

Separate But Ethical?

The Community Culture School (CCS) is a K-12 charter school located in a neighborhood made up of recent Chinese immigrants for whom English is not a first language.¹ CCS was established to address community needs by creating a safe space for students whose cultural and linguistic practices differ from the majority of the city's population. In addition to its focus on Chinese language and arts curricula, social studies classes focus on Chinese and Asian cultures, the issues they face around white supremacist ideologies, and recent increases in anti-Asian violence. While unique, CCS is hardly an anomaly. Many other charter schools across the United States focus on specific cultures and religions.

Proponents of culturally specific schools argue that these institutions are necessary for addressing challenges minority students face in public schools. For example, students who celebrate holidays not on their school's calendar are forced to either miss class or miss their religious observances. Students of color in predominantly white schools recount being teased or feeling ashamed about things like their clothes, hair, religious garb, and lunches. Proponents of CCS argue that students feel more comfortable around peers with similar backgrounds, making it easier to learn. Also, supporters say that community building and cultural preservation goals cannot be achieved in integrated spaces since dominant cultures tend to be favored. Finally, some argue that even in diverse schools, certain subjects like social studies are better taught in racially separated classes.²

However, studies have claimed to demonstrate the value of diversity in schools and the negative impacts of segregation for students of color.³ Additionally, recent research suggests that socioeconomic integration benefits the least advantaged.⁴ Furthermore, some argue, it is only in integrated spaces that minority groups can learn how to effectively navigate and influence dominant culture. Finally, some defend integration for its intrinsic value, arguing that we cannot achieve true equality in our democracy if we don't learn to live in and make decisions about our shared space and shared civic identity. The way to address our current injustices and extreme polarization, some suggest, is to work to increase our interactions across differences, not to further insulate ourselves from those who do not share the same culture or values.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is separation based on identity ever morally permissible in schools?
2. Should we treat all special interest schools (including religious schools, character education schools, and cultural and ethnic schools) the same when deciding how much separation to accommodate?

¹ The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this case are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, or products is intended or should be inferred.

² <https://rei.myschoolapp.com/podium/push/default.aspx?i=294703&s=165>

³ <https://www.epi.org/publication/schools-are-still-segregated-and-black-children-are-paying-a-price/>

⁴ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-022-04996-4>

