

Racial Stratification and Education in the United States: Why Inequality Persists

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INTRODUCTION

I have heard both white and black Americans on several occasions ask: 1) why racial inequality persists and 2) why black Americans continue to lag in school performance and educational attainment after all the improvements in race relations since 1960. They point to new employment opportunities in the private and public sectors for blacks who have a good education, and to the growing number of middle-class blacks. The belief that things *should be different now* because of improved opportunity structure can be seen in the number of black and white social scientists asserting that social class, rather than race, is now the important factor determining the life chances of black Americans.¹ They further argue that the emergence of an “underclass” phenomenon is the reason for the current problems facing blacks in education, employment, housing, and the like. The shift from race to class explanation of the economic, educational, and social problems is attractive to both white Americans and middle-class black Americans. For the whites it is compatible with their model of the United States as a society stratified by class. For middle-class blacks it gives a sense of achievement and reinforces their eagerness to distance themselves from those who have not made it or cannot make it. In the past the problem was “racism” and was blamed on whites; today the problem is “poverty” and is blamed on the underclass. A closer examination of the situation indicates, however, that the changes in opportunity structure have not gone far enough or lasted long enough to undo instrumental barriers, let alone other untargeted barriers of racial stratification, and that class has not replaced race as the chief determinant of the life chances of black Americans.

In this article I will argue that ... the school-performance gap persists because the forces of racial stratification that created the gap in the first place continue to maintain it to some degree....

EDUCATIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF RACIAL STRATIFICATION

Class Analysis of School-Performance Gap

As in the case of racial inequality in general, the preferred mode of analysis of the educational gap between blacks and whites is class.² While researchers may treat race as one “variable,” there is usually no reference to racial stratification. Indeed, this concept does not appear in the index of some of the most influential books on public policies and programs in minority education since the 1960s.

We can identify two forms of class analysis corresponding to the non-Marxist and Marxist concepts of class stratification respectively: correlational and cultural reproduction/resistance analyses. In correlational analysis social class is equated with socioeconomic status (SES). Correlational analysts appear to believe that children’s school success depends on appropriate family background or attributes that can be correlated with school adjustment and performance. Because middle-class children are more successful in school, these researchers assume that middle-class attributes are more conducive to school success than lower-class or underclass attributes. And since they classify most black children as belonging to the lower class, they attribute the lower

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school performance of black children to their lower-class or underclass background.³

One major difficulty with correlational studies is that they cannot explain why black and white children from similar social-class backgrounds perform differently in school. Correlational studies using black and white samples show two things: 1) within the black sample, as within the white sample, middle-class children do better in school and on standardized tests than do lower-class children; 2) however, when black children and white children from similar SFS are compared, black children at every class level do less well than white children.⁴ That correlational studies cannot explain the gap in the school performance of blacks and whites of similar social class is illustrated by the following study.

This was a study of a southeastern suburban elementary school located in an area where black households had higher educational attainment, better job status, and higher income than white households; yet the school performance of black children lagged behind that of the whites. Specifically, in this suburban community about twice as many black adults as whites had college degrees and about one and one-half times as many blacks as white held managerial and professional jobs; black unemployment was almost the same as white unemployment. The average annual income of a black household was about 39.1% higher than the average annual income of a white household, a difference of about \$10,000 per household in favor of blacks. In terms of class status, most black parents were of higher socioeconomic status than white parents. Still, black children lagged behind their white peers in the school district in academic achievement. Thus, in 1980–1981, the 3rd-grade students at the elementary school (80% black), scored at the 2.6 grade equivalent level, or about the tenth percentile nationally, while the county or school district average was 3.1 in grade-level-equivalent score. In the same year, the 5th-grade students at the elementary school scored at 4.7 grade equivalent level or about the thirty-eighth percentile nationally, whereas the school district average was 5.2.⁵

The cultural reproduction/resistance school is usually associated with Marxist-oriented researchers. One version, which points to some resistance or opposition in the relationship between school culture and that of the students, suggests a more useful approach. As this theory is reformulat-

ed by Willis, working-class students fail in school because they consciously or unconsciously reject academic work as being effeminate (recognizing manual labor as masculine and ideal). These students repudiate school by forming a counterculture, which eventually impedes their school success and their chances of getting high-status jobs after leaving school. Working-class students are said to reject school knowledge because they do not believe that the kind of education they are receiving will solve their problem of subordination.⁶ The Willis study introduced “resistance” as a force of human agency in the process of the reproduction of class inequality through schooling. As Weis points out, this has helped researchers shift their attention to the day-to-day attitudes and behaviors or “lived culture” of students.⁷ It is precisely because of the introduction of students and school personnel as human agents actively involved in the process of cultural reproduction or resistance that this kind of study is relevant to the educational problems of racially stratified groups.

