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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers the implications for higher education of existing research on the effects of desegregation at the elementary and secondary school level. Research shows that school desegregation enhances the academic progress of African American students, increases suspension rates but cuts dropout rates among minority students, positively impacts long-term occupational consequences for African Americans, and breaks the cycle of racial isolation. Although some benefits are common outcomes of attending racially/ethnically diverse schools, the mere fact of having a diverse student body does not automatically lead to them. The specific nature of the educational situation and process significantly impacts a wide range of student outcomes. Desegregated schools have one of four orientations, each with important implications for students: business as usual, assimilation, pluralistic coexistence, and integrated pluralism. Integrated pluralism is the most likely to produce positive outcomes of desegregation. Research on K-12 desegregation underlines the importance of anticipating the possibility of resegregation and of implementing active policies to prevent it. The first three institutional approaches to desegregation are associated with resegregation. Factors conducive to achieving integrated pluralism include support of relevant authorities, cooperation toward mutually valued goals, and equal status for members of all groups. (Contains 37 references.) (SM)

CHAPTER 4

Maximizing the Benefits of Student Diversity: Lessons from School Desegregation Research

JANET WARD SCHOFIELD

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to consider the implications for higher education of the large body of existing research on the effects of desegregation at the elementary and secondary school level. I recognize that there are significant differences between precollegiate and collegiate education, as well as important differences among the many kinds of institutions that make up the U.S. higher education system. I do not assume that the outcomes of having a diverse student population at the K–12 level will necessarily be the same as those resulting from diversity at the college level; nor do I assume that the specific approaches that work in the former environment will necessarily be appropriate for the latter. But as someone who has spent much of the past twenty-five years studying the impact of racially mixed primary and secondary schooling on students, I will try to present here some basic ideas and general lessons that appear likely to be useful in thinking about how to maximize the potential benefits of diversity for college students.

The Outcomes of K–12 School Desegregation

A large and rich set of studies exists on the outcomes of school desegregation at the K–12 level, especially with regard to its effects on African American students.[1] These studies, when combined with relevant theory and research in social psychology, give some insight into the processes

through which these outcomes can be achieved. Moreover, this research has been systematically assessed and synthesized by several scholars in the past two or three decades, and there is reasonable consensus about what is known (Cook, 1984; Krol, 1978; Mahard & Crain, 1989; Schofield, 1995a; Stephan & Stephan, 1996; St. John, 1975).

First, we know that desegregated primary and secondary schools enhance the academic progress of African American students, although not necessarily to the same extent in every area or at every grade level. There are also some indications of achievement benefits for Hispanic students. Second, although there is some evidence that desegregation may increase the suspension rate for minority students, there is also reason to believe that it cuts the dropout rate—a more important factor, in the end, given the substantial negative economic consequences of failing to complete high school.

Third, and perhaps most important, desegregation appears to have modest positive long-term occupational consequences for African Americans, including (a) fostering higher occupational aspirations and more consistent career planning linked to these aspirations, (b) increasing earnings modestly, and (c) increasing the likelihood that they will work in professions in which blacks have traditionally been underrepresented.

Although the reasons for these outcomes are undoubtedly complex, the research suggests certain specific mechanisms that appear to play a role, including (a) the positive impact of desegregation on the years of college completed by African American males, (b) the positive effect of the use of desegregated social networks in job searches on the salary ultimately obtained, and (c) the unfortunate but apparently undeniable fact that some employers harbor negative attitudes about hiring minority graduates of urban high schools with large minority student enrollments, but hold more positive attitudes about minority graduates of suburban schools.

Research has also demonstrated a variety of ways in which school desegregation at the precollegiate level appears to help break the cycle of racial isolation, in which individuals from different racial or ethnic groups avoid each other in spite of the fact that this limits their occupational, social, and residential opportunities. So, for example, African Americans who attended desegregated schools are more likely as adults to live and work in racially mixed environments than their peers who attended segregated schools.

Although there is much less research on the effects of desegregation on whites, there are some parallel findings. For example, one study (National Opinion Research Center survey, cited in Aspira of America, 1979)

found that desegregated white students were more likely to report both having had a close African American friend and having had African American friends visit their homes than were their counterparts in predominately white schools.

