A Velvet Rope of Exclusion: The Delmar Divide

DEFINING THE DELMAR DIVIDE

What difference does a mile make? That’s 5,280 feet. If you are a child born in St. Louis, one mile can change the trajectory of your life. The zip code where a child lives is a great predictor. It will likely predict the child’s race, the family’s income, and it often determines where they go to school. The interesting thing is, St. Louisans know that location predicts quality of life. In fact, we have a physical boundary that sections off prosperity from disparity like a velvet rope. Delmar Boulevard is a street that runs through the heart of the city. Locals know it as “The Delmar Divide”, a not-so-imaginary line that defines the boundaries of poverty and splices communities by color.

North of Delmar, 98% of the population is black, the median home value is $73,000, and life expectancy is 67 years. South of Delmar, 73% of the population is white, the median home value is $335,000, and life expectancy is 85 years (Strasser, 2012). These facts are no surprise to people who drive along Delmar and witness the palpable shift. Why does a mile make such a big difference in the lives of children, specifically in regard to their education? Finding an answer requires examination of the causes of the Delmar Divide and how it created pockets that continue to marginalize students of color. Research reveals a history of an education system created intentionally to benefit some and exclude others evident in the form of literacy rates, disciplinary actions, zip code demographics, mortgage lending rates, and many other metrics. These findings unearth a deeply rooted history that continues to impact students.

THE HISTORY OF RACISM AND SEGREGATION IN ST. LOUIS

Our schools are more segregated today than they were in 1968. How did this happen? It should not be a surprise that we are here. Let’s talk about history. Missouri was established as a state in 1821 as a result of the Missouri Compromise in 1820 as a bargaining chip to keep the peace between the North and South in the Senate. Missouri entered as a slave state. Fast forward to 1856 when St. Louis was the center of a court case involving an enslaved Black man named Dred Scott who was appealing for his freedom. The case went to the Supreme Court, where a judge ruled that black people, whether free or enslaved, are not considered citizens by the Constitution (Graber, 2006). Continue moving forward just shy of the 20th century and we see that separate but equal is lawful in Plessy v. Ferguson, and segregation is legal. This pattern continues in St. Louis after World War II, as veterans are returning home. Black residents were met with racial covenants and redlining that prevented them from living on certain blocks and forced them into smaller, dilapidated areas.

Brown v. Board is taken to the Supreme Court in 1954 and suddenly, separate was not equal anymore. Schools were advised to desegregate “with all deliberate speed” and yet, many did not attempt to desegregate until forced years later. It’s not a surprise that schools remain segregated today. This system is functioning exactly in the way it was intended when it was created: to benefit white children and exclude black children from those same opportunities.

THE CREATION OF THE DELMAR DIVIDE

The history of systemic racism in St. Louis does not happen in a vacuum. We cannot speak entirely in the past tense when talking about this history because a lot of the same issues pervade society today. The Delmar Divide was not an accidental byproduct; on the contrary, this velvet rope of exclusivity was created with intention. As formerly enslaved people and their families began to flee the Jim Crow laws of the South during the Great Migration, there was another migration occurring: white flight from the city to the county. These migratory patterns furthered segregation in housing.

Mortgage denial was a common practice that lenders used to coerce black families into certain neighborhoods in the city. Racial covenants were employed by white neighbors to “stand in solidarity” so that no person of color would be welcome on their block. These racially biased practices were purposeful and intentional. What is so fascinating is that "many homes north of the Delmar Divide that are valued at $2,000 are structurally identical to those south of the divide that are worth hundreds of thousands of dollars” (Abello, 2019). The history of mortgage lending displays that race was a key factor in where residents would live. We know that where individuals live is where they are likely to go to school. So, there is a strong connection between segregation in housing and segregation in schools.

ATTEMPTS AT INTEGRATION

Students go to the school located in their neighborhood by default. If children live in a zip code that was intentionally redlined, then their school will most likely be under-resourced, underfunded, and understaffed. Research shows that black children are five times as likely as their white counterparts to go to a highly segregated school (Garcia, 2020).

A concerned St. Louis mother witnessed the lack of resources at her son’s neighborhood school and wanted him to have a better opportunity for an education. In 1972, Minnie Liddell and other concerned African American families filed a lawsuit against the Board of Education for the City of St. Louis demanding equal opportunity and access to education for their children. The case would lead to the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation bussing program that gave individual Black families three choices: stay in their neighborhood school, choose an integrated city magnet school, or participate in the transfer program (Heaney & Uchitelle, 2004, p. 129). This program sought to provide children in the city the option to go to the county for “a better education.” Black children in the city were shown that if they want to go to schools that are resourced and funded, they need to wake up extremely early and take an hour-long bus ride out of their neighborhood and into the predominantly white county schools. Some more lessons emerge from this practice: opportunity does not exist in their neighborhoods, our system believes white education is the “better education”, and they must sacrifice sleep, time, and identity to go to a resourced school.

A crucial element to discuss when talking about integration is the terminology we use to describe it. Using the word "desegregation" may invoke feelings of antiquity tied to the Jim Crow era. Cobb (2014) says, “Today, we are more likely to talk of diversity—but diversification and desegregation are not the same undertakings. To speak of diversity, in light of this country’s history of racial recidivism, is to focus on bringing ethnic variety to largely white institutions, rather than dismantling the structures that made them so white to begin with". While white folks in power might prefer to use a softer term like "diversity", this is simply adding in black or brown children physically without regarding their social, cultural, or emotional needs.

