

segregation, caste and cash: segrenomics in Detroit

Noliwe Rooks

Though in other countries caste is generally understood to name social stratification based on ethnic and/or religious affiliation, in the United States, racial and economic segregation in housing and education are the factors that trap one to the lower rungs of the social system in that nation. Significantly, these caste making levels of segregation are “cash making” for wealthy business concerns. In my earlier work, I have referred to this profit from segregation as, “segrenomics.” In this piece, I offer an example of the mechanics of these relationships relative to segregated schools, caste, and cash making in the city of Detroit, Michigan.

Keywords: caste, citizenship, democracy, segregation, segrenomics

Introduction

For a brief period in April of 2020, a federal appeals court in the United States declared that public school children in Detroit, Michigan had a constitutionally guaranteed and protected right to a level of education that prepared them to participate in the democratic process as citizen voters (Goldstein, 2020). The plaintiffs in the case, economically vulnerable Black and Latino school children, argued that their school system, the second most segregated in the entire nation, had failed them spectacularly. They said the educational result functioned to both create and consign them to the lower rungs of a caste, or hereditary status that socially stratifies societies because children of their race and social economic status overwhelmingly attended schools in a system that did little to educate them to climb the social or economic ladder. By extension, their undereducation impacted their ability to attend college, find robust employment options, and meaningfully participate in the electoral process.

While these arguments about segregation and how it harms are one side of an oft told story about inequality in the United States, this legal case also revealed a less often explored aspect of how caste is made in the United States, and how that system’s relationship to racial and economic segregation in housing and schools financially benefits businesses and corporate interests. As legal scholar Sheryll Cashin has noted in her monograph on segregation and its relationship to caste, a highly segregated neighborhood or, neighborhood “is a source of wealth extraction and exploitation that benefits American capitalists – from the prison industrial complex to Opportunity Zones that enable investors, through loopholes, to shelter 100 percent of capital gains in luxury properties rather than distressed hoods the program was marketed to help” (Cashin, 2021, p. 5).

What that all means is that all at the same time, segregation is both a key ingredient in caste making, and caste making levels of segregation are cash making for wealthy business concerns. I call this profit from segregation, “segrenomics,” the mechanics of which I believe account in large part for

why we in the United States struggle mightily to dismantle segregation. Nowhere is this process clearer than when looking at segregated education where underfunded schools are a key institutional site of caste making. Here, I want to explore those connections in one city in the United States, Detroit, Michigan.

How Segregation Hurts

Returning to the lawsuit filed by schoolchildren in Detroit, filings in that case showed how segregation educationally hurts the predominantly Black, Latino and economically vulnerable children impacted by it in schools. Segregated and underfunded schools in that city were described as so decrepit that during the 2016-2017 school year when the suit was first filed, NONE of the schools complied with basic health and safety codes (United States Court of Appeals, 2020, p. 9). One of the ways this non-compliance showed itself was that building temperatures in many schools regularly hovered at 90F/32C in both summer and winter, sometimes requiring schools to close with little notice when the heat index inside the schools would rise as high as 110F/43.3C (United States Court of Appeals, 2020, p. 10).

Indeed, according to documents filed in the lawsuit, on the first day of school in Detroit in 2016, the heat was so bad that several teachers and students in multiple schools threw up, while others passed out. Heat was not the only problem. In the winter, it was often so cold that teachers and students wore coats, hats, scarves and gloves and layers of clothes when the temperatures plummeted so low, they could see their breath hanging in the air (United States Court of Appeals, 2020, p. 10).

In addition to the issues with the heating and cooling systems, the plaintiffs in the case provided visual evidence that mice, roaches and “other vermin” regularly inhabited their classrooms and teachers reported that they had grown accustomed to cleaning up rodent feces in the morning before their students arrived. Even the water in many buildings was found to have been so contaminated with pollutants that it was unsafe to drink. In a few schools, children said the ceilings in their classrooms were in such poor repair, and that plumbing leaks were so often an issue that they had grown used to keeping an eye on the ceilings of their buildings to avoid falling tiles during class (Sanchez, 2016).

During the 2016-2017 school year, classroom sizes had swelled to 50-60 students in the district, but the classrooms only had desks for 40 students, the supposed maximum (United States Court of Appeals, 2020, p. 10). When that happened, students sat on the floor, or were forced to stand along the walls when class was in session. That is what happened when there were teachers available to even teach the students given that teacher shortages meant that on some days students could spend up to three class periods per day in the gym, as opposed to in class because there were no teachers to teach them in their classrooms (Brown, 2016). In perhaps the most notable example of the severity of the teaching shortages in the district, at one school, “eighth-grade students were put in charge of teaching seventh and eighth grade math classes for a month because no math teacher was available” (Sanchez, 2016).

