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Racial Isolation and Student Achievement

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Abstract

Achievement data of African American, Hispanic American, and Caucasian students from racially segregated and racially integrated settings in an urban, Midwestern school district were analyzed to determine the effect of racial isolation on achievement within each racial group. In the district studied, achievement of students from segregated schools was not significantly different from the achievement of same race students from integrated schools. The study's results should encourage district officials and instructional leaders to look at those factors that have a positive impact on student achievement regardless of the level of racial isolation.

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1 Introduction

Does racial segregation have an impact on students from a particular racial group? Are students that are educated in a segregated setting automatically at a disadvantage compared to others of the same race that are educated in an integrated setting? There is substantial evidence supporting a persistent achievement gap that exists between races (Brown, 2009; Green, 2008; Klopfenstein, 2004; Ladner & Lips, 2009; Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009). There is also considerable research exploring the factors necessary for success of students from particular racial groups (Guerra & Valverde, 2008; Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008;

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Lewis & Moore, 2008; Salinas, 2002; Stull 2002). The purpose of this study was to determine if achievement varies for students of a particular racial group related to the level of segregation for those students within a school district given that other factors such as equity of facilities and quality of teachers were similar.

2 Significance of the Problem

One of the most perplexing problems facing public education today is the continued disparity between the performance of African American and Hispanic students and Caucasian and Asian American students (Evans, 2005). Even though there was improvement in minority students' achievement in the 1970s and 1980s, the gap in minority student performance widened again in the 1990s, and remains wide today (Black, 2004). While nationally 22% of Caucasian 4th grade students scored below basic on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment in 2007, 54% of Black and 50% of Hispanic students scored below basic. At grade 8, 16% of White students were below basic in reading, but 45% of Black and 42% of Hispanic students were below basic. The disparity for minority students showed in math as well (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

It can be argued that this disparity in achievement is being reinforced by rapid resegregation in districts throughout the United States, especially in northern districts and in broad expanses of the South (Kozal, 2005b). Increasing numbers of White children are being educated in suburban, high-quality schools, while African-American and Hispanic students continue to receive lower quality instruction in increasingly racially isolated schools with ongoing problems (Anyon, 1997; Darden, 2003; Kozol, 1995; Kozol, 2005a).

2.1 Context of the Study

The research district is located in a large Midwestern city. The district is surrounded by many smaller, more affluent suburban districts. The research district has experienced changes in demographics and size as a result of white flight prior to and concurrent with the court-ordered desegregation plan mandated in the mid 1970s. The 1970 membership for the district was near 60,000. The membership declined during 1970s and 1980s to a low of about 40,000 in 1990. Since that time, the membership has increased each year reflecting the growth of the city. The greatest decline in membership occurred between 1975 and 1980, when the district lost over 12,000 students. The court-ordered desegregation plan, which included mandatory busing of students to schools outside of their home attendance area, was responsible for this exodus from the district. White flight can be blamed for much of the loss of Caucasian students from a desegregating school district. This can be reflected in residential relocation, transferring to private schools, or residential avoidance, and can be reasonably attributed to desegregation (Armor, 1980). A further attempt to increase racial isolation occurred in the research district with an initiative designed to break up the large urban school district into three smaller districts. Each of these districts would have been racially identifiable. The district would have been subdivided into one "Black", one "Brown", and one "White" district.

Even though the attempt to subdivide the district into an African American district, a Hispanic American district, and a Caucasian district failed, this effort reflects what has been happening nationally. Since 1986 there has been a steady trend toward resegregation. Outcomes of court cases across the country are ending desegregation plans and are forbidding the use of race in student assignment plans (Frankenberg & Lee, 2002). Judicial indifference, beginning with the United States Supreme Court, also proves that racial desegregation is no longer a national priority and state and local education agencies are no longer adopting proactive stances related to the implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* (Russo, 2004). And even though the research district was not subdivided in racially identifiable smaller districts, at the time of this study, there were many schools in the district in which the African American population was greater than 80% and the Hispanic American population was greater than 70% even though the district African American population was 31% and the district Hispanic American population was 24%.

