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Standardized testing and school segregation: like tinder for fire?

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ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests that high-stakes standardized testing has played a negative role in the segregation of children by race and class in schools. In this article we review research on the overall effects of segregation, the positive and negative aspects of how desegregation plans were carried out following the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the de facto re-segregation that followed the dismantling of many desegregation plans, along with the increase of school choice plans. We then analyze these effects in light of the ways that high-stakes standardized testing has grown in importance and intensity in US education policy and practice, especially during the most recent period of school re-segregation. Based on the evidence we argue that the intrinsic features of high-stakes testing, combined with current systems of school choice, function as mechanisms used for racial coding that facilitate segregation and compound inequalities found in schools.

Introduction

High-stakes standardized testing in the US has been found to be deeply problematic by educational scholars, particularly since its forced national implementation vis-à-vis the No Child Left Behind Act (Meier and Wood 2004) and its immediate predecessors in states like Texas (McNeil 2000). Among the criticisms are the role they have played in narrowing the curriculum to only tested subjects, the incentives they place on teachers and schools to focus on the education of particular students near cut-off points ('bubble kids') at the expense of other children, the lack of open and democratic deliberation that precedes deciding the content of the tests and the cut-off points that count as 'proficient,' and the large margin of sampling error that is implicit with the construction of a short test (see for example, Au 2007, 2009; Chapman 1988; Gould 1996; Kohn 1999; Koretz 2009; Lipman 2004; McNeil 2000; Meier 2002; Meier and Wood 2004; Nichols and Berliner 2007; Sacks 1999). Up until this point little attention has been paid to the negative role high-stakes standardized testing has played in one of the most vexing issues in US education: the segregation of children by race and class in schools.

In this essay we review research on the overall effects of segregation, the positive and negative aspects of how desegregation plans were carried out following the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the de facto re-segregation that followed the dismantling of many

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desegregation plans, along with the increase of school choice plans. We then analyze these effects in light of the ways that high-stakes standardized testing has grown in importance and intensity in US education policy and practice, especially during the most recent period of school re-segregation. Based on the evidence we argue that the intrinsic features of high-stakes testing, combined with current systems of school choice, function as mechanisms used for racial coding that facilitate segregation and compound inequalities found in schools.

Segregation, desegregation and re-segregation of schools

The year 2014 marked the 60th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the case in which the US Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, ruled unanimously that segregated schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment of the Constitution, because 'separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.' Since that time, hundreds of studies have been conducted in all parts of the country on the impact that racial and economic desegregation in schools has had on the educational development of children. Most of these studies have revealed positive effects of desegregation in schools, revealing the good sense to be found in the 1954 court decision and the long struggle for desegregation of schools preceding, and succeeding, the ruling. As Orfield and Frankenberg (2011, 8), summarize:

> One of the very important findings in desegregation research is that desegregation has significant educational achievement advantages for nonwhite and poor children without creating any achievement losses for affluent and white children. In other words, it creates a net gain with no loss primarily because the achievement of more privileged children is more determined by their home background and opportunities, while that of more dis-advantaged children is influenced more by the quality of their school experiences and peer group. Aside from changes in test scores and graduation rates, there are important gains of other sorts such as preparation for life after graduation in diverse communities, colleges, and workplaces for all groups of students.

In another review of this literature, the themes of the positive educational impact of racial and economic integration were expounded upon in more detail. Other research has found that racial integration reduces racial stereotypes through increases in cross-racial interactions and understandings, especially for students in earlier grades and that students attending racially diverse schools show a higher likelihood of living and working in diverse communities. Further research has noted psychological benefits of integration as well, particularly feelings of increased safety and less alienation from peers (Tefera et al. 2011).

The literature on the positive impacts of desegregation is significant for multiple reasons, as the emotional and social knowledge, health and well-being of children play crucial roles throughout their lives. Moreover, these findings should be welcomed as achievements toward one of the original goals of public education in the US: for self-governance in a democracy (Knoester and Parkison 2015). Given the nation's growing ethnic and cultural diversity, the knowledge, skills and dispositions described above are perhaps more important than ever. However, the purposes of education in public discourse have notably shifted in recent decades from a focus on education for democracy to a neoliberal focus on jobs and the economy (Apple 2006; Lubienski 2003), a shift that may at least partially explain why more progress toward integration in schools has not been achieved, and is not even discussed as the high priority it once was. Orfield (2009) reports that schools in the US are as segregated today as they were in the 1950s.

