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American Studies: Rethinking American Education

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Absence of Educational Parity in Richmond, Virginia
“Since this school is in Year 6 of school improvement, it is recommended that school improvement funds be used to employ a school improvement expert to assist the alternative governance team. In addition, the PASS assistance will be elevated from coach to auditor. The auditor will meet with a division-level representative and the principal at least monthly. The purpose of this meeting is to align district and school resources as well as discuss the implementation of the school’s improvement plan. It is recommended that a new auditor be assigned to this school.” – (Virginia Department of Education, 2008) (1)

Introduction

In 2008, the above resolution was proposed for Chandler Middle School, located in north Richmond, by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) due to the school’s inability to meet state requirements based on the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). According to Richmond Public Schools (RPS), the purpose of NCLB is to “provide stronger support for public school education and more opportunities to help all children improve academic achievement” (2). Because the school had such low academic performance, the student population had been rapidly declining for years before it eventually closed. Even though VDOE made those above suggestions, the goals for NCLB were evidently not accomplished. If there was enough “support” for the students attending the school, it would not have been in a constant decline during its last six years.

Chandler Middle School (previously called Chandler Junior High School) had a predominantly white student population during times when schools were legally segregated, but within a few years of the Brown v. Board decision, Chandler turned into a predominantly black school and was so until it closed in 2009. Thomas Jefferson High School also experienced the same transition over time. According to Robert Pratt in The Color of their Skin, when schools had been racially switched, school board members acknowledged that it should “minimize the integration problem which confronts Richmond” (12). He used the term white flight to explain the mass “exodus” of white families moving from the City of Richmond to nearby counties further west and south. One article in the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Race in Richmond, stated that in
the 1970s, the student population in the city of Richmond was about 90% white, while City-Data reports that almost 40 years later in 2007, the city’s student population was about 80% black and 17% white \(^{(13)}\). This is almost a complete turnaround for the entire city.

*Figure 1: Student Population for Chandler Middle School*

By 2007 Chandler Middle School had been facing severe issues with the education that it was suppose to be providing its students. That year, 443 students attended Chandler Middle School; a year earlier, 507 students attended; in 2005, 533 students attended \(^{(3)}\). The graph in Figure 1 shows the decline of Chandler’s student population over the course of a few years. Ultimately, the 2008/2009 academic school year was the last for students at Chandler Middle School. Of the 355 students, attending in 2008-2009, only one white student attended. All 354 other students were Black \(^{(3)}\). In 2009, out of the 304 students, 252 students were eligible to participate in the Free Lunch Program \(^{(4)}\). This says something about the economic stability among the families of 82% of its population. Currently, since the school has closed down, the building is no longer available as a middle school for RPS. It is being used as an alternative school for one of the City of Richmond’s programs for gifted students.

As unfortunate as it was for the students affected by the school’s inadequate schooling and eventual closure, the neighborhood in which this school operated is a part of a *high-risk*
community whose residents have a tendency to fall victim to a cycle of low life chances where inequity is produced and reproduced. Using Chandler Middle School as a model for these patterns, it is clear to see the correlations between the institution of education and other social institutions (i.e. economic, political, and domestic). The ideology of meritocracy that many Americans buy into focuses on the success that comes from hard work and merit, but when it comes to putting this into practice, the results are hardly true. Brigit Fowler expresses her perspective, in Pierre Bourdieu’s *Sociological theory of culture*, that “the notion of meritocracy was and is one of the most brilliant rationales of good fortune for the successful few, just as the kharma doctrine served to create a perfect theological justification for the hierarchical pre-eminenence of the Brahmin few”\(^{(18)}\). Some people have a higher chance of receiving quality education than others based on the families and communities in which they are born. This paper examines the connections between housing segregation, access to quality education, and the cycle of low life chances that are produced and reproduced by inadequate education (by achievement gaps) in areas of Henrico County and the City of Richmond in Virginia. Research suggests that true integration of schools, in terms of social class, is not in existence in Henrico nor Richmond, but if it becomes an achieved goal for both school districts, quality education for all students will be achieved, thus reducing the size of achievement gaps that exist racially. The purpose of this paper is not to find ways to further integrate schools but to suggest a shift in focus for providing quality education and reducing achievement gaps from fixing urban schools to fixing patterns of race and class within schools.

