Race and Education

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Primary and Secondary Education

Access

Since its inception, public education in the United States has been beset by questions of which racial or ethnic groups should be granted access to schooling. In many states, black students were legally prohibited from attending schools with white students (de jure segregation) but in the southwest of the United States Latinos were often segregated by practice (de facto segregation). The first federal legal challenge to such segregation occurred in the state of California with the *Mendez v. Westminster* case in 1947. The Mendez case found that the segregation of students of Mexican descent into Mexican-only schools violated their rights of equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment. However, this victory did not lead to school desegregation on a national scale.

The most prominent case to challenge racial segregation was the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Prior to the decision, 17 states practiced legally binding segregation, with many more practicing segregation without a legal mandate. The *Brown* case challenged the prevailing case law established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which concluded that racially separate facilities were allowable if they were equal facilities. The racial segregation of public institutions often meant that black citizens received poorer-quality services, which led to deeper racial inequality. Additionally, evidence presented in the *Brown* case suggested that black students suffered psychological consequences from living under racial segregation. In 1954 the Supreme Court unanimously sided in favor of Linda Brown and others

against the School Board of Topeka, Kansas. Chief Justice Warren declared in the court's written decision that "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

Desegregating public schools proved challenging. The second decision of the *Brown* case, known as *Brown II*, addressed the question of how quickly states should desegregate their schools. The Supreme Court answered, "with all deliberate speed." This murky statement allowed states and school districts to resist the federal obligation to desegregate with little consequence. The resistance of some states led to federal intervention, such as the use of the National Guard to protect black students who desegregated all-white schools. Iconic images from newspapers and popular media often featured contentious desegregation battles. In most cases, however, school desegregation did not play out in public standoffs. Many white families simply removed their children from public schools and opted instead for private or parochial schools, which were predominantly white and not obligated to uphold desegregation mandates. When states and districts did comply with desegregation mandates, they used strategies like busing. Busing entailed assigning and transporting black students to predominantly white schools. In areas where segregation was historically sanctioned by law this practice sometimes led to the closing of "colored" schools and the dismissal of black teachers in those schools (Walker, 1996).

Implicit in discussions of segregated schools are a few background factors. First, throughout the United States, residential neighborhoods are segregated by race, and most American students attend their local zone school. Second, schools that are located in high-poverty areas, on average, have fewer financial resources to provide programming that is of an equal quality to high-income schools. Third, in what became known as the Coleman Report, James Coleman and colleagues (1966) examined the factors that contribute to student achievement. The authors of this report concluded that students' family background was the most significant contributor

to their academic outcomes. These factors help explain why out-of-school experiences are as, if not more, important than what happens inside schools.

Achievement

Racial differences in academic skills start to emerge before children set foot in the classroom. Nationally representative data suggest that by the age of two a smaller percentage of black and Latino children demonstrate cognitive proficiency compared to their white and Asian American peers. For example, 89 percent of white and 83 percent of Asian American two-year-olds showed proficiency in their ability to recognize and understand spoken words compared to 79 and 78 percent of black and Latino two-year-olds, respectively (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016). By the age of four, black and Latino children had lower average scale scores in early reading comprehension and mathematics compared to white and Asian American children (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was developed to monitor the academic progress of American students at various ages. NAEP now provides national data that permit an assessment of racial achievement gaps over time. Achievement gaps occur when one group of students outperforms another on an educational measure (e.g., standardized tests)

and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant.

NAEP long-term trend average scale score data show an overall narrowing of racial achievement gaps since the 1980s; however, gaps between racial groups persist. Among 13-year-olds, for example, the black–white reading scale score gap decreased from 31 points in 1980 to 23 points in 2012, while the Latino–white reading gap decreased from 27 to 21 points. Although black–white and Latino–white gaps are the primary focus of education researchers and policy-makers, the growing Asian–white achievement gap is increasingly gaining attention. By the age of 13, for example, Asian American and Pacific Islander students outperformed their white counterparts on the NAEP reading exam by 14 points in 2012. Table 1 and Table 2 provide more detailed information on NAEP scores and changes in the score gaps over time.