White resistance to desegregation and racial equality

The *Brown* ruling must be seen as a hard-fought victory for Civil Rights, as it ended state-sanctioned segregation in schools. Yet despite the positive effects of desegregated schooling found in research, it is important to note that white resistance to desegregation – and to separate but equal educational resources for black children – has also caused significant harm to black children and communities throughout each of the major periods of segregation, desegregation and re-segregation of schools. In

recent years significant attention has been paid in educational research to the negative repercussions of how *Brown* was carried out and how white resistance often prevented meaningfully integrated schooling. Particularly harmful to black communities was the shuttering of black schools, the firing of black teachers, and the unequal treatment of black students in multiracial schools that accompanied efforts at desegregation in many locations (Jones 2015). *Brown v. Board of Education* may have ended state-sanctioned school segregation, but it did not end white supremacy, the effects of which continue to be felt.

In a recent book focusing on this topic, Horsford (2011, 81) reminds us of the words of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr.: 'We have fought long and hard for integration, as I believe we should have, and I know that we will win. But I've come to believe we're integrating into a burning house.' In the context of desegregated schools, Horsford describes how black students, teachers, and school leaders were treated in southern states in the decades following the *Brown* decision. Nearly all of the black schools were closed in these years, more than 38,000 black teachers lost their jobs, as did hundreds of black principals and other school administrators. Further, students, who were once taught by caring teachers committed to the black community of which they were a part, often found themselves in hostile environments (see also Walker 2000, 1996).

Cecelski (1994) documented the process of school desegregation and the strong resistance from the black community to the closing of two black schools in North Carolina. Cecelski (1994, 9) wrote, 'black students repeatedly encountered hostile attitudes, racial bias in student disciplining, segregated bussing routes, unfair tracking into remedial and other lower-level classes, low academic expectations, and estrangement from extracurricular activities.' Other scholars have pointed out that while many schools may appear to be racially desegregated statistically, all too many of these schools are segregated within themselves, through the use of tracking and other forms of separation (Gamoran 1987; Gamoran and Mare 1989; Oakes 1985, 1990). Horsford (2011, 65) argued:

> School desegregation was an important and necessary step in eliminating the state-sanctioned segregation that limited educational access and opportunities to black children throughout the United States. Separate schools were, in fact, never equal. It is important, however, to note the unintended, or arguably, intended, consequences (Tillman 2004) of desegregation that have diminished the promise of *Brown* in the eyes of many black Americans who discovered that the law was neither neutral, meritocratic, nor colorblind.

These negative experiences of black children in desegregated schools are part of the 'burning house' to which Dr King referred. In response to what should be done about the problem, Dr King reportedly said, 'We're just going to have to become firemen' (Horsford 2011, 91).

In this article, we further interrogate the promise and problems associated with the history of segregation, desegregation, and re-segregation in the US. There is hardly a more troubling issue in education than that of segregation. The lack of meaningful racial integration in schools remains a problem for the same reasons articulated by the Warren Court in 1954, 'separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.' This is true because white individuals and communities historically and presently monopolize political, economic, social, and educational power. While white supremacy – or the belief that white people should continue to monopolize this power due to personal or cultural merit – ensures that separate educational facilities for black children will not offer educational opportunities equal to those for white children (Bell 1995; Lipsitz 1998; Mills 1997; Roithmayr 2014). Due to white resistance to school desegregation, as well as resistance to integrated housing and jobs, and the active but piecemeal dismantling of laws supporting desegregation, the levels of racial segregation in schools have nearly returned to their pre-*Brown* era (Orfield 2009). At the same time, there has been an increase in school choice schemes and greater pressures placed on schools to increase test scores. These laws have facilitated segregation even within integrated cities and neighborhoods ((Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang 2011; Garcia 2008; Glenn 2011; Knoester 2011; Wells 2002).

What might it mean to 'become firemen,' in the words of Dr King? In the following sections we focus on two key challenges that may be considered 'tinder for the fire': (1) The vestiges of white supremacy in educational institutions and policies; and (2) The use of powerful managerial tools such as standardized tests tied to high-stakes decisions, which both serve to racially code schools and to place

enormous pressure on schools with low test scores (generally those with large numbers of children of color and living in poverty) to teach to the test. Here we pose the question: How might we fight the fires of these two key causes of segregation and racial inequality in education today?

