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The Influence of School Segregation on Students' Educational Achievement

by

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Abstract

This literature review evaluates how race, geographical location, and socioeconomic status impacts a student's educational achievement. These variables affect educational success, which is impacted by the history of housing and racial segregation in the United States. The discussion will include why schools are segregated and how this has an impact on a student's education by looking at different studies and theories such as the Black Culture theory and the Acting White Hypothesis. Even in desegregated schools, "tracking" separates and further segregates races in the educational system. The literature review concludes with a summary of the findings, importance, and future research that can be done in this field including equal funding for public schools across America.

Introduction

The United States has struggled with segregation and equal rights for all races since the country was founded. (Bonisita) discusses the causes and consequences of weak federal enforcement in school desegregation. Today, there is still covert segregation in the education system. Schools are racially segregated and the achievement gap differs depending on the racial composition of a school. Depending on the location of schools and a student's race and class, academic success is impacted. Throughout this paper I will use the terms African American and Black interchangeably. Sociologists are interested in looking at how different factors can impact academic achievement and the disparities in the education system. *Brown vs Board of Education* court case in 1954 ruled it unconstitutional to segregate schools and there should be separate but equal facilities. These facilities are still not equal today, in 2017, when looking at student's educational success. *Brown vs Board of Education* was a federal ruling and it is hard for the government to oversee each school district to make sure these laws are being followed. This

Supreme Court case did not result in immediate social change. Instead, it resulted in White parents sending their children to private academies, leaving school districts segregated even after the decision (Bonasita 2015).

I argue that the racial composition of a school has an impact on a student's academic success. In desegregated schools due to "tracking," minority students are still not as successful academically as their White peers. Tracking is the process in schools where students are divided in the classes they are enrolled in by either being on a college bound or a working track (Burriss 2014). Underlying factors such as where a student lives, and their socioeconomic status impact academic success. Due to de facto segregation, segregation not enforced by any federal law, segregated schools still exist via housing segregation and wealth disparities between Whites and African Americans. I look at educational success through the achievement gap; theories about why the gap occurs; and other factors such as wealth, class, and location. All of these factors influence where a student attends school, which impacts their success.

Race and Geographical Location

Sixty-three years after the *Brown vs Board of Education* decision, school segregation is still a social issue. Racial segregation for minority children is on the rise. In 1968, 77 percent of minority students attended a majority non-white school and by 1999, the number of Black students attending a minority school was 70 percent. This percentage has decreased minimally over the course of thirty years (Shapiro 2004). De facto segregation is mostly seen in housing segregation in the United States. Trends show that Whites move out of integrated communities and avoid moving to them. On the other hand, Blacks are less likely to move out of racially mixed areas (Shapiro 2004:11). Living in the suburbs is more expensive and families with more money are able to afford this and move out of urban areas. This leads to both racial and

economic segregation in communities, causing more Blacks to live in highly segregated and high poverty areas. The residential color line distinguishes African-Americans from other races. This leads to an increase in school dropout rates for Blacks, a decrease in their college attendance, impacts later earnings, and future residency (Shapiro 2004).

School segregation will be defined as the measure of unequal assignment of students to schools by race. I mainly focus on neighborhood and school inequalities (Condron 2013). If a school is desegregated, it does not mean that the racial groups are divided equally between half minority and half White. Many suburbs do not have minority students but where they do, they are integrated into the population. It is harder for urban schools to integrate since races are geographically segregated. The root of the problem associated with school segregation is racial and economic segregation. If there are efforts to move towards racial and economic desegregation, segregation in public schools would decrease (Bonastia 2015).

Race and Socioeconomic Status

Minority students are more likely to attend a lower-funded school based on where they live. Studies have shown that more than 60 percent of Black and Hispanic students attend high poverty schools compared to only 18 percent of White students and 30 percent of Asian students attending high-poverty schools. Studies have shown that Whites are the most segregated race in schools (Logan 2012). According to *The Hidden Cost of Being African American* by Thomas Shapiro, White parents define a good school as one where high status families live. One parent describes that they did not send their child to an urban school because they did not want their child to “associate with children who were not up to par” and “lower-class people” (Shapiro 2004:171). Attitudes like these perpetuate racial stereotypes and shows that Whites segregate themselves from minorities.

There is a correlation between race, poverty, and geographical location. In elementary schools, minority students perform around the 35-40th percentile whereas White and Asian students score near the 60th percentile. This shows that there is a disparity between races based on academic performance. There are internal constraints on academic achievements including inadequate facilities and a shortage of instructional materials. These factors impact inner-city student's academic achievement potential (Anderson 2005). Schools with more African-American students have a higher percentage of low-income students. These students are less likely to report variables such as high expectations from peers and safe neighborhoods than White students are.

Class segregation impacts the quality of education an individual will receive (Logan 2012). Location is an underlying factor of the difference in educational success. Depending on where a public school is located, it impacts the amount of funding the school has for technology and funding for teacher salaries. When there are more African-American students in a school, there is teacher quality deterioration. Schools in low-income areas spend 31 percent less than schools in higher income areas. The richest neighborhoods in the United States spend 57 percent more on each student than those in low income schools (Shapiro 2004). In addition to research on race and socioeconomic status, researchers are interested in theories behind segregated schools and the achievement gap.

Race and Achievement Gap Theories

This research utilizes an interactionist perspective, focusing on how individuals act and communicate with each other in their society. The ways in which different races interact and function in the social world can impact a student's educational success. There are two theories at

the micro level that work to explain the Black-White achievement gap. Minority children are more likely to attend highly segregated schools. This can impact their educational success which is demonstrated by looking at the Black-White achievement gap.