Another important measure of achievement and an indicator of later life chances is high school attainment. According to data from the US Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the percentage of Americans between the ages of 25 to 29 with a high school diploma or an equivalent degree is on the rise; yet, racial gaps remain. Between 1990 and 2014, the rate for whites increased from 90 to 96 percent; the rate for blacks increased from 82 to 92 percent; the rate for Latinos increased from

Table 1 NAEP long-term trend average reading scale scores, by race and age (National Center for Education Statistics, 1980–2012).

	1980				2012		
Age (years)	9	13	17		9	13	17
Scale score							
White	221	264	293		229	270	295
Black	189	233	243		206	247	269
Latino	190	237	261		208	249	274
Asian/PI[a]	225	269	284		240	284	299
Score gap							
Black–white	32	31	50		23	23	26
Latino–white	31	27	32		21	21	21
Asian/PI–white	−4	−5	9		−11	−14	−4

[a]Includes Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

Table 2 NAEP long-term trend average mathematics scale scores, by race and age (National Center for Education Statistics, 1978–2012).

Age (years)	1978				2012		
	9	13	17		9	13	17
Scale score							
White	224	272	306		252	293	314
Black	192	230	268		226	264	288
Latino	203	238	276		234	271	294
Asian/PI[a]	229	274	317		265	311	322
Score gap							
Black–white	32	42	38		26	29	26
Latino–white	21	34	30		18	22	20
Asian/PI–white	−5	−2	−11		−13	−18	−8

[a] Includes Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

58 to 75 percent; and the rate for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders increased from 92 to 97 percent (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016).

Achievement measures can often mask important heterogeneity within racial groups – particularly along the lines of gender, class, and nativity. Consider nativity differences among Latinos, for example. According to NCES data, the status dropout rate was 34 percent among foreign-born Latinos in 2007 compared to just 12 percent among US-born Latinos (Aud, Fox, and KewalRamani, 2010). The status dropout rate refers to the percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential.

Numerous theories have been put forth to explain racial differences in academic achievement. These theories generally fall into three major categories: genetic, cultural, and structural. The theory of genetic differences in intelligence by race – particularly the congenital intellectual inferiority of African descendants – is centuries old. In their 1994 book, titled *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, Herrnstein and Murray (2010 [1994]) reinvigorated this argument when they suggested that genetics are at least a partial explanation for racial gaps in academic performance. That is, black and Latino students perform worse academically than their white and Asian peers partly because of their inherited intellectual inferiority. Social scientists have largely abandoned the genetic theory because of its racist connotations and lack of scientific evidence (Fraser, 1995). Additionally,

shrinking educational achievement gaps poses a direct challenge to this explanation (Jencks and Phillips, 1998).

Beyond theories of genetics, cultural theories have become influential in research and policy circles. In the 1980s the "fear of acting white" theory was popularized as an explanation for black students' lower average achievement (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). This theory suggested that black students disengaged from academics for a number of cultural reasons. First, black students are aware of the racial discrimination that their parents face, and perceive discrimination as a barrier to their own success. Second, black students see an emphasis in schools on individual rather than collective achievement. As a result, they develop an oppositional stance to schooling and disengage from the pursuit of educational success.

Despite its widespread popularity, the fear of acting white theory has encountered numerous empirical challenges. A range of studies across grade levels, both quantitative and qualitative, have found limited support for culturally based academic disengagement; for exceptions see Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga (2002) and Fryer and Torelli (2010). These authors have raised concerns that structural factors such as poverty and poorer school resources often supersede cultural ones (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino, 2005). This is not to suggest that culture does not matter; culture does matter, but it has limited power for explaining race-based educational disparities.