Critical race theory

Critical Race Theory is a conceptual framework useful in understanding how racism operates, including within institutions such as schools, by paying careful attention to the differential resources and opportunities available to students of different races, as opposed to the more common form of racial theorizing, focusing on individual acts of hatred or racism. The principal founder of this theoretical traditional was Derrick A. Bell, Jr. (1995), who outlined basic principles that describe how racism can be understood. Reflecting on the *Brown* ruling and its aftermath, Bell (1995) wrote:

> Effective schools for blacks must be a primary goal rather than a secondary result of integration. Many white parents recognize a value in integrated schooling for their children, but they quite properly view integration as merely one component of an effective education.

Further, Bell notes that the schools led by black educators have been unfairly castigated as sub-par and their destruction was deeply hurtful to black communities, since black teachers were part of, and deeply committed to, the improvement of black children's lives:

> Some black educators, however, see major educational benefits in schools where black children, parents, and teachers can utilize the real cultural strengths of the black community to overcome the many barriers to educational achievement.

Thus, as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) point out, given the dismantling of black educational institutions and the placing of black and brown students into predominantly white institutions associated with desegregation programs around the country, it is no surprise that students of color were often underserved and dis-served by many desegregation programs.

Critical Race Theory generally, and as applied to education, also looks at the intersection of race and legal property rights as a key juncture in the maintenance of racism in the US, where there is a long history of outright racist and race-neutral property laws that have contributed to racial inequalities (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Further, a key tenet of Critical Race Theory is that such inequality is regularly obscured under the guise of race-less or race-neutral laws and policies and is instead framed around individual equality as expressed through concepts such as meritocracy – that success is purely the result of individual hard work and not the function of social, historical, or institutional processes (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Delgado and Stefancic 2000; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Thus, within a Critical Race framework, it becomes important to consider issues surrounding segregation, desegregation, and re-segregation of schools as part of a larger conversation about white material advantage and the material disadvantage of communities of color, often under the guise of non-race specific and sometimes rhetorically anti-racist policies. Indeed, the imposition of discourses of meritocracy and race-neutrality serve to decenter structural racism and move discussions of the white supremacist outcomes of our institutions outside of what might be considered the 'sensible,' 'commonsense,' mainstream of US politics (Leonardo 2002). In this way we see the politics of segregation, desegregation, and re-segregation as a 'racial project' as described by Omi and Winant (2015), who state that:

> A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive or ideological practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based on that meaning. Racial projects are attempts both to shape the ways in which social structures are racially signified and the ways that racial meanings are embedded in social structures. (Omi and Winant 2015, 125, original emphasis)

In this light we suggest that the state-enforced segregation of schools, followed by the mass closing of black schools and firing of black teachers, and followed by the re-segregation of schools cannot be understood without viewing white supremacy as a mainstream, widespread phenomenon, one expressed through education policy and practices (Gillborn 2005). It is our contention that, using the lens of Critical Race Theory and taking into account the current education policy context, when we look at the history of high-stakes testing and its contemporary and racially disparate impact on the educational experiences of students today, such testing contributes to the inequitable re-segregation of schools through the false assumption of meritocracy in conjunction with school choice schemes.

How high-stakes testing facilitates racism, segregation, and white supremacy

It is important to recognize that high-stakes, standardized tests as we know them today are simply one form of assessment amongst many possibilities, and that they are the central tool for leveraging reform within the context of US educational policies built around concepts of accountability (Au 2009). Standardized tests are just assessments that have been standardized: The same set of questions administered in same way and under relatively similar conditions (ideally), with the intent of creating comparable results. These tests become "high-stakes" once consequences like teacher performance and student graduation or promotion are attached to test results (Popham 2001). Thus, to be clear, our discussion here is not about assessment writ large. Rather, our analysis focuses on high-stakes, standardized testing as the fulcrum upon which education reforms pivot, and as a tool for racializing decisions about children, schools, and communities. As noted above, a great deal of scholarship has pointed to the negative effects of the use of these tests in schools, especially those required by the No Child Left Behind Law of 2001 (Au 2009; Chapman 1988; Gould 1996; Kohn 1999; Koretz 2009; Lipman 2004; McNeil 2000; Meier 2002; Meier and Wood 2004; Nichols and Berliner 2007; Sacks 1999). These arguments consist of both critiques of the flawed assumptions and construction of the tests themselves, as well as of the use of test results. However, almost no scholarship connects the flaws of standardized testing with the mechanisms of white supremacy and racial segregation.

