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Keywords

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**Conversations in Education Reform:
Socioeconomic Integration as a Tool for Student Success**

Anjani Kapadia

Anjani D. Kapadia graduated from Johns Hopkins University in May 2017 with a B.A. in Public Health Studies. The subject of this review was inspired by a scientific writing course on controversies in adolescence. This review was developed in close collaboration with Dr. Aliza H. Watters, a professor of Expository Writing at Johns Hopkins University.

THE GROWING ACHIEVEMENT GAP

In 1837, Horace Mann, the well-known politician and advocate for education reform, argued that public schools must be institutions in which “the children of all classes, rich and poor, should partake as equally as possible in the privileges” (Kahlenberg 2012: 2) available. Mann’s call for equitable education persists as reformers continue to debate the most efficient and effective ways to improve outcomes for students of all socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly for low-income children. As the achievement gap between students of differing socioeconomic status (SES) grows, controversy persists. Given the decentralized state of the U.S. education system, there have been many opportunities to experiment with potentially successful education tools.

One proposal to achieve this end that has gained attention in recent decades is that of socioeconomic integration, or the placement of “low-income students in middle-class schools (in which less than 50 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch)” (Kahlenberg 2012: 3). This movement is based on the observation that the socioeconomic composition of schools is the most important factor in determining student achievement and attainment outcomes (Kahlenberg 2012; Palardy 2013; Perry and McConney 2010). Proponents of encouraging the placement of low-SES students into middle-class schools assert that this strategy is effective because it increases positive peer influences, surrounds students with a community of engaged parents, and exposes students to strong teachers (Kahlenberg 2012; Kainz and Pan 2014; Orfield, Kucsera, and Siegel-Hawley 2012).

The research is abundantly clear that socioeconomic integration has significant benefits for lower-income students. However, critics of socioeconomic integration plans argue that such plans often overlook three things: (1) reduced rates of achievement for middle-SES students

(Montt 2016); (2) increased parent concerns for student outcomes (Hannah-Jones 2016); and (3) an increased risk of negative psychosocial consequences among low-SES students due to increased competition (Crosnoe 2009). Consequently, opposing politicians, parents, and education experts argue that such plans are not effective in enhancing outcomes for *all students*.

This review draws on the works of leading experts in education reform and research to better understand the current discussion on socioeconomic integration in schools. By raising and responding to several key counter arguments, it will show that when schools and classrooms are *more strategically integrated*, socioeconomic integration plans are an effective tool to improve student outcomes. When this stipulation is met, adolescents of all socioeconomic backgrounds are better prepared to successfully navigate challenges they encounter in their academic, social, and professional lives.

THE RISE OF SOCIOECONOMIC INTEGRATION PLANS

The notion of integrating students of differing SES within schools is deeply rooted in American history, though its origins are more racial than economic. In 1954, in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court deemed racially segregated schooling unconstitutional. Today it is widely acknowledged that race and SES are closely intertwined and often pattern one another (Williams, Priest, and Anderson 2016; Potter, Quick, and Davies 2016), as minority populations often face high rates of poverty (Williams 2016; Orfield 2012; Potter 2016). For this reason, race and class are often used interchangeably or jointly in the conversation on integration. As populations continued to self-segregate, experts noted that the elimination of de jure segregation alone would not suffice to improve outcomes for all students (Kahlenberg 2012; Potter 2016; Center for American Progress 2005). Subsequently, the 1966 landmark Coleman Report brought the concept of socioeconomic integration into the spotlight. This report, which

looked at 600,000 students enrolled in 4,000 schools, is considered one of the most significant studies conducted in the history of education reform. It concluded that “the [socioeconomic] composition of the student body is more highly related to achievement, independent of [a] student’s own social background, than is any school factor” (Kahlenberg 2012: 2). In 1997, a congressionally authorized study of 40,000 students similarly concluded: “as the poverty level of the school goes up, the average achievement level goes down” (Kahlenberg, 2012: 4). These findings have been repeatedly observed in various other studies over the past five decades (Potter 2016; Hair et al. 2015; Lacour and Tissington 2011; Duncan, Morris, and Rodrigues 2011). Affluent parents and conservative politicians rarely support socioeconomic integration plans. Nevertheless, experts agree that poverty is a root cause for reduced student success, and this drives the continued push for socioeconomic integration plans.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Argument for Socioeconomic Integration Reform

