

COMMENTARY

How Racial Segregation and Tracking Cumulatively Disadvantage Middle School Achievement

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Middle schools are a critical stage in the educational sequence that starts in preschool and culminates for many youth in higher education. High-quality and equitable middle schools are essential if all adolescents are to achieve their highest educational potential. Black, Latino/a, and other disadvantaged minority youth are more likely than Whites or Asians to earn lower grades and standardized test scores in middle school. Such persistent racial differences in achievement suggest that too many youth are failing to reach their potential during middle school.

Understanding the sources of performance gaps is essential for designing policies and practices to close them. Explorations of these gaps typically focus on school resources or the characteristics of students and their families. In [this study](#), I examined these factors but also investigated whether the racial composition of schools and the classrooms in which students learn influenced their standardized test scores. This question is crucial because U.S. schools are resegregating, and most middle schools provide instruction in racially correlated academic tracks, with disadvantaged minority youth often placed in the lower ones.

I used unique longitudinal data from 8th-grade students who attended the [Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools](#) (CMS) in 1997 to explore academic outcomes in relation to school racial composition and track placements. CMS is known for its successful desegregation efforts from the mid-1970s through 2002, when its court-mandated desegregation order was lifted. I examined the relationship between variations in 8th-grade students' cumulative exposure to segregation during elementary and middle school and their 1997 reading and mathematics standardized test scores. I randomly sampled 50% of all 8th-grade language arts classrooms in every CMS middle school (N=24) and administered an attitude survey to 2,232 students in selected classrooms. CMS provided me with administrative data about each school, its teachers, and test scores, as well as background data for each student, 43% of whom were Black.

I found that even though CMS was formally desegregated during the years the students attended it, some schools had resegregated by 1997, and almost all students learned in racially correlated tracks for language arts, science, social studies, and mathematics. Students' race predicted their track placement over and above their prior performance. Students' experiences with school segregation and racially correlated tracking had a negative relationship with their scores. Holding constant students' family background, prior achievement, racial background, and gender, I found that learning in lower tracks was negatively associated with test performance. Furthermore, the more years students spent in racially segregated elementary and middle schools, the lower their test scores. Conversely, irrespective of their own race, gender, family background, and prior achievement, the more years

students attended racially desegregated elementary and middle schools, the better they performed compared with their peers who attended segregated minority schools.

My study illustrates the cumulative disadvantages that accrue to students who experience segregated schools and segregated classrooms. Segregation provides highly unequal opportunities to learn, which launch youth onto stratified trajectories for the remainder of their formal educations. Even though my data are almost 20 years old, racial segregation of America's schools and classrooms via tracking remains an organizational feature of contemporary schools. While I cannot generalize my findings from CMS's 1997 8th graders to other grades or school systems, the findings suggest that today's racial achievement gaps will be difficult to resolve as long as racially segregated schools and racially correlated tracking in academic courses continue to characterize the way we operate our nation's schools.

My findings suggest that our failure to address both types of segregation will undercut the potential success of other education reforms—just as failing to seal all sides of a window against the winter's wind makes other efforts to raise a room's temperature far less efficient.

The [full study](#) can be found in Roslyn Arlin Mickelson. (2015). "The Cumulative Disadvantages of First- and Second-Generation Segregation for Middle School Achievement," American Educational Research Journal, 52, 657-692.

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