Black Culture Theory

One theory that sociologists argue is a reason for this gap is that there is a “Black Culture.” This suggests that African Americans have different views towards education, causing the achievement gap. A professor at the University of California, Berkeley stated that there is a tendency towards anti-intellectualism at all levels of the black community (Anderson 2005). Some sociologists do not agree with this and blame the differences of educational attainment on wealth disparities in society rather than cultural differences.

There is a visible income gap in the United States today between Blacks and Whites. The typical Black household earns 59 cents for every dollar the average White family makes, according to (Shapiro). However, the wealth gap is even greater. The net worth for White families is \$81,000 compared to \$8,000 for Black families. This is the baseline racial wealth gap, which shows that that Black families have 10 cents for every dollar of wealth that White families have (Shapiro 7:2004). This relates back to housing segregation and the housing gap in the United States. Since White families have more wealth and income, it is more likely they will have the funds to move out of urban areas and attend adequately funded schools in the suburbs. Due to the economic differences, schools that are highly funded will have higher academic achievements, whereas underfunded schools will have lower educational achievements in comparison (Anderson 2005).

Acting White Hypothesis

Likewise, theorists contend that there is a “Burden of Acting White,” wherein African-Americans define behaviors as “white,” such as doing well in school, and their peers discourage them from achieving their full potential. The Acting White Hypothesis considers the type of school one attends and especially pertains to racially desegregated schools. Black students are thought to underperform because their White peers discourage them from succeeding. However, this is not seen to be the reason for the Black-White achievement gap. Research found that Black students are more likely to see that their school has racial inequalities but all students have similar goals: to attend college (Diamond 2007).

Segregation and the Achievement Gap

There was a study done comparing four types of school segregation and how each impacts the black-white achievement gap. Dissimilarity is defined as the extent to which one group is segregated from another. As Black-White school dissimilarity increases, the achievement gap increases. However, as exposure of Blacks to White students increases, the achievement gap decreases. This shows that school segregation does have an impact on minority students. When minorities are exposed to White students, Whites still perform better than their peers. In Condrón's article, *Racial Segregation and the Black/White Achievement Gap, 1992 to 2009*, he found that factors impact the Black-White achievement gap before kindergarten; this shows that there are non-school inequalities that factor into this relationship. The factors include segregated neighborhoods and economic inequalities (Condrón 2013). When schools are integrated, there is still segregation towards minority students. Individuals hold different attitudes towards minority students and separate them into different classes.

Tracking and the Achievement Gap

Tracking is the difference between being in an advanced placement (AP), a college preparatory course, or not. Even when attending a racially desegregated school, students are racially segregated into different classes. (Burriss) found that in schools with diverse populations, tracking results in racial stratification and lower achievement in low-track classes. Minority students were also perceived by teachers and other students to be in the “low ability” classes (Burriss 2014). Racial and class prejudice is a continuation of racial stratification in the tracking system today. Race has an impact on the educational success of a student even if they do not attend a segregated school.

In a study done in a diverse mid-sized city, in a school with a balanced number of Black and White students, (Diamond) explores the struggles and differences in academic achievement a minority student experiences in a desegregated school. He found that tracking in public schools begins early, with placement tests in elementary school. This test impacts the math courses they will be taking by middle and high school. By fifth grade, the majority of students in upper level math classes are White. When entering high school, there is stratification of students in AP classes. In Riverview High School, Blacks make up 40% of the population but only 9% of Blacks take AP Calculus. Whites, on the other hand, make up 50% of the student population but 82% of Whites end up taking AP Calculus (Diamond 2007). This research shows that even in a desegregated suburb, academic achievement of students is different due to the classes they are taking.

When Black students were placed in these classes, peers and teachers lowered their expectations of these students. A Black student attending Riverview describes the experience he has in his upper level classes by saying, “I just think that kids aren’t use to seeing a successful... black male student. Most people don’t expect anything from black males” (Diamond 2007). This

is harming the educational success of Black students because their White classmates do not think that Black students are as capable since they are not enrolled in similar classes. White students make assumptions of their black peers, harming their academic success. Minority students who attend a mostly White school will not have as many pro-school attitudes due to the assumptions made by their peers and instructors (Goldsmith 2004).

Evidence from many studies that show that racial and socioeconomic stratification are perpetuated by the process of tracking in public schools. This has lowered the achievement of students except for those on advanced tracks (Burriss 2014). Students on the advanced tracks are mostly White students, so even with school desegregation, tracking plays an important role on the educational success of students. Tracking specifically harms minority students due to racial assumptions and stereotypes, even though they have the same potential as other students.

Conclusion

In this paper, I addressed the academic success of students and how success can vary if they attend a racially segregated or desegregated school. Racial segregation in the United States results in an unequal wealth distribution between Whites and minorities. This impacts where families live, and how much money they make. School funding depends on the location of the school. In impoverished or urban areas, schools are more likely to be underfunded and highly segregated. However, even when schools are desegregated, there is still racial stratification due to tracking. Although *Brown vs Board of Education* stated that schools should be “separate but equal,” the schools of today are still not equal. Racial segregation in society impacts the education a student receives and their academic success.

Although the education system is making strides toward desegregating schools, there is still an underlying bias against minority students which impacts their educational success.

Tracking does not treat races equally; as early as elementary school, a specific educational path is laid out for a student based on how they perform, ultimately based on their race. Future research should focus on how schools help students of diverse racial backgrounds be as successful as their white counterparts from an early age, without assuming that they are different from white students. In addition, research should look into segregated schools and find ways to decrease the Black-White achievement gap through school curriculum. Across the United States, public schools should provide equal funding to every school, especially in areas where students do not have the opportunity to attend a better public school. Every student in America should have an equal opportunity to receive an education. Having desegregated and equally funded schools across the country would decrease the Black-White achievement gap and allow every student to be successful in their educational career.

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