

School Segregation Impact on Student Success

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Writer's Statement

Since learning about slavery, segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement in elementary school, I have always been interested in the injustices that Black Americans have faced over the course of United States history. I have always felt that it was very important to be educated about the injustices in this country. It had always disappointed me that my educational institutions had rarely talked about the effects of slavery, segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement, and how they have shaped the current world we live in. I took the opportunity to write a research paper about these topics, and I wanted to specifically investigate the effect of *Brown v. Board* in the U.S. today and how the Supreme Court ruling has shaped the country. As I began my research, the secondary question arose of whether Black Americans today are still negatively impacted by the segregation that had ended decades ago. This question was very interesting to explore as I found that there are indeed still negative impacts of segregation, and that there is still progress to be made in the way of equality. As my interest in this topic grew, I wanted to specify my area of research to the impacts on academic success of people of color. My goal is to bring awareness to readers of the injustices that are still going on everywhere, but specifically academically for Black students. I hope that readers can engage with the article and become more well-versed — and hopefully interested — in the way the United States is operating after segregation and how the end of segregation was not the end of inequality.

Everything that has unfolded throughout the course of history has shaped the world we live in today and will continue to influence the future that we are building. Throughout the United States's history as a country, it has upheld a system of slavery. In 1865, slavery in the United States was abolished; however, the U.S. then adopted a system of segregation. This forever impacted the country's view of the concepts of justice and equality. When many people began to question the rationale of segregation, the government justified segregation under the reasoning that it was a 'separate but equal' system, but separate was inherently unequal. Eventually, in 1954, the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* deemed school segregation to be unconstitutional. This was monumental for the U.S. because it meant that we were progressing as a country, and this was one of the events that helped to set off the Civil Rights Movement. This ruling created great advancements and opportunities for people of color in the country; however, while it's true that the Supreme Court case greatly advanced equality in the United States, the effects of long-lasting segregation are still negatively impacting people of color today. While there are positive steps and advancing measures currently taking place, such as integration techniques, desegregation plans, and efforts to provide proper funding, these efforts need to increase greatly in order to rectify the decades upon decades of setbacks and hardships African Americans have had and continue to face.

The Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* helped to set off the Civil Rights movement and give opportunity to students of color. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, referred to as the NAACP, was formed, and in the early 1950s, they wanted to claim small victories wherever they could to advance the rights of people of color. According to the NBC News video titled *The Hidden History of Brown v. Board of Education*, one of the NAACP's earliest goals was to desegregate schools (NBC News, 2024). They sent people to try to enroll their Black students into white schools, knowing it would anger many people, with the intent to call attention to the social injustices of the U.S. at the time so

that change could be made. Many Black students also protested and went on school strikes (NBC News, 2024). This intentional controversy eventually worked, creating the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Initially, however, the goal of the NAACP was to create an equal education system, not necessarily integration between Black people and whites (NBC News, 2024). They felt this goal was too lofty. But when the result of the *Brown v. Board* case ruled segregation to be inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional, this meant that desegregation now became a reality. This huge step helped to spark the Civil Rights Movement. Black people gained hope that change in the U.S. towards equality was possible and through proper action, legislation could change for the better for them. *Brown v. Board* also gave opportunity to people of color by proving that action could be made through the court, and that civil change could occur in the courtroom. Clint Smith, author of the award-winning novel, *How The Word is Passed*, and host of the Crash Course video, *School Segregation and Brown v Board: Crash Course Black American History 33*, discusses the issue that Blacks in America didn't have representation in their state, so changing laws via legislation was nearly impossible. The court system was one avenue where Black people could fight for their rights (Smith, 2022). To better elaborate on this concept, it's important to know how *Brown v. Board* came to be and the details that accompany this case.

