

# Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society

## Educational Stratification

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society  
Chapter Title: "Educational Stratification"  
Pub. Date: 2008  
Access Date: October 03, 2013  
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.  
City: Thousand Oaks  
Print ISBN: 9781412926942  
Online ISBN: 9781412963879  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963879.n178>  
Print pages: 436-439

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963879.n178>

Although education is viewed as the primary means of equal opportunity and social mobility in the United States, schools have been and continue to be racially segregated, both between schools and between classrooms. The racial differences in school experiences in the United States have led to two disparate systems of education where most White students benefit from access to the best schools and classrooms compared with African American and Hispanics, who are most often located in schools with the least resources to provide an adequate education. As a result, education as an institution reinforces inequality because of the extreme differences in schools and course placements experienced among racial and ethnic groups. This entry examines how experiences differ for students between and within schools, with specific attention to how race and ethnicity shape the allocation and quality of educational opportunities.

## Between-School Stratification

Between-school stratification has roots in the late 1880s with the emergence of public schooling where racial groups including African Americans, Mexicans, Native Americans, and Asians were not afforded the same educational opportunities as most White people. As a result, most non-White children were not allowed to attend schools with White peers. Separate schools were created throughout the United States and its territories to support White supremacy and reinforce the low social status of all others. During enslavement, African Americans in the South were denied formal and informal schooling, and after Reconstruction, they were not allowed to attend schools with White children. Instead, with limited public support and unequal funding, separate schools were created for African American children, establishing unequal educational systems.

Mexican Americans and Asian Americans during this time were also often excluded from attending schools with White children in the United States. During the late 1880s, Chinese children were not allowed to attend public schools in northern California. When this practice was challenged in 1884 regarding Mamie Tape, a Chinese child who was born in United States, the California Superior Court ruled that this exclusion violated the equal protection clause of the [p. 436 ↓ ] Fourteenth Amendment. However, several school districts in the state, including San Francisco's, created separate Chinese primary schools after this judicial decision.

Native Americans were forcefully relocated from their indigenous land to communities west of the Mississippi, and they were subjected to separate schools including boarding schools that took children away from their communities so they would assimilate into White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture.

For many years, federal and state laws supported separate schooling. The 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision upheld the practice of having separate passenger accommodations on railroads for African Americans and Whites. This case provided the legal precedent for “separate but equal” accommodations in all public institutions including schools. Despite the language used by the *Plessy* court, separate schools were inherently unequal. School segregation reflected a two-tier educational system where African American schools lacked the funding, school buildings, textbooks, and supplies—ensuring that most students were provided a poor education.

The fight against legalized segregation was pursued by Mexican Americans and African Americans. *Mendez v. Westminster* (1946) was a class action suit challenging school segregation for 5,000 Mexican American children in California. The U.S. District court decided that separate schools violated students' rights under the equal protection clause of the Constitution, but this case did not reverse the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. The most prominent federal case to end school segregation was pursued by the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). That organization mounted a legal battle to end legalized segregation in all public institutions including schools throughout the early and mid-20th century, including the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case. In 1955, the Supreme Court decided that segregated schooling was unconstitutional and ordered the dismantling of separate schools by race, allowing African Americans the right to attend schools with White children. This case was pivotal in promoting public school integration for all racial groups, especially in the South.

Despite these efforts, the multiple aims of the *Brown* case have not been fulfilled because contemporary schools are still racially segregated, especially in large urban cities. Although school segregation is no longer legal, it still occurs as a result of race-based residential patterns. Present-day segregated schools, serving African Americans and Hispanics who are predominantly poor, continue to be plagued by inequitable funding, decaying school buildings, and a lack of resources including books and

qualified teachers. These school conditions coupled with low-quality curriculum and instruction create difficult circumstances for fostering academic success.

## Within-School Stratification

Educational stratification within schools may result from the methods used to organize students into learning groups. Schools are generally organized by age and grade, and students may be sorted by academic status. Thus, schools and classrooms have been structured to accommodate variations in student backgrounds by differentiating educational programs and curricula based on students' academic achievement, interests, and career aspirations. Being placed into learning groups may be racially skewed, but within-school stratification can help to create an inequitable education system where White and Asian students are the beneficiaries of the best educational programs and African American and Hispanic students are in the most basic academic programs.

