THE FOUR I’S OF OPPRESSION

Ideological
- The very intentional ideological development of the ...isms

Examples: dominant narratives, “Othering”

First, any oppressive system has at its core the IDEA that one group is somehow better than another, and in some measure has the right to control the other group. This idea gets elaborated in many ways—more intelligent, harder working, stronger, more capable, more noble, more deserving, more advanced, chosen, superior, and so on. The dominant group holds this idea about itself. And, of course, the opposite qualities are attributed to the other group—stupid, lazy, weak, incompetent, worthless, less deserving, backward, inferior and so on.

Institutional
- Is demonstrated in how institutions and systems reinforce and manifest ideology

Examples: media, medical, legal, education, religion, psychiatry, banking/financial

The idea that one group is better than another and has the right to control the other gets embedded in the institutions of the society, the laws, the legal system and police practice, the education system, hiring practices, public policy, housing development, media images, political power, etc. When a woman makes 2/3 of what a man makes, it is institutionalized sexism. When 1 out of 4 African American men are in jail or on probation, it is institutionalized racism, etc. Consider that dominant culture also controls the language itself used to describe all groups in society and can make things visible or invisible when necessary.

Other examples/things to consider are the “War on Drugs” instead of “War on Poverty”, as well as an expanded definition of violence and how violence towards targeted groups happens at a systemic level.

Interpersonal
- The way we play violence out on each other, based on oppression

The idea that one group is better than another and has the right to control the other, which gets structured into our institutions, gives permission and reinforcement for individual members of the dominant group to personally mistreat individuals in the targeted/oppressed group. Interpersonal racism is what white people do to people of color up close—the racist jokes, the stereotypes, the beatings and harassment, the threats, the whole range of personal acts of discrimination. Similarly, interpersonal sexism is what men to do to women—the sexual abuse/harassment, the violence directed at women, the sexist jokes, ignoring or minimizing of women’s thinking, etc.

Many people in the dominant group are not consciously oppressive. They have internalized the negative messages about other groups, and consider their attitudes towards other groups quite normal.

No ‘reverse racism’. These kinds of attitudes and behaviors are backed up by the institutional arrangements. This helps to clarify the confusion around what some claim to be ‘reverse ism’s’. People of color can have prejudices against and anger towards white people, or individual white people. They can act out those feelings in destructive and hurtful ways towards whites. But in almost every case, this acting out will be severely punished. The force of the police and the courts, or at least a gang of whites getting even, will come crashing down on those people of color, as has always been the case throughout history. The individual prejudice of black people, for example, is not backed up by the legal system and prevailing white institutions. The oppressed group, therefore, does not have the power to enforce its prejudices, unlike the dominant group. For example, the racist beating of Rodney King was carried out by the institutional force of the police, and upheld by the court system. This would never have happened if King had been white and the officers black.

A simple definition of racism, as a system, is: PREJUDICE + POWER=RACISM
This can be applied to any ‘ism’.
Internalized

- How we internalize the ideological ideas of oppression

Internalized oppression means the oppressor doesn't have to exert any more pressure, because we now do it to ourselves and each other.

The fourth way oppression works is within the groups of people who suffer the most from the mistreatment. Oppressed people internalize the ideology of inferiority, the see it reflected in the institutions, they experience mistreatment interpersonally from members of the dominant group, and they eventually come to internalize the negative messages about themselves.

Oppression always begins from the outside of the oppressed group, but by the time it gets internalized, the external oppression need hardly be felt for the damage to be done. If people from the oppressed group feel bad about themselves, and because of the nature of the system, do not have the power to direct those feelings back toward the dominant group without receiving more blows, then there are only two places to dump those feelings—on oneself and on the people in the same group. (HORIZONTAL VIOLENCE) Thus, people in any target group have to struggle hard to keep from feeling heavy feelings of powerlessness or despair.

On the way to eliminating institutional oppression, each oppressed group has to undo the internalized beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that stem from the oppression so that they can build unity and power among people in that group, support its leaders, feel proud of its contributions and develop strength and organize.

