

A Historical Overview of the Challenges for African Americans K12 through College Education in America

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Abstract: The early American education system developed around the segregation of White and African American students. These differences in learning environment have led to inferior education for African Americans and can be linked to challenges still facing minorities in the current American education system.

In America's early education system, African American students had many difficulties in integrating, assimilating, and successfully matriculating in the classroom. There has been a long progression in the way that African Americans have been viewed, first as private property, then as "less than" citizens, and later as citizens with a subset of inferior rights in segregated environments (*Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 1856). Segregation was an immediate, major obstacle that African American students faced when they entered the early schoolhouses. The purpose of separating African American and White students was justified by some because it provided safety for African American students and also offered an easier learning environment (Coats, 2010). However, having the two learning environments actually fueled the creation of a superior and inferior education platform where White students received educational resources and teaching that was much better than that provided to the African American students.

Though segregation was eventually done away with, schools had to face the inequalities in the curricula concerning the teaching and learning formats for the African American and White students. With the focus of early curricula primarily centered on one perspective of history, educators were tasked with incorporating more diversity into the curricula and education pedagogy in the classroom. As many ethnic groups and multicultural demographics in urban areas increased, the above-mentioned challenges needed closer attention.

In this paper, an investigation into some of the historical challenges faced by African American students in the American education system will be discussed. Other peer reviewed papers will be sourced to examine some of the measures used to integrate African American students into the American education system. There will also be a look into how African American students have been admitted into the higher education system. The topic of affirmative action will be investigated in relationship to equality for admission of African American students. Finally, some modern day challenges will be highlighted with regards to diversity and the current need for a multicultural approach to education.

Early Education for African American Children

African American students did not receive an organized and formal means of public education until after the Civil War (Coats, 2010). One of the earliest main sources made available for African Americans to receive training and education is the Freedman's Bureau, which provided basic training for ex-slaves during the Reconstruction period. However, the training received was mostly catered toward adults in getting employment and the establishment of a Black and White work structure (Carson, Lapsansky, Werner, & Nash, 2010). Though it served an important purpose, this organization did not provide for the education needs of the African American children. As other social and education programs were created, African

Americans began taking advantage of the free public schooling that was made available. But in the South where more than 90% of African Americans lived, most of the schools created were initially segregated (Coats, 2010). There were some, both Black and White, who believed that this arrangement was effective and that it would allow the curricula to support the education needs of each group directly (Lewis, 2009; Washington, 1995). For example, one of the biggest debates of the time was between W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, which centered on the issue of segregation and its place in the Black and White society that had begun to exist (Lewis, 2009; Washington, 1995). However, segregation would eventually be dismantled, and the next challenge of integration would be confronted by America's education system.

Another one of the major problems faced early on by the segregated education system was the imbalances in resources and funding for each environment. There was underlying disagreement with the support of formal education for African American children, and whether there should be equal support for the education of Black children as White children. Another perspective of the strong sentiment against equality in education was that as more and more rights and privileges were extended to African Americans, this could erode the current social fabric, especially in the South (Diorio, 2008). With this attitude, funding and support were held back for educating Black students in an effort to prevent advanced development of the race beyond a certain social level and make sure that African Americans would remain behind in skills needed for them to advance far beyond their White counterparts (Diorio, 2008). Efforts are still ongoing to create equal and fair education systems for African American students despite the obstacles that existed (Lewis, 2009; Virginia Historical Society, 2004).

Integration of African American Students into Schools

When the effectiveness and necessity of segregation began to be questioned, legal proceedings began to arise that challenged its support and its legitimacy within the society. The verdict from *Brown vs. the Board of Education U.S. Supreme Court* case offered no federal support for maintaining segregated education environments (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1954; History of Brown v. Board of Education, n.d.*). At this point, civil rights organizations such as the NAACP looked for methods to challenge the segregated school systems in the South. One of the first such attempts was through the legal case of Ruby Bridges-Hall, which would help lay precedence for support of desegregation in African American communities (Bridges-Hall, 2000). Ruby Bridges-Hall was the first African American student to integrate into an elementary school in the South. Her experience would later open future opportunities for African American students and she later reflected in her experience as follows:

Though I did not know it then, nor would I come to realize it for many years, what transpired in the fall of 1960 in New Orleans would forever change my life and help shape a nation. When I think back on that time and all that has occurred since. I realize a lot has changed. I also know there is much more to be done. That fateful walk to school began a journey, and we all must work together to continue moving forward. (Bridges, 2013, para. 1)

