The Importance of History in the Racial Inequality and Racial Inequity in Education: New Orleans as a Case Example

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Abstract

Racial equality and racial equity in U.S. education has been elusive although decades of education reform have them as goals. Current discourse advocate colorblind and post-racial solutions to racial inequality and racial inequity in education; these solutions implicate presentism, a view that exclusively circumscribes the existence of present-day conditions to the here and now. On the supposition that history is important in understanding present-day challenges, the article promotes historical reflexivity, a process in which education reformers consider the history around present-day desired goals and related outcomes. To illustrate the relevancy of history in developing education reform that facilitates progress towards racial equality and racial equity, a historical trace of racial inequality and racial inequity in education for the U.S. writ large and New Orleans specifically is presented.

Introduction

After decades of attempts to achieve racial equality and racial equity in education, these aims remain elusive in the United States (U.S.). Educational inequality and inequity have emerged and re-emerged in various forms throughout U.S. history as overt acts of prohibition of some groups to be educated to more subtle manifestations like inadequate instructional facilities or scant course offerings in a school’s curriculum with people of color more likely to be subjected to these conditions. As the U.S. populace becomes increasingly diverse with 2050 projections indicating that non-Whites will constitute 54% of the future U.S. population (U.S. Census, 2009), educational equality and equity for all U.S. racial groups gains increased importance. For a substantial portion of the U.S. population to be inadequately educated and prepared for life in the 21st century is not only antithetical and threatening to the democratic ideals upon which the U.S. was founded but also is materially disadvantageous for U.S. international competitiveness, global prominence, and quality of life (Carnevale, Smith, & Melton, 2011). The demographic shift to greater diversity is already evident. The U.S. Department of Education projects that in fall 2014 51% and 48% of students enrolled in grades pre-K through eight and grades nine through twelve, respectively, in U.S. public schools will be non-White (Krogstad & Fry, 2014); the vast majority of these students are clustered in high-

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poverty, high-minority enrollment schools, institutions that receive disproportionately fewer and lower-quality resources than their low-poverty, low-minority counterparts. It is imperative for the U.S. to prepare a larger segment of its population, which includes people of color, to productively engage the 21st century.

Equality and equity are often interchangeably used in common parlance. Similar to the conceptualizations posited by Brayboy, Castagno, and Maughan (2007), we view equality and equity as different but intricately connected. Equality denotes a state of sameness or similarity. In this sense, racial equality in education will be realized when the same quantity and quality of resources (e.g., human, material, symbolic) comprise the educational experiences of all U.S. racial groups. Equity usually pertains to the distribution of resources, both quantity and quality, according to need with equality as the end goal. Equity operates as an equalizer in which investments are made at a level and for a duration that is sufficient to produce and sustain the highest quality outcomes for all groups. After similar outcomes have been achieved in education and other domains (e.g., economy, polity) that directly affect educational outcomes then equality (i.e., the same quantity and quality of resources) is employed as a maintenance mechanism, much like its function in the present era. Because equal educational outcomes, as defined as commensurate to a group’s representation in the overall population, across U.S. racial groups have never been obtained, today’s equality approaches serve to maintain existing inequalities. These equality approaches more often than in the past ignore or de-emphasize race and are prevalent in present-day U.S. education reform.

The tendency to deemphasize or exclude race as a consideration in achieving racial equality and racial equity in education takes two forms in the current educational discourse, colorblindness and post-racialism. Racial neutrality is the ideal for both discourses. The logic of racial neutrality with respect to racial equality and racial equity in education is that if race ceased to exist then racial inequalities and racial inequities and other negative associations with race would also cease to exist. Underpinning the logic of colorblindness and post-racialism are orientations toward history—the excising of history from the present and the dominance of presentism, a view that exclusively circumscribes the existence of conditions to the here and now (Parsons, 2008; Noblit, 2013). Colorblindness and post-racialism, buttressed by presentism, contribute, intentionally or not, to the elusiveness of achieving racial equality and racial equity in education; they lead to an incomplete definition of the problem which determines the kinds of education reform posited as solutions. Acknowledging history and using it to inform the present and future can facilitate the development and implementation of reform that leads to equal and equitable education.

In this article, we conduct a historical trace and highlight continuities and connections between the historical and the contemporary with respect to two U.S. racial groups, Blacks and Whites. First, we highlight continuities and connections broadly in terms of U.S. history and then more narrowly with an illustrative case, New Orleans education reform. We trace racial behaviors and dispositions from the distant past to the more recent past to the 21st century. Based upon the enactment and reenactment of racial inequality and racial inequity across space and time that became evident in our historical trace, we contend that color-blindness, post-racialism, and their foundation of presentism are ineffectual in achieving racial equality and racial equity in education if equality and equity in education are truly desired outcomes in the U.S. We conclude by explicating what we call historical reflexivity, a label for our analysis, and entertaining its use as one mechanism in progressing towards greater racial equality and racial equity in education.