Outcomes Depend on Educational Process

There is one additional, very important finding about precollegiate school desegregation. Although some benefits appear to be common outcomes of attending a racially or ethnically mixed school, the mere fact of having a diverse student body does not automatically lead to them. Rather, the specific nature of the situation in which students find themselves has a crucial effect on a wide range of outcomes.

This has led researchers to the conclusion that attaining a diverse student body is just the first step in a long process, and that attention to the many specifics of that process is absolutely vital if one wants to maximize the potential benefits of diversity and minimize the potential problems (Braddock & McPartland, 1988; Schofield, 1995b). The fact that minority students in predominantly white institutions routinely report higher levels of stress and alienation than their white peers (Allen & Haniff, 1991; Loo & Rolison, 1986) and that, consistent with this, their college attrition rates are markedly higher (Bennett, 1995; Keller, 1988–1989) suggests that this lesson should be heeded at the college level as well.

Although it may seem obvious that the college environment is crucial to maximizing the positive effects of diversity, policymakers and social scientists learned a similar lesson at the precollegiate level the hard way, over many years. Though this is far from a new thought for many of those concerned with diversity in higher education, much remains to be done in changing colleges and universities so that they maximize the potential presented by diverse student bodies (Allan, 1988; Bennett, 1995; Nettles, 1988; Schoem, Frankel, Zúñiga, & Lewis, 1993).

Institutional Approaches to Desegregation

Research on K–12 desegregation suggests that students' school experiences are influenced greatly by the assumptions of those in power, which are embedded in each institution's everyday policies and practices. An analysis of the ways desegregated schools manage the shift from serving primarily or exclusively white students to enrolling a more diverse student body may be helpful in illuminating the situation in higher education—especially for institutions that have historically served whites but have now begun to enroll increasing numbers of minority students, due

either to an active desire to serve a broader constituency or to demographic and economic forces that have made minorities a larger proportion of college-bound youth (Bennett, 1995).

Desegregated schools may be characterized as having one of four distinct orientations, each with important implications for students: 1) business as usual, 2) assimilation, 3) pluralistic coexistence, and 4) integrated pluralism (Sagar & Schofield, 1984).

Institutions taking the first stance, business as usual, try to avoid any particular response to the changing nature of the student body and to carry on in the customary way as far as possible. Those taking the second approach, assimilation, tend to see success as achieving an end point at which minority group members can no longer be differentiated from the white majority in terms of values, orientations, skills, and the like. The changes necessary to produce this end state, however, are seen as occurring exclusively in minority group members rather than as occurring in majority group members as well. The pluralistic coexistence approach recognizes and accepts groups' different historical experiences and values, but makes no effort to foster increased understanding, acceptance, or interaction between them.

The fourth approach, integrated pluralism, starts with the recognition and acceptance of differences, but adds an emphasis on fostering respect and interaction. It differs from the other approaches in that it explicitly affirms the educational value inherent in exposing all students to a diversity of perspectives and behavioral repertoires, and in that it is structured to achieve mutual information exchange, influence, and acceptance.

The first three approaches to educating a diverse student body at the precollegiate level all have significant drawbacks, as will be discussed below. The last one, integrated pluralism, is most likely to produce the positive outcomes of desegregation discussed earlier. Little research has been done on the basic modes of institutional response at the college level.

The Negative Consequences of Resegregation

The research on K–12 desegregation underlines the importance of anticipating the possibility—even the probability—of resegregation, and of implementing active policies to prevent it. The first three institutional approaches to desegregation described above share a major drawback: through quite different mechanisms, each one appears to be associated with resegregation that is likely to undermine many of the positive outcomes summarized earlier (Pettigrew, 1969; Sagar & Schofield, 1984).

The research does not suggest that there is anything necessarily wrong with students who have common interests, values, or backgrounds associating with each other to achieve valued ends. In fact, this can serve useful functions at both the collegiate and precollegiate levels (Tatum, 1995, 1997). The problems arise when schools are set up in a way that segregates and ghettoizes minority students; when the apparently voluntary clustering by race or ethnicity stems from fear, hostility, or discomfort; or when such clustering is not part of a varied set of experiences that includes the kind of significant participation in the life of the larger community that promotes meaningful contact and ties with those outside one's own group. Unfortunately, such situations are not uncommon. For example, a large survey of black undergraduates at predominately white institutions found that almost two-thirds reported little or no integration into general student activities, and over 40 percent reported that white students often or always avoided interaction with them outside the classroom (Allen, 1988).

