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**Racism in the American  
Education System**

# Racism in the American Education System

In the United States, the difference between various racial groups in terms of educational attainment is an issue often debated among scholars of race and education alike. After the end of the American Civil War in 1865, the public education system followed the trend of treating people of different races living in the US as "separate but equal." In 1954, when *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was settled, racial segregation in public schools was deemed unconstitutional. However, despite the nominal desegregation of public schools in the US, the transition to equality is not complete to this day. This article examines recent data gathered on the education of different racial and ethnic groups in the US, including rates of college enrollment and completion among them. The aim of the study is to show that racism remains an issue in the American public education system for three main reasons: inexperienced teachers, little access to higher-level science subjects, and high punishment and dropout rates among racial and ethnic minorities. These disadvantages are significant, as their impact extends to the post-secondary education of racial minorities, thus creating a deficit on the job market as well. Considering that the share of racial and ethnic minorities in the American education system has risen above 50% and is growing steadily, the nation and the government must take steps to avoid creating a system which only serves a minority of students and finally solve the problem of racism in US schools.

## KEYWORDS

**racism, education, United States, segregation, discrimination**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The difference between educational attainment among races has been a much-debated issue in America for centuries. Between the American Civil War and the middle of the 20th century, public education, like many other aspects of everyday life, treated different races in the US as “separate but equal.” This meant that black and white students could not attend the same institutions, and many differences were present between black and white schools, usually at the expense of the former (Martin 2015, 18). A landmark court case occurred in 1954, when *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was settled by the Supreme Court, and segregation based on race in public schools was deemed unconstitutional (United States Courts, n.d.). However, despite the nominal desegregation of public schools in the US, the transition to equality is not complete to this day, especially since the presence of other racial and ethnic minorities became significant, such as Asians and Hispanics. The two largest minority groups, blacks and Hispanics together make up 41% of the students in American public education, yet they are the groups most notably affected by discrimination and the lack of complete desegregation (Geiger 2017). This essay argues that racism is still an issue in American public schools because minority students are taught by inexperienced teachers, they have less access to higher-level science subjects, and the punishment and dropout rate of racial and ethnic minorities is significantly higher compared to their white peers.

The resolution of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) outlawed systematic institutional segregation, but it could not prohibit isolation based on the composition of communities. Although the past decades have seen some decrease in the number of schools with predominantly one race of students, this is still the most common composition of school populations (Geiger 2017). Today, more than half of white elementary and secondary students attend schools with 75% or more white enrollment, while the same can be said about 27% of black and 33% of Hispanic students (National Center for Education Statistics 2017). There are also minority schools where the student body is mainly comprised of students from a racial or ethnic minority. Nearly two-thirds of Hispanics and blacks are enrolled in such schools (National Center for Education Statistics 2017). These figures account for an effect similar to the “separate but equal” treatment of races, wherein schools with a higher number of minority students are able to spend less money on both their students and their staff (Cook 2015).

## 2. INEXPERIENCED TEACHERS

According to Resmovits (2014), a teacher in a school with fewer black and Hispanic students is paid \$5,000 more annually than a colleague who

works in a school with a higher concentration of minorities. Therefore, less diverse schools seem more attractive to accomplished, competent teachers who are looking for a higher salary. As a result, many minority schools are forced to hire new teachers who lack experience and, in some cases, even the necessary qualifications (Cook 2015). While 7% of black students are enrolled in schools where a fifth of teachers are uncertified, Latinos and Native Americans are three times as likely as their white peers to have a large number of first-year teachers in their schools (Resmovits 2014; Rich 2014). While inexperienced teachers are not necessarily unskilled, they are easily challenged by the different social and domestic issues affecting minority students. A more seasoned colleague of theirs would perhaps be able to deal with these problems more effectively than a newcomer, since the hardships in the lives of students from racial and ethnic minorities begin as early as in their preschool years.

When it comes to upbringing, black children are disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of the household environment, compared to their white peers (Cook 2015). More of them experience poverty, homelessness, unsafe living conditions, and emotional trauma in their adolescence. Abuse, neglect, and violence are also not foreign to them. These factors all contribute to the learning difficulties faced by these children in school, both in terms of lack of supplies available to them and fewer abilities to concentrate (Cook 2015). The issues mentioned can prove hard to resolve even for psychologists, let alone underqualified, inexperienced educators who might not be motivated by their low salaries.