Current Racial Responses

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2 We view race and ethnicity as related but different constructs. In this article, Omi and Winant’s (1994) conceptualization of race inform our work: “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 55). This use of race differs from the conceptualization of race connoted in Harris’ (1995) construct of Whiteness, a transferable system of privilege.
Colorblindness, Post-Racialism, and Their Foundation Presentism

Colorblindness, a position that ignores race and disfavors all uses of it in the public domain, first emerged in Justice Harlan’s dissent decision for the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court case *Plessy v Ferguson*, a case that originated in Louisiana and that challenged the constitutionality of *de jure* segregation of public accommodations. Lopez (2007) argued that contemporary adherents of color-blindness are not justified in their liberal employment of colorblindness to reject all uses of race. Harlan believed that Whites were superior then and would continue to be superior and expressed this sentiment in the 1896 dissenting opinion; upon this belief of eternal White superiority and subsequent dominance of Whites in civic life in the U.S. Harlan objected to the uses of race under certain circumstances, specifically when the use of race would oppress the “inferior other.” In the more recent past, colorblindness gained popularity among the populace in the 1960s, first as a misinterpretation of Martin Luther King’s *I Have a Dream* speech3 and later as a counter-response to policies that explicitly and intentionally recognized and considered race as a remedy to systemic, racial discrimination (Berry, 1996; Lopez, 2007). Colorblindness advocates an ignoring and retreat from race with race neutrality as the goal. Similar to colorblindness, race neutrality is central to post-racialism, an ideology that gained prominence in the 21st century after the U.S. populace elected the first person, President Obama, who self-identified as African American. Post-racialism treats racial neutrality not as an aspiration as is the case of colorblindness, but as an achieved state.

Post-racialism in the public and scholarly discourse conveys that race is irrelevant because racial issues, including inequality and inequity, have been sufficiently addressed and curtailed. Cho (2009) purported that post-racialism has several essential features. First, post-racialism is premised upon significant racial progress, an evaluation that considers process exclusive of and in isolation from outcomes (e.g., local rather than state-based formulae for funding public education with low-poverty, low-minority enrollment schools with less need receiving greater financial support). The post-racial view contends that the U.S. has transcended issues of race, that race no longer matters. Second, proponents of post-racialism define the U.S. race problem in terms of tensions among races not as the systemic and structural positioning of races in civic life (e.g., who governs and who decides) that undergird racial divisiveness and racial discord. Additionally, Cho contended that post-racialism adheres to moral equivalence logic with an emphasis on individual rights. For example, a racially motivated act by an individual against another individual is of the same social import and social significance of a racially motivated system that acts against a group of individuals. In summary, post-racialism contends that the racial progress made in the U.S. is sufficient, an indicator that racial neutrality has been achieved and that it should become the modus operandi in order to sustain such progress.

Even though colorblindness and post-racialism assume different postures on the ideal race neutrality, they serve the same ends: the concealment of race and normalization of the racial status quo. Colorblindness and post-racialism constrict the space by eliminating race as a factor in defining the problem thereby making disparities along the lines of race impervious to scrutiny and subsequent action. Presentism enables this constriction.

Presentism is a view that often detaches systemic group-level, structural conditions from history and treats them as isolated, individual occurrences that emerge in the present-day moment in which they are being considered. Presentism separates the current racial arrangements from their historical foundations and

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3 One argument that challenges the seemingly colorblind language of the speech analyzes the well-known phrase, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” The argument highlights the use of the term “judged.” Being judged, to make evaluative conclusions, is not synonymous to being recognized, acknowledged, or perceived (Gotanda, 1991, 2000). The second argument emphasizes King’s naming of racial and ethnic groups later in the speech.
dismisses or ignores the uninterrupted continuities from the past to present that are evident in group outcome disparities. On one hand, in light of the horrid racial history of the United States, an acceptance and adoption of presentism is neither surprising nor condamnable. On the other hand, the acceptance, adoption, and rigid adherence to presentism prevent the undesirables from the past from being reenacted in the present and in the future by preempting critical examination that inhibits learning that could prevent or disrupt the reproduction of the undesired. Countries, societies, communities, families, and individuals have histories and these histories are integral, in conscious and unconscious ways, to present-day realities and future possibilities (Cole, 1996; Holland, 1998). To ignore the past and to insulate and to sever an understanding of it from the present and future increases the likelihood of reproducing the past; one exemplar of this reproduction is racial inequality and racial inequity in education.

