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Separate But (Un)Equal: A Review of Resegregation as Curriculum: The Meaning of the New Racial Segregation in U.S. Public Schools

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Abstract

Resegregation as Curriculum: The Meaning of the New Racial Segregation in U.S. Public Schools (2016) by Rosiek and Kinslow exposes the reality of systemic racial resegregation occurring in U.S. public schools. The authors center the stories of students, educators, and community members affected by the resegregation in a powerful narrative that blends critical race theory and agential realism as theoretical frameworks. This book review offers a review of the authors' findings, commentary on their methodology, and recommended audiences.

Keywords

Book Review, Critical Race Theory, Agential Realism, Hidden Curriculum, Racial Justice, Resegregation

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Separate But (Un)Equal: A Review of *Resegregation as Curriculum: The Meaning of the New Racial Segregation in U.S. Public Schools*

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Resegregation as Curriculum: The Meaning of the New Racial Segregation in U.S. Public Schools (2016) by Rosiek and Kinslow exposes the reality of systemic racial resegregation occurring in U.S. public schools. The authors center the stories of students, educators, and community members affected by the resegregation in a powerful narrative that blends critical race theory and agential realism as theoretical frameworks. This book review offers a review of the authors' findings, commentary on their methodology, and recommended audiences. Keywords: Book Review, Critical Race Theory, Agential Realism, Hidden Curriculum, Racial Justice, Resegregation

“Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children... We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). Chief Justice Earl Warren’s decision in the 1954 *Brown* versus Board of Education historic case buttressed the Civil Rights movement by declaring that separate school facilities were, in fact, not equal. The decision called for public school systems to racially desegregate “with all deliberate speed” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). Despite the Supreme Court’s decree, many school systems, especially those in the South, were slow to implement the call to action. School boards used circuitous policies and manipulatively racist strategies to preserve segregation and its harmful effects. In their book *Resegregation as Curriculum: The Meaning of the New Racial Segregation in U.S. Public Schools*, Jerry Rosiek and Kathy Kinslow provide a glimpse into the reality of racial resegregation as it occurred in Riverton Public Schools in the last decade. The authors offer the stories of students, educators, and community members affected by the resegregation in a powerful narrative that blends critical race theory and agential realism as theoretical frameworks. The reader experiences an empathetic response to Rosiek and Kinslow’s account, a painful understanding of the complex rhetorical strategies used to rationalize the resegregation, and an empowering call to action to identify and reverse systemic racism occurring throughout our U.S. public school system.

Overview and Theoretical Framework

Rosiek and Kinslow examine the discursive effects of a school district resegregating its high schools. The authors explore the systemic racism at play in the school board's decision-making rationale, parent and community members' perceptions and concerns, and students' lived experiences. The authors aim to

tell the story of the resegregation of Riverton public schools largely from the perspective of the students attending the schools (1) to contribute to the considerable body of empirical research that demonstrates the resegregation of our schools is doing real harm, and (2) to affectively jar some of us out of our complacency about this policy dynamic that is happening all across the nation,

so that we might engage together in ameliorative resistance to this systemic social violence. (Rosiek & Kinslow, 2016, p. xv)

The authors accomplish their goals by using and legitimizing a brilliant blended theoretical framework of critical race theory informed by agential realism, as borrowed from new materialism (Barad, 2007). "Agential realism refers to the idea that it is neither adequate to think of our research being conducted on passive objects awaiting accurate representation, nor as if those objects are 'social constructions' whose boundaries are determined entirely by human activity" (Rosiek & Kinslow, 2016, p. xxv). Fittingly, the authors employ counter-storytelling, a hallmark of critical race theory, as a data collection and presentation method (Battacharya, 2017). The stories from students reveal Whiteness as a dictating force in the process of Riverton schools' resegregation, and vividly expose the hidden curriculum working to minimize and silence the experiences of Black students harmed in the process. "*Resegregation as Curriculum* is organized around this idea that there is power in listening to the experiences of others and in the telling of stories about experiences that are not easily assimilated into an existing hegemonic order" (Roseik & Kinslow, 2016, p. xviii).