The 4 I’s as an Interrelated System

It should be clear that none of these four aspects of oppression can exist separately; each is completely supported by the others. It should be clear that any attempt to dismantle oppression should include an element of challenge at all four levels to truly result in change.
Social and economic disadvantage—not only poverty, but also a host of associated conditions—depresses student performance. Concentrating students with these disadvantages in racially and economically homogenous schools depresses it even further. Our ability to remedy this situation by integrating schools is hobbled by historical ignorance. Too quickly forgetting 20th-century history, we've persuaded ourselves that the residential isolation of low-income black children occurs in practice but is not government-ordained. We think residential segregation is but an accident of economic circumstance, personal preference, and private discrimination. However, residential segregation is actually the result of racially motivated law, public policy, and government-sponsored discrimination. The result of state action, residential segregation reflects an ongoing and blatant constitutional violation that calls for explicit remedy. We have little hope of remedying school segregation that flows from neighborhood racial isolation if we don't understand its causes.

Richard Rothstein
A Question of Disadvantage

With less access to routine and preventive health care, disadvantaged students have greater absenteeism. With less literate parents, they are read to less frequently when young and are exposed to less complex language at home. With less adequate housing, they rarely have quiet places to study and may move more frequently, changing schools and teachers. With fewer opportunities for enriching after-school and summer activities, their background knowledge and organizational skills are often less developed. With fewer family resources, their college ambitions are constrained. As these and many other disadvantages accumulate, children from lower social classes inevitably have lower average achievement than middle-class children, even with the highest-quality instruction (Rothstein, 2008).

When a school has a large proportion of students at risk of failure, the consequences of disadvantage are exacerbated. Remediation becomes the norm, and teachers have little time to challenge students to overcome personal, family, and community hardships that typically interfere with learning. In schools with high student mobility, teachers spend more time repeating lessons for newcomers and have fewer opportunities to adapt instruction to students' individual strengths and weaknesses. When classrooms fill with students who come to school less ready to learn, teachers must focus more on discipline and less on learning. Children in impoverished neighborhoods are surrounded by more crime and violence and suffer from stress that interferes with learning. Children with less exposure to mainstream society are less familiar with standard English. When few parents have strong educations themselves, schools cannot benefit from parental pressure for a high-quality curriculum. Children have few college-educated role models to emulate and few peers whose families set high academic standards.

A Question of Race

Across the United States, low-income black children's isolation has increased. It's a problem not only of poverty but also of race. The share of black students attending schools that are more than 90 percent minority grew from 34 percent in 1989 to 39 percent in 2007. In 1989, black students typically attended schools in which 43 percent of their fellow students were low-income; by 2007, this figure had risen to 59 percent (Orfield, 2009).

In urban areas, low-income white students are more likely to be integrated into middle-class neighborhoods and are less likely to attend school predominantly with other disadvantaged students. Although immigrant, low-income Hispanic students are also concentrated in schools, by the third generation, their families are more likely to settle in more middle-class neighborhoods. Integrating disadvantaged black students into schools in which more-privileged students predominate can narrow the black–white achievement gap. School integration, both racial and socioeconomic, can complement improvements in students' early childhood care, health, housing, economic security, and informal learning opportunities.

But segregated schools with poorly performing students can rarely be turned around while remaining racially isolated. The problems students bring to school are so overwhelming that policy should never assume that even the most skilled and dedicated faculty can overcome them. Although schools can make a difference, if they are surrounded by poverty and violence, it cannot come from the school alone.

Discriminatory policy does not become constitutional simply because voters approve it.
Weiner, Lutz, & Ludwig, 2010). For segregation (Guryan 2004; Johnson, 2011; Rumberger, 2007), his need for school integration. Black students' achievement decreases as their schoolwide proportion grows. Schools with well-summer and concerted efforts to involve parents, developed and aligned curriculums, and good teacher–principal collaboration, performed comparable children out of their school in less-affluent areas and randomly purchased apartments in more- and less-neighborhoods didn't improve their performance. The investigators concluded, "Our findings about schooling can be improved" (p. 210).

Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2008) attempted to distinguish the difference, they cannot erase the damage caused by concentrated poverty and racial isolation. Moreover, it seems that the benefits of integration for black students are both academics and behavior, benefits to private apartments. Whether they received vouchers to subsidize moves Chicago public housing residents (Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2009). Experiments add evidence. In one, the history of residential racial segregation efforts are impermissible constitutional unless it was designed to reverse the effects of explicit rules that segregated students by race. Roberts called student categorization plurality opinion by Chief Justice John Roberts.