Mode of Inquiry

For this article, we subjected historical and recent accounts published in books, scholarly journals, newspapers, and newscasts as well as primary documents associated with race and education (e.g., minutes of the Bring New Orleans Back Commission) to a historical trace and deconstructive analyses. First, we examined reported outcomes for race and education generally in the U.S. and traced backwards to unearth any declared and tacit ideologies. Second, we narrowed our lens to a specific case that involved education events in Louisiana and New Orleans, the state from which several ground-breaking judicial decisions that would impact racial equality and racial equity in education evolved. Third, we examined correspondences across space, the U.S. in general to the specific locale of Louisiana and New Orleans, and across time demarcated as past (19th century), more recent past (the 20th century), and the present (the 21st century). The examination of correspondences were guided by questions like do similar outcomes reemerge at different points in history, what are the underlying premises and tenets of the events to which these outcomes correspond, and what are any similarities among these premises and tenets. We then juxtaposed outcomes in the past with outcomes in the present. On the basis of this juxtaposition, we assert that declared racial dispositions that historically influenced equality and equity in education, although not overt in the public discourse as it was in the past, continue to impact present-day education. We further contend that colorblindness and post-racialism undergirded by presentism effectively work against racial equality and racial equity in education in contemporary times through inadequate definition of the problem.

U.S. Racial Ideology and Education

Scientific work conducted for centuries sought a biological basis for the construct of race, but research indicates that race is not a biological construct. That is, any two human beings are approximately 99.9% genetically the same (Bohnam, Warshauer-Baker, & Collins, 2005). The lack of evidence for genetically distinctive racial groups negates a biologistic view of race but it does not defy its social existence.

Race is related to ethnicity and economic class but is a separate construct (Omi & Winant, 1996). Race is a concept, with traceable historical origins, that ascribes meaning to aspects of human physiognomy. These racial meanings serve as one foundation of societal hierarchies that serve varied economic, political, educational, social, and cultural aims. These racial meanings also position groups and their members within these societal hierarchies. Race as signified through racial hierarchies and the positioning of individuals and collectives within these hierarchies is reified and reinforced across time and space.

The predecessor to the U.S. contemporary construction of race emerged in Europe as part of the conquest of Ireland during the 12th century; Whites were categorized into inferior (e.g., Irish) and superior groups (e.g., English) (Banks, 1995; Bonnet, 1998). This inferior-superior dichotomy in ranking the worth of human beings, with race generally denoted as kind or type (Smedley & Smedley, 2005), defined and organized reality when the English settlers encountered the indigenous peoples in what is now the U.S. As
the U.S. settlement grew the demand for labor to ensure its continual growth increased. Simultaneously, condemnation of White servitude as the labor base intensified and the philosophy that the human race consisted of different species eclipsed the once dominant belief that all human beings were of one race and one species (Watkins, 2001). Race changed from a general descriptor of kind or type to specific classifications based on biological markers, physical features and characteristics that were used to assign value to various groups in relation to the needs of the developing nation (Bonnet, 1998; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). In the early 1600s, Whites, in significantly larger numbers than other groups, subjugated human beings with non-White physical markers. The most notable subjugation in the U.S. was the enslavement of Blacks. Blacks were viewed as sub-human, from a different species than Whites (Watkins, 2001). By the mid-1800s with the support of science (Gould, 1981; Jackson & Weidman, 2006), a racial ideology that separated humans into groups based on phenotype; that designated groups as superior or inferior; and that organized reality such that group membership indelibly shaped the lives of group members was embedded in the fabric of U.S. society (Manning, 1993; Smedley, 2001). A racial ideology of Whites as superior and Blacks as inferior (Watkins, 2001) was clearly established, protected, and perpetuated by the U.S. economic, political, educational, social, and cultural spheres.

Challenges to aspects of the racial ideology culminated in the Civil War. After the Civil War of 1865, measures were taken to protect the rights of Blacks. Amendments to the U.S. Constitution to abolish slavery and to extend equal protection to Blacks (i.e., 13th and 14th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution) and the Civil Rights Act of 1875 that forbade discrimination in public accommodations were among these measures. For a brief period called the Reconstruction, from the end of the Civil War to the early 1870s, universal public education, with equitable support initially, was available to Blacks and Blacks made substantial educational gains, outperforming Whites on several measures (DuBois & Gill, 1912; Tyack & Lowe, 1986). Any racial progress that resulted in strides towards equality and equity in education was halted in 1883. In 1883, the U.S. Supreme Court considered five separate civil rights cases grouped together and rendered that it was unconstitutional for the federal government to legislate in the matter of racial discrimination in the private sector (e.g., privately owned businesses) (U.S. Supreme Court, 1883).

