
Democracy & Education

Racism, Reform, Revolution?

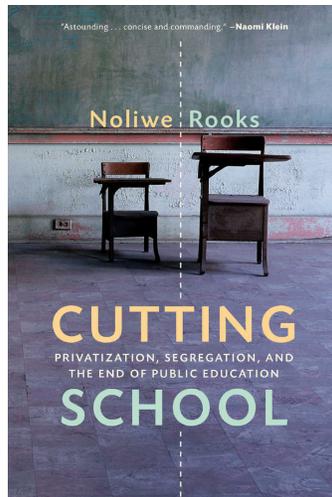
The Segrenomics of American Education.

A Book Review of *Cutting School: Privatization, Segregation, and the End of Public Education*

Sue Ellen Henry, Michael Drabich, Charlotte Detwiler, Katelyn Kempf, Katherine Kromer, Anthony Scrima, Kafilat Oladiran, Melanie Scurto, Will Simonson, Janey Woo
(Bucknell University)

Introduction

AS PART OF an education course called Democracy and Education at a small, private liberal arts institution, this group has chosen to collaboratively coauthor this book review. Our class has run itself democratically; we collectively determined our syllabus, wrote our assignments, delivered course content, and designed our grading schema. This is just one way we have attempted to disrupt traditional faculty-driven, top-down models of knowledge transmission, and engage as a democratic community. We represent varied preK–12 educational backgrounds and political positions to offer a cogent review of *Cutting School: Privatization, Segregation, and the End of Public Education*, by Noliwe Rooks (2017). The basis of our discussions in class has been Labaree's (2012) *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling*, which exposes the endemic problems experienced by a growing number of students who are systemically disadvantaged in American public schools, contextualized in the controversy



between whether schooling is primarily an individual or a public good. Thus, Labaree's text has served as a lens for the class, and, though none of us are on track for teacher certification, we, the authors, have come together with a common interest in the history of American education as well as the reform movements that have and are currently taking place.

In *Cutting School*, Rooks (2017) details the segregated racial history of U.S. society and its schools. According to Rooks, schooling in the United States has always been deeply influenced by capitalism and the possibility of profit; indeed, she maintains that there is a co-constitutive

The authors are representatives of EDUC 308/608: Democracy and Education. This advanced seminar in social foundations of education studied the relationship between democracy and educational practices, with an emphasis on practicing democracy while engaging in deep study. This course is an upper-level offering in the Education Department at Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA.

relationship between societal segregation and capitalism. These institutions, and others, such as for-profit charter school franchises, seek to take advantage of the economic benefits of segregation. In her writing, Rooks coined the term *segrenomics* to expose the racialized implications that early architects of schools used to uphold the inherent imbalances that have allowed these new educational apparatuses to flourish. Rooks argued that schools have always been a tool for maintaining a segregated society, despite the national narrative of schools as mechanisms for integration, individual attainment, and general meritocratic success.

Though Rooks's (2017) rhetoric at times comes across as jarring and mildly alarmist, she succeeds in passionately convincing readers of the severe damages caused by segrenomics. She employed strong, politically charged language to effectively and affectively buttress her argumentation. Through vivid descriptions of case studies that serve to humanize the realities of segregation, Rooks appeals to readers' ethos, thereby providing them with a more commensurate and contextual understanding of this fundamental facet of our national shame.

The book is organized in two major sections. Following the introduction, the first four chapters are primarily historical in nature. The last three chapters and the coda explore modern schooling practices.

Historical Synthesis

Chapter 1: Rich College Students, Poor Public Schools

Rooks (2017) begins the book by noting the emergence and the endorsement of private public schools. She recalls the history of the establishment of Teach for America, its role in the establishment of KIPP charter schools, and its influence on charter schools throughout America.

Chapter 2: White Philanthropy, Black Education

Rooks (2017) explores the historic limitations and segregation of education for Black people. She outlines historic beliefs that Black people ought to be constrained to vocational education for economic gain of the establishment, made explicit in the founding documents of the General Education Board. The board established Black public education, funded by Rockefeller philanthropic efforts dependent upon Black communities' capability of raising a portion of the cost for their own schooling.