However, although resistance theory goes some way toward explaining the school failure of working-class youths, it too has some problems when applied to racial minorities. For example, in her study of black youths in Philadelphia, Weis found a paradox: Black youths accepted academic work and schooling, but behaved in ways that ensured that they would not, and did not, succeed. Weis recognized the difficulty of explaining black students’ behavior within the framework of social class and repeatedly referred to “racial struggle” in black American history. Nevertheless, she still ended up explaining the school failure of black youths within the framework of “class struggle,” saying that the problem ultimately arises from “the material conditions” of blacks.⁸

There are two problems with the Marxist class analysis. One is that by and large Marxist researchers avoid explaining the discrepancies in the school performance of children from different racial/caste origins who belong to the same SES groups. Alternately, they erroneously treat the lower school performance of different types of subordinate age groups as the result of resistance of an exploited working class. On the other hand, the cultural reproduction/resistance researchers are silent about the school success of Asian-American working-class students. On the whole, Marxist-oriented researchers do not have a satisfactory explanation for the paradox of both high educational

aspirations and lower school performance among black students.

Cross-cultural comparisons suggest that class analyses do not shed much light on the educational experiences of racial and caste-like minorities, not only in the United States but also in Britain, Japan, and elsewhere.⁹ A more satisfactory approach must take into account the unique features of the stratification systems that distinguish racial minorities from social classes.

School Performance Gap Transcends Time and Class Boundaries

An enduring educational gap is one major consequence of the racial stratification between blacks and whites. However, in contemporary thinking the tendency is to discuss the academic problems of black children as if they are the product of black underclass status, or inner-city environment, or both. The assumption is also that these are “new problems” that emerged when the “better class” of blacks moved out of the ghetto.¹⁰ A closer look at the evidence suggests otherwise. The historical and persistent nature of the lower school performance of black children is well reflected in two school movements: *school desegregation* and *compensatory education*.

The school desegregation movement had as one of its goals the improvement of black school performance. Note, however, that a few years before *Brown v. Board of Education* several southern school districts began to publish the test scores of blacks and whites, and to use the lower test scores of blacks to oppose school desegregation.¹¹ In relatively affluent urban black communities, like Durham, North Carolina, and relatively poor ones like Memphis, Tennessee, black students lagged behind their white peers; and in both cities desegregation was intended to close the performance gap. It did not necessarily do so.¹² In the North the situation was no better.¹³

Compensatory education to improve the school performance of urban blacks began in St. Louis in 1956 and was operating in New York City by 1959. By 1961 this intervention strategy had spread to many other northern cities, even though there was

no strong evidence that it was closing the gap between black and white children in school performance.¹⁴

Another educational consequence of racial stratification is that even today the school-performance gap is not limited to poor blacks living in the inner cities. *And it never was*. As I pointed out earlier, it is true that among blacks, as among whites, middle-class children do better than those from the lower class. But even this type of *within-group comparison by social class* shows some racial difference. *The correlation between SES and academic performance is not as strong among blacks as it is among whites*. For example, a study of some 4,000 high school graduates in California in 1975 found that among blacks and Mexican-Americans, children from affluent and well-educated families were not benefiting from their parents' achievement. Like children from poorer families, the middle-class children had difficulty achieving academic qualification for college admission.¹⁵ In their analysis of the 1987 California statewide test results, Haycock and Navarro found that 8th-grade black children whose parents had completed four or more years of college did less well than other black children whose parents had attended but not finished college.¹⁶ Of particular note is that when blacks and whites come from similar SES background, at every level blacks consistently perform lower than their white counterparts.¹⁷

The performance of blacks on professional examinations such as teacher certification exams provides additional evidence that the problem is not confined to poor blacks.¹⁸ I was once attending a professional meeting where there was an extensive discussion of a state-mandated test for licensing. Many in attendance who had doctoral degrees said they failed the test several times and passed it only after the norm was lowered for minorities. But as would be expected, when we began to discuss black educational issues in general, my colleagues spoke as if the difficulty of passing academic and standardized tests were limited to the black underclass.

The problem of the school performance gap is found among blacks who live in affluent suburbs, including such places as Alexandria County, Virginia; Arlington County, Virginia; Fairfax County, Virginia; Montgomery County, Maryland; and Prince Georges County, Maryland. In my current research in Oakland, California, black students attending the city's elite high school, Skyline, have

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an average GPA of 1.92 and an average GPA of 1.62 in the courses required to get into the University of California system. The comparable figures for Chinese and white students in the same school are 2.97/2.74 and 2.74/2.48 respectively¹⁹ I need to add that many of the affluent school districts have an impressive array of remedial programs intended to close the gap in the school achievement.