Data Collection and Analysis

Over a ten-year period, Rosiek and Kinslow immersed themselves in the situation and experiences of students, educators, and parents within the Riverton school district. They collected individual interviews with over 200 students as well as teachers, administrators, and parents. In some cases, students came up to the authors to offer information via interview. Parents were often referred by teachers. In addition to interviews, the authors also collected observations and field notes and analyzed documents and social texts. In terms of analysis, the stories speak for themselves, which aligns with the aim to center the stories of minoritized or marginalized groups (critical race theory) and posit the agency and dynamics of experiences in the moment (agential realism). The students' stories have authority. While some readers may be discouraged by the lack of a more traditional data analysis process, Rosiek and Kinslow acknowledge the tension between the need for "specific epistemic foundations that can leverage calls for action" and not wanting to support "any particular version of those foundations for fear of getting caught in the trap of naturalized identities and overly narrow horizons of possibility" (2016, p. xix).

Findings

The authors thoroughly describe a number of findings from their ten-year study, and even more impressively, invite the reader to consider how the findings are interconnected. First, they describe the ways in which public dialogue about resegregating Riverton schools was negative and situated in a rhetoric of fear. Within this rhetoric, the manipulatively strategic "tipping point" argument was flawed, but sadly, effective for the school board to move forward with rezoning, ultimately resulting in resegregation. The most painfully powerful finding is that the experiences of the Black students at Union High (the all-Black high school) were completely ignored, and even worse, seen as a necessary effect of an initiative that would ultimately make things "better." In the conversational interviews, students acknowledged and articulated the racist disparities in their schools throughout the process; in other words, they were not passive recipients of the messaging. The authors recount that differences in high schools were both material (e.g., facilities, uniforms, textbooks etc.) and symbolic (e.g., course offerings, presence of the International Baccalaureate curriculum, and teacher placement preferences). Finally, conversations with Black students at Union High reveal that the messages

to students from adults did not convey a sense of hope that adults would be able to fix things; however, students remained resistant and resilient to the disparaging messages.

Reaction and Recommendations

Resegregation as Curriculum is powerful and emotionally evocative. It is not only an impressive example of combining theoretical frameworks (critical race theory and agential realism) but also a compelling account of how racism is alive and well in our public-school system. This should be required reading for anyone working or teaching in education and especially those at the administrative or board level. The authors challenge readers to have empathy but not pity, and truly feel the urgency of a call to action. They make the hidden curriculum as clear as day - the reader's reaction cannot be anything other than “*how could they not see?*”

I would have liked to see a discussion of Cross's theory of psychological nigrescence, also known as Black identity development (Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2001). It seems quite relevant to how students were making meaning of their experiences. Relatedly, also Helms's (1995) White Racial Identity developmental model would have been a nice supplement to the discussion of the rhetoric of fear. The quotes from students and educators were the most vibrant part of the book – the authors strike a nice balance overall between excerpts from transcripts and prose, but I would have liked to read more direct quotes and notes from field observations. Finally, chapter six provided an especially articulate summary of important takeaways, challenges to the reader, and a reminder of the blended theoretical framework – this was especially helpful in synthesizing the findings.

Final Thoughts

Rosiek and Kinslow's *Resegregation as Curriculum* left me with more questions than answers. I find myself wanting to know: where are the students now? What were the stories of the supporters of resegregation (in other words, how did they individually rationalize such an overtly racist maneuver)? More importantly, I find myself asking: how do we get this book into the hands of people who aren't educators? The stories of Riverton students are important for anyone in education, anyone who thinks we live in a post-racial society, and aspiring qualitative scholars interested in critical and/or emancipatory work or curious to see what new materialism looks like practice. Well done, Rosiek and Kinslow – your challenge to actively seek racial justice in our public-school system has been accepted.

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