Education experts have identified three major drivers for how socioeconomic integration effectively improves outcomes for low-SES students. First, integrated schools create an environment where low-income students have the opportunity to learn alongside their middle-class peers, who tend to be more academically engaged and are less likely to experience behavioral problems than students in lower-income schools (Kahlenberg 2012; Palardy 2013). Second, they benefit from a community of parents who are more actively engaged in school affairs and are able to hold school officials accountable (Kahlenberg 2012; Palardy 2013). Finally, low-SES students benefit from stronger and more experienced teachers who have higher expectations for their students (Kahlenberg 2012; Kainz 2014; Rumberger and Palardy).

Richard D. Kahlenberg summarizes these findings and cites several studies to substantiate his claims. A 2006 report published by the Center for American Progress examined data from 22,000 schools enrolling 18 million students to determine the effects of racial and socioeconomic integration on achievement. The study concluded that “minority students have greater gains in racially integrated schools, and that a substantial portion of the racial composition effect is really due to poverty and peer achievement” (Kahlenberg 2012: 4). Champions of socioeconomic integration plans highlight the importance of altering the context in which adolescents learn (Potter 2016). This change in context lends itself not only to an increase in access to resources, but also to a considerable increase in positive peer and adult influences within schools (Kahlenberg 2012; Palardy 2013; Rumberger 2005).

While low-income students experience substantial growth in academic achievement, middle-class students also benefit from learning in integrated schools. Kahlenberg asserts that as long as middle-class students hold the “numerical majority” or make up between fifty and seventy percent of the school population, they continue to thrive in socioeconomically integrated schools (Kahlenberg 2012: 5). As many universities and companies agree, the benefits extend to all students, and without such exposures and interactions, they are ill equipped to thrive in a “multicultural society” (Kahlenberg 2012: 10; Wells, Fox, and Cordova-Coba 2016). Students in socioeconomically homogenous schools miss out on opportunities to further develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and a sense of civic engagement that is essential in today’s diversifying workforce and globalizing economy (Potter 2016; Kamenetz 2015). In light of the current body of research, many education experts agree there is a need for education reform that benefits children of all socioeconomic classes rather than only those who can readily access the highest quality resources.

THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST SOCIOECONOMIC INTEGRATION REFORM

Reduced Achievement Among Middle- and High-SES Students

In spite of evidence demonstrating the benefits of socioeconomic integration plans, opponents note that advantaged students, or those of middle and high-SES, do not necessarily see gains at the same rate as disadvantaged, or low-SES students. Dr. Guillermo Montt addresses this concern as he defines effectively integrated schools as those that can promote disadvantaged students' outcomes while ensuring that advantaged students do not experience any simultaneous losses (Montt 2016: 808). He concludes that such schools are "elusive" (Montt 2016: 808), but also notes that integration plans have a greater propensity for effectiveness in certain situational contexts, and larger schools and classrooms seem to favor success for all students (Montt 2016: 818; Rumberger 2005: 2015). Such classroom settings allow increased interactions with more diverse students (Montt 2016: 818). Additionally, large schools often experience the added benefit of attracting better resources, such as for extracurricular activities that allow students to engage socially (Montt 2016: 823; Harris 2010: 1169).

Though Montt credits the growing body of research showing the direct and indirect benefits imparted to disadvantaged students in socioeconomically diversified classrooms, he explains that advantaged students in the same environment "show lower levels of achievement" (Montt 2016: 809). Montt found that disadvantaged students in integrated schools score approximately "25 points higher in reading" (Montt 2016: 817) compared to their counterparts in schools that have a high density of low-income students. Contrarily, advantaged students score "over 25 points lower" (Montt 2016: 817) in integrated schools than their respective counterparts in schools that are comprised primarily of middle and high-SES students. This score reduction can be compared to missing 35% of one year of school instruction (Montt 2016: 817).

