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Charters as Counter Publics: Addressing the Civic Side of Charter Schooling

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Abstract

Charter schools continue to expand, particularly in urban communities. To critique the civic side of charter schools, we applied Wilson's counter-public framework from a macro level to analyze the 2014 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)- Civics results. We employed a multilevel regression model to ascertain whether Black and Hispanic charter students outperformed their peers in private and traditional public schools. Variables included civic scores and key factors associated with civic learning such as teacher qualifications and instructional time spent on civics. Results indicated significant differences in civics learning outcomes between races, with White students outperforming both Black and Hispanic students regardless of school type (Charter, private, and traditional public schools). Black and Hispanic students enrolled in private schools marginally outperformed their racial/ethnic peers enrolled in traditional public schools, but these averages were not significant. Lastly, the findings indicated that teachers' civics instructional time influenced students' performance, though no significant difference exists in civic scores based on the teacher's highest degree. Based on the findings of the study, we recommend further study to ascertain the full potential of charter schools due to their distinct composition.

Keywords: Charter schools, civics, civic achievement gap, civic opportunity gap, public schools.

Introduction

A participatory democracy requires an engaged citizenry who possesses the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions to successfully meet grand challenges. Research conducted on civic learning outcomes indicates prevalent performance gaps in civic knowledge, skill, and dispositions among youth from low-income and underserved communities and their white counterparts from wealthy families (i.e., Johnson et al., 2020; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Race, class, and other limiting social obstacles continue to exacerbate existing inequities that foster this performance

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divide (Clay & Rubin, 2020). Analyses of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)-Civics assessment data suggest that Black and Hispanic youth do exhibit an apparent civic achievement gap, thus indicating a civic opportunity gap (Johnson et al., 2020) that mirrors other educational achievement disparities. Though several scholars propose a counter-narrative to explain the prevalence of this gap (e.g., Ginwright, 2011; Ginwright & Cammorata, 2007; Woodson & Love, 2019), inequitable civic learning outcomes and opportunities echo loudly.

Schools and teachers play an important role in promoting civic learning and fostering an environment that enhances civic opportunities (Johnson et al., 2020), as both are important influencers of civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions (Pasek et al., 2008; Torney-Purta & Barber, 2011). Charter schools, as one schooling type, also enhance civic learning outcomes and expand civic learning opportunities (Gill et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; McEachin et al., 2020). "As instruments of civil society as well as places of teaching and learning" that not only embrace cultural distinctiveness, charter schools enhance civic learning opportunities by offering possibilities for civic learning and civic engagement (Johnson et al., 2020; see also Finn et al., 2000; Wilson, 2016, p. 921). Indeed, charter school supporters assert that the unique nature of charters – inventive curriculum, class size, parental participation, and community activism – positively influences youth civic learning (See Buckley & Schneider, 2007; Colvin, 2013). Conversely, some scholars argue that charters hold negative or mixed implications for civic learning and citizenship development (e.g., Goodman, 2013; Sondel, 2015). Lake and Miller (2012), however, sum up the civic side of charter schools:

> Charter schools provide an intriguing opportunity to rethink the role of public schools in preparing students to become informed and engaged participants in the American political system. They can readily adopt best practices in civic education and encourage (or even mandate) extracurricular activities to enhance civic learning. With their decentralized approach to administration, they can allow parents and students a far greater role in school governance than they would have in traditional public schools (p. 157).

The extension of charter schools has been rapid and far-reaching, particularly in urban communities (e.g., New Orleans, Indianapolis, and Washington, D.C.). Since 1991, students enrolled in charter schools quadrupled from 0.3 million to 3.2 million students, with dramatic increases occurring in urban school districts defined as low-income and with higher percentages of Black and Hispanic students (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Frankenberg & Lee, 2003; Henig, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020). Astonishingly, limited empirical research examines the civic learning

outcomes of Black and Hispanic youth enrolled in charter schools (Johnson et al., 2020; McEachin et al., 2020), particularly from a counter-public lens.

To that end, we apply Wilson's (2016) counter-public framework from a macro-level to gauge whether charter schools present a counter-public educational space that contributes to closing the civics achievement gap. Specifically, we utilize 2014 NAEP-Civics scores to examine the civic learning outcomes of Black and Hispanic youth enrolled in charter schools. We also attempt to add to the limited research base on Black and Hispanic youth civic achievement outcomes across school types.

The charter school landscape presents a thriving educative enterprise. In relation to or simply because of this growth, questions abound pertaining to the civic value of charters. We believe that comparing the civic achievement of Black and Hispanic charter students with their peers in traditional public schools (TPS) and identifying the variables associated with higher civic scores (e.g., teacher time spent on instruction) can add to the literature on the achievement of charter students compared with their traditional public-school peers. We further believe that employing a counter-public lens to examine the civic learning outcomes of Black and Hispanic youth enrolled in charter schools can challenge deficit perspectives regarding civic achievement.

