Review of the Article “School Racial Composition and Parental Choice” for Intro to Teaching

Schwarzen, MaryHannah

Bryan College, Dayton, TN

Billingham, C. M. and Hunt, M. O. (2006). School Racial Composition and Parental Choice: New Evidence on the Preferences of White Parents in the United States. Sociology of Education, vol. 89, no. 2,. Pages 99-117. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26382976>

In this article, the authors, Chase Billingham and Matthew Hunt, chose to tackle the topic of racial attitudes and the potential part they play in US school demographics. Primarily, they were interested in how Caucasian parents felt about the presence of other races in the schools that their children attended. Statistics show an unequal spread of white and black students, with white families unequally distributed together. This racial segregation leads to wide divide between people groups, and also to an unequal distribution of resources, leaving predominantly African-American populated schools lacking.

There are many reasons why this could be the case. Racial proxy, conditions that are not directly caused by, but are closely linked or perceived to be linked to race, has long been an issue in America. For neighborhoods, this could look like higher crime levels, lower housing values, and poverty. For the American school, these could be such conditions as residential non-integration and zoning. Thanks to greater options in the schooling world however, parents can choose where to send their child, and according to numbers, white parents are choosing “whiter schools.” This increased choice is aggravating the racial division. But is it racial proxy, or racism?

To discover if racism was the cause for this disparity, Billingham and Hunt performed a survey, randomly assigning participants an imaginary school’s statistics, and asking them how likely they would be to enroll their child in that school. Racial proxy factors in this survey included the presence or absence of high security in the school, varying dates for the last renovation of the school, and test score rankings. Racial segregation factors included the percentage of African-American students enrolled in the imaginary school.

Participants in this survey were randomly generated statistics from these categories for a school, and then asked how likely they would be to enroll their child. They were also asked to rank how they felt about Caucasian and African-American people. The hypothesis of racial proxy would gain support if proxy factors mainly affected potential enrollment, whereas the hypothesis of racial segregation would gain support if the proposed racial composition for the imaginary school predominantly affected potential enrollment.

The results showed that most Caucasian individuals taking the survey had slightly more positive views of whites than African-Americans. On top of this, although racial proxy factors certainly affected enrollment, a steady downward trend of interest in enrollment appeared as the percentage of African-American students in the imaginary school climbed. The school option with average test scores and an 80% African-American enrollment showed that Caucasian families were less than 50% likely to enroll their child. And these numbers only grew worse the more anti-black a participant was.

For conclusions, this article has drawn a definite correspondence from the survey results between black student enrollment numbers and the trend of Caucasian families choosing to send their children elsewhere. While segregation has been revoked for decades, traces of it are still alive and well within the public education system. It is apparent in the fact that white families are disinclined to send their children to a school that is heavily populated with African-American students.

Given how undiscussed and multi-faceted this topic is, the authors did their best to offer as controlled a survey as possible. The aim was to ensure an accurate return on participant answers, reflecting how American families actually think and do. However, there are still flaws in the method used. When offering the survey, they found that the sample from which they mainly received entries was from a higher educated and higher paid percentage than the average American. The survey was further limited in that participants were only offered one school option, and not many. The choice was either enrollment in this school, or “a more arduous educational process,” such as finding and paying for a private school. Given this choice, how many parents perhaps simply chose to enroll their child, no matter the diversity, rather than face the hassle?

While they freely admit that there are flaws in their survey, I would argue that Billingham and Hunt have done an excellent job with the materials they possessed. The survey methods and graphed results were a little tricky to comprehend, but thanks to the explanations offered within the article, their results were clear. The way they went about compiling and interpreting the information from their survey was comprehensive and inclusive, counting potential errors alongside results.

I do not feel that this information can be translated any other way, although it could be argued that racial proxy is given the underhand in this survey. The link between minority groups in the United States and poverty, crime and lower housing values is obvious, and this should not be discounted. In schools, this leaves minority groups with less resources, and less opportunity to break the cycle of repeated poverty and economic/social oppression. In order to combat this however, we need to first address the stereotypes and hostility still so present between our people groups. It is only by doing this that we can hope to offer a healthier, better education for all students.

Billingham and Hunt finish their article with thoughts for action to make a change. If race is what is keeping people apart, then we need to address attitudes that lead to behavior. Combatting racial proxy factors can encourage white families to consider schools that have higher African-American enrollment numbers, by decreasing other reasons to find an alternative education option. Cross-cultural programs can address incorrect beliefs of white superiority, encouraging integration and de-stigmatization.

Overall, this article is original and very educational. It was well thought out, well-executed, and well-organized. The findings support the conclusion of racism that the authors draw, and it is a unique contribution to the world of education.