The Benefits of Integration

Not only is school segregation a matter of chance. Adolescent children pre-posed to learn, the history forgotten, or failed forward to integrate schools. The prudent policy is to move towards increasing the number of innocent private decisions, or failed to get at the issue. The investigation of students in truly disadvantaged communities included, "Our findings about schooling can be improved" (p. 210). Perhaps even more important than growing up in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, where nearly all students were in private apartments. Whether they received vouchers to subsidize moves Chicago public housing residents (Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2009).

A highly regarded investigation of Chicago school reform (Bryk, Sebring, Blank, & Fullan, 2004; Allensworth, Luppescu, Easton, 2008) concluded that Chicago school reform (Bryk, Sebring, Blank, & Fullan, 2004; Allensworth, Luppescu, Easton, 2008) concluded that Chicago school reform (Bryk, Sebring, Blank, & Fullan, 2004; Allensworth, Luppescu, Easton, 2008). The investigators confirmed that students of different races benefit from working together and are better prepared for life in a society that Roberts termed "any society." Academic and noncognitive achievement gaps. The prudent policy is to move towards increasing the number of innocent private decisions, or failed to get at the issue. The investigation of students in truly disadvantaged communities included, "Our findings about schooling can be improved" (p. 210).

A third and more ambitious attempt to understand the effects of school segregation is commonly termed 'De Jure,' or forced segregation. Although it is true that De Jure segregation efforts are impermissible constitutional unless it was designed to reverse the effects of explicit rules that segregated students by race. Roberts called student categorization plurality opinion by Chief Justice John Roberts. Academic and noncognitive achievement gaps. The prudent policy is to move towards increasing the number of innocent private decisions, or failed to get at the issue. The investigation of students in truly disadvantaged communities included, "Our findings about schooling can be improved" (p. 210).

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An Eye-Opening History Lesson
supply plants (Blum, 2006).

ville from rural areas to work in military

for black workers who came to Louis-

in that barely habitable neighbor hood

the federal government placed housing

whites to leave. During World War II,

1937, after a catastrophic flood induced

been opened to black residence only in

dence. In fact, the neighbor hood had

that planners designated for black resi-

from near downtown to a neighbor hood

northern city. Examples abound in

to varying degrees, in virtually every

areas and have been documented,

combined to segregate our metropolitan

State-Sponsored Segregation

residents, not as results of racially moti-

conditions as characteristics of black

White homeowners came to see these

vided (Kerner Commission, 1968).

water and power were less often pro-

streets remained unpaved; and even

(neighborhoods were rezoned for mixed

garbage was collected less frequently;

adequate public services. In the ghetto,

municipalities' discriminatory denial of

black neighbors was fed by deterio-

hoods. Arrests were almost never made,

chasing or renting in white neighbor-

black families who succeeded in pur-

and leaders of white mobs to force out

prosecutors conspired with vigilantes

northern cities and suburbs, police and

policy does not become constitutional

blacks who had purchased homes

accompanied by violent attacks against

success ful campaign to repeal it was

adopted a fair housing law, but a

law prohibited racial discrimination in

agency did not object. In 1957, a state

white neighborhood; the state licensing

Board expelled a broker for the rare

strict. In 1948, the Seattle Real Estate

city and county. Enforcement was

formal plat plans recorded with the

them. Restrictions were included in

and with deeds that barred resale to

Seattle, as elsewhere, developed

lence drove them back.

general, when black families attempted

home was bombed— and Kentucky

moved to a white neighborhood, his

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blacks in other neighborhoods, and

segregation, and so rely on weaker

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dissent. As it is, even the most com-

desegregation, but at least Justice Breyer

Court majority might still have barred

Segregation resulted from state-sponsored

tracts documented how their school seg-

associated property values.

absence of offic ial segregation but can

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laws in suburbs where black families

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Racial segregation's persistence is

An Obligation to Fulfi  l

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Recenly, protesters and police clashed in the streets of Charlotte, North Carolina, following the killing of Keith Lamont Scott, a forty-three-year-old father of seven, who had recently moved to the city with his wife and family. Scott was shot by officers who were searching for a man with an outstanding warrant. Scott was not that man. Officer accounts claim that Scott had a handgun and refused to comply when he got out of his car. Other witnesses say that Scott was actually holding a book, as he often read while waiting for the bus to return his son from elementary school.
that surrounds them, scarves covering their mouths and noses to keep from inhaling the smoke.