The research questions, too, will focus a critical eye on school-related factors that influence civic learning and allow a reframing of civic achievement gap discourses. Given charters expansive nature, the demographics of students enrolled in charters, the socio-political and socio-economic inequities youth from low-income backgrounds and other underserved populations experience (see Clay & Rubin, 2020; Rubin, 2007), and compounded by the need to reframe civic achievement gap discourses, examining the civic learning outcomes of Black and Hispanic youth enrolled in charter schools becomes imperative.

We acknowledge the contentious nature of charter schools in education discourses. We recognize the overtly political nature of these discussions, which often frame charter school and charter school policy as ongoing battles between neoliberal education policies that assert the virtues and necessity of embedding free market principles into education reform initiatives versus the advocacy for sustaining and empowering traditional public education. We intend to move beyond such dichotomous discourses by applying Wilson's (2016) conceptual model to reframe how charter schools are addressed in education discourses. U.S. schools' precarious relationship with racial and linguistic differences, including but not limited to de jure and de facto segregation,

challenges the capacity for schools to bestow and make accessible civic knowledge, skills, and the acquisition of civic dispositions to historically subordinated groups, including Black and Hispanic youth, their families, and their communities.

Civic learning and civic opportunities in the public sphere should reflect the multiple and diverse publics that shape U.S. schooling. Given their particular inception, charter schools operate not only in the public sphere but as counter-publics meant to include the voices of those historically subordinated communities. We hypothesized that charters are of civic value for Black and Hispanic students as evidenced by higher civic scores. We further hypothesized that Black and Hispanic students enrolled in charters would outperform their peers enrolled in traditional public and private schools and that key factors such as time spent on civics instruction and the highest degree attained by the teacher are associated with higher civic scores.

We organized the paper as follows. First, we address the role of schools and teachers as civic learning influencers. We then present the limited but growing literature on the civic side of charter schools. From there, we advance counter-publics as a conceptual framework and situate the origins, growth, and academic performance of charter schools within this framework, thus delineating how charters function as counter-publics. From there, we describe methods and address the findings. We conclude with a discussion and implications for leveraging NAEP-Civics data to enhance understanding of civic outcomes in charter schools.

Literature Review

Public schools function as a public sphere or space where youth "can explore what it means to be a member of a political community and can practice the rights and obligations associated with membership in that community" (Flanagan et al., 2011, p. 102) through the acquisition of civic knowledge, civic skills such as deliberative discussion, and civic dispositions. Research suggests that school civic learning programs enhance students' political knowledge and engagement (Feldman et al., 2007; Hall & Jones, 1998; Hartry & Porter, 2004; McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002) (and increase subsequent participation in politics (Pasek et al., 2008). Reichart and Print (2018) contend that schools only marginally influence youth civic efficacy and political action. Utilizing multilevel analyses across two cohorts of Australian secondary youth, their findings indicated that formal civics learning, community engagement, and student government participation serve to significantly predict civic efficacy.

Teachers, too, are important influences on civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic purpose (Hahn, 1999). A positive, democratic teacher-student relationship has been positively linked with youths' democratic worldview, political interest, and political trust (Hahn, 1998). Student participation in classroom discussions also positively predicted civic self-efficacy (Hess, 2010). Previous research showed a connection between teachers' role and learners' civic knowledge outcome and students' political participation (see Alvair-Martin et al., 2008; Kennedy, 2010; Losito & Mintrop, 2001). Teacher time spent on civics, teacher degree attainment, and access to effectual professional development serve as key factors that influence the extent of civic learning occurring in classrooms, too (Hess & Zola, 2012; Johnson et al., under review). The above-cited studies affirm that not only do teachers transfer skills, attitudes, and knowledge and promote democracy, civic engagement, and political participation, but they equally serve as role models for students in shaping their views toward desirable behavior and civic skills.

The Civic Side of Charters

Limited research has addressed civic learning outcomes associated with charters (Johnson et al., 2020; McEachin et al., 2020) or what key factors (e.g., time spent on civics instruction and teacher degree attainment) are associated with increased outcomes. Civic development has been noted as both abstract and operational in key charter school networks such as Democracy Prep Charter and National Heritage Academies Charter networks (Jacobs, 2013; Lautzenheiser & Kelly, 2013). Author A's systematic review of charter school civic outcomes noted that charter school networks acknowledged the value of associating both the civic gap and the achievement gap, thus bringing forth the civic value of charters. Buckley and Schneider (2007) compared the civic efficacy of charters and traditional public schools on secondary students in Washington, D.C. The authors noted a statistically significant effect of charter enrollment on civic-oriented skills and community service. Specifically, charter students were more inclined to volunteer or partake in debates or discussions. No statistically significant effect of charters on the students' political tolerance was found (Buckley & Schneider, 2007).