Chapter 3: Brown Children, White Retribution

Rooks (2017) recalls several federal court cases leading up to *Brown v. Board of Education*, the ramifications of the case decision, and the prolonged effects it creates in the present. She ends the chapter by arguing a correlation between cases of police brutality, of the sort that have spurred the Black Lives Matter movement, and segregation in school districts that have seen particularly dramatic cases of police violence against Black people.

Chapter 4: How the North Wasn't One

Chapter 4 unveils the truth behind the desegregation of education in the North, contrasting the belief that the states were progressive and in favor of civil rights. Following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, communities in many Northern states did everything in their power to avoid integration, including fostering housing discrimination, stating a lack of transportation funding, and exploiting the lack of federal policy enforcement for appropriate integration.

Modern Critique

Chapter 5: Education Dreams and Virtual Nightmares

Rooks (2017) addresses the current impacts of virtual education endorsed by powerful politicians such as Betsy DeVos. Using case studies from Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Florida, Rooks asserts that school systems are unjustly serving poor and minority students from underfunded rural and urban areas by turning to virtual education, an ineffectual solution to contemporary issues in education. Rooks argues that this phenomenon only exacerbates the problem of segregation in schools.

Chapter 6: Stealing School

In chapter 6, Rooks (2017) details how quality schooling has been turned into a protected commodity and how some school funds are being "plundered," stolen from those most in need of them by education officials for the further benefit of the privileged. Parents of color who are caught enrolling their children in a school districts other than their own are prosecuted and face charges that could amount to a felony. In addition, Rooks focuses on educational officials and charter school operations that siphon funds for personal gain.

Chapter 7: The Age of Resistance

In chapter 7, Rooks (2017) explores various types of resistance to contemporary education "reforms." She profiles community activism and protest surrounding educational policies and disadvantages in education, including but not limited to standardized testing, privatization of schools, and inadequate funding.

Coda: Trickle-Up Education

To conclude the book, Rooks (2017) focuses on how college graduates of color and those from impoverished backgrounds have taken it upon themselves to combat the structural barriers that she detailed throughout the previous chapters.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Rooks (2017) is particularly successful in her project in the early chapters, in which she traces a little-known history of segregation and privatization of public schooling. Bridging critical approaches of race theory, sociology, history, and others, she compellingly galvanizes the reader, chapter by chapter, before reaching an emotional apex. Then, slightly disappointingly, she stops just short of the conclusion readers might expect or desire. Interestingly, the book ends with an open question about how politicians and citizens can act on behalf of public schooling to shift the trends

Rooks articulates throughout the text. Rooks writes passionately and persuasively; her argument, however, could be strengthened in places by a more sincere acknowledgment of contrasting opinions, as well as inclusion of greater empirical support for the humanizing narratives she cited. For instance, some of our collaborative class presentations focused on understanding school funding practices, gaining insight on practices that reinforce segregation in special education, and enrollment and attendance patterns in charter schools. These investigations were useful in giving context to the issues that Rooks explored and understanding them more thoroughly within the contemporary American schooling landscape.

As it stands, however, the text is exciting and incredibly provoking of thought and conversation. It leaves the reader with a clear vision of the American public school system as it is and always has been: a capitalist project that is most effective at maintaining a hegemonic status quo. We wished, perhaps optimistically, that Rooks (2017) would have provided a more

concrete suggestion as to what to do now that we see our schools this way.

In all, this text is powerful in many ways that could make it an excellent supporting text for more traditional education research in social foundations classrooms. The chapters stand on their own in many cases and could be excerpted or utilized holistically at an instructor's discretion. We see the argument of the segrenomics of education as a powerful focus on capitalistic practices that create and maintain school and societal segregation. We are hopeful that other education scholars will use this text as a catalyst for envisioning education reform that divests from the incessant history of racist practices in schooling that Rooks (2017) potently documents.

References

- Labaree, D. F. (2012). *Someone has to fail: The zero-sum game of public schooling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rooks, N. (2017). *Cutting school: Privatization, segregation, and the end of public education*. New York, NY: The New Press.