One reason why the school population declined so rapidly during the final years at Chandler Middle is that students had the opportunity to switch schools. It can be argued that this decline in school population for Chandler Middle School is due to students being given a “choice,” and many people see this “choice” as a positive opportunity for the school’s students.
Ansley Erikson, an assistant professor of history and education at Columbia University, critiques the rhetoric of the word “choice” in one of his articles published in 2011 (5). In that article, he argues that the rhetoric of choice emphasizes the power of individual action and decision. When the school choice, is used, it usually is talking about the choice of the student or student’s family. If choice helps to solve the issues of inadequate education, then the responsibility falls on the individual, the student. This ultimately blames the victim, instead of blaming the system or school. Supposedly, the students who remained at Chandler Middle School had a choice to move to a school that yielded better academic performance. Because they had a choice, these students ideally would be at fault for not receiving quality education. In reality, however, the students who remained at Chandler were not intentionally choosing to attend a failing school. There are other factors that need to be taken into account. School systems implement policies to improve education in many ways, but for many reasons the disparities and inequities still exist. As evident by the data that is provided in this paper, schools in the City of Richmond and its surrounding counties have been, and still are, very segregated. This segregation leads to an uneven distribution of access to quality education as well as other relevant resources. Though school choice is available, as Erikson claims, it is massively controlled. This makes choosing another school more challenging for some parents than others. If the responsibility falls on those making the choices and these choices are more challenging for some than others, then there is not equal access to choice.

**Literature Review**

As a Richmond native, the researcher is familiar with the reputation of many areas in Richmond. Also, having volunteered at Chandler Middle School during its last operational semester, the researcher witnessed the disparities apparent in the data.
The quality of education in Richmond schools was not always distributed in the same way it is today. In 1886, the *Plessey v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case established a “separate but equal” doctrine among races. Almost 60 years later, it was overturned by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 calling for integrated schools. While most of Virginia officials established an immediate *massive resistance* response against desegregating schools, Robert Pratt calls specific attention to Richmond’s reaction of what he calls *passive resistance*: the huge flight of white city residents who moved to the surrounding counties. Pratt called this exodus of white families “white flight.”

In much of the research on achievement gaps, other factors are mentioned aside from school choice, such as the needed improvement of teachers because they, too, contribute to racial, gender, and class gaps in achievement. Suggestions are frequently directed toward improvement in factors like classroom management, teacher preparation, and use of curriculum with demands to meet state requirements. Hilton Kelly, a faculty member of Davidson College’s Education Department, interviewed and studied 44 teachers who did not have resources during the Jim Crow era when schools were legally segregated. He refers to them as Jim Crow teachers. In his article, he claims that in order to overcome some social barriers in education these teachers had to generate materials and supplies, situate curriculum instruction and mobilize human resources that were available to them. He claimed that these teachers “mobilized every available resource for the benefit of individual students and racial progress.” In an article by Nancy Singer and her colleagues, teacher preparedness has been critiqued in how it relates to teacher turnover rates and school failure. Some student teachers found themselves with a feeling of discomfort when being in urban environments and these students are usually “white, middle-class females.” Marvin Lyn and some other researchers argued that before understanding urban education, society must first make sense of the social context in which schools operate.
They suggest that teachers do not have to act as agents of an oppressive system, but they can humanize students through their “culturally responsive and politically imbued” methods of teaching (8). They conclude that teachers must openly teach issues of race, culture, and gender.

As experts and their studies suggest, there are clearly many issues in schools that can be improved by teachers making changes. However, many of these issues could only be resolved completely if students have environments at home that do not contradict values and rules for conduct at school. It is also important, if school is a medium to help prepare students to be economically contributing citizens, to consider the hegemonic, dominant cultures that exist in society and the necessary capital needed to produce active and useful citizens.

There are suggestions for closing schools and changing the dynamics of teacher roles in urban environments. Experts suggest that urban schools change the manner in which teachers and schools get through standards-based curriculum, but these schools will fail to keep high expectations that promote urban student behavior that leads to success in high end jobs and schools. If urban students aren’t socialized in the same manner as their hegemonic counterparts in school systems, then students are not only receiving different types of standards-based curriculum, they are also receiving different forms of hidden-curriculum, which impacts their future.

