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# Academic Segregation and the Achievement Gap: How Black Students Are Collateral Damage in a Flawed American Education System

## Abstract

**Overview:** Segregation is a battle this nation has been fighting for centuries, and the fight still carries on to this day. The effects of segregation are vast; however, its presence is particularly apparent in the United States' education systems. From the start of our nation's history, black individuals have faced segregation and discrimination in the academic world. In the past, it was illegal for black individuals to even read or write. Today, even though a great deal of progress has been made to improve the academic standards and opportunities of black individuals, academic segregation still exists and has given rise to an academic achievement gap between white and black students. Issues within school settings, the archaic nature of the education system, and the crossovers between racial socioeconomics and education are the major catalysts of academic segregation and the achievement gap, which have downstream effects on higher education and the labor market.

**Author's Reflection:** My name is Kara Woglom and I am a sophomore service scholar at St. John Fisher College. I plan to graduate in 2021 with a bachelor's degree in Nursing and a minor in Spanish for the Health Care Professions. I am one of five children; I have three older sisters and a twin brother. As my first official extensive research paper in college, I viewed the 199 final research paper as an onerous task. I was intimidated by the amount of work I had to do and the intellectual level to which I hoped my paper would reach. The jump from a blank page to writing is always scary. However, I found that utilizing the preparatory assignments from class, such as the cubing activity and synthesis paper, eased the stress of starting my paper. With these assignments and a logically organized and detailed outline, when I sat down to write my paper, to my surprise my thoughts flowed naturally. As a result of this class, I am more confident in myself as a writer. I have a better idea of how to analyze and compile research. Most importantly, I have realized how complex and multifaceted controversial issues are. I now know the importance of being educated about an issue before forming a solid opinion.

**Professor Regan's Reflection:** Our primary class readings focused on works of fiction and nonfiction that depicted social and cultural issues regarding race in the U.S. These provided an environment for students to generate papers across diverse areas of inquiry based on their individual interests. Kara's choice of examining how race impacts learning in public schools stemmed from a personal connection to the topic. Her mother's vocation as a teacher in a socio-economically challenged school system in Binghamton motivated Kara's passionate inquiry, and she delved into a variety of sources to discover and illuminate her argument. In her research, Kara effectively used the scaffolded assignments to develop a substantial, coherent argument. Ultimately, she shed light on an important American issue, highlighting some lingering effects of historical segregation in schools and exposing evidence of persistent segregational practices. Importantly, she also looked ahead and explored the collateral professional impact for graduates of color entering the workforce.

## Keywords

MLA, American culture, Writing

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Academic Segregation and the Achievement Gap: How Black Students Are Collateral Damage  
in a Flawed American Education System

Segregation is a battle this nation has been fighting for centuries, and the fight still carries on to this day. The effects of segregation are vast; however, its presence is particularly apparent in the United States' education systems. From the start of our nation's history, black individuals have faced segregation and discrimination in the academic world. In the past, it was illegal for black individuals to even read or write. Today, even though a great deal of progress has been made to improve the academic standards and opportunities of black individuals, academic segregation still exists and has given rise to an academic achievement gap between white and black students. Issues within school settings, the archaic nature of the education system, and the crossovers between racial socioeconomic and education are the major catalysts of academic segregation and the achievement gap, which have downstream effects on higher education and the labor market.

Academic segregation dates to the early 1800s, when it was considered implausible for black slaves to read and write. In an excerpt from his autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass explains the difficulty in learning the simplest ingredients in education: reading and writing. The backlash he received from his slave master

after he discovered that his wife was teaching Douglas was horribly brutal, showing just how difficult it was for a black individual to receive the most basic education:

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A B Cs. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it is unlawful, as well as unsafe to teach a slave to read. . . . “Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. . . if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever make him unfit to be a slave. . . As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontent and unhappy.” (Douglas 20)

The treatment of Frederick Douglass was unjust, yet, he was considered lucky. Since he was a highly intelligent and intuitive man, he was able to teach himself and progress with the minimal education that he did receive. The ability to simply read the alphabet was a foreign language to most black slaves.

