



Equity by Design:

Can Charter Schools Address Racial Inequities Evidenced in Access to the General Education Classroom?

A Longitudinal Study in Chicago Public Schools

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Can Charter Schools Address Racial Inequities Evidenced in Access to the General Education Classroom?

In this research brief, we summarize a study published by Waitoller and Maggin (2018) in the special education journal *Remedial and Special Education*. The purpose of this research was to examine whether charter schools mitigate racial inequities evidenced in access to general education classrooms in neighborhood schools, or if they reproduce such inequities. The research question was, how do racial disparities evidenced in the placement of students receiving special education services (SRSES) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) in neighborhood schools (NS) compare to those in charter schools? The authors used a longitudinal analysis of odds ratios to examine annual school data on students' placement in the LRE in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) from 2008 to 2012.

Key findings:

- Black SRSES are less likely to be included in the general education classroom than their White peers when considering all schools (i.e. charter and neighborhood schools).
- Racial inequities evidenced in access to general education classrooms were initially more consistent in NS and less acute in charter schools. Yet, over time, charter schools mirrored racial inequities evidenced in access to general education classrooms in NS.

Background of the Problem

Black students continue to receive special education services in more restrictive environments than their White peers with the same disability labels (LeRoy & Kulik, 2004; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini,

Simmons, & Feggings-Azziz, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). These racial disparities were noted as early as 1968 when Dunn (1968) observed that in special segregated classes for students with intellectual disabilities “about 60 to 80 percent of the pupils taught by these teachers [those who teach special day classes] are children from low status backgrounds” (p. 6; that is, racial and language minorities, and children from low income background). Many studies have continued to corroborate these findings. For instance, Skiba et al. (2006) found evidence of racial disparities in LRE placement patterns within each of the five high-incidence disability categories (i.e. Emotional Disability (ED), Intellectual Disability (ID), Speech Disability (SD), Language Disability (LD), and Specific Language Impairment (SLI)). These disparities increased as disability diagnosis became more judgmental, “African American students with disabilities are only .71 times as likely to be served in general education settings as other students, and almost three times as likely to be served in a classroom outside of general education 60% or more of the school day” (Skiba et al., 2006, p. 420). At the national level, a similar study was conducted by Leroy and Kulik (2004) who found that Black SRSES were 2.5 times more likely to be placed in a special education segregated setting than their White peers.

Ferri and Connor (2005) have noted that the relationship between race and disability has a long and pernicious history, signaling larger structural and systemic forces negatively impacting Black SRSES learning opportunities. After the 1954 *Brown V. Board of Education* decision these forces aligned to create a

“second-generation segregation” in which student ability is used to justify segregation along racial lines (Mickelson, 2001). As stated by Taylor (1988/2002), “to conceptualize services in terms of restrictiveness is to legitimate more restrictive settings. As long as services are conceptualized in this manner, some people will end up in restrictive environments” (p. 222). This process can be problematic for Black SRSES as (a) many school professionals may hold stereotypical and deficit views of these students and (b) Black SRSES are likely to attend schools with limited resources and capacity to include students with disabilities (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011; Harry & Klingner, 2005; Rogers, 2002).

Why is Inclusion in the General Education Classroom Important?

Placement in the LRE matters, in part because unlike what occurs for their White peers, the gap in educational opportunities intensifies for Black SRSES when access is denied to general education classrooms. The benefits of attending inclusive classrooms are noted in several studies. For example, studying post-secondary outcomes, Rojewski, Lee, and Gregg (2015) observed that of students with learning disabilities or emotional-behavioral disorders and “earning 80% or more of their academic credits in general education settings (inclusive placement) were twice as likely to enroll and persist in postsecondary education when compared with students receiving fewer credits in inclusive classroom settings” (p. 201). Similar positive outcomes for students with more extensive support needs were documented for employment (Benz, Lindstrom & Yovanoff, 2000), literacy (Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2012), mathematics achievement (Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Harris, & Wakemanxya, 2008), and social outcomes (Kleinert, Towles-Reeves, Quenemoen, Thurlow, Fluegge, Wesement & Kerbel, 2015). As these placements influence

student outcomes, it is important to have a better understanding of how LRE patterns can influence student attainment.

