The Development of African American Education and The Causes and Effects of Racial Educational Inequality

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Abstract. African Americans have been a highly visible race throughout history, and they have had a great impact on the United States throughout history. This race went from slavery to freedom, from segregation to the civil rights movement, and they gained legal equality. However, they continue to be treated unfairly in every aspect of society. Racial inequality continues to this day, divorced from the law, and relying only on ingrained ideas can create extremely visible and persistent inequality in many aspects of society. This also includes education, and the continuing inequality in education undoubtedly has a continuing negative impact on African Americans, thus becoming a central factor in the inequality and class solidification between the races. The thesis takes a look at educational inequality against African Americans in the United States, describes the history of African American education, focuses on racial educational inequality for African Americans, and then examines the multiple causes of present-day racial educational inequality and its continuing impact on racial discrimination.

Keywords: African American; Inequality; education.

1. Introduction

The United States, as a nation of immigrants, has a diverse demographic composition. For such a large country, racial and ethnic integration permeates all aspects of society, and this includes inequality. The inequality suffered by African Americans in education is a troubling fact. Many writings in history state the role that African Americans have played in American history and their contributions. For example, John Hope Franklin's book “From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans” describes in detail the economic and educational aspects of African Americans at different times. Although African Americans have long enjoyed equality and freedom in the legal sense, in terms of education, from elementary school through high school, African Americans continue to have lower reading and math skills than whites across the board [1]. This inequality permeates education, giving it a powerful sustainability [2].

This thesis will build on previous research on historical and contemporary racial inequality in education and continue to focus on the causes of racial inequality in education in the modern era, that is, the effects of historical issues. It will also analyze the effects of educational inequality on racial inequality and how these negative effects can be reduced.

This essay primarily uses current literature, including data and journal articles. The research will be analyzed through these informative factual and theoretical foundations. The thesis will begin with an overview of the history of the development of African American education, including slavery, segregation, and the civil rights movement, which are iconic eras in history for African Americans. It will then analyze the causes of contemporary racial inequality in education from different footsteps, and then examine the impact of educational inequality on the persistence of racial inequality.

2. Historical Overview of the Development of African American Education

Slavery was legal in the United States prior to the American Civil War, and the denial of the most basic human rights of African Americans resulted in little to no educational opportunities for African Americans. At that time, the source of education for African Americans was the slave owners who

taught enslaved African Americans basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills to better serve themselves.

Around 1830 abolitionism began to rise, and amidst the constant struggle of African Americans, the American Civil War was fought, and eventually, the North succeeded in unifying the United States.

After the Civil War, the Civil Rights Act was enacted. This gave all African Americans equal status under the law. But although African Americans were theoretically emancipated and became citizens, in terms of public opinion, mainly in the South, it was still no different than before. This forced the African Americans to keep struggling, and in the course of their struggle, they came to realize the importance of education [3]. So, during this time period many African Americans schools began to be started. With the rapid growth of the United States in the second half of the 19th century, compulsory education became widespread, which was a very big step forward for African Americans' education. But at the same time, under the influence of slavery, the concept of white discrimination against African Americans had been deeply rooted, which would inevitably bring more racial inequality to society. The southern states formulated the "black code", which was completely based on the concept of slavery, and the emergence of "white supremacy" extremist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, which showed that the racial discrimination in the south did not improve much after the war. Because of the continuation of these discriminatory ideas, segregation was enforced in all states of the United States, and this was the official beginning of racial inequality in the American education system.

This continued until the mid-20th century until Brown v. Board of Education in 1955. This case was a landmark for African American education because it abolished segregation [4]. Eventually the government claimed that segregation violated the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, and that “separate education facilities are inherently unequal" overruled "segregation but equal." By the 1960s, the civil rights movement had reached its peak with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which explicitly stated that no student could be discriminated against in education, and it brought the Affirmative Action which dramatically improved the educational status of African Americans [5].