The nullification of slavery in the late 1800s improved the treatment and academic opportunities of black individuals. However, the Supreme Court case *Plessy vs. Ferguson* quickly created another hurdle for black individuals. The case ruled the legality of racially separate and equal facilities which were—oftentimes—completely unequal. Not only were black individuals segregated from public restrooms, restaurants, and churches, but they were also segregated from the schools where they could receive the best education. Eventually, the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education* ruled that separate but equal

schools “deny to Negro children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the fourteenth amendment” and ended the legality of separate but equal schools (Drake 2423). However, for the US education system it was too late because for the negative impact *Plessy vs. Ferguson* left on schools was indefinite.

Although 64 years have passed since the ruling of *Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education*, segregation within the education system still thrives and has resulted in an academic achievement gap between white and black students. Today, schools *still* show the same characteristics that separate and unequal schools displayed; black students *still* face segregation and unequal opportunities. According to the *National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)*, the White-Black achievement gap in reading at grade 12 increased 6 points from the year 1992 to 2015 (iv). In addition, the math scores for white students in grade eight for the year 2015 were 32 points higher than scores for black students in the same grade (50). The fact that academic segregation and the academic achievement gap are present flaws of the education system in the United States is well established. The roots of these issues, however, are more ambiguous.

The first major factor of academic segregation and the achievement gap is issues within school settings. When looking at any problem, it is important to look at the center of the issue. In the education system, this is teachers because they provide information via lecturing, either effectively or ineffectively. Dafeny Debauch, Sera Hernandez, and Meneka—contributors to the article “Future Perfect? Teachers’ Expectations and Explanations of Their Latino Immigrant Students’ Post-Secondary Futures”—argue that the foundation of academic segregation lies within the structure of a classroom. In a study with 14 elementary, middle, and high school teachers, the authors examined teacher expectancies for the trajectory of students’ futures and the

effect that expectancy has on student success. Teacher expectancy is the idea that teachers' beliefs can alter student performance. The authors explain that "beliefs have the power to alter reality; in other words, beliefs contribute to creating new situations that otherwise may not have existed" (Debauch et al. 39). Results from their study show that students who are identified as "intellectual bloomers" by teachers score significantly higher on IQ tests than students who are identified as more vulnerable to difficulty or failure. In addition to this, interviews revealed that most teachers who were questioned describe white students as "intellectual bloomers" and non-white students as non-college bound, with employment likely in low-paying jobs. The results of this experiment suggest that a teacher's perception of a student plays a significant role in the student's ability to succeed. While the positive reinforcement teachers in the study gave to white students helped them succeed academically, the negative reinforcement teachers in the study gave to non-white students made them more subject to failure.

However, teacher-student relations are more complex than teacher expectancy alone. The authors for the *Journal of School Psychology*, agree with Debauch's idea that academic segregation and the achievement gap are results of structural inequalities in the education system. Yet, instead of examining teacher expectancy, they look at the effects of teacher-child closeness. After observing the teacher-student relationships and standardized measures of children's math and reading achievements at 54 months, and in 1st, 3rd, and 5th grade, McCormick concluded that low teacher-child closeness results in poor math and reading achievement (McCormick et al. 76). Although these two authors analyze different components of teacher-student relationships, their research coincides. If teachers have low expectations for non-white students, as Debauch suggest, they are more likely to have a weaker or non-existent relationship with those students.

With these low-connection relationships—as McCormick suggests—white students will be more successful than non-white students. Thus, teacher-student relationships can impact the presence of academic segregation and the development of the achievement gap.

Although research supports that teacher-student relationships are a catalyst of academic segregation and the achievement gap, it is not justifiable to blame such a widespread issue solely on one group of individuals who are affected by many outside factors. Teachers have more obligations than relaying information to their students. They must juggle meetings, grading, lesson planning, state requirements, and school responsibilities while still providing an effective and engaging lecture. It is difficult for teachers to establish close relationships with their students, while completing their numerous required tasks. One major factor affecting teacher-student engagement that should be considered is class size. According to the *New York City Department of Education*, the average class size in district one is approximately 30 students (np). If a teacher has several classes and has a 1:30 ratio in each class, it is easy to see how it would be difficult for that teacher to be fully engaged in the life of every student. Nonetheless, if teacher-student relationships are not the single catalyst for academic segregation and the achievement gap, what other possible explanations exist?