Why must standardized tests be understood as connected to segregation? Within the current context, high-stakes standardized tests function as the core for all education policy. Every major initiative, from charter schools to 'value added measurement' and 'student growth models' to evaluate teachers, to challenges to teacher tenure and rights to collective bargaining, to school closings, to the use of undertrained and inexperienced Teach For America recruits in high needs and low needs schools, to the implementation of the Common Core national standards and tests, all revolve around justifications associated with how different populations of students perform on high-stakes, standardized tests. These tests produce the data upon which important decisions about students, teachers, administrators, and schools are being made (Au 2007, 2009). The centrality of high-stakes, standardized testing is the reason that it is important to understand their inherent racism and their role in enforcing white supremacy within the US both historically and today.

A short history of high-stakes testing and white supremacy in the US

Racist bias in mental testing long preceded the paper-and-pencil standardized tests developed at the beginning of the twentieth century. Gould (1996) recounted in great detail the racist assumptions of 'scientists' who used methods such as measuring and comparing the size of skull cavities and head circumferences to determine both individual and race-based group 'intelligence.' The development of question-and-answer based standardized testing to study and assess individuals and groups in the US, similar to the tests widely used in schools today, began with IQ testing and the eugenics movement of the early 1900s. French psychologist Alfred Binet first developed the concept of 'intelligence quotient,' or IQ, to assess whether or not young children were dealing with mental disabilities. Although Binet began by measuring the circumference of children's heads, he later developed question-and-answer tests. US psychologists imported Binet's original conception of IQ by injecting their own underlying

presumptions about humans and human ability into their interpretations of test results (Au 2009; Gould 1996). For instance, in 1917 as a psychologist and Army Colonel in charge of the mental testing of 1.75 million recruits during World War I, Robert Yerkes teamed with Henry Goddard, Lewis Terman, and others to create and administer the Alpha and Beta Army standardized tests to assess and sort incoming soldiers according to 'mental fitness.' Based on this large pool of army recruit test data, these psychologists drew several dubious conclusions including that the intelligence of European immigrants could be judged according to their country of origin: The darker peoples of eastern and southern Europe were less intelligent than their fairer-skinned, Western and northern European counterparts. Yerkes, Goddard, and Terman also concluded that, according to the test results, African Americans were the least intelligent of all peoples (Giordano 2005), a conclusion echoing that of the craniologists of the nineteenth century (however, Gould showed that craniologists ignored their own evidence and skewed their own logic to reach their racist conclusions). As Karier (1972, 163–164) explains:

> Designing the Stanford-Binet intelligence test, Terman developed questions which were based on presumed progressive difficulty in performing tasks which he believed were necessary for achievement in ascending the hierarchical occupational structure. He then proceeded to find that according to the results of his tests the intelligence of different occupational classes fit his ascending hierarchy. It was little wonder that IQ reflected social class bias. It was, in fact, based on the social class order.

With the authority bestowed by such 'scientific' findings, eugenicists – who believed in the genetic basis for behavioral and character traits they associated with gender, race, and class differences – advocated that race mixing was spreading the alleged inferior genes of African Americans, other non-white peoples, and immigrants (Selden 1999). As such, early standardized testing quite clearly operated as a technology to support supposedly 'scientific' basis for claims of white superiority.

Standardized testing, justified by pseudo-science and a racist socio-political order, proved to also be useful as a technology for sorting students efficiently by race and class, and it quickly moved into use in public education in the US. As Tyack (1974, 180) explains:

> Intelligence testing and other forms of measurement provided the technology for classifying children. Nature-nurture controversies might pepper the scientific periodicals and magazines of the intelligentsia, but schoolmen found IQ tests invaluable means of channeling children; by the very act of channeling pupils, they helped to make IQ prophecies self-fulfilling.

As a Stanford professor and with the support of the National Academy of Sciences, Terman was central to the adaptation of the army tests into the National Intelligence Tests for schoolchildren in 1919, and by 1920 over 400,000 copies of these tests had been sold nationwide. Terman and others also developed the Stanford Achievement Test in 1922, and by late 1925 it was reported that nearly 1.5 million copies of this test had been sold. Surveys in 1925, 1926, and 1932 found that the majority of cities in the US with populations over 10,000 people were using such tests to sort students into ability groups in schools (Chapman 1988; Haney 1984). The juggernaut of standardized testing in schools has not stopped since then, and as we noted above, has only heightened (and become high-stakes, meaning key educational decisions were tied to their results) with the No Child Left Behind Act and continues to plow forward with Common Core assessments.

