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Text: Assimilation through Schooling

By The Asian American Education Project

In early U.S. history, schooling was largely provided at home or through religious institutions. But as the First Amendment and state laws separated church from state, there was a need for non-religious, public education. Over time, public education has had to wrestle with questions such as who gets educated and how they get educated. As the United States expanded and diversified, it became evident that not everyone had the same access to education. Marginalized groups including communities of color, disabled persons, and English Language Learners, have had to fight for accommodations and/or equal access. Early Asian immigrants faced issues of racism, sexism, and classism. In addition, being seen as "perpetual foreigners," they faced discrimination as non-native speakers of English.

Tertiary Source:

The goals of a free, public education are to create productive citizens of the nation and to help unify the different people and regions in the United States into a more uniform national body. However, the underlying racism and **nativism** of those in power has impacted this vision of education.

It was believed that having a basic, common education would instill shared values. However, whose values are being taught? And in whose language? Unofficially, American English is the most commonly used language in the United States. It is also the language used in schools. Public education in the United States was created for **assimilation**. It was created to teach and foster a common American culture and language. This is especially true for non-white and non-English-speaking communities.

Through public education, children not only learn English and math, but also "American" manners, customs, and culture in order to fit into U.S. society. The culture promoted was the white, **Anglo-Protestant** culture, since they held the most power in early U.S. society. (And arguably still hold the most power.) Accordingly, the systems and structures that were created for public education incorporated white Anglo-Protestant attitudes and beliefs.

The foundation of the United States is rooted in **white supremacy**. As such, people of color were considered inferior to white people in aspects like their intelligence, appearance, beliefs, customs, and more. Education was thus seen as a key way to "Americanize" immigrant and non-white children, who looked and acted differently from prevailing images of an "American." White supremacist thinking has led to many racist laws and policies.

Glossary:

Nativism: attitude or policy where existing inhabitants are favored instead of immigrants

Assimilation: process through which individuals/ groups of differing heritages acquire attitudes, habits, and mode of life of a dominant culture

Anglo-Protestant: upper class white social group

White Supremacy: social, economic, and political systems that collectively enable white people to maintain power

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In addition to racism, early U.S. society was also anti-immigrant, specifically immigrants of color. This is evidenced by anti-exclusion laws that banned Asians from immigrating to the United States. Public education reflected national politics. As such, **racial segregation** in schools was common across cities and states in the United States. Those who supported segregated schools argued that different races were too different to learn side-by-side. More plainly, white people who supported segregated schools didn't want their children mingling and interacting with non-white children.

But communities of color, including Asian Americans, challenged racial segregation. For many, education was seen as the key to **social mobility**. Being able to speak the language of power and act like the culture in power were necessary for social success.

One notable example is the landmark case, *Tape v. Hurley* (1885). In California in the 1880s, the Tape family legally challenged the San Francisco Board of Education when their daughter Mamie Tape (1876-1972) was denied access to public education. Joseph and Mary Tape (1857-1934) were Chinese immigrants who had lived in the United States since their early teenage years. The Tapes considered themselves as American as any of their white neighbors. They believed Mamie, who was born in the United States, should be allowed to attend the all-white Spring Valley Primary school. But Mamie was denied enrollment due to her race. In response, the Tapes sued the school principal, Jennie Hurley, and took the case to the California Supreme Court.

The case was one of the earliest **civil rights** decisions against racist segregation policies. School officials argued that people of Chinese descent shouldn't be admitted to San Francisco public schools since the California Constitution stated the Chinese were "dangerous to the well-being of the state." The Court ruled that the **Fourteenth Amendment** protected Mamie's right as a U.S. citizen to attend school. At the same time, however, the Court suggested that segregated schools weren't against the law. This led the San Francisco Board of Education to quickly build separate schools for Chinese students, where the Tapes had to enroll their children later that year.

In another notable case in Mississippi in 1927, a Chinese family, the Lums, fought for the rights of their daughters, Berda (c. 1914-?) and Martha (c. 1915-?), to attend an all-white school. Like Mamie Tape, Berda and Martha had been removed from school after the first day due to their race. The Lum family fought the dismissal and took the case all the way to the Supreme Court in *Gong Lum v. Rice* (1927). The Court however ruled to uphold segregation, citing that the State's constitution called for separate schools for white and "colored" students.

over people of other races

Racial Segregation: separation of a racial group by forced residence in a certain area, barriers to social intercourse, and other means

Social Mobility: the ability to change one's social status for the better

Civil Rights: set of fundamental rights for everyone

Fourteenth Amendment: granted citizenship to all persons born or naturalized in the United States and guaranteed "equal protection of the laws"

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This concept of "separate but equal" schools was upheld by the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) ruling. At this time, segregated schools were not perceived to be illegal. Historically, communities of color, denied access to white-only schools, were forced to create their own schools. Often, these segregated schools for people of color were overcrowded and had fewer resources than the white-only schools. They were separate but they were far from equal. For communities of color seeking social mobility, such inequities were intolerable.

Decades later, five Mexican American families in Southern California came together and successfully challenged discriminatory segregation based on ancestry and language ability in *Mendez v. Westminster* (1947). While the case, like *Tape v. Hurley*, didn't end racial segregation, it set a **precedent** for later cases, like *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which found school segregation based on race unconstitutional.

Finally, the case of *Guey Heung Lee v. Johnson* (1971) presented a different perspective on segregation. In response to **desegregation** efforts in the San Francisco Unified School District, some Chinese parents protested the move and sued. They wanted their children to stay in Asian segregated schools,fearing their children would face racism and lose their cultural heritage and language. But the court denied their pleas. The district's desegregation plan moved forward. The ruling stated that *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) extended to all racial minorities discriminated against by the State, which included the Chinese in California. The ruling additionally stated that courses teaching cultural background and heritage of various racial and ethnic groups and bilingual classes were not forbidden, and so those could be created in any manner that did not create or replicate segregation.

The case of *Lee v. Johnson* (1971) demonstrated struggles faced by many communities of color. Communities of color are pushed and pulled in different directions. They have the desire to assimilate for social mobility, but also feared the loss of their language and culture. This tension continues today.

Precedent: an event or action that's an example or guide for future similar situations

Desegregation: the policy of ending the separation of races

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