



Key Topics

Equity in K-12 Education

Autumn 2020



I. Introduction

II. Relational Inequality Theory (RIT)

III. Economic Status and RIT

IV. Racial Identity and RIT

IV. Additional Resources

Motivation

“The idea that you challenge troubling racial and gender inequalities by changing people while leaving the relationships in which they are embedded untouched is a recipe for enduring inequalities.”

-Donald Tomaskovic-Devey and Dustin Avent-Holt

Source: [Relational Inequalities: An Organizational Approach](#), 2019

Introduction

The materials here within provide **frameworks and context to facilitate discussion about the societal-level forces that shape the inequality that persists in the United States' education system.** To this end, the next section of this document describes **Relational Inequality Theory (RIT)**, a sociological framework that explains how and why inequality persists at the societal level. Here, make note of the definitions of **social closure**, **opportunity hoarding**, and **exclusion**. With RIT as a foundation, the two subsequent sections detail how inequality in the education system manifests in relation to **economic status** and **racial identity**.

While EBDI encourages readers to consider the societal- and structural-level antecedents and consequences of inequality, we also believe **any organization's journey toward greater equity and inclusivity begins with individual transformation.** Thus, we encourage you to reflect on your own individual experiences with the education system.

Last, **you may note that we use equality rather than equity.** We do this for two reasons. First, the sociological literature we reference does not conceptualize equity in the same way that the term is used in common parlance. What is generally referred to as equity in non-academic settings is frequently conceived and operationalized as equality in the sociological literature. Second, EBDI, in line with non-academic conventions, defines equality as giving everyone the same thing, and equity as giving people what they need. As the slides detail, the United States has yet to achieve a state of educational equality, much less equity. Thus, the materials focus on the former, with the implication that where there is inequality, there is also inequity.



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Relational Inequality Theory

- **Relational inequality theory (RIT)** draws on empirical evidence ([example 1](#), [example 2](#)) to suggest that **inequality in modern society can be explained by categorical differences that determine who is able and unable to access resources in organizational contexts**
 - Here, “organization” is used broadly to refer to **formal organizations like schools or workplaces, as well as any means by which people organize or affiliate themselves**, such as neighborhoods or informal voluntary associations
- RIT further argues that **specific categorical groups (social identities) have associated statuses**; for example, in Western conceptualizations of the gender category, the group male has traditionally been associated with higher status, whereas the group female has been associated with lower status
- The **status associated with a specific categorical group can determine people’s abilities to access tangible and intangible resources** in organizational contexts, and in turn, in society at large
- **Social closure is a primary mechanism by which categorical inequality manifests**, and occurs in two ways:
 - **Opportunity hoarding**: The reservation of opportunities for the in-group
 - **Exclusion**: The denial of opportunity for the out-group

Source: [Relational Inequalities: An Organizational Approach](#), 2019



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How is public education funded in the United States?

“Education is paid for with the amount of money available in a district, which doesn’t necessarily equal the amount of money required to adequately teach students.”

- In the United States, most K-12 public education is **funded through local property taxes**
 - School funding is determined by states and municipalities
 - Federal dollars account for 8-9% of school budgets on average, most going to Head Start and free or reduced-price school lunches (FRPL)
- Wealthier districts can spend more per student
 - Nationally, **low-poverty districts spend 15.6% more per student** than high-poverty districts

Source: [Good School, Rich School; Bad School, Poor School](#), 2016

The consequences of inequality in school funding

“At every stage, higher spending led to significant increased in student outcomes and narrowing of achievement gaps by race and poverty status.”¹

- Research shows that a **20% increase in per-pupil spending for lower-income children** can lead to an additional year of completed education, 25% higher earnings, and a 20-percentage point reduction in the incidence of poverty in adulthood²
- Research on school funding policies from the 1970s and 1980s shows that **increased school funding benefited low-income students**, and the effects were cumulative; the longer students attended better-funded schools, the better they did.³

Sources: ¹[New data: Even within the same district some wealthy schools get millions more than poor ones, 2020](#); ²[Good School, Rich School; Bad School, Poor School, 2016](#); ³[The Effects of School Spending on Educational and Economic Outcomes, 2016](#)

