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For Some Black Students, Discrimination Outweighed Integration's Benefits

Lucas Hubbard : 6-7 minutes



An integrated classroom in 1957 at Anacostia High School in Washington, D.C. Photo by Warren K. Leffler, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

DURHAM, N.C. — Integrating the American classroom has long been a goal of many who seek to eradicate racial discrimination. But a new paper from four economists, including Duke University's William A. "Sandy" Darity Jr., suggests that Black students do not always benefit from attending racially balanced schools.

Instead, Black adults who attended racially balanced high schools in the mid-20th century completed significantly less schooling than those who attended either predominantly black or predominantly white schools, the authors found.

"Standard wisdom has it that school desegregation paves the way to racial nirvana in the United States," says Darity, director of Duke's Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity and a professor of public policy, African and African American Studies and economics. "Our study suggests that the effects have been more muted than typically claimed in other studies and in the popular media."

"Of course, school desegregation is desirable to produce a better America, but we must be far more cautious about the benefits we ascribe to it."

The authors analyzed data from the National Survey of Black Americans, a nationally representative survey of Black Americans age 18 or older who attended school in the period from the 1930s through the early 1970s. Initial interviews for the survey were conducted in 1979 and 1980, with follow-up interviews conducted eight, nine and 12 years later.

The authors looked at the experience of Black students who attended three types of schools: "mostly or almost all white," "mostly or all black" schools and "mixed-race" schools, where the student population was racially balanced.

Based on data from 1,121 respondents, the authors found that Black students fared worse in mixed-race schools, where the student population was about half black and half white.

Black students attending racially balanced high schools — schools that were about equally divided between black and white students — completed a half year less of school, on average, than Black students in predominantly black high schools. Moreover, Black students attending racially balanced high schools earned three-quarters of a year less education than Black students at predominantly white high schools.

Black students who attended racially mixed high schools were also less likely to graduate, when compared with Black students who attended either predominantly white or predominantly black schools. Black students who attended predominantly white high schools had higher graduation rates than their Black peers in either mixed-race or predominantly black schools.

The study appears [online](#) in RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences.

Previous research by Darity and Darrick Hamilton, a co-author of this paper, suggests a possible explanation for why Black students fared less well in racially mixed schools. In other studies, the authors have found that discrimination arises and intensifies when the dominant group's position is threatened.

In racially balanced schools, competition over resources is highest, and discrimination is thus most likely to arise and intensify, the authors write. In these roughly half-white, half-Black schools, "Black students are perceived as more of a competitive threat to white students for preferred resources," such as attention from teachers, placement in desirable classes, and positions of status in co-curricular activities, the authors write.

"The potential for greater resources available in racially integrated schools does not necessarily offset adverse effects in a school with a negative racial climate," said Timothy M. Diette of Washington and Lee University, the paper's lead author.

Some financial outcomes were also worse for Black students who attended racially balanced schools. Compared to their peers at mostly white or mostly black schools, Black men and women who attended racially balanced schools were less likely to go on to own homes, with the result for Black women being statistically significant.

Employment outcomes were roughly equivalent for Black students regardless of the racial composition of the school they attended.

These findings are consequential for education policy, the authors note. Integration in the 21st century has typically resulted in shifts from predominantly Black schools to mixed-race schools. Yet simply increasing the number of mixed-race schools, without eliminating discriminatory treatment and tracking of Black students, may not improve Black students' performance—and may in fact hinder it, the new research suggests.

Nineteen years before *Brown v. Board of Education*, W.E.B Du Bois sounded a cautionary note about school integration as a potential cure-all for Black students: "(T)heoretically, the Negro needs neither segregated schools nor mixed schools. What he needs is Education," Du Bois wrote in 1935. Du Bois' comments still resonate today, Diette said.

"If the goal is to ensure black students are well educated, then focusing exclusively on school integration is misguided," said Diette. "Resources and school environments matter."

Diette and Arthur H. Goldsmith, another of the paper's co-authors, received financial support for their research from the Lenfest Summer Grant program.

CITATION: "Does the Negro Need Separate Schools? A Retrospective Analysis of the Racial Composition of Schools and Black Adult Academic and Economic Success," T. M. Diette, D. Hamilton, A. H. Goldsmith, and W. A. Darity, Jr. (2021). RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences, 7(1).

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