3. Causes of Current Educational Inequality for African Americans.

While education for African Americans has improved greatly throughout history, this does not mean that they are receiving an equal education.

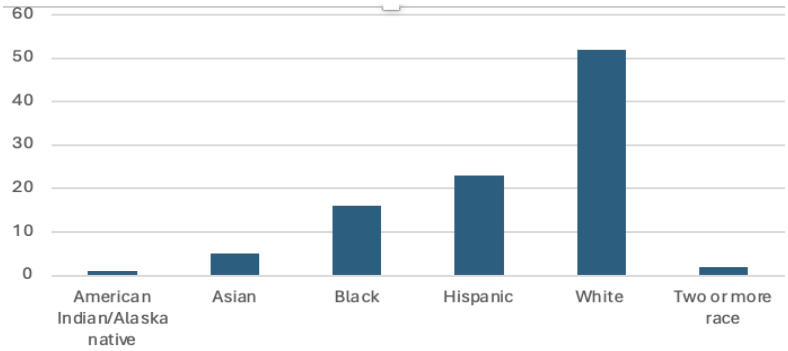

Fig. 1 Percentage distribution of student enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity: Fall 2010 [6].

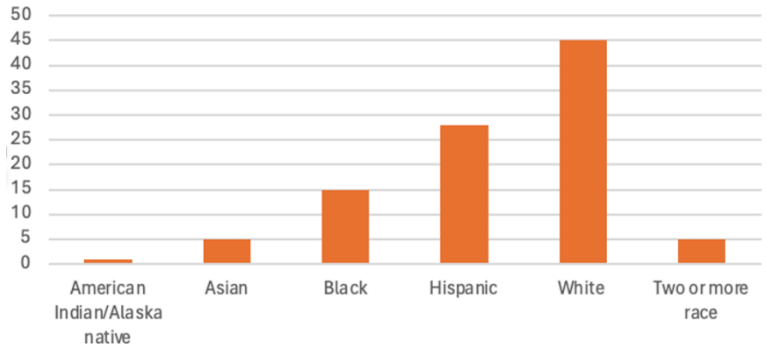

Fig. 2 Percentage distribution of student enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity: Fall 2021 [6].

In Figure 1 and Figure 2, this statistic shows that while the percentage of minorities has increased, the percentage of African American students has not increased over the past decade. This shows that African Americans are still suffering from unequal educational opportunities.

The most direct cause of these inequalities is historical, and the inability to eradicate these historical concepts, as well as the notion that "if you are not of my race, you will be of a different mind", makes it impossible for racial education to be equalized. Because when a highly productive race and a lowly productive race meet on the same land, discrimination is inevitable. In the development of the United States over the past two hundred years, systematic discrimination has been affecting society in all aspects on a macro level over the past two hundred years, including education. Currently, about 79% of teachers in the United States are white [7]. This can lead to a lack of recognition of African Americans, a minority group, as whites. When teaching white students, teachers identify with the values of the students and therefore further influence the students in a positive way. When it comes to the African American group, there is a lack of understanding of the culture and life of African Americans. This leads to the fact that teachers will not have enough identification, thus making it more difficult to guide students accurately.

Secondly, African Americans, as a disadvantaged group, even after segregation was abolished and African Americans and whites attended the same schools, there was still a large gap between the learning outcomes of African Americans and whites. This is when African American students who want to be good begin to look forward to white students, which is called "Acting White". While it is good to be motivated, these African American students who excel in their grades can attract the envy of others. The racially charged term "Acting White" and this racial inequality began to be used by African Americans themselves to fulfill their jealousy [8]. This shows the lack of unity within the African American community in some cases. This undoubtedly increases African American students' fear of the path to success and weakens their self-confidence.

One of the most important and impactful aspects is racial economic inequality. Because African Americans have been historically disadvantaged as a group, there is a gap between their income levels and wealth and whites [9]. Whereas education is not free, a family's level of wealth directly affects the educational resources available to students.

