Socioeconomic School Integration: Schools for Social Justice

Herbert Kliebard uses the term “social meliorists” to describe thinkers such as John Dewey and Boyd Henry Bode who believe that “the power to change things for the better…lay in the power of the schools to create a new social vision” (Kliebard 2004, 25). “For both Dewey and Bode, the road to social progress [is] closely tied to the ability of the schools to teach independent thinking and to the ability of students to analyze and to address social problems” (Kliebard 2004, 166). Schools are responsible for producing generations of democratic citizens, peacemakers, and justice seekers. With a social melioristic understanding of the relationship between schools and society, education reform must pursue socioeconomic integration to increase society’s understanding of power, privilege, and systems of oppression and better prepare students for citizenship in public democracy.

Trends in Higher Education

The value of socioeconomic integration has been realized and prioritized in higher education over the past decade. At the University of Richmond, one of the components of President Edward Ayers’ Richmond Promise is “a defining spirit of opportunity and welcome to excellent students, faculty, and staff of all means and backgrounds, sustained through a bold program of financial aid, a dedication to fairness in all that we do, and an authentic culture of inclusivity that seeks and prizes diversity of experience, belief, and thought to increase access and affordability” (Ayers 2009). Dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard University William R. Fitzsimmons confirms the trend, “‘I honestly cannot think of any admissions person I know who is not looking—as sort of a major criteria of how well their year went—at how well they did in attracting people of different economic backgrounds’” (Schmidt 2010). Scholars of working-class studies attribute this widespread commitment to socioeconomic diversity in higher
education to “shifts in the political landscape, changes in the higher-education work force, the growing popularity of working-class studies as an academic field, and rising concerns about college access and the dominance of students from privileged backgrounds at selective colleges” (Schmidt 2010). Ayers and Nicole Farmer Hurd (2005) explain that “excellence” and “selectivity” is often understood to mean “exclusivity” in higher education. They challenge flagship universities to demonstrate that “public” and “excellent” need not be mutually exclusive, by reaching out to local youth and valuing socioeconomic and geographic diversity on their campuses.

Kliebard notes that as early as the Committee of Ten in 1892, American K-12 education has evolved from the trends and demands of higher education. This trickle-down effect must occur with socioeconomic integration as well.

**Effects of Social Composition on Student Achievement**

In 1972, Nixon addressed the education gap by demanding “that the schools in central cities are upgraded so that the children who go there will have just as good a chance to get a quality education as do the children who go to school in the suburbs” – a mentality that James Ryan reiterates as “save the cities, spare the suburbs” (Ryan 2010, 5). The history of education reform exposes the difficulty in making high-poverty schools work well. Contemporary reform efforts including school finance reform (particularly to increase funding to urban schools), school choice (primarily allowing students to flee failing schools), and accountability through standardized testing (largely to track low-income, low-performing schools) have done little to give children in low-income schools “just as good a chance to get a quality education.”

Rather than physical resources and funding, school reform must rethink the social environment. Provoking a body of research on socioeconomic integration, James Coleman’s
1966 Coleman Report found that the social composition of the student body is the most important factor affecting students’ academic achievement, for both African American and White students in the U.S. (Coleman 1966, 18). Schoolmates create their own social context independent of any individual’s own background, which has a strong influence on individual achievement (Caldas 1997). Peers shape aspirations, define expectations, and thereby affect achievement, for better or worse.

The oppositional culture theory suggests “children in high-poverty, high-minority schools face tremendous peer pressure to avoid the stigma of ‘acting white’ that attends academic success” (Ryan 2010, 166). This opposition might reflect a cultural disconnect between students’ schools and social worlds. Nonetheless, predominately low-income, minority schools struggle to communicate the value and relevance of education. They tend to perpetuate “pedagogy of low expectations” (Kincheloe 2006, 25), and thus become a self-fulfilling prophecy of low achievement. By maintaining a majority culture that prizes and prioritizes education, integrated schools could redress opposition and better engage all students in education.

Richard Kahlenberg advocates, “Virtually everything that educators talk about as being desirable in a school – high standards, good teachers, active parents, adequate resources, a safe and orderly environment, and a stable student and teacher population – are found in middle class schools but not in low-income schools” (Kahlenberg 2007, 1549). In middle class schools, Harry Brighouse explains, “children are resources for each other, affecting each other’s aspirations [particularly regarding colleges and careers] and learning habits” (Brighouse 2007, 581). Middle-income parents often “raise funds through parent associates and private donations… Wealthy parents are also more likely to vote, organize, and lobby for more public spending” (Brighouse 2007, 581). Moreover, middle-income parents can be valuable resources for other people’s
children. “Less privileged students would get to know parents who might help them get a job or gain admission to college or simply serve as role models” (Grant 2009, 106). Furthermore, high quality teachers tend to gravitate toward middle-class schools, with ready-to-learn students, involved parents, and more lucrative funding. Middle class schools are often abundant in social capital and peer, parent, and teacher resources. These opportunities must be extended to all students.

