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The Illusion of Opportunity and Access to Kindergartens in the Southeastern United States During the 1970s

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My paper's focus is people who were marginalized and the people who ignored them in educational policies. Because my focus is the southern states of the United States from 1964 to 1984, the group that was marginalized was African Americans and those who ignored their needs were white politicians.

Equality of Educational opportunity became the theme of federal education initiatives in the United States during the 1960s. Through programs like Head Start and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the federal government provided funds to give children who lived in poverty access to reading materials and lessons in school socialization that their middle class peers received at home or in kindergarten. By the middle of the 1970s, most of the public and policymakers, who should have known better, believed that all children were receiving some kind of preschool education. In the southern United States, however, the state politicians knew that they did not fund public kindergartens or provide the matching funds for Head Start classes. Most of the time, the federal Head Start program could only be found in urban areas either connected to school districts or to institutions of higher education. For example, in Mississippi, only one city offered a Head Start Program and two other cities offered fee based kindergartens with partial local tax support. Poor children who lived in rural areas without access to Head Start or locally funded kindergartens began their education in first grade.

During the same period when access to early childhood education was severely limited, state government officials and state chambers of commerce sought to increase the reputation of their educational systems to attract businesses from the northeast and overseas. To justify increasing taxes and demonstrate efficient use of taxpayer monies, in

the 1970s both Florida and Georgia implemented testing programs for school accountability. With the implementation of these programs, students were held responsible for their test scores while teachers, school administrators, and most importantly, state policymakers were exempt from responsibility. Thus, the skills of children who began their schooling in the first grade were compared to children who had access to preschool education and had come to school familiar with reading and writing. Additionally, African American high school seniors who had attended schools that district officials had denied library materials, furnished science labs, and current curriculum materials were compared to students that the local school boards had provided the best education possible. This push for accountability through testing revealed an “achievement gap,” which these states had created through the lack of access to equal educational materials.

In this paper, I will examine a few of the educational services offered to students in Mississippi, Florida, and Georgia during the period when accountability through standardized testing began—the 1970s. (at this point in time, my particular interest is kindergarten.) Through the examination of blue ribbon educational reports and state materials on the educational systems in these states, I will establish that equal educational opportunity in these states was an illusion created to attract businesses while maintaining the social and political status quo during the end of the period when the federal government was focused on equalizing educational opportunity.

Because of time limits and my research about Mississippi is my current interest, I am going to begin with information about Mississippi and then present on Florida and

Georgia. Much of the information even about those states will be new to some of you, but Mississippi is the most stark of the three and offers the most overt resistance.

Mississippi is a legend in civil rights studies. It is a place where the violence made the national media and state lawmakers resisted federal policies. In this resistance, the educational system was destroyed and abandoned by the state government and the upper middle class white population. Even the federal equal educational programs could not rectify the damage done by state officials after the implementation of the United State's Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka Kansas*, which ended *de jure* segregation in the public schools.

The ideology that supported *de jure* segregation in schools and in public facilities in general was so strong in Mississippi that, after the *Brown* decision, the state legislators removed the enforcement clause from compulsory school laws. This act of defiance meant that if the federal courts desegregated a district in Mississippi, then the parents could simply keep their children at home until a private school could be organized. It also meant that the public schools received little support from the state or the local districts.

Because of the vast number of private schools and the agricultural based economy in Mississippi, there was little concern about the educational system. As one state official described the situation:

In rural areas (and [Mississippi was predominately rural) . . . There was a pervasive view that too much education created dissatisfaction with life on the farm, and that it not good public policy to educate too many people. This mindset was particularly true toward black children. The familiar argument was that field

hands did not need an education, and, in fact, exposure to school might make them less willing to accept their positions in the social and economic structure.¹

Despite these observations in 1982, Mississippi had followed many of the national trends in education. In 1946, a joint legislative report was issued that suggested consolidating high schools, raising teacher salaries, constructing better schools and more vocational programs for [and I quote] “Negro students,” as well as reorganization of the state department of education. As school desegregation cases began emerging in the federal court system, the legislature passed the Minimum Foundation Program to equalize educational funding and some educational services. Like the Minimum Foundation laws in Florida and Georgia (and many other states), this legislative package to equalize school funding was intended to offer African American children facilities equal to those used by white and Asian American students in Mississippi.² (Mullins)

Although there were many reports and legislative consultants, it was not until 1982 that educational reform was taken seriously in Mississippi. The reasons why vary from embarrassment that other states looked at Mississippi’s educational system as a national joke to losing bids for international companies to move to the state because of the reputation of the public schools. Little did the advocacy have to do with offering the current students in the public schools an equal education.