In such cases, research and theory suggest, resegregation undercuts the development of cross-group ties that appear to account for a number of the positive outcomes mentioned above. If resegregation is normative and pervasive, for example, students are unlikely to form relationships across racial and ethnic boundaries that will later be useful in job searches.

Resegregation also undercuts the school's potential to offer an environment in which students from diverse backgrounds can learn about others through classroom and social experiences. Institutions of higher education recognize the importance of experience with certain kinds of diversity in many ways, from admissions policies that value geographic diversity to study-abroad programs. If it is useful for American students to learn about other countries through living in them and meeting their people, should it not also be useful for them to learn more about their own country through extended, meaningful experiences with their peers from different racial or ethnic backgrounds? This seems especially true, given that many students come from backgrounds that make such experiences prior to college unlikely.

Factors Conducive to Achieving Integrated Pluralism

Support of Relevant Authorities

The school desegregation literature and related social psychological theory and research suggest some general principles that should be useful in promoting integrated pluralism in college. Consistent support from those in authority is crucial (Allport, 1954; Hawley et al., 1983). Specifically,

principals in desegregated schools have been found to play at least four important roles in promoting desirable outcomes (Schofield, 1995b). First, they have an enabling function—that is, they make choices that facilitate or impede practices that promote positive outcomes, including choices about the allocation of funds. Second, they can serve as models. Although there is no guarantee that others will follow, this appears to be helpful. Third, they can sensitize others, because they are well placed to argue effectively for the importance of attention to issues salient to them. Finally, they have the power to sanction others, to actively reward positive practices and discourage negative ones.

It seems reasonable to expect that those in positions of leadership in higher education can contribute to positive relations on campus in these same ways. Indeed, Pettigrew (1998) outlines a number of specific ways this can be done. Furthermore, it should be recognized that leadership can exist at a variety of levels. Leadership by faculty may be important in affecting students' academic and social experiences, just as leadership at the policy level is important in shaping institutional practices and policies. For example, dissatisfaction with racial disparities in academic outcomes can lead to the development of teaching strategies that improve performance for all, but most especially for black and Latino students (Kleinsmith, 1993). Further, concern about fostering positive intergroup relations can lead to innovative approaches to breaking down barriers and increasing students' knowledge about themselves and others (Tatum, 1995; Zúñiga & Nagda, 1993).

Cooperation toward Mutually Valued Goals

Probably the most unequivocal finding in the research on school desegregation is that cooperation between members of different groups can play an important role in fostering academic achievement and building positive relationships and strong ties among students (Slavin, 1985, 1992, 1995). Cooperation must be carefully structured, however. Positive outcomes are most likely when students from different backgrounds work together toward shared goals that would not be attainable otherwise, and when all can make a valuable contribution. The clarity of this finding, combined with its impact on both academic and social outcomes, has led thousands of elementary and secondary schools around the country to adopt cooperative learning models for at least some of their students' work.

Generally speaking, changes of this sort may be hard to achieve in higher education. Collegiate work is, if anything, even more individualistic than precollegiate work, and older students have and expect more autonomy than younger students. Further, college professors are unlikely to

have experience in methods of cooperative teaching and learning. Finally, differences in academic preparation can pose serious barriers to productive cooperation (Schofield, 1980). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that a report prepared by the Department of Labor during the Bush administration listed interpersonal skills, including the ability to work on teams with others and to work well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds, among the five basic competencies needed to function effectively in the workplace (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991).

Indeed, the U.S. population is becoming increasingly diverse and many people work in relatively large institutional settings. Most workers would therefore profit from educational experiences that prepare them to work cooperatively with people of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds. Focusing attention on how to give students experience working productively on teams may yield benefits of the kind discussed earlier, and also prepare them better for work and for citizenship in a heterogeneous nation.