To understand the foundation of the problem, we must first understand the foundation of the academic system. In an interview about his latest book, *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathan Kozol addresses his major concerns regarding the education system after years of teaching in both inner city and private schools in Massachusetts. Kozol's primary concern is that the United States is running an "apartheid education system" that is "savagely unequal" (np). He argues that black students and white students do not receive the same schooling or opportunities. For instance, the

*NCES* states that in 2013, 6% of ninth grade black students received credit in calculus, an advanced math course, while 18% of ninth grade white students received credit for the same course. Schools claim that black and white students receive the same opportunities, yet statistics prove that this is not true. Kozol's main reasoning for the difference in opportunities for black and white students is that the education system is "archaic" and runs on obsolete standards; students are still subject to the same segregation that was seen when schools were separate but equal in the 1800s.

The US claims it eradicated separate but equal schooling years ago, yet its education system is still plagued with segregation. Sean Drake, author of the article "Academic Segregation and the Institutional Success Frame: Unequal Schooling and Racial Disparity in an Integrated, Affluent Community" argues that academic segregation is a result of an institutional success frame. According to his research, this institutional success frame "encourages a corollary process of academic segregation that shepherds struggling students" to low-performing schools that are "physically separate, unequal, and punitive" (Drake 2424). When students do not meet this success frame, they are subject to attend disproportional and highly unsuccessful schools. In 2013, the *NCES* reported that students who attend private Catholic Schools have a higher chance of receiving a diploma, attending a four-year college, and earning a bachelor's degree (np). In 2002, 35% of black students attending a public high school received a degree, while 71.7% of black students attending private Catholic School received a degree. These statistics confirm the issues Drake and Kozol discuss. Black students are not receiving equal opportunities as white students, and thus are less likely to attend well-performing schools—such as Catholic Schools— to become more successful in life.

While some researchers argue that academic segregation and the achievement gap are the results of school settings or fundamental issues in the education system, other analysts believe that they are the results of socioeconomics and race. For instance, although Kozol's main argument is that the education system is archaic, he addresses that race and poverty are so "tightly inter-tangled" that it is nearly impossible for one factor to not affect the other (np). He argues that black and poor children are the primary victims of the historic injustices of academic segregation. According to research from the *NCES*, children in racial and ethnic groups have a statistically significant higher chance of living in poverty than white children. In 2014, 21% of children under the age of 18 were living in poverty; out of that percentage, 38% were Black. In addition to this, the *Federal Safety Net* shows that 24.8% of American adults living in poverty do not have a high school diploma (np). Because black individuals have a higher chance of living in poverty, they also are also less likely to receive a reliable education.

Each viewpoint explaining the reasoning for the prevailing academic segregation and the achievement gap in US school systems is well supported with factual evidence and statistics. Yet, when looking at the bigger picture, no one viewpoint can stand alone. This issue is deep seeded in the country's history and is far too complex to have one stimulus. Rather, each stimulus overlaps and effects the next. For example, when teachers have low expectations for their students, those students do not have the drive or self-confidence to try their best. As a result, they do poorly on standardized tests, fall below the institutional success frame, and are forced into low-performing schools. Furthermore, students do not have the financial means or the emotional drive to advance their schooling. Thus, with the segregation they face, the academic achievement gap is born. As Chandra Foote says in her article "The Challenge and Potential of

High Need Urban Education,” schools in areas of dense poverty are affected by a “vast web of interconnected social changes” that are further complicated by “enormous social and cultural barriers” (Foote 372). Foote argues the most realistic view point, the holistic viewpoint: neither teacher-child relationships, the foundation of the academic system, nor poverty are the root of academic segregation; rather, they are major components in an already complicated equation.