Min Zhou, a professor of sociology at UCLA, examines urban education from the lens of culturally diverse children. She asked three questions about immigration population, challenges of families, and community roles (9). Zhou’s findings suggest that children living in the inner city are able to do well, despite some of the harsh conditions, similar to Kelly’s research that suggests Jim Crow teachers can help students thrive in harsh environments. However, Zhou also claims that the key difference in American middle class and inner city youth is an availability and accessibility of community-based resources (9). The availability and accessibility of resources to
all members of society can only be provided if communities are truly integrated. *Plessey v.*

*Fergusson* proved that systems of education (or any institution for that matter) that are both separate and equal, no matter if it is segregation based on race and/or class, cannot exist.

Erikson’s article talks about the use of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation as it applies to education (5). These two types of segregation have greatly impacted one another. Especially in Richmond, *de facto* segregation continues to exist due to the policymakers and lawmakers who have historically supported *de jure* segregation.

**Method**

Authors Dr. John Moeser and Christopher Silver in *Race, Social Stratification and Politic: the case of Atlanta, Memphis and Richmond* (10) and Robert Pratt in *A Promise Unfulfilled: School Desegregation in Richmond, Virginia, 1956-1986* (11) provide information on the educational system in Richmond during the Civil Rights Era through the 1980s. The current conditions of specific schools, as well as the condition of school divisions as a whole came from school reports from the VDOE and demographic information from *City-Data* and *PublicSchoolsReview* websites (16, 17). The data from both Richmond Public Schools and Henrico County Public Schools was collected, organized, and analyzed in the form of a bar graph.

The living patterns of different demographics have been impacted by historical policies, and the effects of these policies are apparent today by looking at different sections of the city. Richmond can be divided by looking at geographical features, such as the James River which divides Richmond into its northern and southern parts.

*Figure 2: Map of Richmond (I-95 and I-64)*

However, the researcher divided Richmond’s schools by their locations in relation to two highways: I-95 which travels north and southbound and I-64 (which travels east and
westbound). Schools east of I-95 are in the eastern end of the city while schools west of I-95 are located in the western end. Both highways almost split the city in four even sections. Figure 2 is a map, taken from MapQuest, of the City of Richmond with both highways present. Similar to the data collected from the two school divisions, the data for specific schools in the eastern end of Henrico County was organized and compared to that of the western end of Henrico. In the organization of the data, schools are strategically ordered from west to east in order to analyze the dynamics of the schools as they relate to their location.

When comparing the quality of education in the eastern and western ends of Henrico, high schools were chosen, instead of elementary and middle schools, in order to determine educational quality through graduation rates. The two most western high schools are Mills E. Godwin High School and Deep Run High School. The two most eastern schools are Highland Springs High School and Varina High School. The graduation rates of these four public high schools were then compared. Among graduation rates, the researcher also took into account Advanced Placement (college-credited) course enrollment when conceptualizing an effective and quality education. These are the factors that were considered in order to determine which location provides more effective and higher quality schools.

Findings/Results

After comparing all of the schools and school districts, it is evident that there is a strong correlation between race, location and quality education, and this is a result of suburbanization as well as white flight during and after the Civil Rights Era; hence, this is why the research presented only considered Black and white student populations. This is also partially due to the amount of information available as well on race in RPS schools.

*Figure 3. City of Richmond’s High School Senior class of 2007 Racial Composition*
When white families moved from the city to suburban areas in order to avoid integration, they took their economic capital with them. There was a reduction of resources and economic capital in the inner City of Richmond and its eastern end. These white families went to areas like Chesterfield and present day Short Pump in the western end of Henrico. Figure 3 and Figure 4, above, show the racial dynamic of the senior class of high schools in 2007 around the city of Richmond and the county of Henrico (14). These schools, as mentioned above, are positioned
from west to east. Above, in Figure 3, high schools in the city of Richmond are shown to have a lower black student population as schools move closer to the west end (left of the graph). Figure 3 also shows that the percentage of students with free or reduced lunch is lower in the west as well. If this information is applied to students with reduced lunch prices to represent low social class, there is an evident link between race and class in these Richmond public high schools, suggesting that the amount of resources that come from families to schools that are predominantly black (or the schools that have the fewest white students) are low. Not only is race and class connected, but the impact that schools have on academic performance is greater the further west they are.

