond years of racial segregation and *apartheid* to achieve equitable access to quality education for all their students, without regard for race, ethnicity, gender, language, or socio-economic status (SES). Following a brief historical and theoretical overview, the authors analyze various factors that have impeded equitable education for all, and the disproportional quality and types of instruction correlated to a child's race, ethnicity, gender, language or SES. The paper concludes with a "way forward" that looks to historical examples of equitable, quality education for all.

A history of segregation, integration and resegregation in US schools

After two centuries of slavery in the US ended with the defeat of the Southern Confederacy in 1865, anti-literacy and Jim Crow laws ensured that inequality would continue based on race, ethnicity, language, gender and SES. According to Walker and Archung (2003, p. 21), Southern Whites purposefully "segregated African Americans into separate schools that received less money in state expenditures per

child". This intentionally designed, inequitable education systems based on race was solidified by the 1896 US Supreme Court decision, "Plessy v. Ferguson", that maintained racial segregation within public schools under the guise of "separate but equal". This remained until 1954 when the US Supreme Court reversed itself with the "Brown vs. Board of Education" ruling stating that separate was inherently unequal, and ordering school desegregation with "all deliberate speed". Slow progress in Southern schools initiated the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and 20 years after the Brown decision, the last student in the Southern state of Florida educated within Black segregated schools graduated in 1974.

Interestingly, processes to achieve racial integration, such as mandatory busing in the 1960s, often enhanced the growth of White academies and magnet schools, and later led to educational "choice". While magnet schools provided a positive incentive for voluntary integration, it also accelerated the resegregation of public schools while reducing funds for local public schools by developing public charter schools (Heilig, Brewer & Williams, 2019).

A history of segregation and post-*apartheid* education in SA

Humans have inhabited and displaced one another for over 100,000 years, including the histories of colonialism and *apartheid* in what is now SA. Moreover, current segments of SA's history have directly caused severe SES inequalities throughout society and education. This section focuses on the establishments of the Republic of South Africa and the beginning of the *apartheid* era (1948-1994), when racist legislation enacted discriminatory and segregationist laws first established in the Dutch Cape Colony in 1856, and extended during British colonization. This system of *apartheid*, which lasted until 1991, entrenched oppressive legislation beginning with the Native Land Act of 1913 that established *"Bantustans"* through the forced eviction of thousands of Black Africans from their land and homes. Though anti-*apartheid* resistance occurred nationwide since the 1940s, strict segregation of society (including schools) persisted. Moreover, extension of the University Education Act #45 of 1959 prohibited Blacks from attending historically White universities and established what became known as the "Historically Disadvantaged Institutions", such as the Universities of Fort Hare, for Black students (Ndimande, 2013, p. 21). Until post-*apartheid* and the election of Nelson Mandela, schools and universities remained legally segregated, and unequally funded. Unfortunately, as in the US, amending policies does not necessarily transform systems of education, nor people's hearts.

Though SA continues to address their unequitable legacies through a decoloniality agenda, Ntshoe (2017, p. 70) noted "new forms of hidden and subtle discrimination, racism and resegregation are developing in South Africa". This also occurred within educational pedagogies such as Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) and the current Curriculum and Assessment Policy statements (CAPS) which focus on broad-based education, rather than on diversity sensitive education (South African Department of Basic Education, 2021).

Theoretical perspectives regarding the causes of educational inequalities

This section analyzes theoretical perspective that blame a racist society, students' inferior genetics and home life, and/or dysfunctional schools. However, it also suggests that instead of schools destined to reproduce societal inequalities, they may instead function as agents for positive social change.

Blame a racist society for school inequalities

Critical Race Theory (CRT) blames a racist society for educational inequities. Delgado and Stefanic (2017, p. 7) state that CRT perspectives help explain the negative impact of "…school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, affirmative action, high-stakes testing, controversies over curriculum and history, bilingual and multicultural education, and alternative and charter schools". CRT also suggests that racism and resegregation of schools and communities is a serious critique of Westernized curricula and deficit theory perspectives. From a more global perspective, this argument reoccurs in current demands for "decoloniality" and the Africanization of curricula within a post-*apartheid* SA.