Rumberger found similar results following a series of simulations that “estimated achievement growth over 4 years of high school for disadvantaged, average, and advantaged white and black students in low-, middle-, and high-SES high schools” (Rumberger 2005: 2019). Under the assumption that all high- and low- schools became socioeconomically integrated, the gains experienced by disadvantaged students moving to middle-SES schools would be less than the losses experienced by advantaged students moving to middle-SES schools (Rumberger 2005: 2019). These findings indicate that although the achievement gap between disadvantaged and advantaged students would be reduced following socioeconomic integration of students, overall achievement would also decline (Rumberger 2005: 2020). Given the possible academic losses for many middle and high-SES students, in addition to concerns for negative life outcomes, there is strong political and community resistance towards integration plans arguing against their effectiveness for *all* students.

Psychosocial Consequences Among Disadvantaged Students

As researchers and parents find reduced rates of achievement among advantaged students in integrated schools alarming, other opponents raise concerns for the unintended consequences of socioeconomic integration plans for disadvantaged students. Dr. Robert Crosnoe highlights potential risks by analyzing data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health through the “frog pond” perspective, which asserts that “students evaluate themselves relative to those in their specific context” (Crosnoe 2009: 3; Marsh 2003). In other words, students are inclined towards comparing themselves to their peers, and this may have negative psychosocial effects in the case of disadvantaged students comparing themselves to more socioeconomically advantaged students. Because SES is commonly used as a “marker of academic ability (and social worth)” (Crosnoe 2009: 15), students of low-SES are subject to a “greater competitive

disadvantage (Crosnoe 2009: 15)” when evaluated by their peers, faculty, and parental communities (Kelly 2009).

Students in integrated schools are positioned to compete for social capital and other indicators of academic success, such as grades and course offerings (Crosnoe 2009: 3). This competition often manifests in the form of tracking, which refers to the practice of placing students on educational paths of varying difficulty based on their academic performance in previous years (Mathis 2013). Tracking has developed into a modern-day mechanism of segregation. This is evident in looking at data on national high school enrollment during the 2011-2012 school year. While minority students comprised 37% of enrollment nationwide, they only comprised 20% of students taking advanced math courses (Kohli 2014). Decisions about tracking are based not only on objective factors, such as test scores and grades, but also on subjective factors, including teacher and guidance counselor recommendations, parent insistence, and student desires (Kelly 2009: 50; Kohli 2014). This final subjective factor warrants further discussion. Disadvantaged students in schools with a larger proportion of advantaged students may be resistant towards joining honors and Advanced Placement courses, for they can lead to feelings of social isolation (Kelly 2009: 51). To evade feelings of discomfort, such students are more inclined to stay with their similarly disadvantaged peers in lower-track courses (Kelly 2009: 51).

Crosnoe explains that this de facto segregation puts low-income students at greater “risk for stigmatization (Crosnoe 2009: 4)” and for reduced gains in achievement when in high-SES schools than when in low-SES schools. Not only do these risks have implications for “status attainment, health, and well-being (Crosnoe 2009: 4)” later in life, but they also hinder prospects for advancement to college and employment (Crosnoe 2009: 3; Kohli 2014). These hidden risks

may undermine the many achievement benefits to low-SES students associated with socioeconomic integration plans.

DISCUSSION

Addressing Key Concerns

Benefits for all students, regardless of SES

Montt's and Rumberger's findings are problematic for many affluent parents, few of whom would be willing to send their children to a school knowing the considerable risk of reduced academic achievement. Their findings highlight a critical flaw in the push for socioeconomic integration plans: The overall reduction in the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students does not necessarily demonstrate effectiveness if some students experience losses for the sake of improving outcomes for others. This is a valid argument, one that must be further substantiated by replicated results, but it is essential to realize that these are singular studies that have assessed academic achievement gains of middle and high-SES students.

Additional studies have sought to elucidate if advantaged students in integrated schools truly do see worse outcomes than in more advantaged schools. Contrary to Montt's and Rumberger's findings, the National Center of Educational Statistics concluded in a 2015 report that "white student achievement in schools with the highest black student density did not differ from white student achievement in schools with the lowest density" (U.S. Department of Education 2015: 1). Though this report focused primarily on achievement by race, it is important to remember the interconnected nature of race and socioeconomic status.

Though the effects of attending socioeconomically integrated schools may be "weaker for advantaged students" (Montt 2016: 818; Rumberger 2005: 2007) in some instances, education

experts argue the importance of examining additional markers of success when assessing the effectiveness of integration plans for all students.