Research comparing the civic achievement of charters versus TPS is limited but growing. Chudowsky et al.'s (2013) analysis of 2010 NAEP-Civics results indicated no significant differences in civic achievement between charter students and their peers at traditional public schools. Gordon (2011) noted that school-wide civic education in an urban charter school

cultivated students who were civically motivated to engage their communities, whereas Lake and Miller (2012) found that charter schools that highlighted character development across the curriculum promoted classroom environments conducive to deliberative discussion. McEachin et al. (2020) found that charter school students were more likely to participate in the election process (i.e., registration and voting). Gill et al. (2020), who examined the impact of Democracy Prep charter schools on voting behavior in the 2016 election, found that enrolling in such schools increases the likelihood that students will vote when becoming an adult.

Charters as Counter Publics

Critical theorist Nancy Fraser (1992, 1997) coined the term counter public in response to the ideation of the public sphere put forward by Jiirgen Habermas (1989). Habermas defined the public sphere as a space where *all* citizens could participate in deliberative discussions and offer valid, viable contributions (Habermas, 1989). Fraser, however, recognized the exclusionary history associated with the public sphere as it pertained to historically subordinated groups (i.e., women, Black people, and gay people). She argued that the exclusionary history of public spheres generated multiple publics that provide "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (1992, p. 123). The term counter publics captures how a society steeped in multiple public spheres (see Fraser 1992; Wilson, 2016) grapples with extending opportunity through the acknowledgment of what Fraser (1992) calls "sub altern" spaces where historically subordinated groups actively debate solutions to close opportunity gaps. These spaces, as Fraser explains, "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups.

As suggested by Fraser (1997/2003), the public sphere has historically exercised exclusionary practices toward key groups, notably women, African Americans, and the poor. Public schools function as part of the public sphere and have traditionally engaged in exclusionary practices, including both de jure and de facto segregation (Johnson & Hinton, 2019). The moralities of exclusion shaped the educational system in America, where individuals in the majority group perceive their group, their norms, values, and voices as superior to the minority groups, thereby excluding, marginalizing, dehumanizing, belittling, or even discarding the norms, values, and voices of minority groups (Johnson & Hinton, 2018; 2019). For historically subordinated families, a new educative enterprise was needed where these groups could "invent and circulate counter-

discourses, to formulate oppositional interpretations of their" learning-oriented identities, interests, and needs (p. 36).

The charter school movement started as a response by progressive educators, families, and communities for limited, small-scale education reform (Mulholland, 1996). As a movement, Charter schools sought to limit the morality of exclusion by providing the opportunity for students and parents from underrepresented minorities and communities to choose an educational institution and practices that align with their interests and values, thus, education by choice. These schools offered a vision of education that departed from encumbered educational practices that reproduced and added to the "education debt" (Johnson et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Rofes & Stulberg, 2004; Stulberg, 2008). Sub-altern educational space was created where historically subordinated communities, such as Black and Hispanic families, could seek opportunities significant to their values and needs (see Finn et al., 2000; Rofes & Stulberg, 2004; Wilson, 2016), including the production of authentic cultural identities and the closing of achievement gaps (Wilson, 2016).

The counter-public serves as an influential sphere that gives voice to those historically subordinated communities by allowing their needs, interests, cultural identities, and values to be included in deliberative discussions. Much like in the public sphere described by Habermas, the counter-public hosts formal and informal networks that influence civic learning opportunities and outcomes. Formal and informal networks foster the development of civic knowledge and skills and civic purpose (civic activity, civic intention, and civic motivation) (Malin et al., 2015; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Communities, schools, and families occupying the counter-public sphere function as networks to influence youth's civic thinking and development. Teachers and schools as networks are not the only agents for youth's civic development and actions. The counter-public sphere influences youth's civic development and actions through family (i.e., youth's parents and extended family), school (i.e., implemented curriculum, teachers, and participation opportunities), community and peer interaction. Several researchers note that historically subordinated youth do engage in counter-public related non-traditional civic engagement practices through community and peer interaction, including social justice movements, hip-hop concerts, and poetry slams (Ginwright, 2010, 2011; Hope & Jagers, 2014). Though Wilson (2016) applied her framework at the micro level by delineating the expansion of civic opportunity and agency at one charter school in California, we believe that this framework can be applied from a macro level to gauge whether

charter schools present a counter-public educational space for closing the civics achievement gap. Let us examine key aspects of charter school research.