In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court ordained segregation, a separation based on the inferiority of one human being and the superiority of another, which was practiced in the educational domain as well as in other sectors of society. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld a Louisiana ruling that denied a Black man the right to sit in the same train passenger car as Whites and declared that the ruling was not a deprivation of the Black man’s rights or a violation of equal protection provided in the 14th Amendment. The 1896 Plessy v Ferguson decision decreed that it was constitutional for states to establish separate but equal facilities for Blacks and Whites with the inequality of facilities in favor of Whites widely noted (DuBois & Gill, 1912). This ruling stood until 1954, a time of burgeoning civil unrest that strained the political and economic relations between the U.S. and other countries (Bell, 1995). In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in Brown v Board of Education Topeka Kansas that legal segregation of public accommodations, including de jure segregation of educational institutions, was unconstitutional. As was the case when the U.S. Constitution was amended in the 1800s, numerous acts (e.g., White flight from public schools, laws to limit the U.S. Supreme Court decision) surfaced to reinstate the status quo that reflected the racial ideology of the 1600s.

More than five decades after the 1954 Brown v Board of Education decision the education of America’s youth largely occurs in racially segregated settings. Harvard University’s Civil Rights Project (Orfield & Lee, 2004) examined segregation patterns in K-12 U.S. public schools from 1991, the year the Supreme Court permitted districts to end desegregation plans, to 2001. The Harvard project indicated that on average in 2001 a White student in the U.S. attended schools in which 80% of the student body was also White (Orfield & Lee, 2004). A Black student in the U.S. attended schools in which only 31% of the student body was White (Orfield & Lee, 2004). As declared by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954, segregated
schooling continues to be inherently unequal, a state reminiscent of the pre-Civil War and post-Reconstruction eras.

In their review of hundreds of studies cited in the amicus briefs submitted in the U.S. Supreme Court cases Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1 and Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education, Wells and Frankenberg (2007) identified characteristics of segregated schools that showcase the inherent inequality. First and foremost, predominantly non-White segregated schools in contrast to their White counterparts lack access to influential and valuable social networks that lead to better opportunities for students. Access to such social networks is further restricted by the persistent and ever-present perception that these predominantly non-White segregated schools are inferior, a perception that is reinforced by their resource-deprived statuses. They receive substantially less financial and public support than their predominantly White counterparts, lack qualified teachers, and experience high teacher turnover. These predominantly non-White segregated schools also offer curricula that do not prepare students for higher education opportunities or enable upward mobility in society. These low-quality educational experiences often take place in debilitated, inadequate facilities and in environments that are not conducive to optimal learning. Even though the unequal and inequitable distribution of resources implicates a U.S. racial ideology of Black inferiority and White superiority that first emerged in the 1600s, a student’s quote cited in Wells and Frankenberg (p. 182, 2007) captures its essence:

It's like we are being hidden.... It's as if [students of color] have been put in a garage where, if you don't have room for something but aren't sure if they should throw it out, they put it there where they don't need to think of it again. (p. 28, Kozol, 2005)

The racial ideology of the 1600s manifested, as in other spheres in society like in Jim Crow in the South, in racial inequality and racial inequity in education. This manifestation dominated U.S. history with a brief interlude of approximately three to six years in the 1860s. The details of how this racial ideology, White as superior and Blacks as inferior, played out in the racial inequality and racial inequity in education are further elucidated by the examination of a case, education reform in New Orleans.

Localized Manifestations of U.S. Racial Ideology

In the following paragraphs, we provide a condensed narrative on race and education in New Orleans. We examined and traced education with respect to Blacks and Whites in Louisiana and New Orleans from the 18th to the 21st century. The racial ideology that operated historically and into contemporary times in the U.S. at large also functioned more locally to produce and reify racial inequalities and racial inequities in education.

The Past: The 18th and 19th Centuries

The founding of New Orleans was made possible because of the arrival of many forced emigrants from Senegambia, the first Africans to arrive in Louisiana, as well as the native Choctaw Indians (Sublette, 2008). In response to the increasing number of African emigrants, the state of Louisiana developed the Code Noir, or black code, in 1724, laws regarding race and slavery. Originally the laws differed from the English colonies—enslaved Africans had the right of property ownership, had the right to be married, and had the right to an education (Bankston & Caldas, 2002). The rights and privileges of enslaved, dark-skinned Africans were dramatically restricted after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, including the enforcement of laws and ordinances that forbade them from being educated (Bankston & Caldas, 2002). After union forces invaded New Orleans in 1863, leadership, under the sponsorship of the union forces, set up the first authorized school for African Americans in Louisiana in an effort to recruit African Americans (Devore & Logsdon, 1991). The next General established a Board of Education for Black schools which was given propriety to levy property taxes to support its schools (Anderson, 1988). However, during the
Reconstruction, the White and Black Board of Education merged and the schools desegregated; New Orleans was the only known desegregated southern school system at this time (Anderson, 1988).