In his speech at the twelfth annual meeting of the Progressive Education Association in 1932, George Counts “berated his audience for ‘at heart feeling themselves members of a superior breed [who] do not want their children to mix too freely with the children of the poor or of the less fortunate races’ (pp. 258-259)” (Kliebard 2004, 163). Counts pinpointed a key challenge for socioeconomic integration of American schools that remains relevant today – upper class parents are not likely to welcome low-income students into their schools, and even less inclined to send their children to low-income schools. These affluent families (who also tend to be politically powerful in our current system) may worry that low-income students will drag their school down, drain resources and demand much of teachers’ attention. However, “there is no evidence that [middle class students] are being harmed academically by economic mixing” (Kahlenberg 2007, 1554). Moreover, amidst this fear we must reflect on the aims of schooling. Academic achievement is not the sole important outcome of public education. More than math and reading skills, American schools are responsible for inspiring compassion for humanity and an understanding of democracy and one’s role in it.

Integration for Schools and Society

Education was established as a positive right in America to afford equal opportunity and defend against a class-based society that the Founders immigrated to avoid. Benjamin Rush
articulated, “Where learning is confined to a few people, we always find monarchy, aristocracy, and slavery” (Rush 1786, 3). Ryan asserts, “Separating the poor and politically powerless in their own schools and districts is antithetical to the idea of equal educational opportunity” (Ryan 2010, 304). Segregated schools promote isolation of classes and their interests. Dewey explains the danger of a society in which “one group has interests ‘of its own’ which shut it out from full interaction with other groups, so that its prevailing purpose is the protection of what it has got, instead of reorganization and progress through wider relationships” (Dewey 1916, 85-86). Isolation perpetuates ignorant class stigmas and fragmented communities.

Ralph Ellison comments on his own childhood, “Through access to [a white boy’s] family…you learned more about whites and thus about yourself. With him you could make comparisons that were not so distorted by the racial myths which obstructed your thrust toward self-perception” (Ellison 1989, 826). Students who grow up in segregated, homogenous environments will inevitably develop distorted worldviews and perpetuate stereotypes (Delpit 2006, xiv). Interacting with difference allows youth to experience and appreciate diversity. “Real integration of different kinds of people ‘means that I now start to understand who you are and what you are about’” (Grant 2009, 101). Lisa Delpit advocates that the answers to education’s ills lie in this “understanding of who we are and how we are connected and disconnected from one another” (Delpit 2006, xv), which is critical for a democracy that Dewey defines as “a mode of associated living.”

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living [italics mine], of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey 1916, 87)
Socioeconomically integrated schools allow students to understand their lives and interests in the context of others in their democracy.

In the fight for racial integration in *Milliken v. Bradley*, Justice Thurgood Marshall espoused, “‘unless our children begin to learn together, there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together’” (Pratt 1992, 98), suggesting that an integrated society will only come alive through an integrated education system. “Cross-class contact during school might facilitate a sense of connection between the advantaged and disadvantaged, and thus a more cohesive social fabric” (Brighouse 2007, 179). To achieve the American ideals of equal opportunity, social mobility, and justice, schools must not participate in marginalization and oppression. Socioeconomically integrated schools will raise students with a societal framework devoid of class-based distinctions, thereby preparing them to pursue a more progressive and just society.

By exposing uneven distributions of power and privilege in society, socioeconomic integration very well might, and *should*, evoke the discomfort and tension that is the result of systems of oppression. Privilege can be defined as unearned power in society, granted by one’s race, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth. “Power plays a critical role in our society and in our educational system. The worldviews of those with privileged positions are taken as the only reality” (Delpit 2006, xv). A society in which reality is determined by the privileged few surely cannot be a true democracy.

The tension produced by socioeconomic integration can elicit critical analysis of power and privilege in our social world, and cultivate a productive empathy. Empathy can prompt privileged members of society to let go of privilege and encourage all members to redefine their interests in the context of the public good. In a democracy, “Public participation arises out of an ethic of care and responsibility, not only for oneself as an isolated individual, but for one’s
fellow citizens as co-builders and co-beneficiaries of the public good” (Sehr 1997, 5). Empathy cultivated by socioeconomic integration better prepares students for public democracy.