These protests happened because of Keith Lamont Scott, but they also happened because Charlotte is a city that has long had deep racial tensions, and frustration has been building for some time. There are many places one might look to find the catalyst of this resentment, nationally and locally. But one of the first places to look is Charlotte’s public-school system.

In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” and thus unconstitutional. The decision mandated that schools across the country be integrated, though, in reality, little actual school desegregation took place following the ruling. It took years for momentum from the civil-rights movement to create enough political pressure for truly meaningful integration to take place in classrooms across the country.

To understand what happened next, it helps to turn to a book published last year and edited by Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, Stephen Samuel Smith, and Amy Hawn Nelson, "Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: School Desegregation and Resegregation in Charlotte.” It uses essays by sociologists, political scientists, economists, and attorneys to illuminate how the city became the focal point of the national school-desegregation debate, with decisions that set a precedent for the rest of the country.

In 1964, a black couple, the Reverend Dr. Darius Swann and his wife, Vera Swann, attempted to enroll their son James in Seversville Elementary School, one of the few integrated schools in the city and one that was closer to their home than the one he attended. The Swanns' request was denied, and James was told that he must attend an all-black school in a different neighborhood. The N.A.A.C.P. sued on behalf of the family and the case moved to the federal district court. The ruling came down in 1969, and James McMillan, the judge presiding over the case, ruled in favor of the Swann family, ordering and then overseeing the implementation of a large-scale busing program, which would go on to make the school system for Charlotte and surrounding Mecklenburg County a case study in integration. In 1971, the Supreme Court upheld the decision, and Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education concretized what Brown v. Board had put into motion more than a decade before. District after district modelled its integration plans on Charlotte, and the city was lauded as an example of what successful integration could look like. By 1980, the school district had reached an unprecedented level of integration. In 1984, the Charlotte Observer editorial board stated, “Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s proudest achievement of the past 20 years is not the city’s impressive new skyline or its strong, growing economy. Its proudest achievement is its fully integrated schools.”

The success of the integration program lasted for almost three decades, until William Capacchione, a white parent, sued the school district because he believed his daughter was not admitted into a local magnet school because of her race. Over the course of the trial, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board forcefully defended its desegregation plan. But in 1999 Federal District Court Judge Robert Potter—who as a private citizen had been active in the anti-busing movement of the nineteen-sixties—ordered the district to stop using race in pupil assignments. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, fearful of seeing three decades of desegregation work wiped away, appealed the decision. However, in 2001 the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals sided with Capacchione and the other parents who joined him on the case, ending the mandatory-busing program.

Under the new “Family Choice Plan,” students were largely made to attend the schools in their neighborhood. But most neighborhoods in Charlotte are deeply segregated and racially homogenous communities, as a result of decades of housing segregation, and so schools that were once integrated and high-achieving soon became stratified by race and income. In 2005, as part of a separate, and far-reaching, case originally brought against the state of North Carolina for its failing school system, Judge Howard Manning issued a report on the state of schools in Charlotte. He concluded, “The most
When Charlotte-Mecklenburg eliminated race as a factor in student assignment, it not only meant less diverse schools; it also created a feedback loop that made the problem worse. Families with the means—most often white families—started to move into whiter neighborhoods, where they knew their kids would go to whiter schools. As a result of the relationship between race and wealth, the social, political, and economic capital became ever more concentrated in a small number of very white neighborhoods.

The power of the 1999 court order and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools’ subsequent racial stratification is perhaps best evidenced by a conspicuous change in the school system’s vision statements over a twenty-year period. In 1991, the vision statement read, “The Vision is to ensure that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System becomes the premier, urban integrated system in the nation in which all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to live rich and full lives as productive and enlightened members of society.” Today, it reads, "Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools provides all students the best education available anywhere, preparing every child to lead a rich and productive life." That the word “integrated” was no longer a part of the district’s self-espoused vision for itself reflects a dwindling sense of political possibility to build a truly desegregated school system.