As the schools began to desegregate, many White families enrolled their children in parochial schools. In 1868 there were only ten private schools; by 1871 there were over one hundred (Spain, 1979). Soon gains in education for Blacks were reversed by the Compromise of 1877 which awarded Rutherford Hayes the disputed presidential election in exchange for the removal of federal troops from Louisiana and South Carolina (Devore & Logsdon, 1991). As troops left New Orleans, the new local leadership no longer under the authority of the union forces re-segregated schools and eliminated education beyond the fifth grade for Blacks. The new leadership also reduced financial support to Black schools and created more publicly funded schools for the White working class (Devore & Logsdon, 1991). These efforts aligned with the sentiments of superintendent Robert Mills Lusher: school reform was needed so White children “would be properly prepared to maintain the supremacy of the White race” (Anderson, 1988, p.27).

The More Recent Past: The 20th Century

Without state or city support, Black leaders worked together through community organizations to raise funds, file petitions to the school board, and submit reports on the poor conditions (e.g. overcrowding) of the schools (Devore & Logsdon, 1991). Additionally, parents petitioned for better school facilities and eventually filed suit for school desegregation in the Bush v. Orleans Parish School Board in 1952. This case became one of five cases grouped into Brown v. Board of Education case in 1954 which declared legally protected public school segregation unconstitutional. Although many Black community groups celebrated the decision, Louisiana took action to derail desegregation.

The state of Louisiana enacted a number of bills to forestall desegregation by creating a per-pupil placement law that prohibited cross-race assignments and by making school desegregation a violation of the state constitution that would result in loss of funding and accreditation (Baker, 1996). When efforts failed to stop the desegregation mandate, the state instituted a grade-by-grade plan wherein one grade would be desegregated each year and an intense application process for Blacks that required an intelligence test, a mental health test, and a home visit for placement into desegregated schools (Wells, 2004). Whereas 135 Black students requested a transfer out of 7000 Black students in the early days of desegregation in Louisiana, only four girls were accepted to attend all-White schools. As Louisiana proceeded to desegregate schools over the next decades, more White students fled to parochial schools (Bankston & Caldas, 2002). In addition to the state’s actions, suburban parishes established structural barriers. For example, St. Bernard Parish instituted a platoon system of half-day attendance to prevent an entirely desegregated system. In the platoon system one segment of the student population would attend for part of the school day and another segment would attend at a later time (Wells, 2004). School demographics are one testament to the success or failure of desegregating over time New Orleans Public Schools. In 1960, enrollment for New Orleans’ public schools was 58% Black and 42% White; by 1980, it was 84% Black and 15% White; in 2010, it was 93% Black and less than 3% White.

In the more recent past, years prior to Hurricane Katrina, the St. Bernard public schools instated caps on enrollment for students transferring from failing schools to schools with higher achievement scores (Wells, 2004). Many scholars argue that this cap was put in place to prevent Black students from transferring to predominantly White schools (Wells, 2004). Despite the fact that New Orleans had one of the highest segregation rates in the country (Tulane University, 2009a), no further state action has been taken to desegregate public schools.

The Present: The 21st Century

In 2004, one year prior to Hurricane Katrina that caused devastation in New Orleans, the Orleans
Parish School System (OPSS) that serves primarily Black students was ranked the worst in Louisiana, a state that measures 49th in education in the U.S. (Raynor, 2006). Prior to Katrina at least 50% of all school buildings in OPSS were in need of at least one major repair such as roofing, plumbing, heating, ventilating, and air conditioning (Tulane University, 2009a). That is, many buildings had impaired plumbing or roof failure and could not provide heat in the winter and air conditioning in the summer. Before Katrina, the outlook of many New Orleans schools was bleak and the schools of New Orleans needed help for a long time but systematic reform was never enacted until Hurricane Katrina.