To follow the very public and racist battle for supporting the public schools would take too long today, but I can give you an example through a brief description of the legislation for state-wide public kindergartens. In 1942, the Mississippi legislature passed legislation that allowed public schools to have kindergartens, but prohibited the use of state funds to support them. In the Minimum Foundation legislation of 1953,

kindergartens were revisited. While the Minimum Foundation legislation allowed the assessment of taxes for education, it prohibited the funding of kindergartens with those tax revenues.³ Mississippi again revisited the topic of kindergartens in educational surveys in the 1960s and 1970s. The survey done in 1966 requested increased funding for public schools, higher salaries for teachers, consolidation of schools, and funding for state supported kindergartens.⁴ In 1971, the legislature passed the Early Education Act, but nothing changed in the public schools because this Act was not funded. Middle class children still began school before the first grade and almost all African American children began school in first grade.

It wasn't until 1981 and 1982 that a Governor William Winters, a public education advocate, supported by the Clarion Ledger [the newspaper with the widest circulation in the state] and civic organizations, pushed through meaningful educational reform. This legislation made kindergarten the official starting point in the state school system, but even then this first step in the equalization of time spent in school was protested and fought as too expensive or an entitlement even after the legislation was passed. School districts had until 1985 to begin the process, but in 1986 the state senate passed a resolution that districts could delay the implementation of kindergarten classes if they wished.

The 1982 legislation also included minimum competency testing for students in elementary and middle grades. As we will find in Florida and Georgia, the testing began before the kindergartens were fully funded and implemented. The deadline for testing was not delayed. It began promptly in 1985.

Florida is a state that is both southern and not southern. The geographic area, known as the “Florida panhandle,” shares many of the traditions of Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. This area extends to central Florida and at one time included Pinellas County. Florida did not go through the same resistance as Georgia and Mississippi because of its links to other parts of the country, the ability of the black community to communicate its needs, and the strength of the business community in state politics.

This southern most state passed a Minimum Foundation Program in 1947, not to offer an equal education to all students, but to prevent the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from pressing for desegregated schools in Florida. This act of appeasement was intended to support the construction of facilities for the education of African American children and to give these children the same curriculum and materials that white children had kindergarten through twelfth grade. Two years earlier the Urban League had reported on the living conditions of African American citizens in St. Petersburg. In the report, the organization explained that among other problems, the children of black citizens did not have access to public kindergartens. MFP allowed the district where St. Petersburg was located, Pinellas County, to use state funding to add kindergarten to an elementary school built in 1952 that was intended to serve black children. After the *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* (1954) decision, the Pinellas County School Board added two more elementary schools with kindergartens as an attempt to equalize educational access for black students.⁵

Construction programs like the schools in Pinellas were how the political hierarchy intended to demonstrate that educational facilities were equal between the races. But elaborate construction programs cost money and the business community as

well as the property owners did not wish to support the construction of a second school district in every county—which would have been necessary to maintain segregation and offer equal educational opportunity. Only the counties that were wealthy enough to use local funds could provide kindergartens and equal services to all the children in their districts.

School funding changed again in the 1970s with the passage of the Florida Accountability in Education program. This act increased funding while it implemented minimum competency testing in grades 3, 5, 8, and 10, with the 10th grade test acting as a graduation exam. As with all things in education, if you are going to start testing in 3rd grade, you need to start teaching students how to take a test in kindergarten. The only problem is that not all the children attended kindergarten. An example of how access to preschool education was restricted is in Duvall County, which includes Jacksonville.