Some might wonder why a commitment to school desegregation matters. Can’t we just inject more resources into poor schools so that they have the opportunity to compete on an equal playing field? But research has long shown that singularly investing capital into a school in which the vast majority of students live in poverty has limited impact on achievement. The social science on the impact of desegregation is clear. Researchers have consistently found that students in integrated schools—irrespective of ethnicity, race, or social class—are more likely to make academic gains in mathematics, reading, and often science than they are in segregated ones. Students in integrated K-12 schools are more likely to both enroll in and graduate from college. While the most disadvantaged students—most often poor students of color—receive the most considerable academic benefits from attending diverse schools, research demonstrates that young people in general, regardless of their background, experience profound benefits from attending integrated schools. As the editors of “Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow” make clear, "Students who attend desegregated schools exhibit greater levels of intergroup friendships, demonstrate lower levels of racial fears and stereotypes, and experience less intergenerational perpetuation of racism and stereotypes across multiple institutional settings."

The racial composition of schools affects the quality of the teachers, too. A 2009 study by Kirabo Jackson in the *Journal of Labor Economics* found that as student populations in Charlotte-Mecklenburg became increasingly black, the most qualified teachers transferred to other schools. In other words, the more a school resegregated, the less qualified the teachers became. Additionally, school segregation was deeply correlated with the likelihood of a student becoming entangled in the criminal-justice system. In Charlotte, the chances of black males coming into contact with the criminal-justice system increased with the resegregation of their high schools.

There is also an economic imperative to move toward integration. School desegregation is associated with higher graduation rates, greater employability, higher earnings, and decreased rates of incarceration. Higher earnings mean more tax revenue. Decreased incarceration means less money spent keeping people in prison. All of which means more money for localities.

One cannot disentangle the state-sanctioned school resegregation that poor black students in Charlotte experience from the police killing of a black man waiting for his son to get off the bus from elementary school. The sociopolitical history of a city in a county with one of the lowest levels of upward mobility among all major metropolises is not a peripheral concern in an analysis of the racial tensions of the moment, it is the foundation of it. Schools are the single largest lever of mobility in this country. When we commit to creating and enforcing laws that acknowledge the injustice of the past, we open up the possibility of using schools as a means of reducing inequality. When we operate as if the past is irrelevant, and
We perceive Keith Lamont Scott as a danger by accident. The country we live in is one that we have built to be this way. The cities we live in were built this way. They were court-ordered. They were signed into law. We made these choices, and now we see the consequences.

*Clint Smith is a writer, a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard University, and the author of “Counting Descent” (2016).* [Read more »]

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**Recommended Stories**
The Lasting Legacy of the Boston Busing Crisis

Desegregating schools by shuttling kids across town failed. That doesn’t mean the achievability or significance of the original goal must fail, too.

“When we would go to white schools, we’d see these lovely classrooms, with a small number of children in each class,” Ruth Batson recalled. As a Boston civil-rights activist and the mother of three, Batson gained personal knowledge of how the city’s public schools shortchanged black youth in the 1950s and 1960s. “The teachers were permanent. We’d see wonderful materials. When we’d go to our
schools, we would see overcrowded classrooms, children sitting out in the corridors, and so forth. And so, then we decided that where there were a large number of white students, that’s where the care went. That’s where the books went. That’s where the money went.”

Batson was one of the millions of black parents and citizens in cities like Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York who saw firsthand how school segregation and inferior educational opportunities harmed black students in the decades after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Like black parents across the country Batson cared deeply about education and fought on behalf of her children and her community. Batson’s three-decade-long struggle for education equality in Boston illuminates both the long history of black civil-rights activism in the North and the resistance from white politicians and parents that thwarted school desegregation. The battles Batson fought are still ongoing and are being discussed today with renewed urgency. Thanks to work by Nikole Hannah-Jones, Richard Kahlenberg, and many others, school integration is being debated publicly in a way not seen in nearly 40 years. The popular understanding of school desegregation, however, is sketchy, and terms like “busing,” “de facto segregation,” and “neighborhood schools” are commonly used but poorly understood. There is a gap between what scholars like Jeanne Theoharis and Ansley Erickson have established about the history of school segregation and how the popular conversation proceeds. In order to think about how school integration can work in 2016 and beyond, it is crucial to reckon with the history of school-desegregation efforts in cities like Boston and to appreciate how people like Batson dedicated their lives to improving educational opportunities for black children.