While many families were still displaced from Hurricane Katrina, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings authorized 47 million dollars for the building of charter schools in hurricane ravaged regions (Saltman, 2007). No such funds were provided for the rebuilding of public schools. In response to the availability of funding for charter schools, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco implemented the Recovery School District (RSD) Act, also known as Act 35. Act 35 significantly expanded state takeover laws by subjecting schools with a School Performance Score at or below the state average of 86.2 in lieu of 60 in the original Act to state takeover. Act 35 also revised state charter laws; decentralized school governance for Orleans Parish; abolished all attendance zones which ensured that all students were assigned to a neighborhood school in proximity to their residence; and fired all of the city’s public school employees (Tulane University, 2009b).

Alongside the expansion of the state’s takeover law, Governor Blanco revised the state’s charter law, Act 42 (Ferguson, 2009). The revised charter law changed the state’s original ruling that required charter schools, like public schools, to serve the same or greater percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Because economic disparities fall consistently along racial lines, qualification for free or reduced lunch is one mechanism to diversify K-12 schools. Compliance to such diversification efforts by charter schools was no longer required (Ferguson, 2009). The new law also removed all prior caps placed on the number and types of charters in operation; permitted charter schools to institute admissions requirements; and eliminated the requirement under previous legislation to accept a minimum of ten percent of students identified as special needs. Furthermore, legislation allowed newly granted charter authorizers to take over sites that were previously public schools (Tulane University, 2009b). As a result, many of the public school buildings with less damage, buildings located in wealthy predominately White neighborhoods in areas of higher elevation along the city’s natural levees, were auctioned off and given to charter school authorizers. These charter schools were funded by the state on a per-pupil expenditure basis. The funding was dependent upon student enrollment and comes from funds earmarked for non-charter public schools (Good & Braden, 2000).

The millions of dollars and changes in legislation enabled New Orleans to implement an intra-district open enrollment, network school choice model that was primarily charter-based. Under this model, schools were organized into networks—groups of similar public schools organized into a cluster. Among the clusters, Recovery School District (RSD) represented one cluster of schools and the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) constituted a second cluster. Noticeable disparities existed between the two clusters. For example, in 2006 and 2007, the RSD charter school group spent $5,120 for instruction while OPSB public schools spent $8,652—a disparity of $3,532 per pupil (Huntley, 2009). In late 2010, there were only 1,876 White students attending public schools in New Orleans, approximately four percent, and nearly seventy-five percent of these students attended selective admissions schools run by the OPSB. Two-thirds of all White students in the district were concentrated into three of these selective admissions schools.

**Correspondences in Past and Present**

As described in the evolutionary account of race in the U.S, two dominant racial tenets existed in the U.S.: (1) humans can be separated into different groups based on human physiognomy and (2) these racial groups are esteemed differently with Blacks and Whites positioned as inferior and superior, respectively.
These tenets were openly declared in the past, a contrast to contemporary times. Does the absence of public declarations mean the previously described racial tenets are defunct? An examination of patterns in past and present-day outcomes implicates a negative response. The examination of outcomes of the recent past and the present shows a continuation of the past with periods of racial progress followed by racial retrenchment. A breaking away from the racial past of the U.S. is not evident when racial inequality and racial inequity in education are considered across time. This continuation of the past embodied as racial inequality and racial inequity in education is illustrated in the correspondences in outcomes at the national (U.S.), state (Louisiana), and local (New Orleans) levels shown in our historical trace (see Table 1).

Table 1
Progress and retrenchment in racial (in)equality and racial (in)equity across time at the national, state, and local level

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<th>Past (1800s)</th>
<th>Recent Past (1900s)</th>
<th>Present (2000s)</th>
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<td><strong>Nation-level Events</strong></td>
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<td>-Race studies supporting the inferiority and superiority of different groups accepted as scientifically valid</td>
<td>-U.S. Supreme Court overturns de jure segregation of public accommodations (school desegregation order)</td>
<td>-eliminated all attendance zones used in school assignments (in late 2010, 4% of students in New Orleans public schools was White and 2/3 of those students attended three publicly funded, selective admissions schools with pupil expenditures substantially greater than other schools)</td>
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<td>-Civil War, Civil Rights Act of 1865, &amp; Reconstruction Amendments</td>
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<td>-eliminated education of Blacks beyond 5th grade</td>
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<td>-directed funds from the education of Blacks to establish more publicly funded schools for Whites</td>
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<td>-implemented platoon system (White and Black students attended school at different times)</td>
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<td>-racially desegregated schools one grade per year</td>
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One reflection of the U.S. racial ideology tenet of Black inferiority and White superiority at the local level, specifically New Orleans, emerged in the early 17th century in the legal restrictions placed on African emigrants from Senegambia. The Code Noir or Black code treated the Senegambia Africans as less than their White counterparts; they did not enjoy the same privileges and rights as Whites. For example, they were restricted in their property ownership and access to education so they possessed less material and symbolic capital than Whites. Later in the 17th century, Africans were stripped of all their rights and privileges and were recast as property. With regards to racial inequality and racial inequity in education, Louisiana passed and enforced laws that forbade the education of Blacks. Conditions endured until the 19th century.