Six years after the Florida Accountability in Education program passed the legislature, the Public Education Study Committee in Duvall County (Jacksonville, FL) issued a group of reports on the school district and made recommendations on how to improve it. The Committee divided itself into task forces charged with analyzing different areas. The report from the Task Force on Learning (K-6) showed that Duvall County had kindergarten classes for 7, 241 children, but that 9, 250 five-year-olds were eligible. Of the over 2,000 children not served by the public schools, 5 attended Head Start, while 193 went to day care centers supported by Title XX of the Social Security Act. The rest were in private and “other public” kindergartens.⁶ The authors of the report explained that the reasons that Duvall county did not serve over 2,000 children were twofold. First, “the state of Florida has not made appropriations to finance facilities

for kindergartens and many schools cannot provide the proper environment for a kindergarten program in their present facilities.”⁷ Without the needed classrooms, the school system could not hope to house all the students. Second, fewer spaces were available due to the school district’s policy of placing first graders back into kindergarten classes if they failed the initial testing in the first grade. Five-year-olds who could not be placed in classes were put on a waiting list.⁸

The Task Force recommended that the State of Florida make kindergarten mandatory as a requirement for first grade and that the county school system “immediately recruit and enroll all eligible children in kindergarten beginning in the 1977-78 school year.”⁹ The committee drew this conclusion because they had found that students who did not attend kindergarten classes often needed additional services in remedial programs “to meet the level of performance achieved by children who have had kindergarten experience.”¹⁰ Their proof was the placement of some of the first graders back into the kindergarten classes. Under the next governor, Robert Graham, kindergarten did become mandatory, but as in Mississippi, the funding and existence of the classrooms only became a reality in the late 1980s.

Georgia’s story is much like that of Florida; the road to equal educational opportunity among the different races and, in the case of Georgia, social classes, was full of good intentions and political side roads. From 1960 until 1974, kindergartens were on the legislative platform of every governor’s race, but it wasn’t until Jimmy Carter became governor that preschool education made it into the budget. Like Florida and Mississippi, the Georgia legislature passed a Minimum Foundation Program. Georgia’s was passed in 1949 under the leadership of Governor Herman Talmadge, who pressed for the

legislation to equalize facilities that black students used. The Georgia Minimum Foundations legislation also added state support for the 12th grade, something that school districts had to find the funding for locally. Kindergarten was not part of the Minimum Foundation Program in Georgia.

In the middle of the 1960s, public early childhood education began to gain support in Georgia. In 1968, the Georgia Education Association made state supported kindergartens its seventh legislative priority.¹¹ A year later in a speech at the Governor's Conference on Education, State Superintendent Jack Nix warned his audience that, "We must not delay longer to provide opportunity for kindergarten experience for every Georgia child."¹² Nix went on to explain that "the fact that kindergarten training helps to close the gap between disadvantaged youngsters and their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds is another reason we should move now if we ever expect to fulfill our commitment to education for ALL Georgia children."¹³

In 1970, the Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers passed a resolution that the State Board of Education consider establishing "adequate kindergartens" in "every school system in Georgia."¹⁴ That year, the Georgia Educational Improvement Council (GEIC), a committee of business, political, and educational leaders, recommended the establishment of public kindergartens in phases. The GEIC went farther than kindergartens. It recommended that the state deliver "nutrition, medical, and dental services" through public early childhood education programs.¹⁵ This plan mirrored the federal Head Start program, which began in had become available in Georgia during the late 1960s. This federal program allowed the expansion of local

support for pre-school education, but it was not intended to support kindergartens in all the state's elementary schools.

In the 1970 gubernatorial race, the Democratic candidates Carl Sanders and Jimmy Carter both supported the idea of statewide kindergartens. In Carter's plan, kindergartens would be introduced over a period of four years and would be compensatory. He wanted to start with the "most deprived children . . . so they can go into the first grade . . . without being embarrassed at being so far behind more fortunate children at the first grade level."¹⁶ His justification for beginning with educationally disadvantaged children focused on their middle class peers. The children who were denied access to reading materials and educational environments in their early years caused classes to move slower through material. Providing early childhood education for disadvantaged children "would prevent the holding back of the more fortunate children in the same grade with them."¹⁷ While this justification for starting such an expensive program was inclusive of all classes and races, it also answered the myth that black children were intellectually inferior and would hold back the white children in desegregated schools. Through the intervention of public kindergartens, all children would be prepared for first grade.¹⁸

Planning for the program began soon after Carter took office in 1971, when the governor's staff discovered that the federal government would fund early childhood programs for children with mental and physical disabilities through Title IV-A of the Social Security Act.¹⁹ They also had found funding for kindergartens for economically disadvantaged students through the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Titles I and III, and the Head Start program.²⁰ To begin the first phase of the program, the state had to supply a mere \$1.4 million to receive \$4.2 million in federal matching funds.²¹

Thus, the focus on creating kindergartens for children needing special education services and economically disadvantaged children brought the cost of statewide kindergartens down to a level that legislators could support.