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Batson was on the front lines of the school-desegregation battles in Boston. Born and raised in Roxbury, Batson recalled being exposed to politics at an early age by her Jamaican parents, who supported Marcus Garvey. “We heard racial issues constantly being discussed” at regular Sunday community meetings at Toussaint L’Ouverture Hall, Batson remembered. “I knew that there were flaws in the cradle
of liberty.” As a former Boston public-schools student herself and the mother of three school-age daughters, Batson knew Boston’s schools were resolutely segregated, with vast differentials in funding, school resources, and teacher quality. Batson ran for the Boston School Committee in 1951, and her campaign fliers urged voters, “For your children’s sake, elect a mother.” Though she lost the election, Batson nonetheless dedicated herself to showing people how Boston school officials used subtle techniques to maintain school segregation. She was dismayed to see Boston’s schools grow more segregated in the decades after Brown, as the district bused white children to white schools with more resources and more experienced teachers.

“What black parents wanted was to get their children to schools where there were the best resources for educational growth—smaller class sizes, up-to-date-books,” Batson recalled. “They wanted their children in a good school building, where there was an allocation of funds which exceeded those in the black schools; where there were sufficient books and equipment for all students.” In short, Batson understood that school integration was about more than having black students sit next to white students. As she knew, more than 80 percent of Boston’s black elementary-school students attended majority-black schools, most of which were overcrowded. Across Boston’s public schools in the 1950s, per-pupil spending averaged $340 for white students compared with only $240 for blacks students. Over the years, data of this sort failed to persuade the Boston School Committee, which steadfastly denied the charge that school segregation even existed in Boston.

“We were insulted. We were told ... our kids were stupid, and this was why they didn’t learn.”

In the 1960s, Boston School Committee chairwoman Louise Day Hicks, who became a local and national symbol of the “white backlash” to school desegregation, consistently resisted the demands of civil-rights advocates. Describing a particularly contentious meeting in August 1963, The Boston Globe reported, “Hicks gaveled the last meeting with Negro leaders to a close in
something short of three minutes when the speaker mentioned the words, de facto segregation—just mentioned the words.” For Hicks, acknowledging segregation at all might lead to having to do something about it. “We’re not quibbling about a word,” Batson told the Globe. “It is not the word. It is the fact that it exists. Our whole quarrel is with their refusing to admit that the situation exists.”

Batson and other civil-rights activists, parents, and students in Boston were organized and creative in their protests against school segregation. In June 1963, for example, Batson and other NAACP members met with the Boston School Committee while 300 black Bostonians demonstrated outside of City Hall. “We make this charge: that there is segregation in fact in our Boston public-school system,” Batson told the School Committee. “The injustices present in our school system hurt our pride, rob us of our dignity, and produce results which are injurious not only to our future but to those of the city, state, and nation.” In a hearing room
crowded with press, the School Committee did not respond positively to these charges. “We made our presentation and everything broke loose,” Batson recalled. “We were insulted. We were told ... our kids were stupid, and this was why they didn’t learn. We were completely rejected that night.” A week later, Batson and other civil-rights advocates organized a “Stay Out for Freedom” protest, with nearly 3,000 black junior and senior high-school students staying away from public school. Organizers preferred “stay out” to “boycott” because students were staying away from public school to attend community-organized “Freedom Schools.” “I feel that the Stay Out for Freedom Day was a success,” Batson told the Globe. “It demonstrated to the Boston community that the Negro community is concerned and that they want action.”