There are three worrisome features of black school performance. First, while all minorities may start lower than their white peers in the early grades, Asian students improve and even surpass their white peers eventually; (or black students, on the other hand, the progression is in the opposite direction: The gap widens between them and their white peers in subsequent years.²⁰ Second, of all subgroups that I have studied, black males fare the worst. Third, not only are the average black GPA and other test scores lower than those of their white counterparts, but black students are often disproportionately underrepresented in courses that would enhance their chances of pursuing higher education.²¹

How Racial Stratification Enters into Black Education

The school-performance gap was created by forces of racial stratification: white treatment of blacks in the educational domain and black responses to schooling. The gap remains as long as these forces remain. How do these forces get into black education and maintain the gap?

There are three ways in which racial stratification enters into and adversely affects black education. One is through societal educational policies and practices. The societal channel includes denying blacks equal access to education through unequal resources, segregation, and the like—common phenomena in the past. This ensures that blacks do not receive equal education in terms of quantity and quality. If the U.S. society or one of her local communities provides blacks with less and inferior education, then blacks cannot perform as well or go as far as whites in school. This societal and community practice of unequal access was instrumental in the school desegregation movement.²² The practice appears to be largely reversed, as the federal, state, and local school systems pro-

vide extra funds for special programs to improve minority educational achievement.

The other societal practice is denying blacks equal reward with whites for their educational accomplishments through a job ceiling and related barriers.... This probably historically discouraged blacks from developing “effort optimism” in the pursuit of education. It may also have forced some to seek self-advancement through nonacademic routes.

The second way that racial stratification enters into black education lies in the way black students are perceived and treated in the specific schools they attend. These treatments include tracking, testing and misclassification, representation or nonrepresentation in textbooks and curriculum. Cultural, linguistic, and intellectual denigration is also part of the problem. I have described elsewhere the within-school treatment of black children in the schools I studied in Stockton, California, and how such treatment affected their performance.²³ One incident will illustrate how the perception and treatment may result in an unequal educational outcome. In early 1969 I discovered with some neighborhood people that 1st-grade children in the neighborhood elementary school had not started to learn to read the book designated for that grade. On inquiry we were informed that the children’s performance on the “reading-readiness test” showed that they were not yet ready to read; they might be ready to read in March. On the other hand, 1st-grade children in the white middle-class schools in other parts of the city started on the same reader in September. In May of 1969 both groups of children would be given a state-mandated test based on the same reader. It does not take a great deal of imagination to see how poor black and Mexican-American children in my study school would perform on that test.

Racial stratification also enters into and adversely affects black education through *black people’s own perceptions and responses* to their schooling in the context of their overall experience of racial subordination. The (actors involved in this, third process is what I call *community forces*. I will elaborate on this mechanism because it is the least recognized, studied, or discussed.

Black Americans have not been helpless victims of racial subordination, as can be seen in the well-documented history of their “collective struggle.”²⁴ The way they have responded or adapted to

their minority status ... has to some extent generated educational orientations and strategies that may not necessarily enhance school success, in spite of peoples verbally expressed wish to succeed, namely, to get good grades in their school work and obtain good school credentials for eventual good jobs and decent wages as adults.²⁵

The community forces arise from the three domains of black adaptation.... The instrumental adaptation generates perceptions of opportunity structure that affect how blacks perceive and respond to schooling. For example, until the civil rights revolution of the 1950s, many black people did not see people around them who "had made it" because of their education, contrary to the claims of "underclass" theorists. In Stockton, California, hardly any of the adolescents I studied in the late 1960s know anyone, except teachers, who had "become somebody" or become successful because of their education. Yet there had been no "exodus" of educated and professionally successful middle-class blacks from the city.²⁶ Many black parents in Stockton explained that they did not continue their education because "education did not promise to pay." One father said that he grew up in a town in Florida where college-educated blacks worked in the post office and at other low-prestige jobs; so he decided to go into the Navy. In my research both in Stockton and in Oakland, California, I have come across middle-class blacks who said that if they were white they "would have been farther along" or more successful. Blacks compare themselves *unfavorably* with whites and usually conclude that, in spite of their education and ability, they are worse off than they should be because of racial barriers, rather than lack of education or qualification.