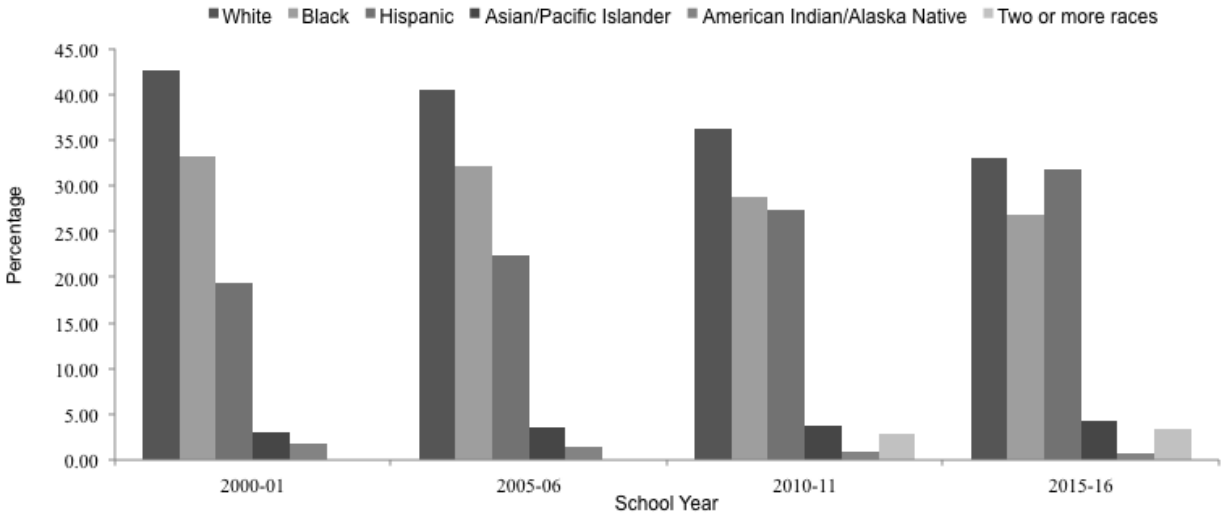
Charters As Sub-Altern Spaces for Black and Hispanic Youth

Charter schools transformed into counter publics where members of historically subordinated groups and other interested parties could formulate education goals and curricular/instructional practices that enunciated neoliberal power arrangements—competition, the dismantling of teachers unions and proliferation of alternative certification, increased carceral/punitive pedagogies, and high-stakes testing—advocated by champions as the next frontier of the Civil Rights Movement, particularly as it concerns urban education reform (Buras et al., 2010; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Dawson 2011; Dixson 2011; Lipman & Haines, 2007; Noguera, 1994). Urban, high-poverty school districts have witnessed significant growth and expansion of charter schools (Johnson et al., 2020; Rotberg, 2018). Table 1 delineates those districts where charter schools account for a market share of 30% or higher.

Consequently, the placing of charters in urban communities renders higher numbers of racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in these settings as is the case with traditional public schools in general (Henig, 2018; Johnson et al., 2020). Bifulco and Ladd (2006) and Frankenberg and Lee (2003) gauged the racial makeup of charter schools nationwide. Their findings indicated that a preponderance of charter schools maintain disproportionately high numbers of racial/ethnic minorities. Indeed, almost 66.9% of charter students were classified as racial/ethnic minorities for the 2015-16 school year, compared with about 50.1% of all public-school students (NCES, 2017). Figure 1 explains the racial demographics of charter schools.

Figure 1

Percentage distribution of public elementary and secondary students in charter schools by race/ethnicity in different school years



No data of "Two or more races" was provided for school year 2000-01 and 20005-06.

Data source: National Center for Education Statistics (2017).

Charter Schools As Spaces for Closing Gaps

Charters as counter-publics have been championed as closing achievement or opportunity gaps. Numerous studies have evaluated the achievement of charter students with their traditional public-school peers (e.g., Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker et al., 2007; CREDO, 2013; Davis & Raymond, 2012; Hoxby & Muraka, 2009; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Zimmer et al., 2009; Zimmer et al., 2012) with inconclusive results (Berends, 2015; Betts & Tang, 2014). Several randomized-design studies indicate greater achievement gains for charter students in cities such as New York and Boston (e.g., Hoxby & Muraka, 2009).

The limited research on the achievement of Black and Hispanic youth enrolled in charters compared to their traditional public-school peers reveals mixed results (Johnson et al., under review). Some researchers present findings that indicate Black and Hispanic charter school students underperform compared to their traditional public school peers (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker et al., 2005). Others present divergent findings or suggest mixed results at best (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009). Nonetheless**,** emergent research establishes that variables such as

teacher qualifications and increased instructional time improve achievement (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009; Angrist et al., 2012; Angrist et al., 2013; Curto & Fryer, 2014; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011).

Charters, Counter-Publics, and Civic?

Wilson's (2016) counter-publics framework provides a powerful lens for understanding the civic side of charter schools. When framed according to a counter-public lens, the aforementioned studies bring into relief some evidence of the civic side of charters. Charters, particularly those focused on civics education, like Democracy Prep (Gill et al., 2020), do expand civic opportunity by focusing on the development of civic skills and civic dispositions. Whereas Chudowsky et al. (2013) noted no substantial differences in students' civic achievement between charters and traditional public schools, questions still abound as to whether or how charters alleviate or exacerbate the civic achievement gap. Research on civic learning outcomes suggests that Black and Hispanic youth exhibit an apparent civic achievement gap when compared to their white counterparts from wealthy families (i.e., Hart & Atkins, 2002; Johnson et al., 2020; Johnson et al., under review; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Levinson (2009) points out that "American teachers and schools are not being given the tools to address the civic achievement gap" (p. 33). Other scholars corroborate these findings, noting that urban schools are often underfunded and lack academic rigor (Kozol, 2005) and that the organization of schools in the U.S. give room to perpetuate inequalities and underachievement.