By the end of the legislative session, Carter had the bill for Early Childhood education, but he did not have the funding to continue the program beyond the first year. He also faced opposition from the Department of Education and from the House education committee. By the end of 1973, funding for kindergartens and preschool interventions for students with disabilities was so low that the classes established the year before could not be sustained.²²

In 1974, Carter established a committee to examine the Minimum foundations program and to make recommend changes. He appointed himself as the chair of the curriculum committee, which in turn recommended the creation of state wide kindergartens beginning with impoverished children and those with special needs. In the larger educational reform bill, the early childhood intervention programs and state-wide kindergarten passed, but again, the legislature did not fund it. Kindergartens in Georgia were not funded until the 1980s when Governor George Busbee pushed his budget, which contained funding for state-wide kindergartens.²³ Like in Florida and Mississippi, the opportunity for all children to attend public schools the same number of years had to wait until the 1980s.

The idea that policymakers deliberately harmed children is difficult to support, but the idea that some people don't count and do not have to be taken into considered in policy is not. In education, the poor or anyone who was viewed as member of a minority group in the southern states was marginalized throughout the twentieth century, and the omission of equal access to education reached well into the 1980s.

In Florida, minimum competency testing began in 1974. It was true that by state law, school districts in Florida could use their funds for kindergartens, but no additional funds were offered from the state to support state-wide kindergartens. Why is anyone's guess, but it may well have been ignorance. When I asked governor Askew's educational advisor, William Malloy why the state government supported implementing state-wide testing before all school districts in the state offered kindergarten education to all children, he replied that he recommended it, but that they wanted to ease into it across the state because they did not know how important preschool education was at that time for closing the gap for "youngsters without strong learning commitments."²⁴

Although kindergartens were a normal part of the educational systems in states with which southern states like Florida and Georgia, eventually Mississippi, wished to compete, most state level officials did not see the entirety of the school systems within those states as part of the quality of life in those states. I have seen state analyses to expand areas of business and to attract commerce from other states, so I find the claim of ignorance hard to accept. Despite my examination of these documents, I find Dr. Malloy's explanation plausible. The state level examines the political climate and the willingness of taxpayers to support the development of a system, especially one as visible as an additional grade level in all school districts state-wide. When groups of people, be they poor or minority, are looked upon as unimportant or marginal at best, providing them with services is not a priority. The most overt example I have discussed today is the situation in Mississippi.

Mississippi offers a clear and concise case study for silencing and marginalization a group and anyone who would support that group. The study that the state commissioned

in the 1970s had supported the addition of kindergartens to all school districts in Mississippi to equalize education among the students. This report had the support of some civic groups and the colleges of education throughout the state, but it did not have the support of the state legislators. Kindergarten education was seen as another government handout to the poor and the African American community. It was not until the business community and the Clarion Ledger supported educational funding and equal access to curriculum that the state officials were pushed to offer all state citizens the same levels of education.

This information about the marginalization of groups is heartbreaking and necessary to understand, but what does it mean? The conclusions that I see running through the material are in the depth of support for public education and the timing of the implementation of the state support for preschool education. Well-funded districts in Georgia, Florida, and private schools in Mississippi all had kindergartens, but districts that did not have additional funding could not offer this opportunity to students until the late 1980s. The late timing of access to kindergarten education means, as Jonathan Kozol has pointed out, that the test scores for elementary students compared students who had been in school at least 4 years in third grade with students who had only been in school 3 years in third grade.²⁵ The national achievement gap that is so evident in test scores may be more of a measure of the state level commitment to mass preschool education than the learning ability of the students. This timing also means that it was not until the late 1990s that students graduating from high school had the same amount of schooling in these states. Historian Ron Butchart has suggested in his work on the formal education of freedmen—that the terrorism in Mississippi, Georgia, and northern Florida was so great

that the African American students are socialized not to challenge the system, so by the time they reach middle school, they are backing away from competing academically with their white classmates.²⁶ But, from what I have seen, until a mere 20 years ago, there was not an even playing field at the beginning of the academic race, which means that institutionally by the time they reached middle school, the students from groups who did not count knew that their educations were different and that they had different experiences than some of their classmates.