In June of 1866, the 14th Amendment was passed, and this amendment gave African Americans citizenship. This is important because this meant they had access to certain rights and resources in America (Smith, 2022). However, whites then created Jim Crow laws that hindered African Americans from voting and implemented segregation (Smith, 2022). This segregation ensured that Black people in the U.S. were not able to exercise their benefits of citizenship, which included education (Smith, 2022). The NAACP was then founded and worked towards desegregation, specifically desegregation of schools, all the way back in the 1930s when they drafted the Margold Report (Smith, 2022). There was some progress with colleges and public universities, but with elementary and secondary schools, there was no forward movement (Smith, 2022). This meant that Black children couldn't access a proper primary education, which made getting into university even harder, practically negating the forward movement. The NAACP then compiled five cases, which took about twenty years, to support the case that the 'separate but equal' method of segregation was unconstitutional (Smith, 2022). These compiled cases created *Brown v. Board of Education*, brought to the Supreme Court in 1953 (Smith, 2022). The people involved in these cases often faced violent threats, lost their jobs, were chased out of their states, and risked their lives fighting for their rights (NBC News, 2024). One particular case was that of Oliver Brown, a pastor in Topeka, Kansas. Oliver Brown tried to enroll his daughter in school, but the principal wouldn't allow it because she was Black, and the school did not accept Black students. Brown then became the lead plaintiff for the Supreme Court case — hence the title *Brown v. Board of Education* — with twelve other plaintiffs (Smith, 2022). Then, on May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court unanimously decided that segregated public schools violated the Equal Protection Clause (Smith, 2022). Chief Justice Warren said, "separate institutions are inherently unequal." The NBC news video also quoted Chief Justice Warren in his deliberation that separate is inherently unequal (NBC News, 2024). These two videos both highlight the significance of this statement. It was then made clear as to how vital it was that students of color were given the same access to primary public education because it was deemed unconstitutional for them not to receive access to the same public education. There were, however, repercussions and loopholes surrounding this monumental event. Although the ruling was a great advancement for African Americans on paper, in reality there weren't as many positive outcomes as people had hoped, and there were lasting negative effects of segregation even after that point.

Segregation in schools until 1954 drastically set students of color back academically. Before *Brown v. Board of Education*, in many areas, there was only one school for Black children to go to, and it was very far away. Black parents either had to send their children to

school in another county, which was not attainable or realistic for a lot of families or not send their children to school at all (Smith, 2022). The highly limited access to schools prevented the proper education of many young Black people in America. According to Clint Smith, in addition to limited access, the few Black schools that did exist were horrifically underfunded and neglected (Smith, 2022). The NBC News video also provides details about the neglect of the Black schools, describing the overcrowding in all-Black schools, the lack of heating in the winter that made the cold months unbearable, and the leaking in the ceilings that dripped water onto students' papers (NBC News, 2024). What makes the situation even worse is that terrible conditions and negative effects did not end when segregation ended. In the United States today, there is still a significant Black-white test score gap. Card and Rothstein, in *Racial segregation and the black–white test score gap*, explain, “test scores are lower at schools with higher Black enrollment shares... Likewise, there is a strong negative correlation between education outcomes and the fraction of Black residents in a neighborhood” (Card & Rothstein, 2007, p. 1). It’s important to note that correlation does not imply causation and that there are many factors that contribute to test scores and education outcomes, but this evidence proves that there is a noticeable Black–white test score gap. The higher the fraction of Black residents in a given school district, the more likely the school district is to be neglected, and therefore the worse the education outcomes of that school district. Lea Vivian, author of *The Influence of School Segregation on Students’ Educational Achievement* also finds in her studies that as school segregation among a minority group increases, the achievement gap also increases (Vivian, 2017, p. 7). The issues of negligence in Black education and under-performing test scores are still prevalent even after school segregation officially ended seventy years ago. In addition to Black and white test-score gaps, there are overall significant achievement gaps in the U.S. between Black and white students. Sean Reardon and Ann Owens in “60 Years After ‘Brown’: Trends and Consequences of School Segregation” state that data regarding school segregation and segregation trends may be difficult to collect because there are various, nuanced ways to measure segregation (Reardon & Owens, 2014, p. 200). However, there is no denying that there are segregation trends, and that there are significant achievement gaps between Black and white students across the United States. One way to measure academic achievement in high school is to examine the ‘tracking’ of students. Tracking refers to which courses students are placed in, like whether they’re taking AP classes or not (Vivian, 2017, p. 8). Across schools in the U.S., even in diverse ones, there are much fewer students of color on high-track classes, such as AP classes, and the low-track classes — wherein a majority of students of color reside — result in much lower achievement (Vivian, 2017, p. 8). These measurements prove a clear trend of academic setback for Black students. Another study found that in Riverview High School, a desegregated high school, Black students make up about 40% of the student body, but only 9% of Black students are enrolled in AP Calculus. Meanwhile, whites make up around 50% of the student body, and 82% of them take AP Calculus (Vivian, 2017, p. 8). This study shows that even in desegregated, suburban schools, achievement gaps in the U.S. are very prevalent. Along with achievement gaps, the issue of academic inequality can be further shown in the opportunity segregation, economic segregation, and education segregation that have set students back.