Around 1865, a crisis in the form of the Civil War precipitated a shift. With the adoption of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution and the generation of federal legislation that addressed the conditions of Blacks, a different set of racial tenets that positioned Blacks as humans with rights surfaced. Rights and privileges enjoyed by other U.S. groups were extended to Blacks and resulted in a move towards racial equality and racial equity in education. For example, education reform during the Civil War era in New Orleans authorized schools for Blacks and conferred authority to Boards of Education to levy property taxes to fund these schools. Later, the boards for schools that separately served Black and White students merged as schools desegregated, thereby, creating spaces for equal and equitable access to resources as well as equally and equitably shared resources. In less than two decades after a new racial tenet emerged, state and local actions that refuted educational equality and equity for Blacks were nationally legitimised in the 1883 and 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decisions that nullified federal legislations and the impact of U.S. constitutional amendments of the Civil War era. Schools re-segregated and policies were implemented to erode the education of Blacks. For example, Blacks in New Orleans were prohibited from receiving an education beyond 5th grade; financial support for schools serving Blacks was substantially reduced; and more publicly funded schools were created for Whites.

Approximately seventy-five years after the 1883 and 1896 U.S. Supreme Courts abrogated the new racial tenet around racial equality and racial equity in education for Blacks that emerged during the Civil War era, the U.S. experienced another crisis: civil unrest that burgeoned into the Civil Rights Movement. The U.S. Supreme Court of that era overturned decisions of previous U.S. Supreme Courts (e.g., 1954 Brown v Topeka Kansas Board of Education overturned 1896 Plessy v Ferguson). The racial cycle—disruption of, resistance to deviations from, and retrenchment of the racial status quo—observed throughout the racial history of the U.S. was reproduced. That is, states and localities resisted federal legislations. States like Louisiana and localities like New Orleans passed laws and enforced policies that systemically circumvented federal legislations. Specifically, in response to the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v Topeka Kansas Board of Education (1954) that declared unconstitutional state laws establishing separate public schools for Black and White students, Louisiana instituted laws that made school desegregation a violation of the state’s constitution. When these efforts failed to halt desegregation, White children whose parents did not enrol them into parochial schools were segregated from Black children by way of a platoon system—Black and White students occupied school facilities at different times during the day. Eventually, these overt efforts to halt and to stall the elimination of de jure segregation of public schools subsided and some desegregation of schools occurred.

In line with the earlier cycles of progress followed by retrenchment marked by decisions of the U.S. Supreme Courts of 1883, 1896, and 1954 in previous eras, the U.S. Supreme Court of the 1990s, less than four decades after the 1954 decision, permitted school districts to end desegregation plans. The instances of racial segregation in U.S. public schools and the under-resourcing of predominantly Black schools that existed since the time Blacks were allowed educational access in the U.S. increased throughout the remainder of the 20th century and continued into next. Although the blatant declarations of the racial ideology that emerged in the 1600s and that was enacted in federal and state legislation to ensure racial inequality and
racial inequity in education in the United States are no longer publically acceptable, processes and corresponding outcomes reminiscent of the past continue.

Harvard’s Civil Rights Project (Orfield & Lee, 2004) showed that schools are largely segregated in the present era with a White student attending schools with a student body 80% White and a Black student attending schools with a student body approximately 70% Black. As argued in Orfield and Lee (2004) and Morgan and Pullin (2010), amicus briefs for 20th century U.S. Supreme Court cases indicated that the allocation of resources to and the availability of opportunity within these highly segregated environments fall along racial lines with predominantly White schools resourced, on average, at levels higher than their Black counterparts. The previously described outcome also existed in previous times in the U.S. For example, in the 19th-century New Orleans the new leadership after the Compromise of 1877 reduced support for Black schools and created more publicly funded schools for the White working class (Devore & Logsdon, 1991). In the 21st-century New Orleans, Louisiana regulations (e.g., removal of attendance zones, exceptions for charter schools) resulted in publicly funded, selective admissions schools that serve 75% of the approximately 1,800 White students who attend New Orleans Public Schools; these selective admissions schools have a higher average per pupil expenditures than the predominantly Black schools in New Orleans. Although the past public declarations related to race did not transverse time, our historical trace shows that the racial inequality and racial inequity in education did.