Nevertheless, organizing students who are academically similar is viewed as an effective strategy for instruction because it allows teachers to appropriately meet specific learning needs. This is accomplished by ability grouping and tracking to stratify learning experiences. *Ability grouping* is the term used to characterize the organization of learning groups associated with a subject, including reading and mathematics in elementary and middle grades. For example, a first-grade teacher may organize students into three reading groups for those that have above average, average, and below average reading skills. These groups may not be formally labeled; however, students may have different reading texts and the pace of instruction may vary. *Tracking* most often refers to secondary school academic programs that relate to students' plans following high school graduation. Therefore, students with college aspirations tend to enroll in college preparatory, honors, and advanced placement courses. Those with vocational aspirations often enroll in career-related courses that are supposed to adequately prepare them for entry-level positions after high school graduation.

Although ability grouping and tracking are common methods used to organize students in schools, [p. 437 ↓ ] there are additional ways to characterize learning groups.

Students with exceptional learning needs are often placed in gifted and talented programs and special education. English language learners may spend some time in bilingual classrooms until they have achieved minimal English proficiency. Students lacking academic proficiency in a subject or grade level may be placed in temporary or permanent remedial programs. In elementary schools, students needing additional assistance may participate in supplemental instructional programs where they are pulled out of the regular education classroom to get individual or small-group attention. Secondary students also receive supplemental education through remedial courses for subjects such as reading and mathematics.

A major concern about ability grouping and tracking is that separate educational programs perpetuate learning disparities because expectations vary across learning groups. Lower-level learning groups tend to experience less rigorous academic programs with a slower instructional pace. Learning often focuses on rudimentary academic work with students doing rote seatwork such as worksheets. In contrast, students in the highest learning groups experience a more engaging learning environment with challenging academic content and instructional practices that develop critical and higher order thinking. Differences in content coverage and instructional pace result in between learning-group differences where those in the highest ability groups and tracks outperform those in the lowest groups.

Research consistently shows that African American and Hispanic students are disproportionately placed in low-level academic groups from elementary school through high school. African American students are also underrepresented in gifted and talented programs, and African American males tend to be over-represented in special education. The reasons for the inequitable representation of African American and Hispanic students in ability groups and academic tracks are complex. Many factors contribute to learning group placement in elementary, middle, and high schools. Although standardized tests and other assessments of achievement are significant determinants of course location, subjective factors are also considered, including student behavior. At the secondary school level, student choice can also influence course placement. Some suggest that low academic expectations for African American students by school personnel leads to their placement in the lowest learning groups.

During the 1994 *People Who Care v. Rockford, Illinois Board of Education* litigation, it was proven that discriminatory placement practices existed in Rockford, Illinois. Data from this school district showed that African American students with the same standardized test scores as their White peers did not have the same access to high-track courses.

Despite the efforts to eliminate the vestiges of past racial discrimination in schools, it is reinforced by between- and within-school educational stratification where African American and Hispanic students are placed in learning environments that are racially isolated and lack the necessary resources required to promote high levels of academic engagement and achievement. Differential outcomes among racial groups can be seen as a reflection of the differences in what students are taught and expected to know across educational environments. There are tremendous consequences for racial stratification in education because most African American and Hispanic students are being prepared for vastly different postsecondary opportunities compared with White and Asian peers.

## Remedies to Educational Stratification

Given the ongoing challenges regarding educational stratification, federal and state policymakers have proposed state standards and high stakes testing as strategies to alleviate these inequities. The development of state-level standards establishing common educational expectations in all academic subjects is a policy designed to address the differences in curriculum and instruction between schools and classrooms. Common curricular goals help with creating alignment in educational experiences. High-stakes testing promoted by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act creates an expectation for universal student outcomes at each grade level. A unique aspect of NCLB is that it focuses greater attention on and makes schools accountable for the educational disparities among student subgroups by race, socioeconomic status, and special education and English language learner status. State standards coupled with testing provide a centralized framework to be used with all students regardless of race and school circumstance.

However, the implementation of standards and testing does not eliminate the gross disparities in resources and experiences that exist in schools. Many racially isolated schools serving African American and Hispanic students continue to confront challenges [p. 438 ↓ ] regarding inadequate school funding and access to quality resources. In addition, these policies do not necessarily call for the dismantling of ability grouping and tracking or suggest viable alternatives for creating learning environments where teachers can appropriately meet students' academic needs and challenge them academically.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963879.n178>

*See also*

#### Further Readings

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