Michelle Fine criticizes, “Low-income schools officially contain rather than explore social and economic contradictions, condone rather than critique prevailing social and economic inequities, and usher children and adolescents into ideologies and ways of interpreting social evidence that legitimate rather than challenge conditions of inequity” (Fine 1991, 61). American schools tend to silence student voice and suppress social criticism. In doing so, they fail to prepare students for their most fundamental right, rather their civic duty, to actively participate in democracy. “Critically analyzing the social world is a crucial skill for public citizenship. Helping young people develop this skill, and the habit of employing it, is an essential charge of schools for public democracy” (Sehr 1997, 97). By confronting disparities, encouraging critical analyses of systems of oppression, and teaching students to thrive amidst diversity, socioeconomically integrated schools are schools for public democracy.

**Wake County Socioeconomic School Integration**

Socioeconomic status has been used as a factor in student assignment in approximately 40 U.S. school districts, serving some 2.5 million students (Kahlenberg 2007, 1545). Wake County, North Carolina became “the first metropolitan school district to move away from racial balance to economic balance as the measure of a school’s diversity” (Grant 2009, 105). Wake County merged Raleigh city and county schools in 1976, turned a third of its schools into magnet schools, gave parents a choice, and capped concentrations of poverty in each school at forty percent (Grant 2009, 94).

The county implemented brief but frequent tests to measure student progress, extensively trained teachers and administrators to learn how to analyze data more quickly and speed up
change, and trained principals to use testing data to reallocate resources within schools most effectively. Although we should be suspicious of test score data and purely quantitative measures of success, researchers praise Wake County’s marked improvement on standardized test scores and decreased racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps. More than 91 percent of all Wake County students in grades 3-8 passed the North Carolina math and reading tests in 2003. The test score gap between black and white students shrank from 37 points to 17, and similarly, the gap between Hispanic and white students shrank from 28 points to 11. Furthermore the passing rate for poor children increased from 55 to 80 percent. (Grant 2009, 104)

It must be acknowledged, “In 2009, a new conservative majority was elected to the Wake school board, [and] it voted to dismantle the integration plan” (Winerip 2011). Last October, the board “approved a new student assignment model…driven by parental choice…among schools close to their home address” (Wake County Public School System 2011). The current school board may not reflect the people of Wake County; only 11 percent of registered voters cast ballots in the October 2009 election that brought these members onto the board (Wake County Board of Elections 2011). Moreover, the school board’s 2010 survey found that “approximately 95% of the nearly 41,000 respondents were satisfied with their child’s school for which they were assigned” (AdvancED 2011, 12). Wake County demonstrates that while socioeconomic integration can be very successful in increasing academic achievement, it is controversial and challenging legislation to pass and maintain. Nonetheless, social ideals must be paramount to political viability in the consideration of education reform.

**History of Segregation in Richmond**

School desegregation initiated by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 was met with massive resistance in Richmond. “The Richmond *Times-Dispatch* reported that ‘officials of some
states already are on record as saying they will close the schools rather than permit them to be
operated with Negro and white pupils in the same classrooms.’ Not a single Virginia politician
supported Brown” (Pratt 1992, 2), citing Section 140 of the Virginia constitution which “stated
that ‘white and colored children shall not be taught in the same school’” (Pratt 1992, 4).

Residential segregation was spurred by the ‘white flight’ of the 1950s and 1960s, in
which white families fled to suburban neighborhoods to avoid integration. Meanwhile, black
families could not move into ‘white neighborhoods.’ “Real estate brokers would not show black
families houses in white neighborhoods… Bankers refused to lend money to a black family that
was considering buying a home in a white residential area. The Federal Housing Administration
would not insure home loans in those areas that were not racially homogeneous” (Pratt 1992, 14). Before 1964, public housing projects “were established specifically for either black or white
occupancy…[which] resulted in ‘a total isolation and segregation of the Negro’” (Pratt 1992, 43). While Brown demanded de jure desegregation, distinct residential segregation continues to
produce de facto school segregation. Arbitrary, invisible lines divide Richmond City from
surrounding suburban counties, separating schools by neighborhood, and thus by race and class.