Although academic segregation and the achievement gap are complex, multifaceted issues, the nation must work to ameliorate these issues because they affect higher education. Research conducted by Georgetown University shows that the same racial and ethnic divide found in the nation's K-12 schools is repeated in higher education. Between the years 1990 and 2015, the percentage of students enrolling in 2-4-year college programs was consistently lower for black students (average of 35%) than white students (average of 42%) (*NCES 90-91*). Furthermore, the percentage distribution of post-baccalaureate student enrollment in the years 2000 to 2014 included an average of 70.7% for white students and a meager 12.3% for black students (*NCES 101*). Because students were unsuccessful in the lower education system, it makes it more difficult for black students to succeed in the higher education systems. Thus, black students experience the same academic segregation they did earlier in life, and a similar achievement gap evolves.

While some statistics show that there is an achievement gap in higher education, other researchers argue that this gap does not exist. Mark Perry, author for the *American Enterprise Institute*, explains that the Association of American Medical Colleges reported in 2015 that black applicants were 2.8 times more likely to be accepted into US medical schools than white students, who had similar MCAT scores. Medical school acceptance rates show that the

likelihood for black students to be accepted over white students is in fact true. Between 2013 and 2016, the acceptance rate for black medical students was 81.2%, with an average MCAT score of 27.3, while the acceptance rate for white students was 29%, with an average MCAT score of 29.2 (Perry np). Perry argues that because black students have a higher chance of getting into medical school, there is no academic segregation in higher education. He claims that institutions cannot be blamed for creating academic segregation or an achievement gap because they are ensuring black students' seats.

Krista Sayo & Elissa Choi, authors of "How Race Plays a Role in College Admissions" would argue alongside of Perry. In their article, they state that "from elite private institutions of learning to public colleges and universities, students are categorized according to ethnicity" (Sayo et. al 6). The source suggests that although applicants attempt to impress admission officers with exemplary SAT and ACT scores, outstanding lists of extracurricular activities, and moving letters of recommendation, they fail to consider race. Typically, students do not consider race as a determining factor in their college acceptance, it is simply a box that must be checked in the application. Yet, due to the Equal Education Opportunities Act of 1974 which is a federal law prohibiting the discrimination of students, faculty, and staff, the check of a box may have more meaning. Because of this act, many schools have implemented specific "racial quotas" which are designed to "admit a balanced number of students according to their ethnicity, all the while attempting to create representation for all" (Sayo et. al 6). These quotas include African-American, Latino, and Asian students. However, out of all the applicants, the representation for black students is the lowest (Sayo et. al 6). This may suggest why so many black students are being accepted into schools, over white students who are just as qualified.

Although Perry and Sayo's research is valid and factual, it does not mean that academic segregation and the achievement gap do not exist in higher education because there are other factors that come into play.

The integration of black students into higher education systems falls under the umbrella of Affirmative Action. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) defines Affirmative Action Policies as "those in which an institution or organization engage in efforts to improve opportunities in historically excluded groups in American history" (NCSL). The racial quota policies that some institutions—such as the pre-med universities discussed by Perry—implement are categorized as Affirmative Action Policies because they aim to eliminate the academic segregation of black students. Although policies such as these attempt to eliminate academic segregation and the achievement gap, many flaws arise. First, racial quota policies create a reverse form of discrimination, where black students are preferred over equally qualified white students. Furthermore, many critics argue that these policies are unconstitutional under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (np). They do not give equal opportunities to white and black student.

Lastly and perhaps most significantly, as statistics show, increasing a student's acceptance rate does not equate to increasing a student's overall academic success. Academic segregation and the achievement gap are more involved than simply acceptance rates. It is important to look at the student's entire academic journey from start to finish. Yes, black students have a higher chance of getting into some colleges; however, are those students graduating with diplomas? The *NCES* reports that in 2014, out of all students graduating with a bachelor's degree, 63% were white and 41% were black (96). Additionally, only 35% of black

students completed their bachelor's degree at the first institution they attended, compared to 60% of white students (102). These differences are statistically significant and suggest that there is remanence of an achievement gap in higher education. This data does not eliminate the work done by Perry and Sayo; rather, it shows that although institutions are attempting to eliminate academic segregation and the achievement gap, further steps need to be taken.