While it is accepted that school segregation sanctioned by law is bad, there is disagreement over whether purposeful desegregation practices have been good (Armor, 1995). Thernstrom and Thernstrom (1997) believe that race-conscious policies can be detrimental and, rather than help, may actually increase race-

consciousness, and actually "carry American society backward" (p. 539). Also, school segregation is a small part of the individual and institutional discrimination that takes place in the United States (Feagin, 1980; Raffel, 1998). The criteria used to determine whether or not desegregation works depends on how the impacts of desegregation are judged. Whether the goal of desegregation is changing racial attitudes, more opportunities in later life, a more democratic America, or high academic achievement is of considerable importance (Raffel, 1998).

3 Importance of the Study

Unlike studies that focus on the achievement gap that exists between racial groups, this study focused on academic achievement of students from particular racial groups in schools which would be classified as either racially integrated or racially segregated. Ramirez and Carpenter (2009) discuss the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to student achievement, and support the need to look at success and lack of success from a "within-race" perspective. This study focused on school achievement characteristics of student within each of three racial subgroups.

For this research, all schools with minority populations above the research school district average were classified as racially segregated to some degree. When the racial segregation is low, the schools offer an integrated educational experience for the race group under consideration. When the racial segregation is high, the schools offer a segregated educational experience for the race under consideration. Within this particular group of district schools, no research had been conducted showing the relationship between increased rates of minority enrollment and student achievement data on a particular racial group. This research determined if same race segregated students were at an advantage or disadvantage over same race integrated students. The results of this research will contribute to the discussion and implications of the increasing number of schools and districts that have become increasingly racially identifiable.

4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the achievement of students attending racially segregated schools with same race high African American, Hispanic American, and Caucasian enrollment compared to students attending racially integrated schools with same race low African American, Hispanic American, and Caucasian enrollment in the same district.

The study analyzed achievement data of randomly selected 5th-grade students attending schools with high rates of segregation for African American, Hispanic American, and Caucasian enrollment and randomly selected 5th-grade students attending schools with low rates of segregation for African American, Hispanic American, and Caucasian enrollment. All study achievement measures were retrospective, archival, and routinely collected school information. Permission from the appropriate school research personnel was obtained before achievement data were collected and analyzed.

Same race integrated schools were those just above the district average for that racial group and were considered racially integrated for this study. This included schools with African American enrollment from 31% to 45%, schools with Hispanic American enrollment from 26% to 40%, and schools with Caucasian enrollment from 43% to 55%. At the time of the research African American students represented 30.5% of the district enrollment, Hispanic American students represented 24.2% of the district enrollment, and Caucasian students represented 42.1 % of the district enrollment. The other 3.3% of the district enrollment included Native American and Asian American student who were not included in this analysis.

Same race segregated schools were schools with African American enrollment greater than 80%, schools with Hispanic American enrollment greater than 70%, and schools with Caucasian enrollment greater than 70%. All research schools selected were meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and were not included in the district magnet program.

The achievement research question focused on the difference in California Achievement NCE scores for (a) reading total, (b) math total, and (c) language total subtests for African American students in segregated schools compared to African American students in segregated schools?

5 Results of the Study

CAT NCE total scores for 5th-grade African American, Hispanic American, and Caucasian students attending segregated and integrated schools were compared. Table 1 displays the independent t test results comparing total reading, language, and mathematics scores for African American, Hispanic American, and Caucasian students attending segregated schools to total reading, language, and math scores for African American, Hispanic American, and Caucasian students attending integrated schools. There was no significant difference between the total reading scores (M = 37.80, SD = 20.99), language scores (M = 49.30, SD = 22.71), and mathematics scores (M = 47.70, SD = 18.64) for African American Students from segregated schools compared to the total reading scores (M = 44.90, SD = 14.69), language scores (M = 49.20, SD = 15.88), and mathematics scores (M = 52.40, SD = 12.10) for African American students attending integrated schools. There was also no significant difference between the total reading scores (M = 50.95, SD = 16.68), language scores (M = 53.90, SD = 17.08), and mathematics scores (M = 58.60, SD = 17.58) for Hispanic American Students from segregated schools compared to the total reading scores (M = 48.15, SD = 15.72), language scores (M = 54.95, SD = 20.10), and mathematics scores (M = 57.95, SD = 21.49) for Hispanic American students attending integrated schools. Similarly, there was no significant difference between the total reading scores (M = 63.80, SD = 20.21), language scores (M = 69.55, SD = 19.81), and mathematics scores (M = 66.00, SD = 23.26) for Caucasian Students from segregated schools compared to the total reading scores (M = 71.15, SD = 21.74), language scores (M = 68.75, SD = 18.75), and mathematics scores (M = 70.15, SD = 19.35) for Caucasian students attending integrated schools.

