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The Ambivalence of School Segregation and the Inefficacy of Desegregation Policies

*Giancarlo Gasperoni**

Author information

* Department of Political and Social Science, University of Bologna, Italy. Email: giancarlo.gasperoni@unibo.it

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The Ambivalence of School Segregation and the Inefficacy of Desegregation Policies

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[Review of the book: Understanding School Segregation: Patterns, Causes and Consequences of Spatial Inequalities in Education, edited by Xavier Bonal and Cristián Bellei, Bloomsbury, London, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-3500-3351-1]

The topics of this book – defined by its co-editors, Xavier Bonal and Cristián Bellei, as “the uneven distribution of pupils in schools, according to their social origin, ethnic group, sex or any other ascriptive characteristic” and the policies used to redress the imbalance and its well-documented role in perpetuating education and social inequalities – enjoy a long tradition (dating back at least to the Coleman Report in the 1960s) in the United States, where the main research and policy focus has concerned segregation on racial/ethnic bases. A more recent research tradition in Europe has privileged migratory status, families’ access to socio-economic resources, and students with special needs. In Latin America empirical investigations into school segregation are even more recent, as education provision has expanded in a context of scant public resources.

The co-editors contend that (de)segregation studies have experienced a “renaissance” due to a host of factors, including globalisation-fuelled inequalities, urban fragmentation, migratory flows, market-oriented reforms, and improved access to pertinent data. The social mechanisms engendering segregation are accordingly multidimensional – residential segregation and neighbourhood effects, institutional differentiation of schooling systems, market-based education provision, student admission and allocation pro-

cedures, and compensatory policies – and difficult to disentangle. Typical school reforms (curricular differentiation, within-school tracking, tailored admission procedures in prevalently public systems; school autonomy, controlled school choice, competition in primarily market-based systems) may attempt to mitigate the *effects* of segregation and often either fail to do so or in fact reinforce unequal outcomes. Desegregation measures aiming to control segregation are further hampered by the fact that germane evidence about the incidence of segregation (outside of the United States) has emerged only recently, that there is no robust consensus relating to effectual policy tools, that implementation of such tools triggers political conflict.

Besides the co-editors' introductory chapter, the collection comprises ten "case studies" in Europe, Latin America, and the United States, plus a closing interview with a leading expert on school segregation studies. Each case study examines segregation patterns (as regards disadvantaged groups identified primarily in terms of socio-economic status and ethnicity) and the efficacy of attempts at desegregation adopted in specific contexts. The case studies – penned by 21 different authors – are grouped into three sections.

The first section focuses on the link between segregation and social inequalities and how educational segregation is shaped by cultural and historical factors. The first case study, concerning France, briefly discusses three policies linked, at times indirectly, to segregation patterns: comprehensive schooling, school mapping, and priority education measures (reserving additional resources to areas with weaker social make-ups). Avoidance strategies employed by families and endorsed by education officials as well as the mismatch between these policies' goals and means have prevented the emergence of more egalitarian schools and helped to accentuate the stigma attached to specific schools characterised by a high incidence of low-status or immigrant-origin students.

The second case study refers to the schooling system of the French-speaking Community of Belgium, which arose from the resolution of the historical conflict between its Catholic and secular components. The twofold freedom of school choice and education provision led to the development of a "quasi-market" featuring school hierarchies, distinct networks, and educational niches – a situation characterised by a strong presence of segregation without any acknowledgement of the concept itself, especially as concerns its ethnic dimension. Compensatory policies (based on the provision of additional resources to priority education areas and positive discrimination measures) and structural policies (common teaching standards, attempts to constrain school choice) have done little to impair schools' "self-segregation".

The third case study explores recent school segregation patterns (in terms of students' skin colour and age-grade mismatch) in four Brazilian state capitals and the effects (in terms of skin colour and parental education level) of

a student allocation reform in Rio de Janeiro. The reported analyses point to major discrepancies between cities, greater segregation in private schools, and a weak association between segregation levels and incidence of disadvantaged students; the reliability of these findings is however limited due to non-negligible levels of missing data. The introduction of a “lottery” system was expected to constrain the segregating outcomes of the educational bureaucracy’s control over student reallocation in Rio, yet the opposite effect ensued.