What is missing, though, is a systematic examination from a macro level of whether charter schools expand civic learning opportunities to Black and Hispanic students from a counter-public perspective. We acknowledge arguments surrounding assessing civic learning outcomes and civic readiness. Some researchers argue that civic learning assessments should focus on student knowledge of government, including the structure of government and the legislative process (Farkas & Duffet, 2010; Pondisco et al., 2013). Others, however, assert that civic learning assessments must evaluate youth's abilities to engage in deliberative decision-making and civic actions (Levinson, 2012; McDevitt & Kiousis, 2006). We believe, however, that large data sets, such as NAEP-Civics, provide useful information on patterns and changes in civic achievement gaps and factors undergirding such gaps over time. Examining NAEP-Civics results within a counter-public framework can bring into relief whether and how charter schools enhance civic learning outcomes of historically subordinated youth. Moreover, it can conceptually anchor

whether key factors enhance civic learning. As charter schools pervade the educational arena, it is incumbent upon researchers and policymakers alike to gather evidence of their civic value. In the next section, we describe the methods used and present our results of the large data set analysis in an attempt to address the research questions.

Method

Research Design

The present study interprets charter school civic outcomes using Wilson's (2016) counter-public framework from a macro-level to gauge whether charters represent counter-public educational spaces that contribute to closing the civics achievement gap. We conducted secondary data analyses using a nationally representative sample from the NAEP-Civics 2014 results. The NAEP-Civics assessment gauges the civic knowledge and skills researchers and policymakers deem critical to civic development in a constitutional democracy in the United States (NCES, 2023).

The NAEP-Civics assessment is administered to students in grades 4, 8, and 12. The most recent civics assessment was given in 2018 to approximately 13,400 students in grade 8. The National Center for Education Statistics has yet to release the restricted use NAEP-Civics 2018 or 2022 data set; thus, the 2014 results are the most recently available data set for researchers to analyze in depth.

Civic mean scores across school types (i.e., traditional public schools, charter schools, and private schools) provided the researchers with a comparative vantage point to view charter school data in context. We also examined whether Black and Hispanic students enrolled in charters outperformed their racial/ethnic peers enrolled in traditional public schools and private schools as measured by 2014 NAEP-Civics median scores. Specifically, we examined additional variables, such as the average national civic achievement scores of this population, and gauged whether key elements, such as teachers' instructional time on civics and degree, were linked with students' higher civics scores. The following questions guided our inquiry:

1. Do charter schools offer a productive civic learning space for Black and Hispanic youth as measured by higher NAEP-Civic scores?
2. Do Black and Hispanic youth enrolled in charters outperform their racial/ethnic peers in private and traditional public schools according to NAEP-Civic scores?

3. If so, what variables (e.g., teacher time spent on civics instruction and teacher degree attainment) are associated with higher NAEP-Civic scores?

Data Collection Tools

Civic achievement scores served as an outcome. We explored three student characteristics– civic performance score, gender, and race; two teacher characteristics – corresponding teacher's time spent on civics/government instruction and corresponding teacher's highest academic degree--and one school characteristic, viz., school type, for their relationship with the outcome.

Civics achievement. This measure examined students' civic knowledge and the skills deemed essential to the responsibilities of citizens in the U.S. Multiple-choice and constructed-response questions intended to gauge student responses to five key civics-knowledge questions about government and civil society. The NAEP data set contains a set of 20 plausible values (i.e., CIVRP1–CIVRP20) to represent civics performance scores for each student.

Student sex. The NAEP variable, "dsex," was used to indicate student's gender. Students' genders were coded dichotomously, and a male group (coded as 0) served as a reference group.

Student race. The NAEP variable, "sdracem," was used to represent school-reported student's race. The variable originally classifies students into six categories: African American, Hispanic, Asian, White, Native American, and unclassified. For the current investigation, we only focused on students who were categorized as African American and Hispanic.

Teacher's time spent. NAEP student data file variable "t094802" was used to indicate teacher's time spent on civics/government instruction. The variable is an ordered categorical variable with six categories. Because the variable contained large amounts of missing data, variable analysis reduced the sample size.

Teacher's degree attainment. The NAEP student data file variable 't056301' indicates students' corresponding teacher's highest academic degree attained. The variable originally consisted of six categories. We assumed all teachers would have at least a bachelor's degree to be able to teach. Responses with the selection of 'high school diploma as the highest degree, were eliminated as an invalid response. Further, we merged the categories, Education Specialist, Doctorate, and Professional degree into one category, described as "beyond master's degree." This was due to the uncertainty of the order among these three categories and the small sample sizes for some categories. After merging these categories, we treated the variable as a three-ordered category scale

(i.e., bachelor's degree, master's degree, and beyond master's degree) representing their level of academic attainment.