Segregated African American, Hispanic American, and Caucasian Students compared to Integrated African American, Hispanic American, and Caucasian Students NCE Scores

	Segregated African American Students	Integrated African American Students			
Sources of Data	M (SD)	M (SD)	Effect Size	t	p
Reading	37.80 (20.99)	44.90 (14.69)	0.40	-1.24	.22
Language	49.30 (22.71)	49.20 (15.88)	0.01	-0.02	.99
Math	47.70 (18.64)	52.40 (12.10)	0.31	-0.95	.35
	Segregated Hispanic American Students	Integrated Hispanic American Students			
Reading	50.95 (16.68)	48.15 (15.72)	0.17	0.55	.59
Language	53.90 (17.08)	54.95 (20.10)	0.06	-0.18	.86
Math	58.60 (17.58)	57.95 (21.49)	0.03	0.10	.92

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	Segregated Caucasian Students	Integrated Caucasian Students			
Reading	50.95 (16.68)	48.15 (15.72)	0.17	0.55	.59
Language	53.90 (17.08)	54.95 (20.10)	0.06	-0.18	.86
Math	58.60 (17.58)	57.95 (21.49)	0.03	0.10	.92

Table 1

6 Discussion

The data from this study indicate that the level of racial isolation on a particular racial group may have little impact on student achievement. The research question analyzed achievement African American, Hispanic American, and Caucasian students from segregated educational settings and integrated educational settings. For each of the groups there was no significant difference in achievement regardless of the level of racial isolation. How does this happen when racial segregation is thought to have an adverse impact on minority and majority achievement (Rumberger & Willms, 1992)?

This study focused on the achievement within particular racial groups and did not look at achievement across racial lines. The research district resembles districts throughout the United States where there continues to be a gap in achievement between Caucasian students and African and Hispanic American students (Ogletree, 2004; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Viadero, 2005). This study was not intended to minimize the importance and the severity of the achievement gap that exists between racial groups. The intent was to see if racial isolation had an impact on a particular racial group. The study found that students within each of these racial groups included in this study had no difference in achievement regardless of whether they were in a segregated setting or an integrated setting. Factors that may have contributed to this equipoise in achievement within the racial groups identified include school choice, equity of resources and facilities, and quality teachers.

The current student assignment plan used by the research district encourages choice. Parents may choose to send their children to neighborhood schools or a variety of other schools throughout the district. Many of the choices available include transportation. Parental choice was a key component of a new student assignment plan which was instituted following eight years of court ordered integration and twelve years of voluntary integration efforts which included mandatory busing of students. The district integration plan was replaced by a student assignment plan which, while continuing to strive for student diversity, used socio-economics rather than race, in making student assignment decisions. The task force that designed the current student assignment plan recommended that at the elementary level parents be allowed to express preferences for particular schools, and that the preferences would be honored to the extent that they were compatible with the integration objectives of the district. Parents may make the decision to select a school other than the neighborhood school based on a number of factors. They may include the availability of transportation, magnet program, after school programs, racial diversity, or child-care issues. The availability of a wide range of choices for parents and their children may contribute to the lack of significant difference in student performance within each racial group studied. There is evidence to suggest that choice can make a difference "...desegregation can yield certain academic benefits if it is voluntary" (Armor, 1995, p. 231). When families make a deliberate choice they have often committed themselves to supporting the academic program at the school they choose (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). In the research district the majority of parents choose their neighborhood over the out-of-neighborhood options.