**Socioeconomic School Integration for Richmond**

Judge Merhige proposed the merger of Richmond City with Henrico and Chesterfield
county school districts in 1972, similar to the consolidated Wake County school district. Merhige
faced opposition from Virginia’s attorney general office, school boards, and parent-teacher
associations, among others. The Chesterfield School Board labeled the merger “‘detrimental to
the welfare’ of schoolchildren in all three areas” (Pratt 1992, 67). In 1973, Richmond became the
first city where the issue of metropolitan school consolidation was debated before the United
States Supreme Court (Pratt 1992, xii). A divided Court left the issue unresolved. Ultimately “the
Virginia State Board of Education and Henrico and Chesterfield counties appealed Merhige’s decision to the Fourth Circuit Court” (Pratt 1992, 70). The defendants argued that Merhige’s consolidation order was without legal precedent; a white majority in the classroom was not necessary for black children to excel academically; and there was no substantial differences between the three schools systems other than the number of black students enrolled in each (Pratt 1992, 70-71).

If this merger were order today, the result would be much different. Wake County is just one successful precedent for the merger of city and suburban school districts among many. While a white majority certainly is not necessary for black student achievement, the 1966 Coleman Report and subsequent studies support the academic (not to mention social) benefits of a diversified student body. In *Five Miles Away, A World Apart*, Ryan illuminates substantial differences between the school systems through case studies of Richmond City’s Thomas Jefferson High School and Henrico County’s Freeman High School. Freeman is 75 percent middle-class; students typically perform better than the state average on standardized tests (Ryan 2010, 1). Students attending Thomas Jefferson, on the other hand, are mostly poor and predominantly black; roughly 90 percent of the students score at the ‘proficient’ level on the basic state tests, which is still below the state average for high schools (Ryan 2010, 2). Ryan identified very different approaches to curriculum in the two schools: state standardized tests set the bar for Thomas Jefferson and teachers clearly taught to these standards; whereas at Freeman, state tests were the minimum standard and treated as an aside to their more comprehensive curriculum.

Judge Merhige’s failed merger was a missed opportunity for Richmond, an opportunity that must now be seized. As of school year 2010-2011, Richmond Public Schools serve more
than 23,000 students, more than 75 percent receiving free/reduced lunches (“About RPS” 2011); Henrico has more than 48,000 pupils, 35 percent with “economic deprivation” (“Just the Facts” 2011); Chesterfield has more than 58,000 pupils, 30 percent receiving free/reduced lunches (“Fast Facts” 2012). A merger of the three districts would produce one consolidated district with 129,000 pupils, 40 percent of which qualify for free/reduced-price lunches. This consolidated district would be conducive to a socioeconomic integration plan much like Wake County’s, in which each school would not exceed a 40 percent cap on low-income students (measured by student enrollment in the free/reduced-price lunch program).

It is undeniably challenging to rally political momentum for progressive reform efforts such as socioeconomic integration. Courts are often not willing and/or able to fundamentally change or enforce “positive rights,” like education. However, “demographics and changes in attitudes about the most desirable places to live and about diversity [demonstrate that] this generation has embraced diversity as none has before it” (Ryan 2010, 274-275). Ryan acknowledges that both Freeman and Thomas Jefferson High School “are slowly becoming more racially and socioeconomically diverse… there is a nascent movement in the Richmond metropolitan area, led by business and religious leaders to consider ways to integrate suburban and urban schools along socioeconomic lines” (Ryan 2010, 3). He suggests that jurisdictions take advantage of these trends by ensuring a diverse supply of housing options, because “housing policy is school policy” (Ryan 2010, 286).

Ryan also recommends a more explicit trickle-down effect from higher education to K-12 schooling. Colleges and universities should “announce that students who attend diverse schools, whether measured by race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, will be given a boost in the admissions process” (Ryan 2010 298). If colleges and universities demand diverse schools,
Americans might be more likely to realize the benefit of their participation in socioeconomically integrated schools.

Historically media played a large role in advancing an anti-integration, resistance movement in Richmond. “The management of both the News Leader and the Times-Dispatch used their editorial pages to create an atmosphere of mass hysteria and defiance by fanning the flames of emotionalism and racial bigotry… The newspapers contributed significantly to the constant erosion of support for the city’s schools among the white middle class” (Pratt 1992, 101). The media frames issues and inevitably shapes public perception. Support from local media outlets is critical to the advancement of the idea and the success of a socioeconomic integration plan.

Conclusion

There is not one simple answer to education reform, and there are certainly many questions. A critical rethinking of American education challenges our fundamental assumptions about society, democracy, and citizenship. Socioeconomic school integration alone will not solve educational and social inequalities. Nonetheless, it is a positive step toward a more just American education system and society. As microcosms of their communities, schools reflect their larger social world and set the pace for social progress. Integration will disrupt class isolation, allow Americans to better understand each other and their society, and promote more cohesive communities. Socioeconomically integrated schools will inspire compassionate empathy, uncover the dynamics of power and privilege in society, and prepare students for citizenship in a public democracy.

*I pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in the completion of this work.*
Bibliography


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