One professional interviewed by Matusow in Washington, D.C., illustrates this problem. He was a young lawyer who grew up in Alabama, believing that the civil rights revolution of the 1960s had indeed brought equal opportunities for blacks and whites. He took his education seriously, attended Princeton University, and eventually became a lawyer. But when he began to practice he began to feel that he could not be as successful as his white peers.²⁷

It is true that in spite of the historical experience of blacks in the opportunity structure, black folk theories for getting ahead stress the importance of education. But this verbal endorsement is not to be accepted at face value. It is often not accompanied by appropriate or necessary effort. I have pre-

viously mentioned the paradox of high educational aspiration and inappropriate academic behaviors discovered by Weis in her research in Philadelphia.²⁸ My students and I encounter the same phenomenon in various locations in California: The students verbally assert that making good grades and obtaining school credentials are important. They also say that in order to make good grades, one must pay attention in class, do what teacher says, answer questions in class, and do homework. However, from our observations in the classroom, in the family, and in the community I must conclude that many do not do these things.²⁹ I have suggested that the reason for this lack of adequate and persevering effort is probably that, historically, blacks were not adequately rewarded for their educational achievement. So they may not have developed a widespread effort optimism or a strong cultural ethic of hard work and perseverance in pursuit of academic work.³⁰ Furthermore, the folk theories stress other means of getting ahead under the circumstances that face black people. But these alternative or "survival" strategies appear to detract from and conflict with their pursuit of formal education.

There are also factors arising from symbolic adaptation that do not particularly encourage striving for school success among lower-class as well as middle-class blacks. One such factor is how blacks perceive or interpret the cultural and language differences they encounter in school. I suggested earlier that black culture embodies a kind of oppositional cultural frame of reference vis-a-vis white American culture. Thus, for some blacks cultural and language differences between blacks and whites are consciously or unconsciously interpreted as symbols of group identity to be maintained, not barriers to be overcome. Moreover, they tend to equate the school culture (e.g., the curriculum and required behaviors) and standard English with white culture and language. They therefore perceive school learning not as an instrumental behavior to achieve the desired and verbalized goal of getting a good education for future employment, but rather as a kind of linear acculturation or assimilation, detrimental or threatening to collective identity. Some are afraid to behave according to what they see as the white cultural frame of reference for fear it may result in loss of minority cultural identity. This problem has been reported in studies of black students in high school, junior college, and graduate school and parents in adult school.³¹ A black professor told Weis that "a lot of black students see [academic work] as a white world. (If I tell students, 'you're going to be excel-

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lent—often time excellence means being—white—that kind of excellence is negative here.”³² Based on his research findings in New York City, Labov explains that for some black youth accepting school values is equivalent to giving up self-respect because academic participation is equated with giving up black cultural identity.³³

Apparently, some black educators and others agree with this interpretation that academic work is “white” because they, too, complain that the school curriculum and language of instruction are “white.” A careful study of the writings of some black scholars who are proposing changes in the education of black children indicates that their proposals are more or less based on the assumption that the school curriculum, standard practices, and standard English are white and detrimental to black children’s cultural identity. Among them are advocates of Afrocentric curriculum and cultural infusion. I think that Claude Steele, a black psychologist at Stanford University, expresses the assumption of these black educators very well in a 1992 article in *The Atlantic Monthly*:

One factor is the basic assimilationist offer that schools make to blacks: You can be valued and rewarded in school (and society), the schools say to these students, but you must first master the culture and ways of the American mainstream, and since that mainstream (as it is represented) is essentially white, this means you must give up many particulars of being black—styles of speech and appearance, value priorities, preferences—at least in mainstream setting. This is asking a lot.³⁴

The equation of the school curriculum, the standard classroom behaviors and instructional language, the standard English, with white American culture and language results in conscious or unconscious opposition or ambivalence toward learning and using instrumental behaviors to make good grades and obtain the school credentials that the students say they need and want. This phenomenon, which has to do with identity choice, is a dilemma that cuts across class lines. It may partly explain the low school performance of some middle-class black students.

Racial stratification also affects black education through black *relational adaptation*. I will

briefly point out two aspects of this. First, the deep distrust that blacks have developed for the public schools and those who control them—white Americans or their minority representatives—adversely affects communication between blacks and the schools and black interpretations of and responses to school requirements. Second, among blacks themselves, the practice of physical and social disaffiliation with the community by the academically and professionally successful middle class raises the question in the minds of community people about the real meaning of schooling.

IMPLICATIONS

From a comparative perspective, the persistence of black-white inequality in general and in education in particular is due to racial stratification, not class stratification. The barriers to equality caused by racial stratification go beyond those of jobs, income, housing and the like. These are the most obvious and are targets of public policies and efforts to achieve equality. There are other complex and subtle aspects of racial stratification in white treatment of blacks and black perceptions of and responses to their social reality, including their responses to schooling, that need to be better recognized, understood, and targeted for change.

Focusing on education, to promote a greater degree of academic success and good social adjustment, 1) it is essential to recognize, understand, and remove their obstacles from society and within the schools described earlier; and 2) it is equally necessary to recognize, understand, and attend to the community forces or the obstacles arising from black responses to racial stratification described above. At the moment, the role of community forces is the least known and the knowing is most resisted. Yet it is among the things that most distinguish immigrant minorities who are doing relatively well in school from nonimmigrant minorities who are not doing as well. There are two parts to the problem of the school-performance gap. Community forces constitute one part.

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