Charter Schools and Placement in the LRE

Prior research suggests that racial disparities evidenced in the placement of SRSES in the LRE are less acute or nonexistent in charter schools. For instance, charter schools include SRSES in the general education classroom at higher rates than neighborhood schools regardless of their disability labels (Rhim et al, 2015; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012; Waitoller et al., 2013) and tend to enroll low proportions of students with more extensive support needs (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012) who are less likely to be included in the general education classroom (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2015).



Methods

Waitoller and Maggin (2018) utilized data from the Funding and Child Tracking System (FACTS) used by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to track special education enrollment and placement. The data included the number of students with an IEP for each school



in Chicago Public Schools and their respective race and LRE placement from the 2008 – 2009 through the 2011 – 2012 school year. The researchers computed the odds ratio (2x2 contingency table) to compare the likelihood of White and Black students placed in each LRE category based on enrollment in either the charter or neighborhood schools. Odds ratios are interpreted based on the direction and deviation from 1.0 with those equal to 1.0 indicating no difference in the chance of the outcome, those greater than 1.0 indicating increasingly greater chance of the outcome, and those lower than 1.0 indicating decreasing chances of the outcome. Confidence intervals are used to assess the precision of the estimates and—consistent with recommended practices—are used for descriptive purposes (Szumilas, 2010). For all analyses, odds ratios were determined significant if the p-value was less than .01.

Limitations

The researchers did not examine disparities by disability categories or socio-economic status, nor school level variables. Also due to the nature of the data, the analysis could not account for the differences in how LRE rates are reported at the elementary and high school level using national categories of inclusion. Next, the study did not examine the quality of the inclusion placement. Lastly, this study focuses on the City of Chicago and may not reflect trends in other urban or rural geographies.

Findings

The study found that when accounting for neighborhood and charter schools, White students were almost twice as likely than Black students to be included for more than 80% of the school day in the general education classroom and less likely to spend time in more restrictive settings. This trend was more acute in neighborhood schools than in charter schools; yet, over time, mirrored racial

inequities evidenced in access to general education classrooms in NS. This finding was more consistent at the elementary than at the high school level (see Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4).

Recommendations

School districts should provide support for all schools (e.g., charter, neighborhood, magnet) to include students with disabilities, targeting schools that disproportionately serve Black students. These supports should include teacher and principal training in inclusive education, as well as extra resources to provide assistive technologies and inclusive but varied and intense types of educational supports.

Tables

Table 1. Odds Ratios and 95% Confidence Intervals by Proportion of Time in General Education for the Overall Sample of White and Black Students

Placement Category	School Year			
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
> 80%	1.95*** (1.81 – 2.09)	1.76*** (1.64 – 1.89)	1.82*** (1.68 – 1.97)	1.79*** (1.66 – 1.94)
40% -- 70%	.80*** (.73 – .87)	.81*** (.74 – .88)	.64*** (.59 – .70)	.62*** (.57 – .68)
< 40%	.52*** (.47 – .56)	.47*** (.43 – .52)	.68*** (.62 – .76)	.65*** (.58 – .73)

Table 2. Odds Ratios and 95% Confidence Intervals by Proportion of Time in General Education for White and Black Students in Neighborhood and Charter Schools

Placement Category	Neighborhood Schools				Charter Schools			
	School Year				School Year			
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
> 80%	2.14*** (1.99 – 2.30)	1.95*** (1.81 – 2.11)	2.04*** (1.89 – 2.21)	2.01*** (1.94 – 2.29)	1.48 (.91 – 2.46)	1.29 (.83 – 2.03)	1.66* (1.14 – 2.49)	1.75* (1.17 – 2.68)
40% -- 70%	.80*** (.74 – .87)	.81*** (.74 – .88)	.63*** (.57 – .68)	.57*** (.53 – .63)	.70 (.39 – 1.20)	1.03 (.64 – 1.63)	.59** (.38 – .88)	.60* (.38 – .91)
< 40%	.46*** (.42 – .51)	.42*** (.38 – .46)	.61*** (.55 – .68)	.32*** (.28 – .36)	.79 (.32 – 1.65)	.41* (.13 – 1.00)	.84 (.35 – 1.74)	.52 (.11 – 1.60)

Tables cont.