At the opposite end of the achievement spectrum, sociologists have interrogated the high

academic performance of Asian Americans. According to the "model minority" narrative, people of Asian descent have adopted cultural values that give them an advantage (relative to other racial and ethnic minority groups) in accumulating social goods and increasing their acceptance by mainstream America. The popular media have latched onto the idea that Asian American families have unique cultural values that prepare their children to outperform all other racial and ethnic groups (Chua and Rubenfeld, 2014). Despite the suggestion that culture drives achievement, a number of factors contribute to the above-average performance of Asian Americans including selective migration, achievement-focused cultural frames, favorable institutional reception, and institutional resources (e.g., extra assistance in entering advanced courses) (Lee and Zhou, 2015). These factors suggest that both culture and structure help account for part of the Asian–white gap. Additionally, while many assume a monolithic Asian American community, there is a great diversity within this group according to ethnic background and national origin (Lee, 2009).

Cultural sociologists continue to argue that culture influences educational experiences, but often cultural shifts are shaped by structural realities. Differences in child-rearing strategies between low-income and middle-income families have been indicted as causes of educational disparity (Lareau, 2011). These theories suggest that material conditions beget cultural adaptations that adults and youth use in negotiating their environments inside and outside of school. Social class-based differences have long been attached to theories of racial inequality, but social class does not fully explain all of the racial gap. In diverse settings, middle-class black families still encounter race-related barriers to accessing school-related opportunities (Lewis-McCoy, 2014).

In terms of structural explanations, education researchers have identified disparate home, school, and neighborhood environments as contributing to racial and ethnic gaps in student achievement. However, the impact of structural factors is hard to disentangle since they are often correlated. The effect of family socioeconomic status (SES) on children's educational outcomes has received widespread attention. Phillips and her coauthors (1998) suggest that reducing racial differences in parental education and annual income reduces the black–white gap in children's Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) scores. In fact, they were able to explain up to two thirds of the black–white test score gap by incorporating a broader array of SES and family environment variables, such as mother's cognitive ability, parenting practices, and household size. While this early work on the importance of the home environment for children's test scores is largely corroborated by later studies, not all researchers agree on exactly how much these factors contribute to racial differences in achievement.

The Coleman Report is often discussed for its findings about family background, but it also influenced the discussion on school effects (i.e., the effects schools have on student outcomes). The authors concluded that school quality (e.g., facilities, curricula, teacher, and peer ability) was responsible for just a small fraction of the differences in student achievement once student SES was taken into account. However, they identified an important caveat regarding race. The achievement of racial minorities (with the exception of Asians) was more tightly linked to the schools they attended than that of white students. In the years since the Coleman Report, researchers have debated the extent to which school quality influences racial achievement gaps. It is clear that racial minority students, especially blacks and Latinos, are more likely to attend schools with fewer financial resources, lower-paid teachers, and more disadvantaged peers.

The influence of schools has been reinvigorated by the proliferation of charter schools in areas with high concentrations of racial and economic minorities. The evidence on charter schools has been largely mixed. A study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (2015) found that children attending charter schools in major metropolitan areas outperformed their traditional public school peers. While this is promising, their positive effect on achievement was small. Additionally, charter schools vary widely in their performance, with some driving this average positive affect and many others doing no better than traditional public schools or fairing worse.

Differences in neighborhood disadvantages have also been identified as a source of the achievement gap. Black youth, in particular, are much more likely than nonblack youth to reside

in high-poverty neighborhoods intergenerationally, and to remain in these neighborhoods through adulthood. This accumulation of economic and social disadvantage has been linked to a decline of up to 0.5 standard deviations in cognitive ability (Sharkey and Elwert, 2011). Family background, school resources, and neighborhood resources hold significant sway on the observable disparities on the achievement gap.

Institutional Experiences

Legislative decisions between 1968 and the early 1970s resulted in many school districts being placed under court-ordered desegregation, also known as involuntary desegregation plans. Among districts that utilized voluntary and involuntary desegregation plans, busing was a popular choice and led to a dramatic fall in school segregation in the late 1960s and into the 1980s. However, in the late 1980s, as court-ordered segregation programs ended, voluntary desegregation plans lost popularity, school desegregation fell from the national policy agenda, and progress in public school desegregation stalled.