Affluent parents voice concerns for smaller increases in test scores by protesting socioeconomic integration plans, yet mounting research suggests that test scores are limited in their ability to comprehensively define academic success (Hiss and Franks 2014; Hoffman and Lowitzki 2005; Beatty, Greenwood, and Linn 1999). Education experts highlight how all adolescents experience cognitive and non-cognitive benefits in socioeconomically integrated schools. For example, white students are inclined to work both “harder and smarter (Kamenetz 2015: 3)” and are likely to be “more empathetic and less prejudiced (Kamenetz 2015: 3)” when in diverse classrooms as a result of forming friendships with students of other racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. These friendships lend themselves to greater cross-racial understanding and social cohesion (Spencer and Reno 2009: 9).

Katherine Philips exemplifies these findings as she compares how groups of all white and mixed race students address a murder mystery. The results show that the more diverse student groups have a greater tendency to work harder, focus more, and expand their thinking. As a result, they are more likely to come to the correct answers (Kamenetz 2015: 3). Research put forth by The Century Foundation explains these findings by saying that students learning in such diverse environments benefit from greater “cognitive stimulation” (Wells 2016: 9). These findings challenge both parents and researchers, such as Montt and Rumberger, to look outside of standardized test scores when assessing student achievement. Evidence indicates that students in socioeconomically integrated schools experience considerable gains in work ethic, emotional intelligence, and critical thinking, all of which confer practical benefits for students in school and beyond.

Achievement and attainment beyond the classroom

Parents often worry for the future life outcomes of their children in integrated schools; however, more focus should be placed on the advice coming from the institutions where parents hope their children will one day study or work. Dr. Amy Stuart Wells supports Kahlenberg's findings on the benefits of socioeconomic integration and explains that many universities and employers, including 50% of Fortune 100 companies, assert that their employees must exhibit capacities such as those noted by Kamenetz in order to succeed (Wells 2016; Spencer 2009). Nevertheless, many affluent parents and politicians continue to question integration policies given the apparent disconnect between approaches taken by universities and K-12 education systems. Due to a lack of policy reform and research in these sectors, student outcomes are primarily measured by test scores and graduation rates rather than by the experiences derived from diverse learning environments (Wells 2016: 6). Consequently, teachers are more focused on gearing students towards college entrance rather than on equipping them with the skills they will need to thrive in college and beyond. As skills gained from such diverse learning experiences are less tangible and more difficult to quantify than test scores, integration plans remain a hard sell to parents and politicians that influence education reform. To bolster this argument, decision-makers should note how integration plans would not only benefit students in the long run, but also the general population.

Societal benefits of socioeconomic integration in schools

While many education experts agree that students of all socioeconomic backgrounds benefit academically, socially, and professionally from learning in integrated classrooms, benefits extend to society as a whole as well. The Metropolitan Planning Council is a Chicago-based non-profit that aims to address challenges in regional development. In a recent report, the

organization estimated the tangible benefits of integration in the Chicago region. The study highlights advantages such as an average increase in African-American earnings by nearly \$3,000 annually, an \$8 billion increase in Chicago's GDP, a 30% reduction in the homicide rate, a \$6 billion increase in residential real estate values, and an additional 83,000 college graduates increasing regional earnings by \$90 billion (Chiles 2017: 3). Integrated communities also benefit from reduced residential segregation, better quality schools, and a diversified workforce (Spencer 2009: 9). With these gains, it is evident that integration not only benefits low-income minority populations, but also benefits higher-income white populations who may not recognize the larger economic and social ramifications of segregating practices.

Psychosocial benefits for adolescents living in poverty

Scientists agree that removing adolescents from poverty to improve cognitive function is ideal, yet not all agree that placing them in integrated schools yields better outcomes than further investment in high-poverty schools. Crosnoe complicates Kahlenberg's research by exposing that policy proposals favoring socioeconomic integration plans often overlook the risks of unintended psychosocial consequences to lower-SES students. An understanding of the effects of poverty on the adolescent brain reveals that socioeconomically diverse learning environments can mitigate these risks. Economic Mobility Pathways, a Boston non-profit that strives to improve the economic self-sufficiency of families, explains how the "ever-present stress" associated with poverty can overwhelm the brain (Mathewson 2017). Results of their recent study demonstrate that when the limbic system, the emotion processing center of the brain, is overwhelmed with fear and stress, it communicates these messages to the pre-frontal cortex, which is in charge of executive function (Mathewson 2017). In consequence, individual ability to efficiently "solve problems, set goals, and complete tasks" is inhibited (Mathewson, 2017). This