What those early IQ and in-school standardized assessments have in common is that, just as psychologists and others believed 100 years ago, today's high-stakes, standardized tests are built upon a foundational assumption of providing objective, 'scientific' measurements of student learning (Au 2009, Au 2015). It is critical to consider the leap of faith that tests require of those who interpret their results as being accurate and objective: All high-stakes, standardized tests are based on sampling a small portion of a test-taker's knowledge through a limited number of questions, and the entire breadth of a test-taker's knowledge is never measured. Thus, the information generated by such specific samples are based on correlation and inference, and by definition cannot be used to make causal, general, or definitive conclusions about the child or about teaching and learning (Popham 2001). Legitimizing the accuracy of the tests therefore rests on their appearance of objectivity, bathed in the language of science and measurement, an approach consistent with the 'objective' methods of 19th century cognitive psychologists (Au 2009; Au 2011; Sacks 1999). In the following section we take up how the

presumed objectivity of high-stakes standardized tests are used, vis-à-vis the ideology of meritocracy, to mask racist outcomes embedded within the very tests themselves.

Standardized testing and meritocracy as a proxy for whiteness

The use of standardized tests to measure, sort, and rank students is based on the assumption that these tests are measuring students objectively and accurately. If the tests are objective, then they truly are assessing the individual merits of students. In turn, following this logic, the hardest working individual students (those with the most merit) will rise above their peers. This idea, that individual merit through hard work is what creates opportunity and success, is referred to as the idea of 'meritocracy' (Lemann 1999; Bonilla-Silva 2013). Early standardized testing in the US was built upon the idea of meritocracy in that they were viewed as providing a completely objective and value free measurement of human intelligence and ability, despite the fact that they clearly produced racist and classist outcomes (Au 2009). Perhaps ironically, given the unequal outcomes, the perceived objectivity of these tests was used to argue against class inequality in education: Early advocates of testing also saw standardized testing as a means of challenging class privilege through objective measurement of student ability, not class status or other social and economic factors (Sacks 1999). Such logics are also extended to testing, merit, and racial inequalities, as Moore (2005, 184) suggests:

> In terms of race, we assume that who is tested, what is tested, and how tests are administered and interpreted have all been bathed by neutrality through 'testing conditions' that include sterile classrooms, 'expert' test givers, and the use of inanimate computers and 'color blind' standards.

If we assume the objective accuracy of standardized tests in their measurement of students, then every test taker is offered a color-blind and class blind, fair and equal shot at educational, social, and economic attainment. Early creators of the SAT college entrance exam, for instance, saw this test as a means to challenge entrenched class privileges that gave the rich advantages in accessing higher education (Lemann 1999; Sacks 1999).

As noted above, however, these early standardized tests were used to justify racism and classism. Thus the ideology of meritocracy undergirding the use of standardized tests effectively concealed structural inequalities associated with racism and white supremacy under the cover of the idea of 'naturally' occurring individual aptitude (Bisseret 1979). Framed by this ideology of meritocracy, the disproportionate low achievement on standardized tests of non-whites can be and was (and is) simply attributed to the failure of individual students, and by extension whole families, cultures, races, teachers, or schools, and not attributed to existing structural inequalities that support white supremacy. As Hartman (2007, 143) explains, even the SAT:

> … failed to stray from past definitions of what it meant to be American. Sure, after the implementation of the SAT blacks and other peripheral groups were able to gaze upon increased opportunity. But this gaze was merely an apparition for most. The SAT, consistent with other integration projects, did not accommodate black or female identities – in this case, differing learning styles. In order for a more fully integrated society to emerge from the SAT, the onus was placed upon blacks to accommodate to American identity. The SAT further entrenched a seemingly elusive White identity as the de facto American identity.

Standardized tests, in conjunction with the ideology of meritocracy, thus have operated as a tool of white supremacy because they make racist outcomes of the tests appear as a byproduct of the way the world works objectively and naturally – they 'scientifically' justify the existing racial order, and they do so within a false promise of measuring everyone equally, accurately, and fairly. Indeed, in their research on the SAT, which was drawn from data of over 300,000 test takers, Kidder and Rosner (2002) found an unrecognized racial bias buried in the SAT test question process itself. As Rosner (2003, 24) explains:

> Each individual SAT question ETS chooses is required to parallel outcomes of the test overall. So, if high-scoring test takers – who are more likely to be white – tend to answer the question correctly in [experimental] pretesting, it's a worthy SAT question; if not, it's thrown out. Race and ethnicity are not considered explicitly, but racially disparate scores drive question selection, which in turn reproduces racially disparate test results in an internally reinforcing cycle.