In 2007 school desegregation efforts were dealt a further blow. *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* challenged a voluntary school desegregation plan. The Supreme Court found that diversity was a compelling rationale for desegregation at primary and secondary levels, but the use of racial classification to assign students with the goal of desegregating schools was unsupported. As in the decisions at the higher education level, the court maintained that race is one of multiple factors that can be used to inform school composition; however, it cannot be the determining factor.

Recent research points to the resegregation of public schools. For example, 38 percent of black students and 43 percent of Latino students attended intensely segregated schools in 2009 – up from 33 and 34 percent, respectively, in 1991 (Orfield, Kucsera, and Siegel-Hawley, 2012). Intensely segregated schools are schools where 90–100 percent of the student body is nonwhite. Researchers have also found a strong positive correlation between the concentration of black and Latino students and the concentration of poor students in a school – what Orfield, Kucsera, and Siegel-Hawley (2012) refer to as "double segregation." Trends in school resegregation are paradoxically accompanied by the diversification of the US student population (see Table 3).

By 2024, the student population is expected to become "majority minority," whereby racial and ethnic minority students will replace their white peers as the majority of total public school enrollment. NCES projections place white students at 46 percent of enrollment and students of color at a combined 54 percent in 2024 (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016). However, the makeup of the United States' teaching force has not kept pace with the changing student population. As of 2011, 82 percent of public school teachers were non-Hispanic white – a figure that has remained stable for nearly a decade (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016).

Table 3 Percentage distribution of public primary and secondary school enrollment, by race (data for 1970 from Orfield, Kucsera, and Siegel-Hawley, 2012; data for 2002–2024 from Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016).

	1970	*2002*	*2012*	*2024*[a]
White	79.1	59.4	51.0	45.6
Black	15.0	17.2	15.7	14.9
Latino	5.1	17.8	24.3	29.2
Asian/PI[b]	0.5	4.3	5.1	5.7
Native American	0.4	1.2	1.1	0.9
Two or more races[c]	–	–	2.8	3.6

Note: Figures may not total 100% as a result of rounding.
[a]Data for 2024 are projected; data for 1970–2012 are actual.
[b]Includes Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.
[c]Data for the "Two or more races" category are not available for 1970 and 2002.

At the core of racial disparities in education is the issue of funding inequities. On average, schools with larger numbers of ethnic minorities (particularly black and Latino) and poor students, perform less well than schools with high concentrations of white and affluent students. School funding remains an area where racial disparities persist. United States public education is decentralized, which means that there are 50 different funding formulas that determine how much money is spent on education. These formulas are typically composed of a mixture of local, state, and national revenues. In the 2013 fiscal year, nationally, local revenues composed 45.3 percent of the funding formula and state revenues 45.6 percent, while 9.1 percent came from federal sources (US Census Bureau, 2015).

Racial residential segregation and disparities in home-ownership have allowed predominantly white districts to acquire a greater set of resources to dedicate toward schooling. To offset these disparities and their accumulated advantages, national legislation like Title I funds are offered to schools and districts that educate a disproportionate share of poor students. Still, these offsetting federal funds do not eliminate disparities between districts or disparities between schools within districts. Additionally, state-level lawsuits have been filed to challenge disparities in local funding formulas, but when these cases have been successful in winning a recalculation of formulas or offsetting funds, these have done little to impact the disparities in district- and school-level wealth that have accrued over time.