Segregation in schools until 1954 negatively impacted students of color in various aspects, not just academically. After the ruling of *Brown v. Board* in 1954, people still found ways to segregate. This means that the problem of school segregation was not solved. After *Brown v. Board*, most states in the South put into place ‘freedom of choice’ desegregation plans in which schools made it very hard for Black families to enroll their children into previously all-white schools, allowing for segregation to still be in place despite the Supreme Court ruling (Reardon & Owens, 2014, p. 202). In 1968, 77% of Black students went to majority Black schools, and 50% of Black students went to schools where 90% of the student population was Black (Reardon & Owens, 2014, p. 202). These statistics show that there was essentially zero progress toward school desegregation after *Brown v. Board*, which happened in 1954. Almost

all of the schools in the U.S. were still highly segregated. Lea Vivian also refers to the issue of segregation still being in place even after *Brown v. Board* (Vivian, 2017, p. 2). She emphasizes the point made by Reardon and Owens that schools were still able to segregate by highlighting the weak federal enforcement and the covert 'freedom of choice' systems that essentially created loopholes for the continuation of segregation. NBC News found that some school districts took another approach and went so far as to shut down their entire school district so as not to have to desegregate (NBC News, 2024).

Another variation of segregation and racism is not just where Black students are enrolled in school and the classes that they take, but the attitude of the teachers towards their African American students. The aforementioned Riverview High School study found that even when Black students earned placement in higher level classes, their teachers had lower expectations of them (Vivian, 2017, p. 8). Black students who were interviewed said they could tell that their teachers were not used to seeing Black students being successful, which was a disheartening feeling to them (Vivian, 2017, p. 8). This double standard and differing attitude of teachers, even in integrated schools, demonstrates the unwavering segregation present in the country's schools in the present day. There is an overall view of Black students not being as capable as their white counterparts, which greatly harms the academic success of these Black students. There is no denying that segregation was not abolished completely in schools right after *Brown v. Board*, and this lack of proper change further contributed to the damage in education of students of color.

Since school segregation continued to be in place even after the Supreme Court ruling, Black students had a very difficult time achieving educational success (as shown in the achievement and test score gaps). Educational success directly relates to and impacts economic success, so when Black communities couldn't access proper education, these communities could then not achieve economic success (Smith, 2022). Segregation in schools not only affected the education of Black students, but it also set whole communities back economically as well. The Black-white income gap in the U.S. is further evidence of the economic and opportunity disparities Black people face. A Black household currently makes 59 cents for every dollar a white household makes on average (Vivian, 2017, p. 6). This drastic income gap limits many opportunities for people of color in instances such as properly funded education, socioeconomic growth, financial freedom, and poverty escape. Vivian goes on to state that today there is a trend of whites moving out of integrated communities, from urban to suburban areas. Black people tend to stay in racially mixed areas in urban areas, which tend to be more inclined to less opportunity. This leads to racial and economic segregation, and Black people living in more highly impoverished places. This phenomenon directly leads to more African American students dropping out of school, which leads to fewer college attendees, ultimately causing lower earnings, which impacts residency (Vivian, 2017, p. 3-4). This creates a cycle that is very hard to get out of, which is why these issues still exist in our country today.