Thus, because the SAT is constructed on past performance of SAT takers as a predictor of what makes a 'good' SAT question for future tests – and past performance correlates strongly with race and class, the SAT is fundamentally built around a self-reinforcing cycle of racism that limits the college access of non-whites. Couched in the language of statistical reliability and validity, an officially race-neutral process of test development ultimately produced very race-biased results (Kidder and Rosner 2002). Further, it is important to note that more recent research on the SAT has identified other forms of racial and cultural bias built into the types of questions asked on the exam, with significant bias found specifically in the easier questions that appear earlier in the SAT question sequence (Santelices and Wilson 2010).

While researchers have not been able to 'get inside' the test development process to the same degree that they were able to for the above research on the SAT, we do know from decades of research that modern-day, high-stakes, standardized testing in K-12 education similarly correlate more strongly with structural inequalities associated with racism and poverty than any other factor – especially the 'meritocratic effort' of individuals. As Berliner (2013, 1) explains:

> When the variance in student scores on achievement tests is examined along with the many potential factors that may have contributed to those test scores, school effects account for about 20% of the variation in achievement test scores …

> On the other hand, out-of-school variables account for about 60% of the variance that can be accounted for in student achievement. In aggregate, such factors as family income; the neighborhood's sense of collective efficacy, violence rate, and average income; medical and dental care available and used; level of food insecurity; number of moves a family makes over the course of a child's school years … provision of high-quality early education in the neighborhood; language spoken at home; and so forth, all substantially affect school achievement.

While school does remain a critically important factor in the success or failure of all students, socio-economic factors outside of school – those that disproportionately impact communities of color – have an overwhelming effect on educational achievement. However, the ideology of meritocracy embedded in high-stakes testing functionally masks this reality (Au 2009).

High-stakes, standardized testing, and the meritocratic assumptions that serve to underpin it, also create another self-reinforcing cycle of racism that serves as a proxy for the expression of whiteness (Au 2015). Since on the whole, low-income and communities of color perform poorly on these tests, research has consistently found that the pressures of high-stakes, standardized testing are greatest in states and districts with large populations of non-white students (Nichols and Berliner 2007), and that the narrowing of the curriculum to align with the tests is sharpest in schools with large, populations of non-white students (Au 2007, 2009; Renter et al. 2006). This has meant that, within the high-stakes testing environment, low income and children of color are effectively experiencing a type of segregated, test-based curriculum with more rote memorization, more teacher centered instruction, less recess, less art, less music, less science, and less social studies than the type of curriculum that whiter, more affluent students receive in their high performing schools (Au 2007, 2009; McNeil 2000). As such, both test performance and school curriculum become effectively marked in highly racialized terms. Using test scores as a guide, a 'good' school is thus equivocated with whiteness, affluence, and a rich curriculum, while a 'bad' school is equivocated with black and brownness, poverty, and an un-enriching curriculum. As we discuss in the next section, when high-stakes testing is combined with meritocratic assumptions to establish a veneer of objectivity and fairness, and thus allowing for test success to proxy for whiteness, it allows white parents to distance themselves from the racism inherent in the school choices they are making for their own children.

White parents, high-stakes testing, and racial coding

Institutional and cultural segregation and marginalization of black communities (and other communities of color) compound the effects of inequality on education. As Rothstein (2013) notes, racial and economic isolation is prevalent and disproportionately racist today, with 39% of black children coming from families living below the income poverty line versus 12% of white children,

and 28% of black children residing in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty versus 4% for white children. Further, the unemployment rates for blacks is more than twice that of whites, and young black adults are incarcerated by the criminal justice system at alarmingly disproportionate rates that exceed those of the 1950s.

Kozol (2005) and others who focus on the problem of segregated schools describe in great detail the inequalities present in today's schools. They describe many schools that serve poor black and brown students as decrepit, under-resourced and dangerous places. It is easy to understand why parents would not want to send their children to these schools. But what he and others generally do not describe are the high-functioning, welcoming, racially and economically integrated schools, those that resist the pressure of high-stakes testing to strip rich curriculum from the school in favor of rote preparation for the tests (Apple and Beane 2007; Knoester 2012). Places like these continue to exist despite the odds, but the continued process of segregation based on test scores that misrepresent the positive aspects of racially and integrated schools exacerbate these problems.