Table 3. Odds Ratios and 95% Confidence Intervals by Proportion of Time in General Education for White and Black Students in Neighborhood and Charter Elementary Schools

Placement Category	Neighborhood Elementary Schools				Charter Elementary Schools			
	School Year				School Year			
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
> 80%	2.25*** (2.07 – 2.45)	2.01*** (1.85 – 2.19)	2.32*** (2.16 – 2.54)	2.40*** (2.19 – 2.63)	.82 (.25 – 2.67)	.66 (.25 – 1.73)	1.57* (1.00 – 2.53)	1.68* (1.03 – 2.85)
40% -- 70%	.77*** (.70 -- .85)	.78*** (.71 – .86)	.63*** (.57 – .70)	.58*** (.52 – .64)	1.15 (.36 – 1.37)	1.65 (.61 – 2.60)	.67 (.39 – 1.07)	.63 (.36 – 1.04)
< 40%	.46*** (.42 – .51)	.41*** (.37 – .46)	.52*** (.46 – .59)	.51*** (.45 – .58)	1.19 (.18 – 1.54)	.85 (.10 – 2.60)	.72 (.22 – 1.81)	.53 (.06 – 1.07)

Table 4. Odds Ratios and 95% Confidence Intervals by Proportion of Time in General Education for White and Black Students in Neighborhood and Charter Secondary Schools

Placement Category	Neighborhood Secondary Schools				Charter Secondary Schools			
	School Year				School Year			
	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
> 80%	1.93*** (1.66 – 2.24)	1.82*** (1.56 – 2.12)	1.61*** (1.37 – 1.89)	1.49*** (1.25 – 1.76)	1.61 (.89 – 2.98)	1.57 (.90 – 2.80)	1.78 (1.00 – 2.53)	1.71 (.84 – 2.85)
40% -- 70%	.95 (.80 – 1.12)	.90 (.76 – 1.07)	.61*** (.51 -- .72)	.63*** (.51 – .76)	.72 (.36 – 1.37)	.90 (.49 – 1.60)	.49 (.20– 1.07)	.61 (.26 – 1.12)
< 40%	.40*** (.33 -- .50)	.44*** (.36 -- .54)	.93 (.72 – 1.18)	.80 (.67 – .948)	.61 (.18 – 1.54)	.32* (.06 – 1.00)	1.07 (.22 – 2.81)	.53 (.06 -1.07)

About the Authors

Dr. Federico Waitoller is an associate professor at the department of special education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and serves as an Equity Fellow for the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center. His research focuses on urban inclusive education. In particular, his work examines and addresses policies and practices that generate or reproduce inequities for students of color with disabilities. Dr. Waitoller is also interested in examining how these inequities are affected by the production of space in urban economies and the role of teacher learning and school/university partnerships in developing capacity for inclusive education.

Dr. Leonor Vanik holds a PhD in Urban Planning and Policy from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her research focuses on the intersectionality of housing policy, social justice and marginalized communities, specifically people with physical disabilities, in the built environment. She is the recipient of a Housing and Urban Development Early Doctoral Research Grant and a National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant to study the social production of disability spaces in urban environments. She has served as the Chair of the Disability Studies group of the American Association of Geographers and is currently the Chair of the Latino Disability Foundation and Forum. The foundation serves to build leadership among the Latino undocumented disability community, raises funds for grant programming; and provides policy recommendations for the Latino Disability community in Illinois. In addition, she has worked with the schools and disability families from K-12 is an advocate for Latino families with disabilities; a co-author of the 360 Life workbook; and as a consultant to non-profit organizations for disability inclusion. She has a sibling with Down Syndrome and identifies with the disability community.



About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

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Disclaimer

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