

BOOK REVIEW

International perspectives on countering school segregation, edited by J. Bakker, E. Denessen, D. Peters and G. Walraven, Antwerpen-Apeldoorn, Garant, 2011, 282 pp., €32,00, ISBN 978-90-441-2694-5

What is segregation in education? What are its causes and effects? What are the local initiatives or the national policies aimed at countering it? Are they effective? And, last but not least, does segregation really matter?

These are the core questions this book puts forward with three explicit aims:

- To investigate the international state of the affairs regarding school integration and segregation.
- To collect and disseminate examples and information about the effectiveness of various desegregation policies.
- To examine the effects of policy intervention, not only regarding positive outcomes among students with respect to school achievement, but also with the broader intent of developing positive out-group attitudes, interethnic contact and positive citizenship values.

Fourteen essays covering almost 20 countries, regions and communities – such as the USA, as well as all European countries – allow the reader to follow the very complex and often conflicting issues this volume addresses.

The book represents the result of contributions from an international, informal network established and organised by the Dutch National Centre for Mixed Schools. It offers a very comprehensive picture on segregation in education, framed by a general introduction which presents the project and by a well-organised conclusion which sums up the different issues raised and the ‘lessons learned’.

A more theoretical socio-philosophical essay ‘Does segregation really matter?’ completes the volume. The essay poses uneasy questions and adds an in-depth perspective to the contributions.

Since inclusion involves participation and issues of social justice, desegregation in education is generally considered to be a goal worth striving for. However, as these essays show, things are far more complex than wishful intentions, and segregation and desegregation in education are very layered concepts that present many different and often contradictory aspects.

First of all, segregation and desegregation, as authors suggest, are not always per se negative or positive: in fact, not all mixed, integrated schools are inclusive and desegregated schools (some essays warn they can reinforce segregation and stereotypes) and sometimes self-segregation is regarded by minority groups as desirable to protect their ethnic identities and values. Voluntary segregation by

minorities can also be an alternative attempt to offer more educational chances to their children or it can be considered an acquired right. So, whether desegregation is always the best means to empower disadvantaged students remains an open question with many possible answers, which are very much context-dependent.

These essays also remind us that the causes of segregation are different, often intersecting and interacting. Issues of race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, socio-economic disadvantage and disability are often fostered by quasi market-driven educational systems where, for example, schools are mainly financed according to quantitative outcomes – their economic efficiency, the number of students they can attract, school results, etc.

Histories of segregation are very different as well: the USA has a history of segregation that is predominantly racial in character, while in some Western-European countries the genesis of segregation is post-colonial history and economic and political migration. During the last decades, recent immigration patterns in, for example, Ireland and Italy (both with traditional emigration histories) and multiethnic communities in some Eastern and Central European countries are witnessing desegregation in education as a pressing challenge on the political and social agenda.

Since situations vary considerably and desegregation policies are highly context-related, various approaches have been attempted to confront segregation. In general, if not prepared, organised and mediated with the communities they want to address, top-down desegregation policies may even increase segregation: they can adjust segregation between schools but not within schools, or they can perpetuate separation and stereotypical views of other cultures.

Some of the essays indicate that there has been an increase of bottom-up desegregation initiatives set up by groups of parents; in other cases, working with local communities and voluntary associations has proved to be effective not only to advance desegregation, but also to remove stereotypes and increase the status and attractiveness of schools that were once viewed as ‘schools for immigrants’.

Other desegregating agents can be the students themselves: intergroup contact and interethnic friendship have been shown to contribute to positive outgroup attitudes and to the reduction of prejudice and stereotypes, as well as motivated by teachers who are sensitive to the multicultural backgrounds of their students and of the communities their schools serve. Since educational segregation is often connected with housing segregation, policies associated with integrated housing, geographic mobility and mixed enrolment can help to positively impact majority–minority relations. Such policies will be most effective if they involve all stakeholders, including policy-makers, national and local authorities, neighbourhoods, as well as teachers and parents, in order to provide both institutional and environmental cooperation and support.

Three key issues emerge from the various contributions to the book. They are freedom, equality and choice. Equality and freedom are usually considered to mutually reinforce each other, but equality may sometimes clash with freedom, and that is quite often the case when school choice is at stake. The freedom to choose a school for one’s children is a basic right which is difficult to call into question and interventions by authorities that impact enrolment procedures are not generally welcomed by parents. While exposing the two contrasting issues of personal freedom and social equality, school choice raises a further question: the access to choice. All parents tend to desire the best possible education for their children, but not all

parents have the opportunity to make a free choice – and in such cases we have to ask whether self-segregation is still a free choice.

Given the many controversial issues that are raised, the complex questions put forward and the multifaceted answers offered, these essays show, once again, how much and how far education is a metaphor of the complex changes taking place in our societies.

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