School type. NAEP classified schools into three types: Charter, non-Charter Public, and Private schools. The variable "charter" was used only to represent the characteristics of those schools that participated in the assessment. The inferential analysis established a set of dummy variables (i.e., Public [1=public, 0=otherwise] and Charter [1=charter, 0=otherwise]). Public schools served as a reference group.

Data Collection

We retrieved Black and Hispanic student data from the restricted-access NAEP 2014 Civics grade 8 Assessments data set. Data were provided by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), which is the main federal division for assembling, evaluating, and reporting education-related data in the U.S. Unlike NAEP assessments in various subjects, including science, mathematics, and reading, the civics assessment does not report individual state results. The original civics assessment data set contains a total of 1085 Black student responses and 1715 Hispanic student responses from 408 schools. Collected data employed a probability design. NAEP participating schools and students assessed are a representative sample of the entire population. Therefore, sampling weights were used to estimate population parameters by considering the sampling design (Snyder et al., 2016).

Data Analysis

Descriptive Analysis. We conducted all descriptive analyses of civics scores utilizing the R statistical package, '*EdSurvey version2.0*' in R (R Core Team, 2018). The *EdSurvey* package was created by the American Institutes for Research® (AIR). It is specifically designed to analyze large-scale data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and some data from the International Assessment Database. Analysis with *EdSurvey* incorporates sampling weights to produce population estimates by taking the differential sampling probabilities of each unit, a set of 20 plausible values for measurement errors for performance outcome estimates, and 62 replicate weights for variance estimates for student performance outcomes via Jackknife estimation.

Inferential analysis. To address the research questions, we conducted analyses with two-level cross-sectional multilevel modeling. In this model, students serve as level-1 units, and schools

serve as level-2 units. We used the variables representing student weight (origwt) and school weight (spsrswt) in the NAEP data sets to incorporate each unit's sampling probability. We also used a set of 20 plausible value variables to represent student civics performance as a level-1 outcome. We included HLM 7.03 software (Raudenbush et al., 2017) to fit all MLM models.

We separately conducted a set of MLM analyses for Black and Hispanic student samples. First, we tested the unconditional model with no student- or school-level predictor in the MLM model to evaluate how students' civics performance differs due to school effect. Next, we analyzed the fully conditional MLM model with all four student-level predictors and school predictors, as shown in equation (1). In this model, all level-1 coefficients were varied across groups.

Level 1: $Civic_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}Sex_{ij} + \beta_{2j}TeacherDegree_{ij} + \beta_{3j}TeachingTime_{ij}$

Level 2: $\beta_{pj} = \gamma_{p0} + \gamma_{p1}Charter_j + \gamma_{p2}Private_j + u_{pj}$, where $p = 0,\ldots, 3$ … (1)

Because the fully conditional MLM model analysis indicated that the level-1 coefficients are not significant or vary across schools, the effects were fixed at level-2. We did, however, maintain these variables in the model. The final MLM model includes all three student-level predictors, and the school-type variables were only contained in the level-2 intercept model. The final tested model for Black students is shown in equation (2):

Level 1: $Civic_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}Sex_{ij} + \beta_{2j}TeacherDegree_{ij} + \beta_{3j}TeachingTime_{ij}$

Level2: $\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}Charter_j + \gamma_{02}Private_j + u_{0j}$

$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10}$

$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20}$

$\beta_{3j} = \gamma_{30}$ … (2)

The final model for Hispanic students is slightly different as the effect of the teacher's academic degree on student's civic scores varies across the group. The model is shown in equation (3):

Level 1: $Civic_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_{1j}Sex_{ij} + \beta_{2j}TeacherDegree_{ij} + \beta_{3j}TeachingTime_{ij}$

Level 2: $\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}Charter_j + \gamma_{02}Private_j + u_{0j}$

$\beta_{1j} = \gamma_{10}$

$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + u_{1j}$

$\beta_{3j} = \gamma_{30}$ … (3)

Findings

Descriptive Analysis

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the average civics performance for each subgroup in student and school characteristics.

Table 1

The average civics performance as a function of student /school characteristics for Black students

Variable	Category	*N*	*M*	*SEM*
Sex	Male	193083.10	135.67	2.57
	Female	198077.90	140.57	3.30
Time spend	None	7897.30	134.81	8.64
	1-10%	90255.30	137.36	3.74
	11-40%	171315.12	138.97	3.08
	41-60%	74884.49	136.85	4.96
	61-90%	29137.78	135.90	7.97
	than 90%	17670.94	144.94	9.90
Degree	Bachelor's degree	193314.36	134.82	4.43
	Master's degree	160110.72	139.56	2.39
	Beyond master's degree	37735.85	149.22	3.37
School type	Public	344974.3	136.85	3.07
	Charter	28222.9	147.30	8.83
	Private	17963.7	148.70	8.97

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2014 Civics Assessment, NAEP Restricted-Use Data File.

