



Portraits of the Past-Perspectives for the Present: Segregated and Desegregated Schools in Early County, Georgia, 1960-1981

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Research Problem

American public school resegregation is a rarely discussed reality, as are the origins and effects of desegregated public schools. This qualitative portraiture study examined segregated and desegregated public schools in rural Early County, Georgia, from 1960-1981 to give a more complete accounting of the time.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework constructed from relevant literature demonstrated that a spiraling silence developed in regard to events in the progression of civil rights and educational opportunity. Silence and a misunderstanding of history bred anger, fear, guilt, and defensiveness that made authentic cross-racial communication and relationships rare, and contributed to the resegregation of American public schools. Resegregation exacerbated the spiral by lessening first-hand cross-racial experiences, thereby reducing cross-racial understanding.

Research Purposes

The purposes were to: Portray segregated and desegregated schools as they existed in Early County from 1960-1981; Elucidate the meaning the schools had for those who studied and worked in them; Glean from these meanings perspectives that both inform and ease cross-racial conversations.

Research Methodology

This qualitative portraiture study developed through three overlapping and intermingled facets: Facet I-Context; Facet II-In depth Interviews; Facet III-Cross-racial Perspectives.

Research Sources

Sources included: In depth interviews with 11 African American and 16 White participants from 3 generational groups; informal interviews with other individuals; archival evidence from public and private sources; and contextual understanding of the community and its schools from 1818-1960.

Research Findings

Although this spiraling silence about race and schooling developed in Early County, exceptions also developed there in the form of cross-racial communication and partnerships. These factors rewrote the narrative of school desegregation in Early County and engendered enduring public school loyalty.

Candid yearbook photo depicting the Early County High School Class of 1973



Source: *The Bobcat*, 1973

Research Metaphor

Findings were presented using a central metaphor that compared the public school system in Early County to a century-old live oak tree. Just as the great oak may have begun as two separate trees, so the White and African American schools grew separately at first, one in full sun, the other tree blocked by the first. When court intervention called for the *grafting* of the African American and White schools, people from both schools felt as if a part of them had been sliced away and that they were being forcibly bound to something unfamiliar.

Nevertheless, the graft took, and the school system remained desegregated for the next 40 years, despite some loss of outside support and notable internal divisions. As the only public school system in the huge county, the system drew from a wide area and in turn, offered to many a respite from the still burning heat of prejudice and from the opportunity-poor surrounding area. With the right elements in place at the right times, the system escaped the resegregation that befell other schools



Century-old live oak tree in Early County, Georgia

Research Conclusions

Reasons for the exceptions to the spiraling silence in Early County included: nontraditional, inclusive, courageous, and optimistic leadership practiced by White and African American educators; a local carrot and stick desegregation strategy combining legal mandates with highly visible federal funding; relentless, positive public relations; and daily perseverance through the difficult and unprecedented work. This study supported previous research findings on the fragile nature of desegregated schools within a segregated society, the evolutionary nature of racial attitudes, and the positive influence of desegregated education on such changes .

Research Recommendations

Recommendations are that: School leaders commit to cross-racial dialogue despite its difficulties; higher education institutions educate about the spiraling silence on race and schooling and teach ways to break the silence; local school systems retell their own school histories in ways that to include African American educational heritage; Americans regain the moral imperative to support desegregated public schooling and broaden the contemporary narrative on accountability and school choice to consider desegregation.

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