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COMMENTARY

The Racial School Climate Gap

Within-School Disparities in Students' Experiences of Safety, Support, and Connectedness

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Racial and ethnic disparities in academic achievement pose challenges to educational equity in the United States. One feature of schools that may be related to these gaps and that has garnered increased attention of late is school climate, which refers to feelings of safety and connectedness, opportunities for meaningful participation, and the quality of relationships between students and staff. While climate is typically understood as a characteristic of schools, there is some evidence that students within the same school may experience safety, support, and relationships differently based on their race and ethnicity (we use the term "race" hereafter for the sake of brevity).

In this study, we tested for the existence of a racial school climate gap in California middle schools using a large sample of student and staff survey data from the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey (Cal-SCHLS) system. We further examined the relationship between a school's racial climate and racial achievement gaps.

We combined Cal-SCHLS survey data from 754 middle schools in California in 2008–09 and 2009–10 with administrative data from the California Department of Education (CDE). From this group of schools, we created two separate subsamples to examine the Black-White and Hispanic-White school climate gaps, respectively, including only schools that had significant numbers of students in those subgroups. Students' responses on the Cal-SCHLS student survey were used to create scores for each student on three dimensions of school climate: (a) safety and connectedness; (b) adult-student relationships; and (c) opportunities for meaningful student participation.

We estimated a series of multilevel regression models and found that, for both racial comparisons and for most school climate dimensions, significant gaps existed within schools. In schools with significant numbers of both Black and White students, Black students reported, on average, lower levels of safety and connectedness and adult-student relationships. In schools with significant numbers of both Hispanic and White students, Hispanic students reported lower levels of safety and connectedness, adult-student relationships, and opportunities for meaningful participation.

The results also showed that there is a significant relationship between the racial climate gap and racial achievement gap in a middle school. Holding constant overall academic performance, schools with larger Black-White achievement gaps had larger Black-White gaps in perceived safety and connectedness and opportunities for participation, and schools with larger Hispanic-White achievement gaps had larger Hispanic-White gaps in perceived safety and connectedness and adult-student relationships.

This study shows that there are significant differences in school climate experiences among various student subgroups within a school. Thus, simply averaging all students' reports to create a single school-level climate score may obscure important information regarding unique subgroup climates. This is of particular interest in California, where the CDE and the California Office to Reform Education (CORE) are now including measures of school climate in their school accountability systems. Specifically, as part of the CDE's new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), districts in the state are required to work with parents, students, staff, and community members to identify needs in the area of school climate, create an action plan to address them, and state how progress will be measured.

The full study is in Adam Voight , Thomas Hanson, Meagan O'Malley, Latifah Adekanye, "The Racial School Climate Gap: Within-School Disparities in Students' Experiences of Safety, Support, and Connectedness," American Journal of Community Psychology, forthcoming.

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