Blame dysfunctional schools

Some theories blame dysfunctional schools for systemic racialized education and curricula. From this perspective, scholars such as Artiles and Trent (1994) and Serwatka, Deering and Grant (1995), underscore the dissonance between school and home cultures as an explanation for unequitable education based on students' race, ethnicity, language and/or SES. Thus, inequities are blamed on a school's inability to provide a cultural bridge between traditional school practices and students' home cultures, languages and values.

Blame the victim

This approach blames students and their families for educational inequities due to their racial and social backgrounds. Authors such as Herrnstein and Murray (1994), for example, sustained theories of genetic inferiority that blamed students and their home life for academic failure. The negative impact of such perspectives encouraged the elimination of compensatory education programs, such as Head Start in the US, as it was assumed that education could not overcome genetic deficits, and thus there was no need to fund programs for minority and/ poor children.

Reproduction of societal inequalities

This perspective suggests that schools simply reproduce society's inequalities instead of functioning as agents for positive social change. It argues that schools serve the interests and needs of the dominant class (which in many countries is White), thus reducing other students' equal chances for success. For example, traditional school curriculum often functions to reproduce societal beliefs and assumptions. Moreover, Ndimande (2013) posits that this also excludes indigenous knowledge within the curriculum.

Conflict theorists

This final perspective assumes that both schools, and the societies in which they exist, serve as a means to dominate, exploit, oppress, and subordinate marginalized and poor students. This perspective is succinctly reflected in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970).

Decolonization or resegregation? Reflections on US and SA experiences

Though separated by thousands of miles, the US and SA share some similar patterns of social and economic inequalities based on race, as reflected in segregated school systems that are supposed to provide equitable education for all children. Sadly for both countries, there have been multiple promises, yet unfulfilled policies and programs designed to establish education that is more equitable. However, many US desegregation and SA post-*apartheid* policies have evolved to address the problems that addressed the institutionalized and sustained inequalities linked to educational opportunities. These issues were underscored by multiple scholars such as Kozol who focused on the "Savage Inequalities" within US schools. In a similar manner, Ndimande (2013) argues that SA schools are continuously widening the gap between SES, race and gender, as the location of a school often plays a critical role in the provision (infrastructure) and quality (service delivery) of education.

Clearly, the struggles for greater educational equity in the US parallel ongoing decoloniality and the Africanization struggles within SA. While the US began this difficult task in 1954 with the landmark Brown decision, SA initiated its journey toward greater racial equality four decades later, when *apartheid* policies ended in 1994. Moreover, whether framed in terms of desegregation, decoloniality or indigenization, research suggests that both countries continue the struggle to provide equal access to quality education and service delivery for all children. Scholars such as Black, Spreen and Vally (2020, p. 48) made the following succinct comparisons regarding the daily struggles of children in both countries: "As in South Africa, the US has millions of children who are homeless, food insecure, and without health care. Schools serve critical social reproduction functions for the vulnerable beyond their core role of advancing learning, by providing feeding schemes, computers and connectivity to those without, and – in many cases – childcare for essential workers".

Research has critically analyzed curriculum, arguing for the need of a decoloniality agenda that provides culturally relevant and historically accurate content and delivery modes. They demand a curriculum in stark contrast to the White/Eurocentric curricula reflective of the previous US segregation and SA *apartheid* policies. Christie (2020) suggests that decoloniality must separate knowledge production from previous Eurocentric foci, and extend beyond the assume universality of Western knowledge and superiority of Western culture. For Walker and Archung (2003, p. 25), "…the education of Blacks in both countries was embedded in a system of racial segregation, designed to promote Whites into positions of leadership, land ownership, and economic control and to doom Blacks to subservience".