Furthermore, partially due to their own lower levels of educational attainment, black parents do not expect their children to do well in schools as much as their white counterparts do (Cook 2015). Their limited encouragement and lack of interest do not motivate their children and might result in negative connotations about school. Again, veteran teachers would be able to stimulate their pupils enough so that they gain an interest in learning. Similarly, while the majority of white children are read to by their family members in their early adolescence, black parents are less likely to read to their children due to less time, materials, reading confidence, and diversity among books (Cook 2015). Although these habits may inhibit early developmental skills, with proper help from skillful teachers, the advancement of differently advantaged children may be leveled out in time. Nevertheless, qualified and experienced educators are not only needed for resolving social inequalities, but also to adequately teach the subjects which students can benefit from later in life.

### 3. PUNISHMENT AND DROPOUT RATES

Apart from adequate instructors, school attendance is also crucial to students' success in finishing school. However, minority students are disadvantaged in their elementary and secondary school completion process from an early age. This repression takes place in the form of suspensions, expulsions and other discipline techniques aiming to delay a student's educational attainment (Resmovits 2014). School suspension among minorities, especially black students, is significantly higher than among white students. This difference is already present in preschools, where out of the students who are suspended from school more than once, 48% are black (Resmovits 2014). Meanwhile, Resmovits claims that suspension rates are not due to these racial or ethnic groups misbehaving more frequently. Holding back students is also a common practice throughout grade levels, even though it has been shown that no social or academic advantage comes from being held back as a child, only a higher likelihood of dropping out (Cook 2015). Black students are also held back at higher rates than their white peers. If children are suspended from school or held back in their studies, it hinders their course of educational attainment and might drive them away from continuing their learning process.

A serious consequence of the heightened punishment rates against racial and ethnic minorities is the "school-to-prison pipeline," that is, the process of handing problematic students over to the justice system, therefore cutting their chances of school completion severely (Resmovits 2014). This happens due to the zero-tolerance policies regarding school misbehavior, wherein even the smallest violations of the school code are punished by suspension, expulsion, or arrest. As demonstrated above, a difference between the severity of punishments can be traced along racial lines (Scott 2016). Therefore, minority students, and especially blacks, are more likely to transfer from small, sometimes unintended wrongdoings in school straight to the world of serious crimes and truly violent activity, at a relatively early age compared to their white peers (Cook 2015).

Moreover, even if students from racial and ethnic minorities are not incarcerated while they are in school, suspension and expulsion rates put a strain on their educational advancement and trigger a higher rate of school dropouts among them (National Center for Education Statistics 2016). In general, it can be said that the recent decades have seen a fall in overall high school dropout rates in the US, especially among students of Hispanic descent (Krogstad 2016). However, Hispanics and blacks are still the groups with the highest high school dropout rates, with 12% and 7% respectively, compared to 5% of white students who drop out before completing high school (National Center for Education Statistics 2016). If a student does not obtain a high school diploma, their chances of college

enrollment are essentially reduced to zero. The significance of this inhibition is proven most notably by the rapidly rising share of Hispanic high school graduates who enroll in college, but an increase among other minorities is in effect as well (Gramlich 2017). This rate means that lack of interest is not what prevents the majority of these racial and ethnic groups from entering higher education, but their lack of qualifications to do so. High school does not mark the end of differences, as graduation rates are a distinctive factor in race disparities throughout all levels of education (Garrison 2013, 357).

College enrollment and completion are important steps among all races and ethnicities in this era because of the significant value of a college degree in the job market which emerged in recent decades. In the 21st century, the wage and employment differences between a high school graduate and a person with at least a bachelor's degree have increased substantially (Pew Research Center 2014). The median yearly income of a college graduate is \$12,500 higher than that of a high school educated adult among Americans aged 25–32. Furthermore, the unemployment rate is more than eight percent lower for college graduates, and a person with only a high school diploma is around four times more likely to live in poverty (Pew Research Center 2014). Therefore, today's young adults have a higher chance to get ahead in life if they complete more degrees, and the less education they receive, the more likely they are to be unemployed. Moreover, those who do not finish high school may be at an even higher risk of unemployment and living in poverty, as their lack of qualifications might reduce their options to menial jobs or forces them to work without a proper contract, thus losing the social benefits of a legitimate workplace.