With the City of Richmond schools shown in Figure 3, a small correlation between the distance west (to the left end of the bar graph) and east (to the right) of I-64 and the racial makeup of the schools is evident, but this correlation is not as stark as the correlation with public high schools in Henrico County as seen in Figure 4. In Figure 4, high schools in Henrico County were also organized in order from west to east (looking at a Google map) in the form a bar graph that also takes race into consideration. It is very clear to see that moving from western (left) to eastern (right) Henrico, there is a higher percentage of black students in the schools and a lower percentage of white students. However, Varina High School is an outlier. This may be due to the large amount of farm land mostly owned by white families. This is further understood by the researcher’s experience of living in that school district for the past six years. Schools in communities that have a closer black-white ratio also attract other minority races.
The VDOE states on all school/division reports that the “percentage of students enrolled in advanced programs is a key indicator of school quality at the secondary level,” so the researcher compared the percentage of students in Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high schools in the western end to the schools in the eastern end of Henrico. Only the data from four high schools in Henrico County were examined: the two most western and the two most eastern schools, which represent both ends of the county as divided by highway, I-95. In Figure 5, Deep Run and Godwin, the two most western high schools in Henrico County, have a much higher enrollment in AP classes; this of course correlates with the percent of students who actually take the test. In the City of Richmond, a significantly lower amount of students were enrolled in AP courses, but there were no records of any of these students who actually took the test. This could be due to the lack of social capital (i.e. shared knowledge) that exists about the options. After organizing the information into this bar graph, there is a striking similarity between the shapes of the racial demographics from Figure 4 and the AP Enrollment statistics from Figure 5. With Varina as an outlier both graphs, the percentage of white students in schools organized from left to right looks very similar to the percentage of students enrolled in AP classes.
Students in the West End of Henrico are being pushed more toward an Advanced Diploma compared to the East End. This is shown in Figure 6. If one considers the idea of a meritocracy as true, the students are once again for not aspiring to higher goals. However, with the strong correlations between location, race (in Figures 3 and 4), and academic performance (in Figures 5 and 6), it is evident that all of these factors that make up a quality education are interrelated. If the students from Chandler Middle School and their families are blamed for not choosing a better school, these factors that have clearly played a role in the school’s history are not being taken into account.

**Conclusion**

There is a consistent cycle of inequity that exists in the educational systems of Henrico County and the City of Richmond. The schools located further east in Henrico County have a lower access to quality education. The amount of Advanced Diplomas received and the enrollment in AP courses are all higher in the west end of Henrico County Public High Schools. This is simply updated evidence of the achievement gap that exists caused by the segregation that stems from white flight. Just like what happened to schools during the time of *massive resistance* in Virginia, where “black schools had been built in black neighborhoods” (11), schools
in Richmond are still clearly segregated by race. Pratt stated that, “school officials therefore assured parents that very little integration would occur as long as students were assigned to the schools in their own neighborhoods.” The promise had been kept up until today.

It is important to provide resolutions to failing public schools like Chandler Middle School. However, if changes continue to be made as reactions to problems, these same problems will not be prevented from reoccurring. Changes must be made institutionally. In order for students to receive positive outcomes from the provided education, communities and home neighborhoods need to be desegregated so that capital, in its many different forms, can be dispersed evenly. Unfortunately, in Henrico and the City of Richmond, this is currently not the case. Residents Henrico and Richmond may not be able to be forced to live in integrated communities right now, but there can be changes in educational policy made to further integrate schools.

As mentioned before, true integration of schools, in terms of social class, is not in existence in Henrico nor Richmond, but if it becomes a reality, quality education for all students will be achieved for students, thus reducing the size of achievement gaps that exist racially. Social, economic and racial integration in communities will provide better access to resources and quality education for all moving towards a more competitive, better society.
Sources

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12. Pratt, Robert A. “The Color of their Skin”
14. Ryan, James E. Five miles away, a World Apart