Clearly, any comparison of the US and SA requires analyzes that respect significant differences between their cultural and educational histories. For example,

Blacks are a majority in SA but a minority in the US, and Blacks in SA, unlike their counterparts in the US, were not enslaved. Nonetheless, threads of comparability between the two cases remain informative when unpacking notions regarding greater equity for all students.

School "choice" and the resegregation schools in the US and SA

Ironically, mandatory busing to achieve racial integration in the US beginning in the 1960s not only encouraged many White students to leave public education, which enhanced the development of private White academies, but also led to "choice" through the growth of magnet schools. These were originally designed as incentives for parents to send their children voluntarily to integrated schools featuring specialized "magnet" programs. In SA, the rise of private schools focusing on a single culture and language have increased, which furthers social inequality.

Unfortunately, since US desegregation was abandoned in favor of multiple "choice" programs in the 1990s, "the tremendous progress in the South has been slowly eroding year by year as black students and the exploding population of Latino students become more isolated from white students" (Orfield & Lee, 2005, p. 4). Moreover, while magnet schools have reduced high concentrations of poverty by attracting a more diverse population of students, it remains unclear if magnet schools are successful in promoting racial integration. The 1990s' concept of educational "choice" posited that schools would improve naturally if forced to participate in a free marketplace. While magnet schools and "choice" have the potential to reduce segregation based on race, we are reminded that mandatory plans to achieve racial balance have been three times as successful in promoting integrated education as voluntary plans, such as magnet school.

However, as the US extended parental choice, in SA racial desegregation in the early 1990s led to a movement where thousands of children began to attend non-local schools. While educational planners predicted Black children's desire to take advantage of better-resourced schools, few expected that White children would also choose to attend a different public school or to obtain access to a private school in an urban setting based on SES more than race.

Clearly, the linkages between race, school choice and educational stratification affect both the US and SA. Scholars such as Hill (2016) have underscored how a family's race is closely linked to their efforts to take advantage of choice opportunities by transferring their children to schools offering better educational programs. However, these linkages are rather complex and intersect with other social diversity issues, thus negating simplistic one-to-one correspondence explaining how historically disadvantaged groups have engaged in post-*apartheid* and more inclusive educational opportunities (Blake & Mestry, 2020).

Conclusion: Looking back to find a way forward? Reflections on historically black segregated schools in the US

While one might assume that moving from segregated to desegregated schools would provide marginalized populations with greater access to quality education in both the US and SA, this may not be the case in all instances. While the authors do not suggest resegregating schooling, there may be a "way forward" by looking to

our past. For example, while clearly segregated schools for Black children in the US received unequal funding and support as compared to White schools, it would be erroneous to assume that the quality of instruction in Black segregated schools was also substandard. Scholars such as Patterson et al. (2008, p. 312), have captured the oral histories of Black students who were educated in these segregated schools. As an example, they found that "According to the alumni, Douglass School was the heart of the Black community and was integral in providing cohesion to a community divided by geography and church affiliation… the one institution in the Black community where everyone came together, where teachers and parents worked together to ensure that their children received a high quality education".

Moreover, three themes have emerged regarding segregated schools. First, students recall that attending these schools was an extremely positive experience. Second, students remembered that these schools demanding academic rigor. Third, even though these schools were significantly underfunded, they maintained a dynamic and rich educational experience. Clearly, the curriculum within Black schools was a politically strong defense to combat segregation, particularly as many of its harmful effects were underscored through stereotypes, misinformation, and the omission of Black history and culture in public schools. Finally, it is clear that the quality of teachers remained exceptional by stressing academic success as a means of competing within the dominant White society. Sadly, for Black students in the US, racially integrated schools often excluded this former determination to transmit a challenging curriculum to students who were expected to succeed. Learning was reduced to conformity in an atmosphere that often viewed Black students from a deficit perspective. To move forward, while remembering past strengths, nations such as the US and SA should promote teacher education programs that are more inclusive and reflective of their diverse student populations while transforming their racist, sexist and classist curricula.

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