

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 potentials. Blacks, Latinos/as, 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 too many youth are failing to reach their potential while in middle school.

Understanding the sources of performance gaps is essential for designing policies and practices to close them. Explorations of the sources of the gaps typically focus on school resources or characteristics of students and their families. In this study I looked at these factors but also investigated if the racial composition of schools and the classrooms in which students learn influenced their standardized test scores. The answer to this question is important because U.S. schools are resegregating and most middle schools provide instruction in racially-correlated academic tracks. Disadvantaged minority youth most often are 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 relationship to school racial composition and track placements. CMS is known for its successful desegregation efforts during the mid-1970s through 2002 when its court-mandated desegregation order was lifted. I examined the relationship between variations in 8<sup>th</sup> grade students' cumulative exposure to segregation during elementary and middle school in relation to 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 2232 students in selected classrooms. CMS provided me with administrative data about each school, its teachers, and test scores and background data for each student, 43% of whom were Black.

I found that even though CMS was formally desegregated during the years 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 to their scores. Holding constant students' family background, prior achievement, racial background, and gender, I found learning in lower tracks was negatively associated with test performance. And 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 that 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 remain organizational features of contemporary schools. And while I cannot generalize my findings from CMS's 1997 8th graders to other grades or to other school systems, the findings suggest that today's race gaps in achievement will be difficult to resolve so long as racially segregated schools and racially correlated tracking in academic courses continue to characterize the ways we operate our nation's schools. My findings suggest 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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