For racial and ethnic minorities, these factors are relevant because of their already existing deficit on the job market. Although the proportion of different races and ethnicities among college graduates has not changed significantly, the rate of college graduates within all of these groups has been growing steadily (Wang and Parker 2011). When looking at the share of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher, Asians have shown the largest percentage (55%), while 36% of whites, 22% of blacks, and 15% of Hispanics hold the same level of attainment (Ryan and Bauman 2016, 5). College completion is also vital in terms of race and ethnicity because at higher levels of attainment, racial and ethnic disparities shrink substantially. According to Milan (2012) and Hoffer, the employment of doctorate holders at colleges in the of fields science, engineering, and health was nearly equally shared among races and ethnicities (8). Therefore, the degree completion process of minorities should be supported on all levels instead of retaining punishments introduced at an early stage to deal with the misbehavior of troubled students.

## 4. LESS ACCESS TO SCIENCE SUBJECTS

Even if minority students are able to finish high school, the knowledge they obtain during secondary education might not suffice the requirements for college courses which could grant them high-paying jobs. The fields of science, technology, mathematics, and engineering (STEM, in short) are often criticized for underrepresenting both women and racial-ethnic minorities in their workforce (Garrison 2013, 357). Although some companies may have taken steps to increase diversity among their employees, the roots of this problem, at least the racial aspect of it, can be traced back to secondary education (Anderson 2017). According to Rich (2014), "[a] quarter of high schools with the highest percentage of black and Latino students do not offer any Algebra II courses, while a third of those schools do not have any chemistry classes." Furthermore, Cook (2015) states that "[w]hile nearly one in five white students took Calculus in high school, one in 15 black students did." These pieces of data show that students of color do not have access to as many advanced science courses in high school as their white peers. This is due to the lack of financial support from poor school districts for such classes to be held (Scott 2016). The only racial minority exempt from the lack of scientific attainment is Asians, which is explained by students of Asian descent enrolling in schools with a lower number of minority students (National Center for Education Statistics 2016).

The problem with fewer science courses offered in minority schools is that it is not students' lack of desire to work in a STEM field what stops them from doing so; it is their performance and level of attainment (Anderson 2017). As shown in a study by Garrison (2013), moving towards higher and higher levels of qualification in a STEM field is not inhibited by minority students' change of interest, but rather the decreasing graduation rates compared to white students (358). One's performance, however, can have an impact on their overall interest in the subject, especially at an earlier stage of their studies. Anderson (2017) shows that among high school seniors, those who were reported to enjoy sciences and would prefer to get a STEM field job tended to do better on tests. Therefore, a correlation between attainment, interest, and the availability of subjects can be traced, although there are other factors to consider, such as the interference and educational attainment of parents.

School is not the only ground where differences in science proficiency can be found based on race and ethnicity. When it comes to general post-education knowledge and questions, white adults are also more likely than blacks or Hispanics to answer correctly (Anderson 2015). The disparity in science knowledge reaches over several fields, with similar results. Once again, educational attainment is a defining factor here, as

well as the aforementioned underrepresentation in STEM fields. However, minority students would not only benefit from advanced science courses in terms of general knowledge. Going to college, majoring in a science subject, then obtaining a STEM field job can greatly increase the chances of a member of a racial or ethnic minority to get ahead in life and to broaden their future choices. These fields offer the highest salaries, with computer science at nearly \$50,000 as the annual income; sciences and engineering are also the majors which result in the most degree-related positions in the job market (Pew Research Center 2014). This is why it is important for minority students to have access to advanced sciences and to be encouraged to pursue their interest in them, as well as other career choices requiring higher degrees of qualification.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As demonstrated, the attempts to desegregate the US education system and end discrimination have not proven to be sufficient. Racial and ethnic differences and deficits are still present in several aspects of the education system. Due to the remaining existence of minority schools and the smaller budgets of these schools, the distribution of teachers is unequal, leaving minority students with inexperienced, underpaid instructors. Suspension and expulsion are practiced more frequently among blacks and Hispanics, preventing these groups from successful school completion and college enrollment. Limited financial support allows for fewer advanced science courses in high schools, therefore students from most racial or ethnic minorities do not have access to the knowledge necessary for higher-paying STEM field jobs. Meanwhile, the percentage of white students in the US education system has dropped below 50% in recent years for the first time, and is expected to decrease even further, with the share of racial and ethnic minorities constantly on the rise (National Center for Education Statistics 2017). If the issue of racism is not settled, the American education system will soon become a system helping only a minority of students, leaving the majority at a disadvantage with their other socioeconomic deficits (Cook 2015). Fortunately, there are some efforts to protect students affected by racial disparities (Scott 2016), but the nation, as well as its leaders, must recognize the significance of this problem in order to eventually solve it and truly end segregation in US schools.



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