Given these realities, it should not surprise that in 2017, only 7% of students in the public schools in Detroit read at or above grade level, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In 2019, only 6% did so (Washington Post, 2020). The percentage of Detroit students overall who performed at or above the NAEP proficient level that same year was 6%. Nearly half of all adults in Detroit — about 47% — are functionally illiterate (The Week, 2015).

While this lawsuit took place in Detroit, it is worth noting that in my research, I have found that across the United States, a similar story holds true about children who live in low-income segregated communities and are Native American, Black, or Latino and are then more likely to have severely limited educational options and inferior facilities when compared to their white, and wealthy counterparts. At the same time, these neighborhoods, and specifically schools are cash cows for wealthy business concerns (Rooks, 2017).

Accordingly, in the last 30 years in Detroit and elsewhere, government, philanthropy, business and financial sectors have heavily invested in efforts to privatize certain segments of public education; stock schools with inexperienced, less highly paid teachers whose hiring often provides companies with a “finder’s fee”; outsource the running of schools to management organizations; and propose virtual schools as a literal replacement for – not just a supplement to – the brick and mortar educational experience.

This profit from segregation is one of the developments parents and educational activists offer to explain why it has been so difficult for schools to consistently educate their children in Detroit. They believe that the beginning of the story about the financial and caste making impact of education policies on their children begins in 1994. That was the year that community members defied the mayor of Detroit, along with the president of the teacher’s union, the governor for the state of Michigan, and its legislature, and organized a campaign to tax themselves to raise 1.5 billion dollars in bond money (Schmidt, 1994). Due to the actions of the politically well-connected and the wealthy, this effort ended up making schools and education worse.

How Segregation Benefits the Wealthy

Community members, parents and activists organized the bond campaign in order to make much needed repairs to dilapidated schools, build new ones and fund needed curricular and pedagogical initiatives for the children in the district. At the time, the city had a supportive school board who had worked collaboratively with school leaders to design an innovative curriculum that included foreign languages, vocational arts, fine art, music, and college prep. All they needed, organizers and school leaders said, was for taxpayers whose children attended Detroit schools to tax themselves to provide the funding to pay for their vision (Schmidt, 1994).

So, campaign organizers took their case directly to Detroit voters, encouraging them to go to any city school and to see conditions for themselves. They asked voters to approve the bond so that children in the city could have the same opportunities as any other children in the suburbs and throughout the state. Though it caught seasoned political insiders completely by surprise, the bond issue passed with 60% of voters, a majority of whom were Black, turning out to support the public schools in the city (Schmidt, 1994).

The community vision of who the funds would support was very different from what ended up happening. Members of the business community, including those in construction who wanted access to the 1.5 billion in bond money, took their grievances to the governor. They were amongst his largest donors. A few weeks later, surprising many, the governor declared the district bankrupt, heading in the wrong direction, dilapidated, and failing, and announced that he was stepping up and stepping in to help. He said the changes he was about to make were not about “race, money or power” but that “the reforms were about children” (Citizens Research Council of Michigan, 2019). He then announced that he was dissolving the democratically elected school board and installing a

“reform board” to save the district. This new board would, he said, report directly to him and not be responsible to the voters in the city of Detroit (Citizens Research Council of Michigan, 2019).

The first thing the new “reform board” did was determine that none of the 1.5 billion in bond money would go to individual schools, or to principals who wanted to make curricular and pedagogical enhancements. No, all of it would go to construction and infrastructure. The board also decided that one of the white construction firms that had taken their grievances to the governor, was now to have sole discretion and oversight for how this money would be spent.

Activists and residents said this action was driven solely by the interests of wealthy and well connected, not the interest of the people in the schools. Nonetheless, over the next three years, the reform board took a district with a 93-million-dollar surplus into \$250 million dollars in debt AND spent the 1.5 billion in bond money (Bomey & Gallagher, 2013). While in 1999 Detroit had been in the middle of the educational pack in Michigan, in 2019, it was at the bottom (Detroit Access to Literacy, 2015-2019).

By the time the citizens of Detroit finally got the control of schools returned, there was more debt than any of them could believe. Also, 200 of Detroit schools had been closed and over-reliance on standardized tests had labeled whole swaths of the community as deficient, triggering various provisions of federal policy that required traditional public schools be replaced with charter schools, thus shrinking the district, and draining the enrollment that ensures districts stay solvent. Instead, the district’s deficit is currently almost \$500 million dollars, and its long-term debt is roughly \$1.5 billion. They will be paying this back until 2038 (LeBlanc, 2021). It is the children who have been most hurt by these policy games and policy cures.