Table 2

The average civics performance as a function of student /school characteristics for Hispanic students

Variable	Category	*N*	*M*	*SEM*
Sex	Male	324556.40	141.52	2.12
	Female	320991.30	142.62	1.95
Time spend	None	16986.04	135.20	7.12
	1-10%	134952.64	140.64	2.34
	11-40%	286907.33	143.70	1.48
	41-60%	111381.08	138.04	7.56
	61-90%	66417.73	142.84	3.39
	than 90%	28902.89	150.22	8.24
Degree	Bachelor's degree	345081.10	145.74	1.60
	Master's degree	259099.20	138.52	2.36
	Beyond master's degree	41367.40	133.58	8.89
School type	Public	543677.7	141.22	2.04
	Charter	66871.7	142.07	6.23
	Private	34998.3	155.19	4.44

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2014 Civics Assessment, NAEP Restricted-Use Data File.

Inferential analysis with MLM models

The results of the final conditional model (shown in Tables 3 and 4) address one of the primary research questions in this study: *Do Black and Hispanic students enrolled in charter schools outperform their peers?* We found significant variation in Black students' average civic performance scores across schools, $\chi^2_{(278)}$= 879.025, $p < 0.001$. The interclass correlation (ICC), representing the proportion of students' score variance due to school differences, is .2615. This indicates that the large amount (26.2%) of performance variation among Black students is due to

differences among schools the students attend. For Black students, we found no significant average performance differences among three different types of schools (γ_{01}= 9.09, *t*[227] = 1.228, *p*=.221 for the average score difference between public and charter schools; γ_{02}= 10.65, *t*[227] = 1.028, *p*=.305 for the average score difference between public and private schools. This means that Black students enrolled in charter schools perform equally as those students in public and private schools. We also found no civic score difference by the student's sex (*p* = .293) and teacher's time spent on civic instructions (*p*=.092) and academic degree (*p*= .866).

Table 3

Summary of MLM results with the final conditional model for Black students.

Level 1 Intercept and slope	Level 2 fixed effect	*Estimate*	*SE*	*T-ratio*
Intercept	Intercept, γ_{00}	139.56	2.25	62.16
	Charter, γ_{01}	9.10	7.40	1.23
	Private, γ_{02}	10.65	10.36	1.03
Sex slope	Intercept, γ_{10}	2.58	2.46	1.05
Time slope	Intercept, γ_{20}	2.72	1.62	1.69
Degree slope	Intercept, γ_{30}	0.79	4.66	0.17

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2014 Civics Assessment, NAEP Restricted-Use Data File.

In contrast, we found significant variation in Hispanic students' average civic performance scores across schools, $\chi^2_{(308)}$= 1149.06, $p < 0.001$. The ICC indicates that 21.1% of Hispanic students' civic performance variation is due to the schools they attend. The result of the analysis with school type in the model (shown in Table 4) indicates that Hispanic students' performance in a private school tends to be higher by 11 points (*p*= 0.035) than those in either public or Charter schools. We found no significant score differences between Hispanic students in traditional public and charter schools (*p* = .318). Interestingly, and as indicated by the descriptive results reported in Tables 1 and 2, we found a significant negative relationship between teacher's academic degree

and student's civic performance. Students whose teacher's academic credential is a bachelor's degree tend to perform better on the NAEP civics test than students whose teacher's academic degree is beyond a bachelor's degree.

Table 4

Summary of MLM results with the final conditional model for Hispanic students.

Level 1 Intercept and slope	Level 2 fixed effect	*Estimate*	*SE*	*T-ratio*
Intercept	Intercept, γ_{00}	142.32	1.800	79.09
	Charter, γ_{01}	4.91	4.902	1.00
	Private, γ_{02}	11.01	5.183	2.12
Sex slope	Intercept, γ_{10}	1.313	2.413	0.54
Time slope	Intercept, γ_{20}	0.27	1.033	0.26
Degree slope	Intercept, γ_{30}	-8.93	2.972	-3.00

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2014 Civics Assessment, NAEP Restricted-Use Data File.

Discussion, Conclusion and Implications

Research informs us that schools, as essential features of the public sphere, serve as civic learning influencers (e.g., Hall & Jones, 1998; Hartry & Porter, 2004; McDevitt & Chaffee, 2002), yet civic achievement gaps between affluent, White students and youth from historically subordinated communities is real. Topically, the results from this secondary data analysis confirm that a Black-white and Hispanic-white civic-achievement gap across school types stubbornly persists (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levison, 2007, 2012). The configuration of the NAEP-Civics assessment would suggest that Black and Hispanic 8th grade students lack "a fundamental understanding of the structure of government and the processes by which government passes laws and makes policy" (Gould et al., 2011) due to mean average differences. The indication of a Black-white and Hispanic-white civic-achievement gap underlines general concerns with measuring civic achievement (e.g., Levinson, 2012). It may be the case that this civic assessment failed to capture the nuance of Black and Hispanic youth's civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Woodson &

Love, 2019). Ginwright (2007), Ginwright and Cammorata (2007), and Ginwright and James (2002) repeatedly note the nuances associated with Black and Hispanic youth civic learning, particularly the *acquisition* and *demonstration* of civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions. Measuring the full scope of civic achievement within this population seems to be a plausible solution to verifying the nature and scope of a Black-white and a Hispanic-white civics achievement gap (Woodson & Love, 2019). Given the persistence of a civic achievement gap, a national civic assessment should include youth's abilities to engage in deliberative decision-making and civic actions (Levinson, 2012; McDevitt & Kiousis, 2006).

