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Racial Apartheid and Incarceration in American Schooling

In the midst of national controversy around the police state and mass incarceration, an ongoing form of incarceration has existed for decades on the periphery of national attention. Although inadequate funding of public schools is a perennial concern of American families, the education system suffers a deeper issue of racial apartheid, even after significant efforts to integrate the classroom. Assata Shakur's autobiography addresses educational inequality through her own lens, both as a student experiencing public schools firsthand and as an activist educator for disadvantaged youth. She argues that American schooling places Black children into pre-determined roles regardless of their own academic aptitude (Shakur, 181), and that state-run education failed to address the needs of nonwhite communities. As a result, the modern education system incarcerates its ethnic minorities in systems of oppression while also restricting their intellectual freedom. Jonathan Kozol, an author best known for his writings on racial segregation in American schools, further elaborates this pressing issue in his 2005 article *Still Separate, Still Unequal*, detailing the abject state of education given to children of poor neighborhoods. Kozol argues that minority children are relegated to lower-funded schools that are separate and unequal to the education offered to wealthier, white, suburban districts. This lasting inequality can be best addressed by overhauling school funding and offering more community control to determine curricula, allocate resources, and to fix the squalid conditions of American education.

While public school education is not a central theme to Assata's autobiography, she does describe in some detail her experiences as a young student. Her most insightful analysis comes later, however, as a college student and nascent political activist. As a student at Manhattan Community College she attended a tiny Garveyite meeting, remarking with sadness how their group had been diminished to a handful of supporters. She attributed this to a sort of educational censorship; that children were only ever taught about the "so-called responsible leaders" of a bygone era, never about the modern day radicals, who are branded as "hideous monsters" to alienate them from the general public (Shakur, 181). In fact, she had only just learned about Marcus Garvey, even though he led "one of the strongest movements of Black people in amerika" (180). The educational system, in short, had no interest in liberating its students:

"Nobody is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you... your true heroes, if they know that knowledge will help set you free. Schools in amerika are interested in brainwashing people with amerikanism... and training them in skills needed to fill the positions the capitalist system requires. As long as we expect amerika's schools to educate us, we will remain ignorant" (181).

This argument on education is one of her many astute observations about ulterior motives of government structure. Her claim that students are merely trained to serve the "capitalist system," however, might surprise many who were given an academically balanced American education. How might a school curriculum focused squarely on English, foreign languages, history, math, science, and art be preparing its students for simple manual labor? In fact, these curricula vary significantly between schools in wealthy and poor areas. In wealthier schools, class offerings generally reflect the expectation that their students will attend college –

meanwhile, the poorest schools have classes that are “obviously keyed to low-paying levels of employment” (Kozol). In his article, Kozol describes a student, Mireya, in a Los Angeles high school who was placed in sewing and hairdressing courses despite selecting Advanced Placement college preparation classes instead. She was fulfilling course requirements for “Applied Technology” – a district-level curriculum guideline which in a wealthier school may have been covered by classes in computer software or engineering. Replacing higher-level classes with simpler topics serves both the budgetary requirements of poor schools, and the expectation that their students will go on to low-paying careers. This stark difference in educational quality perpetuates divisions in socioeconomic status between neighborhoods and demographics, giving wealthy, predominantly white students excellent courses for a college application while poor students have fewer options for upward mobility.

While Assata worked as a student teacher with the Golden Drums society, she realized how students were miseducated in even more profound ways. She and other members worked as student teachers for summer remedial classes, drafting curricula not only to improve their test scores but to “enhance the students’ sense of self-worth and give them more of a sense of their history” (Shakur, 186). While teaching arts and crafts, she tasked her students with drawing pictures of themselves – “All of the students were Black, yet the drawings depicted a lot of blond-haired, blue-eyed little white children” (188). This identity crisis clearly mirrors Assata’s own childhood schooling, when she became infatuated with the beauty standards of white children and even rejected her friend Joe, scared of losing face over dating a boy who was “too black and ugly” (72). In response to her students’ drawings, she changed her lessons, focusing their art on Black people, places, ideas, and beauty. In retrospect, she remarked that while she loved working with kids, she “could never participate in the board-of-education kind of

teaching,” refusing to make her students say the pledge of allegiance “or any other such bullshit” (188-189). Of course, this raises the question – how could Assata or people like her teach their communities what really mattered to them? If Black children have no self-worth, how could the education system change that? One method is to give more power to the parents. In discussing a movement in Brooklyn for community voice in education, Assata explains that “Black parents... wanted a say in what their children were taught, in how their schools were run, and in who was teaching their children” (181). If the education system in the US reflected regional demographics and followed parental guidelines instead of federally-mandated teaching goals, children can be better set up to understand their surroundings and learn histories unique to their own life experiences. This extends beyond only Black children – classes could be altered to reflect the needs of Hispanic, Native American, or Jewish students to name only a few.

Sadly, community control alone can't regulate the deep inequalities of the American school system. Racial segregation in school districts is a continuous issue, and with it comes grossly imbalanced funding divided along lines of race. Segregation is the main focus of Jonathan Kozol's articles and books – that despite court rulings to integrate classrooms, despite mandated busing, schools are still racially disparate. Kozol lists numerous examples. He visited a school in Missouri with a 99.6% African American student body, even while the school claimed to be “diverse,” and another district in New York had “2,800 black and Hispanic children in the system, 1 Asian child, and 3 whites” (Kozol). This isn't only because the areas themselves are segregated: in one Seattle neighborhood, “approximately half the families were Caucasian” but they made up only 5% of the school body at the local Thurgood Marshall Elementary School. Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr. High School in New York City was built in a white neighborhood with the intent to bus nonwhite children from other areas, but the local families

refused to enroll. Now the school is “a destination for black and Hispanic students who could not obtain admission into more successful schools.” When schools are segregated, they also become unequal – public school funding is largely derived from property taxes of the families that attend, giving a straightforward result that the funding of the school is proportional to the average wealth of its students. In 2005, New York City spent an average \$11,700 per pupil every year, whereas nearby wealthy suburbs spent almost twice as much. Kozol’s article goes to lengthy detail about the unhygienic state of disrepair experienced by disadvantaged students at poor inner-city schools. These same children are taught American doctrines of equal opportunity, even while the quality of their education depends entirely on socioeconomic status.

It is difficult to even approach the scale of these issues. Decades of segregation, school degradation, and the inequalities that result are now deeply embedded in the educational system, perpetuating a very persistent reality of incarceration. As Assata and Kozol explain, nonwhite children receive a perverse education, trapped by capitalist structures and denied basic dignity and self-worth. Community influence – through parent/teacher associations and other such institutions – must be emphasized to bring students an education that is tailored to their needs. Just how Assata chose to affirm her own students’ lives and history, so should all educators work toward this goal. Community control, however, can only go so far; even if classes are designed to reflect demographics, unequal funding will still perpetuate divisions of race. Clearly, a legislative overhaul is long overdue. As long as funds are drawn from local residents, it is absurd to expect students to be equally valued. The funding of education should be invoked in current discussions around defunding police, because an equal and dignified education for all is its own asset for the health and success of American society – reallocating funding from police to school systems can address two aspects of social and economic incarceration at once.

Works Cited

Kozol, Jonathan. "Still Separate, Still Unequal: America's Educational Apartheid." *Harper's Magazine*, Sep. 2005.

Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Chicago, Lawrence Hill Books, 1987, pp. 72, 180, 181, 186, 188-189.