

First grade reading suffers in segregated schools

July 29 2014

A groundbreaking study from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG) has found that African-American students in first grade experience smaller gains in reading when they attend segregated schools—but the students' backgrounds likely are not the cause of the differences.

According to the Center for Civil Rights, although the United States is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, [segregation](#) is still on the rise. To better understand segregation's impact on student performance, FPG scientists looked at nearly 4000 first graders in public schools nationwide.

"When the minority composition of schools was 75% or more, the growth in African American first graders' reading skills lagged behind their African-American peers in more integrated schools," said Kirsten Kainz, FPG's director of statistics. "This alone wasn't news. Numerous studies have shown how the performance of African American students suffers in segregated schools."

Kainz said that researchers have long faced a difficult problem when investigating the reasons behind differences in reading development or other learning outcomes in segregated settings.

"The economic, social, and academic backgrounds of the students who attend segregated schools could be the cause of differences in achievement—and not aspects of the segregated settings themselves,"

said Kainz. The challenge, she explained, is in disentangling one group of potential causes from the other.

In order to separate student characteristics from aspects of segregated public schools, Kainz used a statistical technique called "propensity score matching," which allows for comparison of reading growth in segregated and non-segregated schools, while also accounting for numerous differences in the students' backgrounds. When the analysis revealed that African American students displayed less growth in reading during first grade in segregated schools than in other public schools, Kainz realized the primary reason was the schools themselves—not the students.

"When similar groups of first graders do better in one type of school than another, then it must be some aspect of the school that accounts for the difference," Kainz said. "This study goes further than any other in being able to say, 'It's not the kids.'"

Kainz, a research associate professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has studied effective education practices, especially for economically disadvantaged students. She said zeroing in on the precise opportunities to promote better and more even reading development for African-American students in segregated settings remains challenging.

"It may be that segregated schools affect African-American students in particular because these schools have fewer resources to devote to high-quality instruction, experience more teacher turnover, and are more likely to employ novice teachers," Kainz explained. "In addition, the communities surrounding segregated schools may not have as many supports for reading development outside of the school day and year."

Although segregated neighborhoods and communities persist, Kainz said some local measures can help to bring more integrated schools, such as

care in residential planning—including the location and concentration of low-income housing—and in drawing attendance lines for schools.

"Many communities have direct local control over processes that can ensure they don't inadvertently promote segregation," she said.

"Researchers and educators, in partnership, must identify the ways and means to promote adequate learning for all students," added Kainz, who published her results in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* with FPG's Yi Pan. "Sixty years after the Brown decision, we still have plenty of work ahead of us."

More information: *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* Volume 29, Issue 4, 4th Quarter 2014, Pages 531–537. [DOI: 10.1016/j.ecresq.2014.06.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2014.06.005)

Provided by Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

Citation: First grade reading suffers in segregated schools (2014, July 29) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-07-grade-segregated-schools.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--