The book’s second section hosts three case studies focusing on the tie between segregation and student performance. The section first case study deals with the use of pupils’ eligibility for free school meals in England as a measure of poverty, in turn used to allocate additional resources to the schools such students attend. This compensatory policy considers whether a pupil has ever been eligible over the last six years. The authors argue that this measure fails to distinguish between individuals distressed by chronic disadvantage and others whose difficult circumstances are more short-lived. Against the backdrop of North-South differences in poverty rates and academic performance and the role of grammar schools, the authors convincingly show that determining resource allocation according to *duration* of poverty would be more decisive and that grammar schools are no more effective than comprehensive ones in improving student performance once the former’s selective intake is taken into account.

In the following chapter, Argentinian, like most Latin American, schools are shown to be affected by levels of socio-economic segregation that are both high and rising over time, as well as important private-sector provision of education that reflects residential segmentation and privatisation of public services in general. PISA data are used to apply three segregation indices and develop multilevel regression models showing that socio-economic segregation is high, school composition significantly impacts skill levels, and the private-public divide plays a relatively minor role. Segregation among public schools – shaped by residential segmentation and reinforced by the opaque nature of school authorities’ allocation procedures – is particularly pernicious in that it is probably more difficult to reverse than between-sector imbalance.

The second section closes with a helpful, wide-ranging overview of social, educational, and behavioural research in United States over the last 30 years. Firstly, it is shown that the U.S. – as it becomes more diverse in ethnic and socio-economic terms due to demographic shifts and internal and international migratory flows – has been undergoing educational re-segregation since the late 1980s, mostly between, rather than within, its over 15,000 school districts responsible for education provision, to the detriment of Latinos and African-Americans. Secondly, research evidence clearly points to

the fact that the net effects of diverse schooling are beneficial in both the short and the long term and for both academic (achievement, attainment, level of education) and non-academic (future income, civic values, racial prejudices, friendship networks, criminal and violent behaviour) results. Even though the strongest effects benefit economically and ethnically disadvantaged youth, all social groups tend to profit from diverse schooling, which thus tends to foster a viable, cohesive, equitable, multi-cultural democracy. Yet desegregation appears unlikely, due to the strong link between residential and school segregation, the rise of market-based reforms (private, charter, and magnet schools), the extremely decentralised nature of educational management, and, not least, a growing ideological resistance among American policy-makers to ignore evidence-based research.

The third section's four chapters are intended to shed light on the role of market dynamics. The first case study focuses on primary school segregation in Dutch cities. In the Netherlands the pillarisation of the political system carries over into education, where most primary schools are private and based on religious (Catholic, Protestant, and – more recently, as a by-product of immigration – Muslim and Hinduist) or pedagogical principals; also, families enjoy a long-standing tradition of freedom of choice. Yet evidence points to the fact that school segregation depends to a greater degree on residential segregation than on parental choice processes, the appearance of new faith-based schools, and local regulations. Even desegregation, where it occurs, appears to be determined by gentrification of urban centres previously settled by disadvantaged immigrants. (It is not clear to me why the Dutch case study was placed in the book's third rather than first section.)

Peru – plagued by a low-quality, under-resourced, basically unregulated schooling system, largely untouched by relatively recent efforts to improve its situation – is here depicted as “a radical example in the global trend to develop markets in education”. Major internal migration flows from rural to urban areas have created intense residential segregation in large cities, with affluent central areas and poor peripheral ones, mitigated in recent years by the advent of a middle class in the disadvantaged peripheries. This has led to the growth of private schools in urban environments, characterised by particularly strong school segregation along socio-economic lines, and differentiation among public schools which – unconstrained by catchment areas – also fuel segregation via less advantaged families' ability to make “voluntary” contributions to their upkeep. In both arenas, spontaneous “school choice” thus promotes deepening inequality.