Many of the policies undergirding this dismantling of education, and interruption of democracy in Detroit make clear the issue is not merely that schools in the city had failed to adequately teach children and young people to read. There is also a story here about the lucrative nature of caste making levels of segregation when wrapped in education policies. The resulting whole made many of the parents and aunts and grandparents and students in that city not just doubt and question themselves, but also led them to mistrust elected officials, and lose faith in the ability of the vulnerable to ever triumph over the powerful. In the end, many came to doubt the efficacy of democracy itself.

In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. gave a speech entitled “Where Do We Go From Here, Community or Chaos?” I often reflect on his questions when thinking about where the contemporary paths we are traveling in relation to segregation, caste, cash, and public education are leading. I think community or chaos are two potential destinations. The choices we make will tell future generations much of what they will need to know about what our democracy means to us here in the 21st century.

References

- Bomey, N., & Gallagher, J. (2013, September 15). How Detroit went broke: The answers may surprise you — and don’t blame Coleman Young. *Detroit Free Press*.
<https://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2013/09/15/how-detro>



- Brown, E. (2016, January 20). Rats, roaches, mold – Poor conditions lead to teacher sickout, closure of most Detroit schools. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/education/wp/2016/01/20/rats-roaches-mold-poor-conditions-leads-to-teacher-sickout-closure-of-most-detroit-schools>
- Cashin, S. (2021). *White space, black hood: Opportunity hoarding and segregation in the age of inequality*. Beacon Press.
- Citizens Research Council of Michigan. (2019). *After 20 years, Detroit public schools to regain control of its finances*. <https://crcmich.org/after-20-years-detroit-public-schools-to-regain-control-of-its-finances>
- Detroit Access to Literacy. (2015-2019). *The nation's report card*. https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/districtprofile/overview/XR?cti=PgTab_OT&chort=1&sub=MAT&sj=XR&fs=Grade&st=MN&year=2019R3&sg=Gender%3A+Male+vs.+Female&sgv=Difference&ts=Single+Year&sfj=NL
- Goldstein, D. (2020, April 27). Detroit students have a constitutional right to literacy, court rules. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/27/us/detroit-literacy-lawsuit-schools.html>
- LeBlanc, B. (2021, January 5). Michigan house chairman seeks to accelerate state payments to teacher retirement system. *The Detroit News*. <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2021/02/19/michigan-house-chairman-seeks-accelerate-state-payments-teacher-retirement/4496029001/>
- Rooks, N. (2017). *Cutting school: The segrenomics of public education in America*. The New Press.
- Sanchez, R. (2016, January 28). Detroit public schools hit with lawsuit. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/28/us/detroit-public-schools-lawsuit/index.html>
- Schmidt, P. (1994, November 16). Detroit voters back unprecedented 1.5 billion bond issue. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/education/detroit-voters-back-unprecedented-1-5-billion-bond-issue/1994/11>
- The Week (2015, January 9). Detroit's 'shocking' 47 percent illiteracy rate. *The Week*. <https://theweek.com/articles/484910/detroits-shocking-47-percent-illiteracy-rate>
- United States Court of Appeals, S. C. (2020). *Gary B, et al. v. Gretchen Whitmer, et al.* https://www.metrotimes.com/media/pdf/2020.04.23__01__opinion.pdf
- Washington Post. (2020, May 14). National digest: Michigan settles lawsuit over literacy in Detroit public schools. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/national-digest-michigan-settles-lawsu>

Recommended Citation

Rooks, N. (2021). Segregation, caste and cash: Segrenomics in Detroit. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 4(11).
https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2021.11.3

[Download PDF version](#)

Do you want to comment on this article? Please send your reply to editors@oneducation.net. Replies will be processed like invited contributions. This means they will be assessed according to standard criteria of quality, relevance, and civility. Please make sure to follow editorial policies and formatting [guidelines](#).

noliwe rooks

Noliwe Rooks is the Chair, and a Professor of Africana Studies at Brown University where she is the founding director of the Segrenomics Lab. Her research explores how race and gender both impact and are impacted by popular culture, social history and political life in the United States. She works on the cultural and racial implications of beauty, fashion and adornment, race, capitalism and education, and the urban politics of food and cannabis production. Rooks' current book, in which she coined the term "segrenomics," is *Cutting School: Privatization, Segregation, and the End of Public Education* which won an award for non-fiction from the Hurston/Wright Foundation.