School funding and intra-district inequality

- A new federal reporting requirement has shown that **funding is unevenly distributed even *within* districts**—schools with lower-income student populations tend to receive less funding per student than schools in the same district with wealthier students
- Why? The **wealthiest students tend to draw the most experienced teachers**, who cost more. And because small schools cost more to operate without economies of scale, districts that happen to have more of these schools in higher-income areas may end up spending more on wealthier kids

Source: [New data: Even within the same district some wealthy schools get millions more than poor ones, 2020](#)



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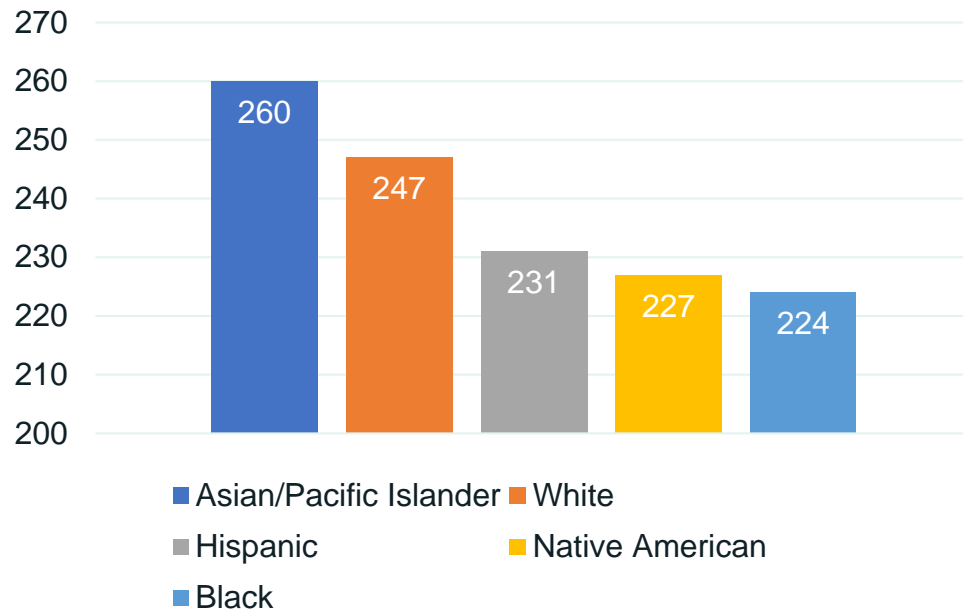
The Racial Achievement Gap

- An achievement gap is a **statistically significant difference in the average score performance** of one group of students (e.g., by race/ethnicity, gender) versus another group;¹ may also be called an **opportunity gap**
- Nationally, an achievement gap between BIPOC students and White students has existed for decades
- The racial achievement gap declined in the 1970s and 80s, which has been attributed to proactive desegregation efforts. Today however, **public schools “remain highly segregated both by race and class”**²
- The **racial achievement gap has tapered slightly since 1990, but remains significant**. In some categories, the gap has increased³
- **Poverty is considered one of the most significant contributing factors to achievement gaps**. However even **after accounting for poverty, a racial achievement gap remains**. Segregation and per-pupil spending appear to be important explanatory factors⁴