The desegregation literature also suggests that the classroom is not the only, or even the best, arena for fostering cooperation between students of different backgrounds. Extracurricular activities affect both student development and school climate (Braddock, Dawkins, & Wilson, 1995). Cooperation across racial and ethnic boundaries in the context of sports, arts organizations, clubs, and other such activities is especially effective in building mutual respect, friendship, and shared social identity (Schofield, 1995b).

Stephan and Stephan (1985) suggest that people often feel considerable anxiety at the prospect of interacting with those of different backgrounds and that this can get in the way of forming constructive relationships built on cooperation. Furthermore, research suggests that both majority and minority group members may bring expectations and behavior patterns to mixed situations that impede full and equal participation by all (Cohen, 1980, 1984). Thus, one cannot assume that students will automatically seek opportunities of this sort, or that any and all cooperative experiences will improve intergroup relations. Careful thought must be given to ways of making them attractive and effective.

Equal Status for Members of All Groups

Equal status for members of all groups is another condition that helps produce positive outcomes, whereas unequal status can cause problems (Schofield, 1995b). Previous work on equal status in desegregated settings has distinguished between equal status within the contact situation and that outside it. Because race and ethnicity are so strongly associated with

social class in the United States, it is frequently true that white students in a given school come from wealthier families than their minority group peers, thus bringing to their interactions a higher social status from outside school. This often creates significant obstacles to attaining equal status within the school, given the strong and persistent correlation between socioeconomic background and academic achievement and the fact that academic achievement itself can create a kind of status hierarchy within a school. Creating positive race relations is more difficult when race and class differences reinforce rather than cut across each other; in such a situation, for example, the effects of poverty may be perceived as innate racial differences. A variety of ways to help promote equal status within schools have been suggested—ranging from ensuring that all groups are well represented in positions of power to adopting policies specifically designed to mitigate the impact of unequal status from outside the school.

Similar issues of status are certainly relevant in higher education. For example, the lower socioeconomic status of minority group students is often reflected in the special intensity of their financial concerns compared to those of their white classmates (Muñoz, 1986; Oliver & Etchevery, 1987). Such differences in background often translate into differences in academic preparation. These differences should be addressed in ways that do not create lower status within the school. They may also result in differential amounts of time students must devote to income-producing activities, with corresponding effects on academic performance and status.

All this suggests that financial aid policies can play a crucial role in giving students equal time to function as students and members of the college community. It further suggests the importance of developing pools of academically talented minority students—not only for the benefit of those students themselves, but also because having them on campus, performing comparably to or even better than their majority group peers, helps create an atmosphere in which the status of different groups outside the institution does not predict the status of individuals inside it.

The equal status finding from K–12 school desegregation research warns us of a serious potential problem with plans to promote racial and ethnic diversity on campus by replacing race-conscious affirmative action in college admissions with a system based on class. Such a system would make it much more difficult for colleges to identify and recruit academically talented minority students from middle-class backgrounds, and would virtually guarantee that a much greater proportion of minorities on campus would come from families of low socioeconomic status (Kane, 1998). It is therefore likely that class-based admissions policies would in fact be counterproductive to the goals of institutions seeking to

promote cooperative and positive race relations, as Pettigrew (1998) has argued.

In summary, there is a large body of research that explores the impact of school desegregation at the K–12 level on student outcomes. It suggests that a wide array of positive outcomes do often occur. For example, it appears that school desegregation can contribute to breaking down strong historical social patterns that isolate majority and minority group members from each other in spite of the limitations this imposes on their social, residential, and occupational choices. However, this work also suggests that such outcomes are far from inevitable. Crucial to their attainment are the specific conditions obtaining in the school environment. Although there are many differences between the precollegiate and collegiate education, these findings should be of use to those in higher education who must think through the challenges they are facing as the demographic composition of the pool of college-age students changes and our country struggles to meet its need to prepare all its citizens for productive futures.

Note

1. Most desegregation research has concerned desegregation's effects on African American students. Thus, my tendency to focus on outcomes for this group is a consequence of the available research base rather than a lack of awareness of the many other diverse groups in this country or the potential importance of the impact of diversity on white students. Readers desiring comprehensive citation information on these studies should refer to Schofield (1995a).

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