The most influential indicator of school quality today – according to mainstream discourse – is the test scores a school's students produce, which are publicly available on city and state websites, and often published in local newspapers. As noted above, standardized test scores, being strongly correlated with race and class (Berliner 2013), serve to convert racial and class-based prejudices into 'objective science' (Au 2009, 2011), which enables the racial project (Omi and Winant 2015) of white and middle-class parents to situating their children with other white and middle-class children, without the burden of appearing to be racist or classist in their choices. It is tempting to argue that white supremacy blinds white parents and prevents them from thinking logically about school choices for their children; that their first priority is always to prevent their children from being educated along with black children. This conclusion would be simplistic and ignore the articulated thought processes of many parents as they choose schools (and housing arrangements) that they believe will prepare their children for competitive advantages and upward mobility relative to educational and social success (Weis, Cipollone, and Jenkins 2014).

In one attempt to understand the thought processes of white parents regarding school choices related to race, Stuart Wells and colleagues (2013, 1) conducted interviews with white parents of school-age children in New York City. They found liberal parents who expressed a desire to send their children to racially diverse schools, but their commitment proved to be very weak. Stuart Wells et al. wrote:

> We conducted in-depth interviews with dozens of parents participating in the kindergarten lottery in one of the increasingly white community school districts in New York City. The majority of the white parents we interviewed said one of the reasons they live in New York City is so that their children will grow up in a diverse environment. They bemoan[ed] the degree of racial segregation between and within the public schools, noting that this makes them uncomfortable and contradicts their sense of who they are and why they chose to raise their children in the city.

> Despite these intentions, when these white, affluent parents are faced mostly with choices of racially segregated schools or majority white gifted education programs within otherwise diverse public schools, they tend to make decisions for their children that perpetuate these racial distinctions. As one parent we interviewed for our larger research project noted, when you only have the choice of segregation, you choose segregation.

The indicators of 'good' schools for these parents were the test scores of children in attendance. Given the strong correlations of race and economic class to high-stakes, standardized test scores (Au 2009), and given the disproportionate numbers of people of color living at or below poverty levels (Rothstein 2013), such test scores can serve as a proxy for parents to make functionally racist judgments about school and educational quality without talking about race explicitly. In Trainor's (2005, 141) analysis of white discourse about race, she finds that, 'racist language functions metaphorically. That is, it acts as a rhetorical bridge between unlike domains: the affective domain of feeling, on the one hand, and the political domain of racial belief and identity, on the other.' Since the 'fear of being labeled a racist' has become 'perhaps one of the most effective behavioral and verbal restraints in the United States today' (Van Den Berghe 1996, as cited in Pollock 2004, 2; see also Bonilla-Silva 2013), talk about race has become hidden behind metaphors and, high-stakes, standardized test scores have become a

seemingly race-neutral metaphor for these parents to operationalize their racial fears without having to visibly appear 'racist' to outsiders.

A recent example of this language among white parents choosing a school for their children comes from an article published in the regional magazine *Washingtonian.* There, a parent details her obsession and the 'peculiar blend of hysteria, fear, and desperation in us helpless parents' about choosing a school in the Washington, DC area. Despite finding a (racially diverse) school for her child that she and her husband were 'ecstatic' about one year, she:

> … re-entered the pre-K lottery last year because that's what everyone else at our not-all-that-prestigious school did. Unless you've landed at one of the handful of places that a specific cohort of white, over-educated, 'high SES' (i.e., high socioeconomic status) parents salivate over, you're supposed to keep on spinning the wheel. (Moser 2014, 55)

Never in the article does Moser blatantly state that she wants a school with a large portion of white, 'high SES' children in it. Rather, it is the test scores that 'matter' to her:

> While schools are expanding, the desirable ones just aren't growing fast enough to keep pace with the population. For next fall's kindergarten class at Brent Elementary, which has the best test scores on Capitol Hill, there are three open OOB [out of boundary] spots. The school had 185 hopeful applicants last year, 129 the year before. (2014, 54)

Moser's article offers a clear example of how affluent, white desirability is easily mapped onto metrics of test scores, all in the maintenance of upward mobility and class status vis-à-vis educational institutions. Thus we see the role that high-stakes, standardized tests play in creating the appearance that a multicultural, diverse school with a significant population of communities of color is constructed as less 'desirable' or 'viable' than a largely white school.

Reflecting the common sense understandings of many affluent, white parents, in their research on school choice, Schneider, Teske, and Marschall (2000, 45) suggest that for parents in their study, 'Other things equal, parents who value ethnic diversity in their children's schools should enroll their children in a school with a diverse student body, while parents who value academic performance should enroll their children in a school with high test scores.' Such a perspective is worrisome because it sets up a false dichotomy that is predicated on inequality and self-interest: If you value cultural awareness, and, fundamentally, a more democratic life, then send your child to a school with more 'diversity.' However, if you want your child to get ahead of the others, then look for a school with higher test scores. But a closer look at what standardized test scores actually tell us, as we have done here, makes it clear that the tests also serve a different function – that of enabling parents to segregate their children by race and class without the appearance and stigma of doing so.