Conclusion: The Need for Historical Reflexivity

Our historical trace illustrates that presentism, an orientation that situates racial inequality and racial inequity in education as contemporary challenges rooted in the present, is inaccurate. The relationship and connections between past outcomes of racial inequality and racial inequity in education and the U.S. racial ideology originating in the 1600s are obvious because of the overt expression of the racial ideology. Connections in contemporary times are less obvious due to the absence of such overt and public declarations related to the U.S. racial ideology but the subterranean nature of the connections does not negate their existence. Connections among racial ideology and racial inequality and racial inequity in education can be unearthed through a conscious and intentional consideration of the past in relation to the present. Without an adequate understanding of the challenges and a thorough diagnosis of the various dimensions of the problem, it is improbable that appropriate remedies are proposed and implemented to address the malady. Eliminating the consideration of race, meaning ascribed to physiognomy that indelibly and differentially impacts people’s lives, leads to an incomplete and inadequate understanding of racial inequality and racial inequity in education, hence, the effectiveness of remedies that align with the prevalent colorblind and post-racial orientations to reform are greatly compromised. For example, if solutions that feature social class (e.g., diversifying schools based on socioeconomic status indicators), the most prevalent mechanism undergirded by a colorblind and post-racial philosophy, are implemented to address inequalities and inequities in education some aspects of the challenge may be addressed but the inequality and inequities along racial lines will likely persist as evinced in the failure of class-based school desegregation plans to diversify schools. Analogous to illnesses that can have deleterious long-term effects if untreated or ill properly treated, remedies that do not address the race component of educational inequalities and inequities that fall along the lines of race alleviate symptoms for a period but the underlying cause of the illness remains and worsens over time. As the U.S. population becomes increasingly more diverse, the educational inequalities and inequities along racial lines will result in greater numbers of the U.S. populace being ill-prepared for life in the 21st century and have grave negative effects for quality of life, global competitiveness, and representative democracy that undergirds the core notion of what it means to be America. Historical reflexivity in lieu of presentism and solutions that consider race instead of colorblind and post-racial ones may be a formidable combination for attaining the elusive goals of racial equality and racial equity in education. Historical reflexivity, a term that characterizes the historical trace featured in this article, advocates contemplative and goal-directed behavior supplemented by a consideration of history. Historical reflexivity is a process in which education reformers consider the history around desired goals and related outcomes. This reflexivity,
a process of looking backward in order to inform moving forward, requires education reformers to (1) examine past goals that are similar to the current ones of interest, (2) consider the conditions, actions, and outcomes related to the past goals, (3) juxtapose conditions, actions, and outcomes of past goals to corresponding elements for present goals, and (4) identify and scrutinize correspondences across time. For example, if racial equality and racial equity are contemporary goals in New Orleans education reform then historical reflexivity would examine past actions and resulting outcomes by racial groups. A critical comparison and contrast between past goals, past actions, past outcomes and present-day goals and proposed present-day actions to achieve current goals would be conducted. If correspondences exist then it is reasonable to deduce that if proposed actions are fundamentally similar to past actions then current outcomes by groups will likely resemble past results. Historical reflexivity makes repeating patterns more apparent and signifies a need for a different course of action if the outcome for a goal deviates from what is desired. If racial equality and racial equity are desirable goals then history offers insights on how to achieve them.

An examination of history suggests that when the U.S. addressed inequality and inequity in education caused by racial policies with policies that heavily considered race progress towards equality and equity in education was made. For example, notable advances were evident during Reconstruction and during the Civil Rights Era. With the passage of time, challenges based on the ideal of race neutrality have resulted in the diminished employment of race-conscious approaches and progress towards racial equality and racial equity in education has stalled and regressed. Historical reflexivity, contemplation of contemporary action with respect to historical patterns, is one approach for education reformers to include among their repertoire. Historical reflexivity can be a mechanism in retaining advances made to date and promoting future progress towards racial equality and racial equity in education. If continual progress towards racial equality and racial equity in education is not made then the negative impact is not localized to the livelihood of certain U.S. groups as was the case historically. Due to the sheer number of the racially diverse in the U.S. and the growing demands of the 21st century (e.g., supply of professionals in science, engineering, technology, and mathematics), racial inequality and racial inequity in education is a threat to the quality of life in the U.S., the very status of the U.S. in the global community and subsequently the livelihood of all its citizens. History has also shown that progress towards racial equality and racial equity in education was largely stimulated by crises not by democratic ideals or morality. Will it take another history-making crisis for the United States to achieve greater racial equality and racial equity in education or will education reformers take a more proactive approach and develop education reform that reclaims the competitive edge of the U.S. that is in the best interest of all its citizens?

References


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