In September 1963, a month after the March on Washington, Batson led more than 6,000 black and white protesters on a march through Boston’s Roxbury neighborhood to protest school segregation. The march concluded at Sherwin School, built in 1870, five years after the end of the Civil War. Pointing to the dilapidated 93-year-old building, NAACP Boston executive secretary Thomas Atkins told the crowd: “This is where Negro kids go to school in Boston! What are you going to do about it?” After observing a moment of silence for the four young girls killed a week earlier in the bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Burch in Birmingham, Alabama, the crowd joined Susan Batson, Ruth Batson’s teenage daughter, in a chant that clearly outlined the marchers’ demands. Susan Batson shouted, “Jim Crow”—“The crowd replied, “Must go!” “The School Committee”—“Must go!” “De Facto”—“Must go!” “Mrs. Hicks”—“Must go!”

As civil-rights pressure continued through the fall of 1963, Hicks and the Boston School Committee only grew stronger in their opposition to school desegregation. When Hicks received the most votes in the November 1963 School Committee election, she saw the victory as a referendum on school desegregation. “The people of Boston have given their answer to the de facto segregation question,” Hicks argued. Having failed to oust Hicks or elect someone to the School Committee who would support school desegregation, the black community organized a second “Stay Out For Freedom” on February 26, 1964. The “stay out” kept more than
20,000 students (more than 20 percent of the city’s public-school students) out of school and connected Boston to similar school boycotts that took place earlier in the month in New York and Chicago. Like her peers in other cities, Batson encountered school officials and politicians who refused to believe that unconstitutional school segregation could exist outside of the South.

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It wasn’t until the mid-1970s that Boston’s “busing crisis” finally garnered national attention. It was easy to forget that this wasn’t a new phenomenon, that black people in Boston and other cities had been fighting for years to secure equal education, and that powerful local officials and national politicians underwrote school segregation in the North. School desegregation was about the constitutional rights of black students, but in Boston and other Northern cities, the story has been told and retold as a story about the feelings and opinions of white people. The mass protests and violent resistance that greeted school desegregation in mid-1970s Boston engraved that city’s “busing crisis” into school textbooks and cemented the failure of busing and school desegregation in the popular imagination. Contemporary news coverage and historical accounts of Boston’s school desegregation have emphasized the anger that white people in South Boston felt and have rendered Batson and other black Bostonians as bit players in their own civil-rights struggle.

One reason Boston’s “busing crisis” continues to resonate for so many people is that it serves as a convenient end point for the history of civil rights, where it is juxtaposed with Brown v. Board of Education (1954) or the Little Rock school-integration crisis (1957). In this telling, the civil-rights movement, with the support of federal officials and judges, took a wrong turn in the North and encountered “white backlash.” The trouble with the “backlash” story is that the perspectives of white parents who opposed school desegregation figured prominently in the very civil-rights legislation against which they would later rebel. In drafting the 1964 Civil Rights Act, for example, the bill’s Northern sponsors drew a sharp distinction
between segregation by law in the South and so-called “racial imbalance” in the North, amending the Act to read:

“Desegregation” means the assignment of students to public schools and within such schools without regard to their race, color, religion, or national origin, but “desegregation” shall not mean the assignment of students to public schools in order to overcome racial imbalance.

This language was directly designed to keep federal civil-rights enforcement of school desegregation focused away from the North. White politicians and parents in cities like Boston, Chicago, and New York regularly pointed to the 1964 Civil Rights Act to justify the maintenance of white schools. This landmark legislation therefore actually allowed school segregation to expand in Northern cities.

Most people today associate busing with Boston in the 1970s, but as Batson knew, organized resistance to school desegregation in the North started in the mid-1950s. As early as 1957, white parents in New York rallied against a proposed plan to transfer 400 black and Puerto Rican students from Brooklyn to schools in Queens. In Detroit in 1960, thousands of white parents organized a school boycott to protest the busing of 300 black students from an overcrowded school to a school in a white neighborhood. In Boston in 1965, Hicks made opposition to busing a centerpiece of her political campaigns. “It was Mrs. Hicks who kept talking against busing children when the NAACP hadn’t even proposed busing,” the Globe noted.

“I am no longer a ‘bigot.’ Now I am called ‘the leader of the antibusing effort.’”