School discipline is another area plagued by longstanding racial disparities. A recent report from the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014) found that black public school students are over-represented among those on the receiving end of exclusionary discipline and zero tolerance policies beginning at the preschool level. While black students represented 16 percent of all public school enrollment in 2011–2012, they accounted for 42 percent of multiple out-of-school suspensions, 34 percent of expulsions, and 31 percent of school-related arrests. In comparison, white students made up 51 percent of enrollment, 31 percent of multiple out-of-school suspensions, 36 percent of expulsions, and 39 percent of arrests. Disparities were just as stark at the preschool level, where black children accounted for 18 percent of enrollment, but 42 of single out-of-school suspensions and 48 percent of multiple out-of-school suspensions. While much of the existing research on school discipline centers on the experiences of black boys, given their high rates of punishment, black girls are also increasingly impacted. In 2011–2012, for example, black girls had higher suspensions rates (12 percent) than girls of any other racial or ethnic group and most boys, with the exception of black (20 percent) and Native American (13 percent) boys.

Higher Education

Access

Higher Education, like its K-12 counterpart, remained racially segregated throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s. As a result of the legislative work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a 1961 decision forced the University of Georgia to integrate racially. Desegregation of higher education has also been rife with interpersonal and legal contestation. On the heels of the Civil Rights Movement, affirmative action was introduced as a policy intervention to improve access to higher education for historically omitted groups, particularly African Americans. Affirmative action has taken multiple forms including the consideration of race and socioeconomic status in admissions.

This policy came under legal challenge with the *Regents of University of California v. Bakke* case in 1978. The Bakke decision ruled that affirmative action was allowable and that "diversity was a compelling state interest," but it also outlawed quota programs in higher education. In 2003 another major challenge to affirmative action occurred at the University of Michigan. *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* ultimately reshaped the implementation of affirmative action by upholding the use race as a factor in admissions; however, the Supreme Court emphasized that race cannot be the deciding factor. Affirmative action in higher education remains politically contentious but legally permissible.

Over the years, affirmative action has increased the proportion of racial minorities at selective college and universities in the United States.

Beyond access, researchers have found positive effects for civic engagement, income, and satisfaction with collegiate experiences for beneficiaries of affirmative action (Bowen and Bok, 1998). Campus diversity has been linked to greater degrees of satisfaction for faculty and students, positive perceptions of collegiate experience, and student achievement (Gurin *et al.*, 2002).

In 1980 whites composed a large majority of those enrolled in some form of higher education at 84 percent (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016). By 2013, 20.4 million US higher education students were 59 percent white, 15 percent black, 16 percent Latino, 6 percent Asian American or Pacific Islander, 0.8 percent Native American, and 3 percent multiracial (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016). However, these students are differentially distributed across types of institutions in terms of their selectivity and the degrees offered. NCES data from 2013 show that, among Latino students, 48 percent attended two-year institutions compared to 44 percent of Native Americans, 37 percent of blacks, 33 percent of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and 31 percent of whites. Thirty-three percent of all Asian Americans and Pacific Islander students attended four-year universities with high research activity versus 24 percent of whites, 15 percent of Latinos, 14 percent of Native Americans, and 13 percent of blacks. Black students had the highest rates of enrollment in private, for-profit colleges at 17 percent, compared to 10 percent of Native Americans, 8 percent of Latinos, 7 percent of whites, and 5 percent of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016).

Minority-serving institutions (MSIs) continue to serve as a major gateway to postsecondary education for many racial minorities. These institutions emerged in response to unequal access to higher education. MSIs range from public to private and from two-year to four-year colleges, and they serve approximately 20 percent of all undergraduate students. Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) refer to institutions founded prior to 1964 with the principal aim of educating African Americans. Until the mid-1960s, these institutions were, with few exceptions, the only option for most blacks pursuing higher education. By 2012, HBCUs enrolled 11 percent of black undergraduates (University of Pennsylvania Center for Minority Serving Institutions, 2014). Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) are colleges and universities where Latinos comprise at least 25 percent of total enrollment. HSIs received federal recognition in the early 1990s and they now enroll half of all Latino students. Tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) enroll 9 percent of all Native American students, while Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander-serving institutions (AANAPI-SIs) enroll 20 percent of all Asian American and Pacific Islanders (University of Pennsylvania Center for Minority Serving Institutions, 2014).