The illusion of educational opportunity and access was reflected in curriculum materials, media reports, and even myopic legislation. Those who created the illusion knew that theirs was a work of fiction, but they persisted in portraying their policies as equalizing the educational playing field. Now that equalization in years in school is achieved, our attention must be drawn to how to equalize the environments where everyone's children receive their education. Then and only then can the snapshots that we refer to as testing reflect the reality that our nation's children experience.

¹ Andrew P. Mullins, Jr. A History of the Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982 (Ph.D. Dissertation, Oxford, Mississippi, The University of Mississippi) May 1992, 2.

² Ibid., 18.

³ Robert W. Plants, Peggy Emerson, and Earl Fortenberry, Jr., The Early Childhood Education Act of 1971: Public Kindergartens for Mississippi, *Mississippi Law Journal*, Volume XLII, Winter 1970, No. 1, 1-19.

⁴ Booz-Allen & Hamilton, Inc. "State-Wide Education Study," (published report of a consulting group authorized by the Mississippi Legislature, December 1966), exhibits 1-4, from Mullins, A History of the Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982, 23.

⁵ Patricia Perez Costrini, Ed., *Tradition of Excellence: Pinellas County Schools: 1912-1987* (Clearwater, FL: School Board of Pinellas County, 1987), 29-31, 200.

⁶ *A Report Prepared by the Task Force on Learning (K-6) of the Public Education Study Committee*, by Harry Reagan and Clanzel Brown, Co-Chairmen (Jacksonville, FL: Jacksonville Council on Citizen Involvement, Inc, 1977), 4. It should be noted that the number of children eligible for public kindergarten does not match the number assigned to different educational institutions.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹¹ Proposed Legislative Program, Georgia Education Association, 1968-1969, Education, Record Group 12, Sub Group 2, Series 17, Box 27, State Superintendent Papers. The Georgia Education Association changed its name to the Georgia Association of Educators in 1971 when it combined with the Georgia Teachers and Education Association, the African American teachers association.

¹² Speech for Governor's Conference on Education, 1969, Education, Record Group 12, Sub Group 2, Series 27, Box 27, State Superintendent Papers.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Georgia Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers, Resolutions - 1970 Session, Education, Record Group 12, Sub Group 2, Series 27, Box 28, State Superintendent Papers.

¹⁵ Georgia Education Improvement Council, Minutes of Meeting, March 26, 1970, Education, Record Group 12, Sub Group 2, Series 27, Box 30, State Superintendent Papers.

¹⁶ "Carter and Sanders Give Stands on 19 Key Issues," *Atlanta Journal*, 20 September 1970.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ In his work on black students, Thomas Sowell discusses the myths of African American intellectual inferiority. This work was published in 1974, and therefore reflects the myths contemporary to Carter's career. See Thomas Sowell, *Black Education: Myths and Tragedies* (New York: David McKay, 1974), 219-250 and 265-295.

¹⁹ Interview with Dr. Larry Gess, 28 April 1997.

²⁰ Education, Governor's Press Secretary Reference File, Record Group 1, Sub Group 1, Series 98, Box 2, Carter Papers, Georgia Department of History and Archives, Atlanta, Georgia. (Hereafter cited as Governor Carter Papers.)

²¹ Bill Jordan, "Childhood Development Plan in Trouble, Floyd Reports," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 27, 1972.

²² Letter to Jack Nix from Jimmy Carter, March 6, 1973, Education, Governor's Incoming Correspondence, Record Group 1, Sub Group 1, Series 5, Box 59, Governor Carter Papers. See also Deanna Michael, *Jimmy Carter as Educational Policy Maker*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), 76-77.

²³ See Michael, *Jimmy Carter*, 78-84.

²⁴ Phone interview with William Malloy by author, 2005.

²⁵ Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Random House, 2005), 49-52.

²⁶ Ron Butchart, Awards Panel, History of Education Society Annual Meeting, November 3-6, 2011.