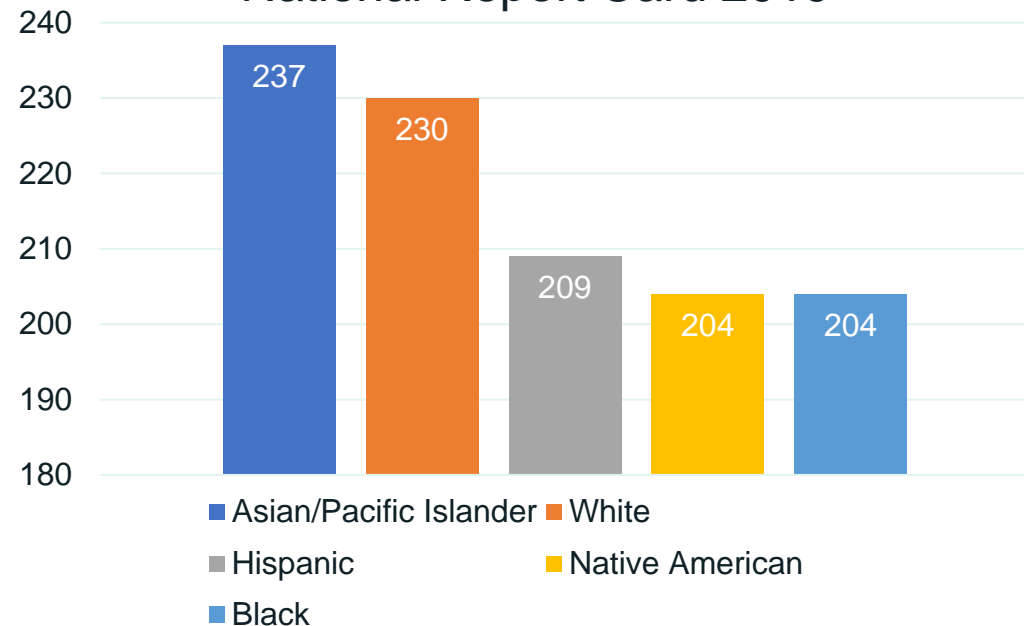
Sources: ¹ [National Center for Educational Statistics](#); ² [Is Separate Still Unequal? New Evidence on School Segregation and Racial Academic Achievement Gaps, 2019](#); ³ [Nation's Report Card Achievement Gaps Dashboard](#); ⁴ [Is Separate Still Unequal? New Evidence on School Segregation and Racial Academic Achievement Gaps, 2019](#)

Significant gaps persist for Black, Native American and Hispanic students

4th Grade Math Average Scores
National Report Card 2019



4th Grade Reading Average Scores
National Report Card 2019



Poverty (as determined by FRPL eligibility) decreases but does not erase a statistically significant achievement gap between BIPOC groups and White and Asian groups.

Source: [Nation's Report Card Data Explorer, 2019](#)

The “New Racism” of K-12 Schools: Three ways racism manifests in education

	1 “Evaded Racism”	2 “Anti-Racist Racism”	3 “Everyday Racism”
Level	Societal	Organizational	Interpersonal
Definition	Frameworks that elide explicit discussion of racism and structural failures , often shifting blame to BIPOC students and their families	Policies that purport to address racial disparities in education but actually exacerbate them	Interpersonal incidences of racism that may go unrecognized but cumulatively have “lasting and damaging impact on the self-perceptions of students”
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The achievement gap as distraction from structural injustices • Diversity celebrated in a superficial way that reinforces norms of middle-class Whiteness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School choice leading to increased segregation • Testing that centers individual achievement over structural factors • Colorblind punishment policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White teachers being unable to speak to structural and social causes of inequality • BIPOC students experiencing both overtly racist comments and microaggressions

Source: [The ‘New Racism’ of K–12 Schools: Centering Critical Research on Racism, 2017](#)



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Additional Resources

1. [Nation's Report Card Achievement Gaps Dashboard](#). Set up your own criteria to explore achievement gaps nationally or by state, with crosstabs for poverty or gender. See how particular gaps have changed over time.
2. [My Mother's Garden](#). Fiction author Kaitlyn Greenidge reflects on her experience growing up in a housing project of predominantly White city and going to a predominantly White school (Arlington, MA, unnamed) during the period where the “the biggest threat to America continued to be the welfare queen.”
3. [Reflections from a Token Black Friend](#). An essay from a Black student from Boston who attended a wealthy public high school in the suburbs through the METCO program. He reflects on racial biases he encountered and his own role in accommodating those biases.
4. [Donald Trump and the white achievement gap](#). An opinion piece arguing that a White achievement gap in history and civics contributed to the rise of Donald Trump.
5. [Nice White Parents Podcast](#). A 5-part podcast exploring how well-intentioned White parents have reshaped a school in Brooklyn, arguably increasing inequality and exclusionary practices while purporting to do the opposite.
6. [Color Lines Interview Video](#). An 8-minute video interview with 8 young Black high school students, who discuss the biases they encounter and how it makes them feel.
7. [Gifted Education's Race Problem](#). A 3-part series exploring how “Gifted” programs worsen inequality and what might be done about it.
8. [This Is the Casual Racism That I Face at My Elite High School](#). One student's perspective on how a restorative justice disciplinary model effectively managed an incidence of racism he experienced at his elite high school.