Along with racial segregation in schools still being in place after *Brown v. Board*, there was and still is economic segregation. In 2005, the average Black student attended a school where about 60% of the students were considered poor, while the average white student attended a school where only around 33% of the students were considered poor (Reardon & Owens, 2014, p. 204). This statistic shows a very clear pattern of economic segregation demonstrated in schools in the United States of America. Schools in high-poverty areas tend to have significantly lower funding and fewer resources. We can define these resources as physical facilities, skilled teachers and staff, and school curriculum. A large majority of students in these high-poverty areas with lower funding and fewer resource schools tend to be Black students (Reardon & Owens, 2014, p. 204). This is another example of the modern segregation trends we see today and how economic segregation and education segregations are directly correlated and related to one another. Further evidence from Reardon and Owens' study regarding wealth and

academic success also supports the idea that economic and educational segregation are correlated. Reardon and Owens find that poor students — a majority of whom are Black — have less exposure to high-achieving classmates due to the relationship between parental income and school enrollment (Reardon & Owens, 2014, p. 208). With less exposure to more successful students, these poor students have a much more difficult time achieving the academic success than the high-income students do. When students don't see success around them, it's hard for them to find success themselves.

With clear-cut examples and studies showing the existence of segregation in schools today, as well as economic segregation, it is very difficult to deny that these issues are present. With state governments still finding ways to segregate even after school segregation was made unconstitutional, clear evidence showing residential trends of people of color compared to whites and the relationship between residence and education and opportunities, and the achievement, test score, and income gap between Blacks and whites, it's clear to see the negative impact that the long-standing system of segregation still has on our country today. It's important to remember that these racial, civil, social, and educational issues are still problems that need to be dealt with today and that these issues need to be addressed. Change is required to create a system of equal education in America. The U.S. federal government cannot continue to support this system that makes equal education almost unattainable for such a vast population of our country. Closing achievement gaps is both necessary and possible in the United States. Studies from the article *Racial segregation and the black–white test score gap* show that moving from a segregated city to an integrated city correlates to a 45-point closing of the Black–white SAT test score gap (Card & Rothstein, 2007, p. 3). Studies also show that the more integrated the school, the smaller the white–minority achievement gap is in that school (Vivian, 2017, p. 7). This positive change needs to be a possibility for all so that everyone can better their lives. Studies also find that desegregation in the 1970s led to a 2-to-3-point decrease in the rate of Black students dropping out of high school (Reardon & Owens, 2014, p. 210). Reardon and Owens elaborate and state that the graduation rate for Black students then increased by about 1%, and in addition, they found that desegregation does not have any effect on whites (Reardon & Owens, 2014, p. 211). This means that desegregation benefits Blacks and has no harmful effect on whites, which aligns with Card and Rothstein's studies. There is also evidence showing that desegregation may increase the expectations of teachers for Black students (Reardon & Owens, 2014, p. 212). This addresses the inequality issue of teachers having lower standards and therefore accepting lower academic quality, decreasing academic education. This further proves that the equal opportunity provided by desegregation is necessary for all. For this equal opportunity, there needs to be proper funding to segregated or previously segregated schools. Currently, white families are more likely to be able to move to suburban areas where there are more highly funded schools, while most Black families reside in areas with underfunded schools, which cause lower educational achievements (Vivian, 2017, p. 6). There must be an effort to focus on underfunded schools so as to provide equal primary education for all, regardless of social class, economic status, or residential status. Failing to make this change would be an act of segregation itself.

Brown v. Board of Education and school segregation have had an immense impact on the education of students of color in the United States. Until 1954, schools in the United States were segregated. This meant that students of color could not attend school with the white student population. Since the white schools were the ones with proper funding and resources, this led to better education for white students and poor education for Black students because there was a lack of funding for the all-Black schools. In 1954, when the Supreme Court ruled school segregation to be unconstitutional, America took a step in the right direction towards equality, and the Civil Rights Movement began. Blacks in the U.S. gained opportunities that they did not have previously; however, the long-lasting lack of equal education in America led to achievement and test score gaps, and even though school segregation was declared

unconstitutional in 1954, these gaps in achievement and test scores are still prevalent to this day.

These achievement gaps affect people of color in other aspects of life other than education as well, such as opportunity, financial, and economic aspects. Change in the United States is required in order to create a system of equal education and equality overall. While it is true that the desegregation of schools has greatly advanced our nation and given educational opportunities to students of color, it is simply not enough. The effects of long-lasting segregation have caused issues that desegregation alone could not solve. The United States requires proper action through proper funding to boost the efforts towards desegregation, equal opportunity, and equality. There are efforts being made and studies being conducted that are trying to bring to justice these inequalities and rectify the situation for Black people in this country; however, these efforts need to be heightened and treated with greater intensity in order to bring true equality for all.

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