finding suggests the positive affect of removing low-SES adolescents from the *constant* stress of poverty and placing them in socioeconomically integrated schools. Research on the dramatic role of peer influences, such as that conducted by Kahlenberg and Dr. Linda Spear indicates that investing resources is not sufficient to mitigate the effects of poverty and that a true change in the social context of schools is necessary to improve student success (Spear 2012: 10-11; Kahlenberg 2012: 5).

Social integration as the key to successful socioeconomic integration

Research on adolescent brain function and behavior provides a lens through which we may draw a new conclusion: although socioeconomic integration plans have the potential to be successful, they operate under the assumption that students are adequately socially integrated within socioeconomically integrated schools. This is not always the case, as Montt's and Crosnoe's findings suggest. Both Kahlenberg's and Crosnoe's perspectives may be employed together to drive a compromise that better addresses the drastic achievement gap between students of differing SES. Kahlenberg, Crosnoe, and Montt cite research pointing to the fact that "students can be segregated within schools as well as from them" (Kahlenberg 2012: 12; Montt 2016; Crosnoe 2009). This pitfall implies that more must be done to alter the learning context.

As Kahlenberg urges reformers to ensure that "integrated school buildings are not resegregated by classroom" (Kahlenberg 2012: 12), Crosnoe and Montt delve deeper into the issue. Both offer convincing arguments as they show that socioeconomic integration plans can be improved by ensuring opportunities for social integration, including the elimination of tracking and the expansion of extracurricular activities (Crosnoe 2009: 15; Montt 2016: 823). Such initiatives are compelling, as they aim to moderate the hidden risks of socioeconomic integrations plans. Neuropsychologists agree that these extensions of current plans would create

less stressful environments that enhance performance since they “reduce status hierarchies” (Crosnoe 2009: 16) and boost feelings of “social belongingness” (Crosnoe 2009: 13). Crosnoe’s and Montt’s critique of current plans in light of research on adolescent emotionality and cognition suggests a need for improved implementation plans to maximize student outcomes.

Remaining Political and Social Concerns

Conservatives and liberals, who generally oppose and favor socioeconomic integration plans respectively, both continue to show resistance. In a personal interview, Paul Kihn underscores the key influence of the political climate when implementing socioeconomic integration plans and notes that even if parents did buy into the perceived gains, there are other barriers to consider further (2017). Among them, he emphasizes that of parent choice when buying homes to gain access to particular school districts (Kihn 2017). In other debate, Nikole Hannah-Jones spotlights minority parent concerns for the marginalization of their children in minority-majority classrooms (2016). The concerns of both minority and majority parents are valid; however, research indicates that if schools can develop strategies to bypass potential pitfalls of unequal achievement gains and increased negative psychosocial consequences while also facilitating social interaction, many of the fears that parents voice would be addressed.

CONCLUSIONS

A peak into history shows clearly that socioeconomic and racial segregation hinders opportunities for everyone. In response, education reformers should focus efforts on advocating for and implementing *effective* socioeconomic integration plans to reduce the socioeconomic achievement gap. Socioeconomic integration plans have gained weight in the past several decades as evidence highlights their ability to confer cognitive and non-cognitive benefits to students of all socioeconomic backgrounds. Large political resistance from racial majority

affluent parents persists as they argue that socioeconomically advantaged students do not experience the same rates of academic achievement in integrated schools as they would in more advantaged schools.

Parents from the other side of the socioeconomic spectrum raise concerns about negative psychosocial consequences. Leading experts in education, however, contend that these fears are unwarranted given the research showing that students in strategically integrated schools are better equipped with the skills deemed necessary to thrive by numerous universities and employers. Socioeconomic integration plans are effective in improving outcomes for students of all SES, but only when education reformers and schools ensure that social integration is a key component of program implementation. Given the current education climate, advocates of socioeconomic integration must increase their efforts to not only address the potential risks to students of all SES, but to also tackle the inevitable challenges of political dissent, feasibility, and implementation.

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