Diversity is measurable, but inclusion is a feeling. The question remains: is today really all that different from 1954? “For the tragedy of this moment is not that black students still go to overwhelmingly black schools, long after segregation was banished by law, but that they do so for so many of the same reasons as in the days before Brown" (Cobb, 2014). Reaching the feeling of inclusivity requires much more than physical integration. St. Louis schools today are disproportionately funded and the children who need it most are being left behind.

THE CURRENT STATE OF ST. LOUIS SCHOOLS

Did bussing work? Let us address this question by first making meaning of it. If “work” means did it occur, then yes. The program began in 1983, but by 1998, a total of 14,500 students, the maximum number, were transferred to the county. If “work” means did it end segregation in schools, the answer is a resounding no. As we know, America’s schools are more segregated today than they were in the late 1960s. Bussing was a one-way street. No white county students were going to school in the city.

Meanwhile, the students of color who entered the county school faced new kinds of challenges. Being one of a few black students in a white space can be a jarring and uncomfortable experience. Statistically, 80% of our nation’s teachers are white. Current findings conclude that implicit bias is an issue that all educators face, and the lack of training impacts outcomes (Anderson, 2019). Racism permeated the county schools where many black students described feeling alienated or isolated (Heaney & Uchitelle, 2004). We should not dismiss the power of cross-racial relationships for students, however. There is a strong tie to educational outcomes when students are integrated. Breslow, Wexler, & Collins (2014) argue that “integration doesn’t just mean access to better schools, it can also mean a better chance of earning a degree…for every year a black student attended an integrated school, their likelihood of graduating went up 2 percentage points. The longer that student stayed in school, the greater his odds.” Research also supports that while there are numerous benefits for students of color in inclusive settings, white student’s achievement rates are virtually unaffected (Brooks, 2013). Whether or not children of color are in their periphery, white students will continue to find success in standardized test scores and aptitude tests.

School is often the first institution that an American child will experience. Let’s be frank, school is a bureaucracy and it is a business. In Missouri, the state and federal government as well as school districts fund schools using a formula, yet those students in North St. Louis are chronically and drastically underfunded. Findings conclude that the racial composition of schools is the indicating factor for funding gaps (White, 2015).

If we compare the funding metrics for a school in Clayton, a wealthy county suburb just outside of city limits, to the funding metrics for the entire St. Louis Public School District, we see that the revenue per pupil in Clayton is 43% higher (Missouri Comprehensive Data System, 2020). Property taxes are used in the formula of where school funding comes from. The higher the value of homes, the higher the funding is for the district. We looked at the housing disparities that exist between North city and South city and the gap between the entire city and county is just as stark. If housing is so enmeshed in systemic racism, why is that a part of our funding formula? Again, it all comes back to that real estate adage, “location, location, location”. This phrase connects back to the point that this system is not actually broken, because it is carrying out its intended function with ease. This truly encapsulates the difference one mile can make.

A screenshot of a cell phone

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This difference is further exemplified when we compare two schools in proximity to Delmar Blvd. Captain Elementary is 1.15 miles South of Delmar Blvd. Ford Elementary is one mile North of Delmar Blvd. Children who are born just 5,280 feet North of a street have a completely different life ahead of them than children who live 5,280 feet South. And that isn’t fair to any child.

EQUITY IN EDUCATION

We’ve spent a lot of time clarifying this problem of inequity in education. We’ve considered research, we had a quick history lesson, and talked numbers. Equity in education is more than research or numbers though. Equity in education is about human lives and more so, the lives of black and brown children in St. Louis. Many terms are thrown around to describe positive recommendations for schools. Some include equality, diversity, social justice, restorative justice, and equity. Equality is treating everyone the same and diversity is the physical presence of people of color. These optical examples will no longer suffice to serve students of color. The chosen word here is equity because it goes beyond equality and diversity. Equity is a shared value of justice so that students are given what they *need*.

Students of color often need more than white students because “schools where poverty is concentrated are systematically associated with numerous barriers to educational equity, including high rates of teacher and staff turnover, outdated and unchallenging curricula, limited extracurricular offerings, low achievement and poor graduation rates” (Orfield et al., 2012, p. 39). This is not to say that we are powerless to assist in establishing equitable education. There is hope.

According the Orfield et al. (2012), “many things can be done, at all levels of government and in thousands of communities, to move towards a new vision of educational and social equity” (p. 84). To overcome years of systemic racism in housing and education requires a lot of passion, practice, and persistence.

One of the first steps is creating awareness. This will lead to advocacy and ideally, will change policy at the local, state, and federal levels to support these students. Our students should all have the right to quality education. The fight for equity will involve schools, teachers, families, churches, non-profits, community institutions, organizations, foundations, neighborhoods, and government to all come together and find the same courage that created this system to dismantle it.

On a macro level, we cannot be surprised that this educational system benefits the wealthy and white children when it was created to serve those very people foundationally. On a mezzo level, the "achievement gap" is perpetuated by a lack of resources to primarily black and brown schools. These schools often rely on the generosity of others to supply their classrooms with desks, books, and basic supplies. Property tax-based funding exacerbates this gap. On a micro level, school is the first institution that children experience. Historically, this institution was not created equal, or with black and brown children in mind. Every individual child should have the right to an equal education, otherwise we cannot describe our system as democratic, public, or just. One mile should not determine the quality of a child’s life.

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