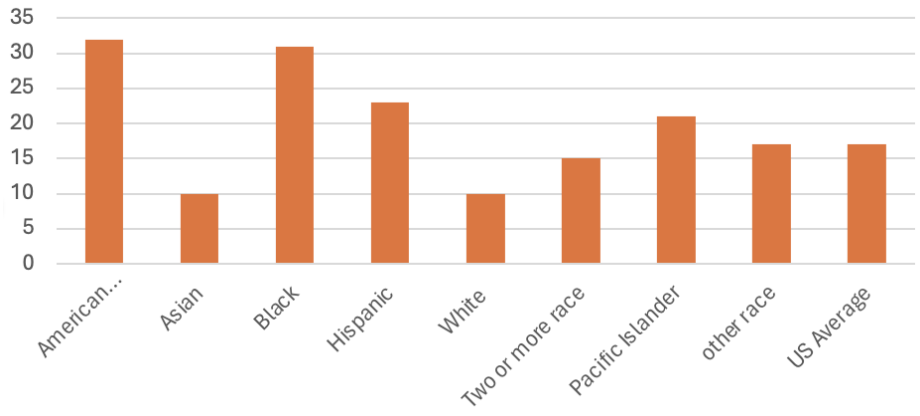

Fig. 3 Percentage of children under age 18 in families living in poverty, by child's race/ethnicity: 2021 [6]

As shown in Figure 3, when there is a gap in wealth levels at the racial level, it also directly leads to inequality in education at the racial level. At the same time, poor families may not be able to afford to pay for their studies, resulting in students from these families needing to juggle their studies with earning money and not being able to devote their full attention to their studies, even if they have a good grade.

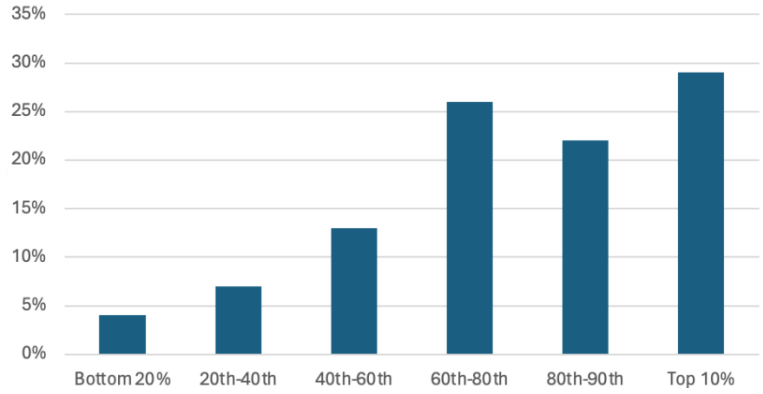

Fig. 4 Family income of Ohio St. Students [10]

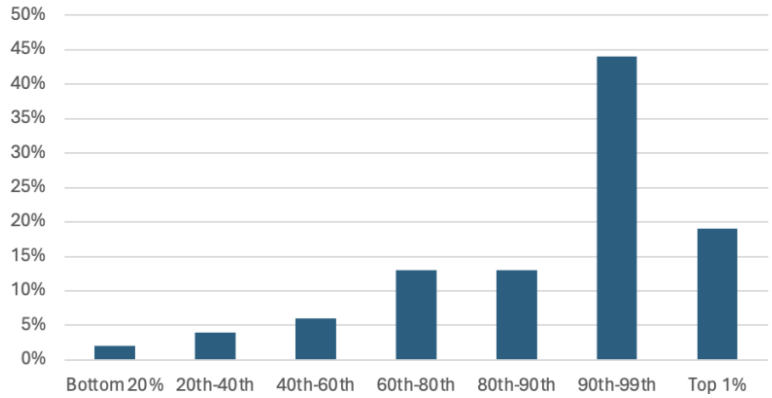

Fig. 5 Family income of B.C. students [10]

As shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5, in public schools, the percentage of students in college is directly proportional to the wealth of the student's family. Private schools are even more dramatic, with over 60% of students at Boston College coming from families in the Top 10% income bracket. It can be seen that when there is an overall difference in family wealth between races, educational inequality occurs between students of different races.