Ruby Bridges' struggle helped inspire others to challenge the "separate but equal" attitude that had proliferated in the South (*History of Brown v. Board of Education, n.d.; Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896*). Another remarkable integration that happened in the South took place in Little Rock, AR, where in 1957, nine African American students were the first to enter the all White high school. Federal support was shown for the integration, with the President sending National Guard troops to the school to provide the safe entry of the students into the school despite the disapproval of the state and local government leaders. The other integration that set

precedence for de-segregation was the entrance of Vivian Malone and James Hood into the University of Alabama, despite the strong objection and resistance from state leadership (Dunn, 2008; Smith, 2000). However, these de-segregation actions helped back that legal ruling made in the court decision for *Brown v. Board of Education* from the primary school level all the way to the post-secondary education level. They also helped to unite the efforts to disassemble segregation.

Encouraging African American families to challenge the segregated school environments around them was a dangerous undertaking and proved harmful to those who advocated for this type of change in the South. Nevertheless, after the school environments were desegregated, the challenge of learning and successful matriculation of African American students moved to the forefront. African American students entering these environments found out that there were many challenges in thriving in the new classroom environments, where they were the minority. Cultural values and multicultural teaching experience should have been considered along with integration of African American students into the existing White education environment (Kelly, 2010). The entrance of African American students into this education environment not only presented challenges for African American students, but also presented challenges for their White teachers, who had very little or no experience with non-White students at the time. Such experiences in teaching students from diverse backgrounds can directly affect the pedagogical approaches that teachers take in their delivery of curriculum (Coats, 2010; Grant, 1991). This challenge of multicultural education to support the diversity needs of the classroom environment of the time presented past and current obstacles.

Other Challenges for African American Students and America's Early Education System

African American students had many challenges that were not easily discoverable early on in their entrance into predominately-White schools. Many challenges existed in and out of the classroom and support for education in the homes of many African American children was a struggle. Many of the early African American beliefs about the value of education were influenced by the current plight of the majority of African American families. Most African Americans in the South supported themselves with work skills that they had learned before Emancipation. In addition, many years after slavery had ended, the importance of a formal education was not realized as offering much opportunity beyond what was seen as socially acceptable for African Americans to do at the time. The new educational opportunity for some was not seen as any advantage to helping the situation of African Americans. The legally backed Jim Crow system of the Southern states had legal and policy components that helped create setbacks for African Americans and presented challenges in convincing African Americans of the need for education (Kelly, 2010).

Equal Opportunity in Higher Education for African Americans

After the successful attempts to open admission of African Americans into public higher education institutions, African Americans began to enter these institutions at increased rates, but more work was needed to support equality in the enrollment practices of higher education institutions. The establishment of the Committee on Equal Opportunity Employment by President John F. Kennedy made it illegal to discriminate based on race (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1961). Executive Order 10925 provided the foundation for the balancing of admission practices of post-secondary institutions and helped to create what has become known as affirmative action.

Current Challenges for Diversity and the Need for Affirmative Action

There have been challenges of affirmative action and whether it still has a place in

education (American Civil Liberties Union, 2010). One of the most recent challenges to the need for affirmative action was in the case of *Grutter v. Bollinger*, which challenged the use of race for admission into the University of Michigan's School of Law (*Grutter v. Bollinger* 2003). The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the use of affirmative action in this case to help insure diversity. However, future challenges to this ruling, for example in *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, has called into question whether certain scenarios exist where a school's affirmative action policies are detrimental to the balance in the admission practices of a school (*Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, 2013). Despite challenges to its necessity, there is still a strong belief that such policies like affirmative action are essential to make sure balances remain in place and that these policies can support improvements in the lower minority enrollment rates at higher education institutions.

Conclusion

The laws and policies that have been created to address discrimination and equal rights in society have provided a level playing field for African Americans in education. However, more work is needed to help support the multicultural education needs of America's education system, not just for African Americans any longer, but for other cultures and ethnic groups that have become large in number. Many of the policies that have been created have opened opportunities for African American students to be able to have access to better education and have made school more accessible. One misconception about policies such as affirmative action is that these policies only help African Americans and other minorities. These policies actually help make sure diversity and multicultural perspectives are integrated into our social structure as a country. The impact of such policies may not be seen for some time, but in the long term, it will help intertwine the multicultural point of view into future populations and help support future growth. The struggles to include multicultural principles in America's education system still exist, but there are many challenges also with the inclusion of many other ethnic groups into the curricula and pedagogical focus of America's schools.

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