Though the results of this study indicate that large percentages of performance variation among Black and Hispanic students is due to school type, Black and Hispanic students enrolled in charter schools only slightly outperformed their ethnic/racial peers enrolled at traditional public schools, though the averages were not statistically significant. Findings align with the role schools play as civic influencers; in this case, there was variation dependent on school type. Data presented only partially addressed the civic efficacy of charters as civic performance scores of those students enrolled in charters only slightly outpaced their ethnic/racial peers at traditional public schools. Additional analyses of other NAEP-Civics variables, such as curricular and instructional exposure, curriculum emphasis, and civic skills, may provide valuable insights regarding other factors that contribute to the civic efficacy of charters.

Let us return to our original hypothesis. We hypothesized that Black and Hispanic youth enrolled in charters would outperform their peers enrolled in private and traditional public schools according to NAEP civic scores. Given the percentage of Black and Hispanic students enrolled in charters, we expected that Black and Hispanic students enrolled in charters would outperform their peers at traditional public schools. The result of the final conditional model indicated no significant difference in Black or Hispanic charter students' civic performance compared to their peers enrolled in traditional public schools, which aligns with those researchers who suggest mixed results (e.g., Berends, 2015; Betts & Tang, 2016; CREDO, 2013; Zimmer, 2009; Zimmer et al., 2012). Black and Hispanic students enrolled in private schools did, however, outperformed their counterparts in both Charter and traditional public schools. These results call into question the scope and nature of the civics curricular and instructional exposure 8th grade students enrolled in private schools receive. Fundamentally, what are private schools doing that could be replicated across other school types to enhance civic learning opportunities and performance outcomes?

Potentially, additional NAEP-Civics analysis could provide insights to answer this question through multi-level modeling equations that account for school type, teacher and student-oriented responses to the type of civics knowledge and skills introduced in private school settings.

Finally, we hypothesized that key factors such as teacher time spent on civics instruction and teacher degree attainment would be associated with higher civic scores. There is a slightly significant difference in scores based on teacher time spent on civics instruction (instructional time). These findings confirm Hess & Zola's (2012) findings. Findings further indicated no significant difference in civic scores based on teacher's highest degree held (teacher qualification), which counters Johnson et al. (under review) most recent evidence. More important results show teacher's academic degree effect differs between traditional public schools and charter schools. This could be a result of the circumstance that charter school teachers tend to be inexperienced and lack certification and advanced degrees. Interestingly, charter school students tend to demonstrate lower performance when taught by teachers with advanced degrees. These findings support Buddin and Zamarro (2009), Hanushek et al. (2005), and Ladd and Sorensen (2015), all of whom found that a teacher's advanced degree had little to no effect on achievement. The data set, however, did not indicate whether those teachers' advanced degrees were specific to civics or social studies.

Persistent formal and informal exclusion of Black and Hispanic populations from official spheres of public schooling and decision-making led Black and Hispanic families to pursue charter schools as they cater to their values, customs, and language (Johnson et al., under review). Charter school proponents underscore charters as a solution for revitalizing civic involvement and civics education, especially among students mostly left behind. As such, charter school proponents contend that parental involvement, community engagement, size, and curriculum of charter schools positively influence youth civic acquisition (Colvin, 2013). Based on the 2014 NAEP-Civics results**,** it would appear that charters as an educative enterprise fail to reduce civic achievement gaps. Neither do traditional public schools. These findings support the current literature addressing a Black-white civic achievement gap. One could argue that both school types fail to provide rich environments that provide learners with the civic knowledge and civic skills needed for active citizenship. Granted, the literature on civic practices in charter schools reveals cases where reducing civic opportunity gaps is paramount to the mission of the schools. Narrative

inquiries and qualitative data collection could provide additional examples that bring into relief the civic practices in charters.

Our findings also raise issues surrounding discourses about measuring civic achievement and the civic efficacy of charter schools. The NAEP scores reinforce the idea that civic achievement is measured only in a testing environment (Levinson, 2012), thus accentuating education in terms of providing better outcomes as evidenced through standardized test scores. More research is needed to gather whether charter school flexibility, classroom instruction, and school ethos foster a positive civic learning environment. Framing charter schools as counter publics from a macro level underscores the correlation between civic learning opportunities and civic performances. This framework can help show the limitations associated with creating counter publics when structural racism shapes not just the everyday civic experiences of historically subordinated communities, but also the extent and type of civic learning opportunities made available to the families and youth who comprise these communities.

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