4. Consequences of Racial Educational Inequalities

First, educational inequality will continue to bring about income inequality. Educational inequality and economic inequality are a mutually reinforcing and sustainable vicious circle. For example, figure 6 shows that African American students have the highest student loans. This leads to African Americans having to pay back more loans after they work, which cuts into their wealth. Less disposable income means fewer opportunities for wealth creation in society such as entrepreneurship. This in turn causes income inequality to continue and affects education.

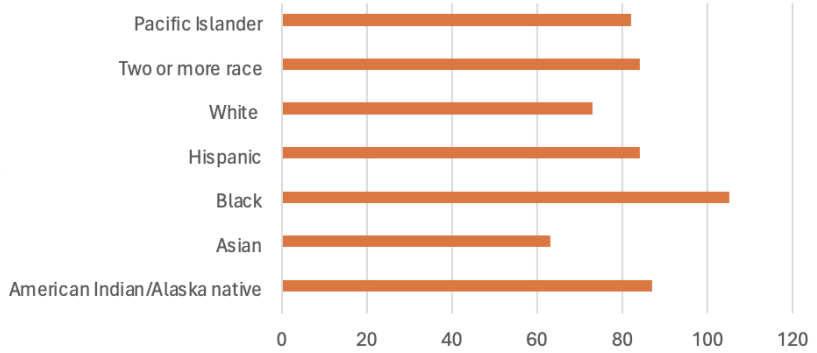

Fig. 6 The average amount owed as a percentage of the amount borrowed as of 4 years after 2015-16 bachelor's degree completion, by race/ethnicity: 2020

It can be seen that the unequal distribution of resources due to historical reasons has led to economic polarization and educational polarization. Although many policies have been made to address the phenomenon of racial inequality in education, they have not been able to solve these problems. This is because of the Matthew effect, which is the effect of the strong getting stronger and the weak getting weaker [11]. The essential reason for the Matthew Effect is that resources are limited, and desires are unlimited. Policies and regulations are used to limit the desires of the dominant group, but this does not lock those desires away. The "Matthew effect" of inequality reinforces inequality; this makes these inequalities persistent, even if they are limited by laws and regulations.

5. Conclusion

In the United States, decades after the civil rights movement, the African American community has achieved nominal equality, with the same legal citizenship rights as whites. However, the various social conflicts caused by the racial issue are a constant reminder that the racial issue has not been resolved in practice. The problem lies in the concept of "discrimination," which is a subjective idea that is not subject to legal control, because the law cannot control the mind. But "inequality" must exist in the human mind because "superiority" is part of the basic human desire. Sadly, when people find a more uniform source of superiority, they usually don't give it up. For the African American community, the concept of "equality in education" simply means equal access to the same quality of education, but even though there has been nominal equality of access to the same quality of education for African Americans since the Affirmative Action Act of 1964, and even subsequent policies to further assist disadvantaged groups. However, the concept of "discrimination" still exists, which means that having the same access to education does not mean having the same quality of education, and having the same quality of educational outcomes does not mean having the same opportunities in society. This is why legal equality cannot be simply equated with real equality.

In addition, the problem with "discrimination" itself is that it is a very aggressive word, and whether it is "discriminatory" or "non-discriminatory" it is a way of judging others, which shows disrespect and creates an inter-individual compartmentalization. This shows disrespect and creates a gap between individuals. When this phenomenon escalates to the level of groups, it leads to inequality between groups. It is only when the concept of "discrimination" is removed that true equality between races can be realized.

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