Seeing the connections among standardized testing, white supremacy, and segregation

The connections between high-stakes, standardized testing, segregation, and white supremacy that we describe in this essay should not be surprising. Scholars and policy makers have known about the correlations between race and class and test scores for decades (Au 2007, 2009, 2011, 2015; Berliner 2013; Gould 1996) and the choices that affluent, white parents have historically made with regards to the kinds of schools and communities they have wanted to send their children. However, as neoliberal discourses in education policy have become hegemonic (Apple 2006), the goal of desegregating schools has been pushed off the agenda of policy makers. Indeed, if the tests provide objective, meritocratic measurement of students, then neoliberal logics decree that structural inequalities do not exist. Thus, by extension, individual parents appear to be making individual choices for their children based on market competition and demand. Within these logics, if segregation happens, then so be it: Segregation is simply an expression of the will of the free market, and issues of segregation and desegregation are ostensibly not the concern of policymakers. Further, and perhaps as a product of the hegemony of neoliberal discourses, the specific connections amongst high-stakes standardized testing, segregation, and white supremacy have also gone nearly without comment in educational research.

The official reason testing is carried out in schools is because tests are used to evaluate, and supposedly, to improve schools. But we must also understand that testing is supported politically because it serves other purposes as well: Given its racist history and contemporary racist outcomes, high-stakes, standardized testing converts segregation, and its white supremacist impulses, into an 'objective science.' Testing allows parents and others to avoid the stigma of saying out loud that they favor segregation as they choose schools with a whiter and richer population for their own children, and also provides justification for their support of segregation within schools – tracking students of different races into rigid 'ability groups,' relegating students of color to lower tracks, as well as lower expectations, fewer resources, such as highly-qualified teachers, and with little chance to escape this lower track (Gamoran 1987; Gamoran and Mare 1989; Oakes 1985, 1990).

We want to be clear that it is not our intention to argue that white parents choosing a more diverse school, in itself, necessarily improves the education of children of color. At the root of many arguments in favor of desegregation (and against segregation), including that made by the Supreme Court in 1954, is the assumption that desegregation will more equitably distribute resources for the education of all children. Thus, setting aside arguments about segregation, high-stakes testing, and the choices that white parents make for their children, we recognize that a core issue here is the amount and quality of resources allotted to support the education of children of color in public schools. Desegregation in and of itself will not necessarily address all the needs of students of color or students in poverty; an under-resourced, desegregated, and diverse school is still an under-resourced school.

Conclusion

Given our analysis, what might it mean to be firefighters in the 'burning building' that is an 'integrated' institution dominated by white supremacy? We do not care to give up the dream of creating meaningful integrated and equal schools that can attend to the identities of all students. Children (and educational leaders) should experience public education in a democracy as development of knowledge, skills and dispositions to understand and interrupt powerful social forces of racism and oppression, to develop academic identities using culturally relevant pedagogies, and to learn history, science, math, art, and literature relevant to their lives and futures. These goals have become more difficult with the rise of high-stakes standardized testing. Further, school leaders cannot depend for high-stakes decisions on assessment tools like standardized tests, which were created to differentiate by race and class. These tests can be, and are, used as a coded vocabulary by those wishing to segregate by race and class. Citing nothing more than a test score, parents and policy makers sustain a segregated and unequal educational system while appearing 'objective' and 'removed' from the segregation that is perpetuated by this flawed technology. Many more valid forms of assessment are available, those that involve knowing children well, reflective of the content knowledge actually taught in schools, and more effective in communicating to students, parents, and the community the strengths and challenges of particular students and groups of students (Knoester 2008, 2012a, 2012b; Meier, Knoester, and D'Andrea 2015).

There are many other problems with the use of high-stakes standardized testing in schools, but in this essay we have focused on the connections between these tests and the social process of segregation found in US schools. Citing the problematic history of desegregation in the US, we drew on the metaphor used by Dr King to describe the troubled goal of integrating into an unequal system: a 'burning house.' To 'become firefighters' we must extinguish the burning tinder: the continued logic of white supremacy and the enabling technology of high stakes standardized tests.

Disclosure statement

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