The reason it is vital to eliminate academic segregation and the achievement gap—aside from moral obligations— is because these factors ultimately affect the labor market. Georgetown University states that "the postsecondary system mimics and magnifies the racial and ethnic inequality in educational preparation it inherits from the K-12 system and then projects this inequality into the labor market" (np). This suggests that individuals who do not receive higher education have a decreased chance of getting a job. In 2015, the *NCES* performed a study analyzing the percentage of individuals, ages 18-24, who neither received proper education (a High School Degree or College education) nor have a paying job. Out of this percentage, black individuals comprised 23% (134). It is detrimental that academic segregation and the achievement gap are eliminated in lower school systems because they have lifelong effects on black individuals. From primary school to their attempt to find a job to provide for themselves and their family, black individuals are at a disadvantage.

This disadvantage is not only unjust and unfair, but it is also morally and ethically wrong. To fully eradicate academic segregation and the achievement gap, a great deal of change needs to be made in US school systems. The *National Education Association (NEA)* and the *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)* provide several ways teachers can integrate classrooms at lower levels to ensure that non-white students do not fall behind. Some of

the solutions include enhancing cultural competence in the classroom, setting high standards for students, implementing a challenging curriculum, and providing extra support or guidance (np). The goal is that when a teacher implements these aspects into the classroom, he/she will create an environment where students feel comfortable and are able to learn with proper support and guidance. Furthermore, the *NEA* and *ASCD* also stress the importance of the value of a teacher's credibility. If teachers are not invested in their job and the success of their students, those students will easily fall behind. Not only do teachers need to be invested, but they also need to be educated. Reports suggest that in every subject area, students in high-poverty schools are more likely than other students to be taught by teachers without even a minor in the subjects they teach (np). When teachers are not competent and knowledgeable about their content area, they are not as effective. For schools to eliminate this problem, they must ensure that their teachers are involved and properly educated. Overall, teachers have an enormous ability to diminish the academic segregation and achievement gaps within their own classroom.

Nonetheless, teachers are only one part of the issue. Schools must also look at outside factors, such as outreach to student families, strong district support, access to qualified staff, standardized curriculums or the academic core, and adequate resources and funding. Schools can create greater support systems for their students by communicating with family members and getting parents engaged in their children's education. In addition to this, school leaders can encourage their staff to advocate for their students and continuously introduce new ideas for integration in the classroom. Many of the other factors recommended by the *NEA* and *ASCD*, however, are out of reach of school principals and staff. Schools cannot determine their access to qualified teacher, the requirements from the state for lesson plans, or the funding they receive.

These are issues that the state and government must fix. For the solutions proposed to work, teachers, school staff members, state officials, and government officials must collaborate and work together to eliminate the presence and effects of academic segregation and the achievement gap that presides in today's schooling systems.

Change must be made to end the cyclic injustices that are a result of academic segregation and the achievement gap. Marian Adelman and James Jones advocate the urgency to make changes, stating: "the gap between the races will widen and poverty's grasp will strengthen if the nation continues down this current path" (Adelman and Jones 134). It is in the power of this nation to make change and end the injustices that occur every day. A flawed education system is not an act of God; it is in the hands of mankind. Humans are the ones who allowed this segregation to begin, and humans are the ones who must put an end to it. The solution to this problem is complex and long term; however, it is achievable. There was a time when it was unlawful for black individuals to learn how to read and write. Now, there are countless lawyers, doctors, philosophers, dentists, authors, and other successful, well education black professionals. Once lawmakers, politicians, and citizens accept, acknowledge, and address the cause and effect of the lingering academic segregation and inequality in the United States' education systems, change can be made, and progress can occur. With determination, passion, and persistence, the education system *can* be salvaged; old ways *can* be changed; and, students of race *can* receive equal opportunities.

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