In Spain, as well, residential segregation and private-public dualization of education provision help account for high levels of socio-economic and immigrant-related school segregation. A tacit agreement allows private institutions to compensate inadequate public subsidies with nominally voluntary

contributions from families. In public schools, middle-class families can exploit school choice regulations and admission procedures so as to engage in “white flight” from undesirable schools. The decentralised nature of Spain’s federal system condones a micropolitics whereby local policy-makers disregard an array of measures that could alleviate segregation.

The final case study highlights the Chilean system, another “radical” example of market-based education and comparatively high socio-economic segregation in Latin America. Private schools are increasingly present and profit-oriented, enact discriminatory admission processes, and compete with each other in order to cater to family preferences and receive public funds supplied via a voucher system. A qualitative study investigating parents’ rationales in choosing schools (predictably) underscores upper- and middle-class desires to avoid public schools attended by low-income students. In sum, both institutional and social forces converge in reinforcing segregation.

Taken together, the case studies provide a variety of outlooks not only on “patterns, causes and consequences”, as suggested by the book’s subtitle, but also on the *conceptualisation* of segregation itself. Interestingly, each chapter defines educational segregation differently and, it seems, with varying degrees of awareness. Some of the authors appear to equate segregation with inequality, perhaps induced to adopt such an approach by paucity of data and plausible conjectures concerning the interplay between segregation and inequality. Others further refine the co-editors’ tentative definition and emphasise that school segregation must derive from the behaviour of actors placed within the educational system, produce exclusionary or inequitable outcomes, and/or mirror a power imbalance between social groups. In some cases, even clustering of students according to academic performance (which is *not* an ascriptive characteristic) is considered a form of segregation. This semantic inconsistency suggests that the topic is structurally ambivalent: researchers from dissimilar social contexts view it differently, adopt only partially overlapping assumptions and expectations, and consequentially employ diverse methodological approaches. In part, this may be due to differing levels of data availability and authentic contextual specificities, but one may suspect that it also reflects a certain extent of epistemologically impaired perception, i.e. a tendency (afflicting researchers no less than it does educators, politicians, and parents) to take as given certain features of the education systems in which they operate. Ultimately, this ambivalence supports the flexibility with which school segregation needs to be studied (and fought).

This semantic elasticity is echoed in the range of methodological approaches used across case studies. Such diversity understandably stems from available data sources, yet in their introduction the co-editors could have gainfully devoted some effort to taking up issues of method in the analysis

of educational segregation. For example, several chapters make use of data drawn from PISA surveys: providing opportunities for secondary analysis is part of the programme's mission, of course, but the sampling strategy employed is not optimal for comparing individual schools and tackling segregation *per se*.

The final chapter comprises a concise yet resonant interview with Gary Orfield, a renowned American scholar of educational inequalities and a long-time activist promoting school desegregation. Orfield raises several enlightening, and somewhat disheartening, points. Despite the undeniable positive consequences of desegregation, "most educators and policy-makers... do not want to change the social composition of schools" and prefer reforms that avoid "intentionally integrated education and socialisation opportunities"; "both the intellectuals and the political leaders tend to think that the policies that perpetuate elite privileges are simply normal"; governments avoid pursuing active desegregation policies due to "cowardice, prejudice, lack of information, research and advocacy, and fears of public reaction"; "unregulated markets do not produce equal outcomes but systematically reward those who have the most information, understanding and ability to navigate and manipulate complex systems"; "essential data are missing or even illegal in too many countries". On a slightly more optimistic note, even without resorting to politically naive mandatory measures, desegregation can be attained by means of choice-based strategies: "plans for diversity, very strong information and recruitment of diverse groups of students, set-asides of seats to guarantee... diversity, and selection by families, not by schools".

As a final note, readers may be interested to know that educational segregation – with a sharper focus on its link with residential segregation – is explored in a recent special issue of *Urban Studies* (vol. 56, no. 15, 2019) on "School segregation in contemporary cities: socio-spatial dynamics and urban outcomes". The contexts explored in the issue's articles – the Netherlands, Finland, France, Greece, the United States, Italy, Denmark, Spain, and Germany – only partially overlap with those addressed in Bonal and Bellei's book.