Attainment

Since the 1980s, racial and ethnic minorities have captured a greater share of the higher education degrees across all levels, as shown in Table 4. For example, 89 percent of all bachelor's degrees were awarded to white graduates in 1981. Of the total number of bachelor degrees awarded in 2013, 69 percent were conferred on whites, 11 percent on blacks, 11 percent on Latinos, 7 percent on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and 0.6 percent on Native Americans. Yet, there are racial and ethnic differences in degree attainment patterns.

One indicator of postsecondary attainment is the percentage of 25- to 29-year-olds with a bachelor's degree or higher. In 1990, 26 percent of whites, 43 percent of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, 13 percent of blacks, and 8 percent of Latinos possessed at least a bachelor's degree (data for Native Americans are unavailable for this year) (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016). Over two decades later, the percentage of those with bachelor's degrees rose for all racial groups, but considerable gaps remained. By 2014, 40 percent of whites and 58 percent of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in this age group had at least a bachelor's degree compared to 21 percent of blacks, 16 percent of Latinos, and 17 percent of Native Americans (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016).

Institutional Experiences

The most recent wave of student protests in the wake of the 2014 Ferguson unrest has renewed the spotlight on racial climate at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) across the country. Years of research demonstrate that perceptions

Table 4   Percentage distribution of post-secondary degrees conferred, by race and degree type (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016).

	White	Black	Latino	Asian/PI[a]	Native American
1980–1981[b]					
Associate's	84.0	8.8	4.4	2.1	0.6
Bachelor's	88.5	6.7	2.4	2.1	0.4
Master's	88.8	6.3	2.3	2.3	0.4
Doctoral	90.9	4.2	2.1	2.4	0.3
2012–13[c]					
Associate's	62.3	13.7	16.0	5.0	1.1
Bachelor's	68.8	10.8	10.5	7.3	0.6
Master's	69.4	13.4	8.1	6.8	0.6
Doctoral	71.6	7.8	6.5	11.9	0.6

Note: Figures may not total 100% because of rounding and the exclusion of the "Two or more races" category.
[a] The "Asian/PI" category includes Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.
[b] Data for 1980–1981 are for what the NCES categorized as institutions of higher education.
[c] Data for 2012–2013 are for postsecondary institutions participating in Title IV federal financial aid programs.

Table 5   Full-time instructional faculty, by race and academic rank, fall 2013 (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016).

	White	Black	Latino	Asian/PI[a]	Native American
Professors	83.6	3.8	3.2	8.7	0.3
Associate professors	78.2	5.9	4.3	10.6	0.4
Assistant professors	74.7	7.0	4.7	12.2	0.5
Instructors	78.1	7.9	6.7	5.5	0.9
Lecturers	80.6	5.1	5.9	7.2	0.3

Note: Percentages are based on full-time instructional faculty whose race/ethnicity was known. Figures may not total 100% because of rounding and the exclusion of the "Two or more races" category.
[a] Includes Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

of campus climate at PWIs vary by student race. Racial and ethnic minorities often perceive their campus communities as being more racist and less accepting than their white classmates. Several studies suggest that black students are the most likely to report dissatisfaction with the campus racial climate. Black students also tend to perceive discriminatory treatment on the basis of race more frequently than their Latino, Native American, and Asian American peers (Harper and Hurtado, 2007).

Racial and ethnic minority students also have grievances with the pervasiveness of white culture in activities and curricula on PWI campuses, which many believe runs counter to university claims of diversity and inclusiveness (Harper and Hurtado, 2007). The under-representation of racial and ethnic minority faculty on these campuses is another grievance of students and others concerned about the campus racial climate. As shown in Table 5, full-time college and university faculty in this country are overwhelmingly white and the disparity widens with academic rank for professors.

SEE ALSO: *Brown v. Board of Education*; Educational Inequality; Race and Schools; School Choice; School Segregation, Desegregation

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