With busing, Northerners had found a palatable way to oppose desegregation without appealing to the explicitly racist sentiments they preferred to associate with Southerners. “I have probably talked before 500 or 600 groups over the last
“Almost every time, someone has gotten up and called me a ‘racist’ or a ‘bigot.’ But now, all of the sudden, I am no longer a ‘bigot.’ Now I am called ‘the leader of the antibusing effort.’” White parents and politicians framed their resistance to school desegregation in terms like “busing” and “neighborhood schools,” and this rhetorical shift allowed them to support white schools and neighborhoods without using explicitly racist language.

Describing opposition to busing as something other than resistance to school desegregation was a move that obscured the histories of racial discrimination and legal contexts for desegregation orders. In covering school desegregation in Boston and other Northern cities, contemporary news media took up the busing frame, and most histories of the era have followed suit. Americans’ understanding of school desegregation in the North is skewed as a result, emphasizing innocent or unintended “de facto segregation” over the housing covenants, federal mortgage redlining, public-housing segregation, white homeowners associations, and discriminatory real-estate practices that produced and maintained segregated neighborhoods, as well as the policies regarding school siting, districting, and student transfers that produced and maintained segregated schools.

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Understanding the history of school desegregation in Boston and other Northern cities makes it clear that so-called “de facto” residential and school segregation in the North were anything but innocent. While civil-rights advocates initially promoted this distinction between “Southern-style” and “Northern-style” segregation to build a political consensus against Jim Crow laws in the South, the de jure/de facto dichotomy ultimately made it possible for public officials, judges, and citizens in the North and South to deny legal responsibility for the visible realities of racial segregation. As black writer James Baldwin observed in 1965, “‘De facto segregation’ means Negroes are segregated, but nobody did it.”

Over the past two decades, scholars like Thomas Sugrue, Beryl Satter, and David Freund have revealed the vast web of governmental policies that produced and
maintained racially segregated neighborhoods and schools in the North, as well as the civil-rights activists who fought against these structures of racial discrimination. These studies provide overwhelming evidence that, in every region of the country, neighborhood and school segregation flowed from intentional public policies, not from innocent private actions or free-market forces. Among the most important aspects of this body of scholarship is that it shows that the distinction between de jure segregation and de facto segregation is a false one.

“‘De facto segregation’ means Negroes are segregated, but nobody did it.”

The crisis in Boston and in other cities that faced court-ordered school desegregation was about unconstitutional racial discrimination in the public schools, not about busing. Judge W. Arthur Garrity’s decision in Morgan v. Hennigan (1974) made it clear that the Boston School Committee and superintendent “took many actions in their official capacities with the purpose and intent to segregate the Boston public schools and that such actions caused current conditions of segregation in the Boston public schools.” Judges issued busing orders to school districts—such as Denver, Detroit, Kansas City, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Pontiac—that were found guilty of intentional de jure segregation in violation of Brown and the Fourteenth Amendment. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare chief Leon Panetta—who was fired from President Richard Nixon’s administration for advocating for investigations into school segregation in the North—said in late 1969:

It has become clear to me that the old bugaboo of keeping federal hands off Northern school systems because they are only de facto segregated, instead of de jure segregation as the result of some official act, is a fraud ... There are few if any pure de facto situations. Lift the rock of de facto, and something ugly and discriminatory crawls out from under it.
The challenge for civil-rights lawyers and activists like Batson was that it was extraordinarily difficult to lift all of the rocks of “de facto” to expose the illegal discrimination underneath.

For over half a century, parents, school officials, politicians, and writers from across the political spectrum have described busing as unrealistic, unnecessary, and unfair, most often citing Boston as evidence that busing and school desegregation failed. The problem is that busing is so routinely described as having failed that Americans have lost sight of what this equation—“busing failed”—asks them to believe about the history of civil rights in the United States. Agreeing that busing and school desegregation failed makes it possible to dismiss the educational goals that were a pillar of the civil-rights movement and to dismiss the constitutional promise of equality endorsed by Brown, though it was never fully realized. This busing narrative is comforting because it authorizes people to accept the continuing racial and socioeconomic segregation of schools in the United States as inevitable and unchangeable. The national resistance to school desegregation was immense but not inevitable. If Americans are indeed ready to think seriously again about school integration, we must start by reckoning with the history of school segregation in the North and remembering the stories of people like Ruth Batson.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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