A possible second factor contributing to the lack of significant differences from segregated settings to integrated settings may be the availability and distribution of resources. The research district continues to fight for increased state funding to meet the needs of the students in the district. This is evident in the attempts of the district to join others in challenging the state's school funding system. And, even though

the research district continually seeks to address the funding of public education in the state and region, the district may be unlike other large urban districts that are routinely funded at a lower rate than the surrounding suburban districts. Anyon (1997) found that despite a greater need, 79% of the large city districts studied by the Council of Great City Schools are funded at a lower rate than are suburban schools. And even though per pupil spending has increased overall, the discrepancies between urban districts and suburban districts has not changed (Kozol, 2005). In the metropolitan area containing the research district, there are several school districts that had an average per pupil expenditure of approximately $8,560 based on average daily membership for the 2005-2006 school year. The research district spent approximately $8,470 per pupil during that year. The expenditure was less than the metropolitan area average and the research district certainly has more students with special needs, students living in poverty, and students learning to speak English. The difference in spending found in the research district and surrounding suburban districts did not reflect the magnitude of the discrepancies in per pupil spending described by Kozol (1991). "A sample of 110 Texas districts at the time showed that the wealthiest districts spent an average of three times as much per pupil as the four poorest district, even with the funds provided under the state's equalizing formula" (p. 214). Brimley and Garfield (2008) agree, stating that while the ratio difference between high spending and low spending districts have improved considerably since the 1970 *Serrano* case, when ratios were as high as 50 to1, extremes still exist. The ratio of high-spending to low-spending districts within a state may vary from 2.6 to 1 to 9.6 to 1.

The research district also differs from other urban districts in its facilities. The research district has made sure that facilities are equitable throughout the district. Regardless of where parents choose to send their children to school, they can be assured of high quality, modern and safe facilities. Students are not subject to substandard conditions and do not lack the bare essentials required for quality educational programs which were often present prior to school desegregation and similar to the conditions outlined in *Williams v. California* (1963). The research district's 1999 bond program, with a contract budget of approximately $250,000,000, was responsible for building three new elementary schools, one new middle school, renovation and additions to 21 elementary, middle, and high schools. This insured that every school in the district, regardless of age of the building, was well equipped, safe and comfortable. This raises the question whether racial isolation in this district would have the same negative impact it may have on other urban districts of similar size in which there is considerable difference between the qualities of facilities.

The third condition that may have influenced the results observed in this study is related to teacher quality. The likelihood that students have inexperienced, uncertified, and out-of field teachers increases with the more improvised and racially isolated the school (Lee, 2004). Wherever they attend school, highly qualified teachers teach students in the research district. Evidence suggests that teacher quality and instructional resources affect student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hedges, Laine, & Greenwald, 1994). The percentage of classes taught by teachers endorsed in that subject in the research district is 94.6%, slightly higher than the state average.

This study analyzed achievement data only. Racial isolation may certainly effect more than just achievement during the school year in which the racial isolation occurred. "When the Supreme Court decided the *Brown* decision that began the desegregation revolution, it emphasized the psychological harm of segregation and said nothing about specific about the educational gains connected with desegregation" (Orfield & Lee, 2006, p. 4). Determining whether increased racial isolation influences conditions other than achievement should be studied. Additional analysis needs to focus on the results of the educational program that are found in future employment and housing practices, involvement in the community at large, and attitudes about living in an ever increasing diverse society. Nieto (2005) argues that for the past two decades, schools have been the front line of the battle for equality and social justice. This battle transcends achievement of students in a district that promotes and encourages diversity while appreciating the value of personal choice, a district that consistently fights for financial equity and adequacy while making the best use of available resources, and a district that settles for nothing less than highly qualified teachers and administrators.

This study should remind us to continue to focus on what is needed for each student rather than the gap between students. Efforts should address the unique characteristics of each group when addressing achievement. "The importance of within-group differences compared to between-group differences means

teachers, leaders, and policy makers should extend uniqueness of treatment to the individual level, based on the student's personal needs and the professional judgment of the educators who work with him or her" (Ramirez & Carpenter, 2009, p659). At the same time we must use education as well as all societal institutions to address the imbalance that continues to permeate our society.

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