From Diversity to Integration: How Schools Implement Diversity Programs and Create Integration.

Sixty years after Brown vs. Board of Education, school racial, ethnic, and class segregation in the United States is still widespread, and some even argue it is increasing (Reardon and Owens 2014). Learning in segregated, isolated environments has negative consequences for the educational achievements of minority and poor students (Benner and Crosnoe 2011; Bifulco and Ladd 2007). Schools that are integrated in terms of race, ethnicity, and class have long-term benefits for students’ health, income, college attendance, and incarceration rates (Guryan 2004; Johnson 2011; Reber 2010). While there have been many deliberate attempts to ensure racial and class integration in schools, there is still much to learn about why school integration programs succeed or fail. My dissertation uses a qualitative, comparative case study of three public elementary schools participating in a voluntary integration program in New York City to examine the factors that facilitate or hinder the success of school integration. I operationalize the success of school integration in two ways: first, a numeric mix of students of different backgrounds in the school; second, a school environment that is perceived by families to be substantively integrated. I draw on data from two years of fieldwork, coupled with school and neighborhood demographic data, to examine the core issues administrators, parents, and staff confront in their attempt to numerically and substantively integrate the school, how they act to facilitate integration and overcome obstacles, what school practices result from these actions, and whether schools meet their numeric and substantive integration goals.

The NYC pilot program examined here sets aside seats each year for disadvantaged students entering the schools’ pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes. Following the 2007 “Parents Involved” Supreme Court decision, the criteria for the schools’ set-aside seats is based on economic, rather than racial-ethnic characteristics (Frankenberg, Diem, and Cleary 2017; Ryan 2007). My study provides one of the first empirical assessments of the on-the-ground implications of ‘Parents Involved’. I analyze the schools as institutions embedded in unique geographical contexts with particular regulatory and demographic characteristics that shape their organizational outcomes (Marquis and Battilana 2009). I find that the interaction between the criteria used in the pilot, whether the school is zoned or has some type of choice plan, and the racial-ethnic composition of the neighborhood where the school is located shapes the schools’ ability to meet their numeric policy goals. The most successful of the three schools in meeting this goal is a choice school that takes students from large parts of the city; defines its policy criterion as students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch which captures a large portion of NYC students; and is in a historically racially and ethnically mixed working and middle-class neighborhood. The combination of the policy criterion that many students meet, the vast geographical area it draws from, and the fact that there are no clear race-ethnic or class contentions over who the neighborhood belongs to, makes numeric diversity easier to achieve. In comparison, a school that is also a choice school that draws from a large geographical area and
that uses the same more inclusive free or reduced-price lunch criterion, finds it harder to meet its numeric policy goals because of ethnic and class divides within the neighborhood. This school, in contrast to the first, is considered by many in the neighborhood to be a school for the white and wealthier families of the neighborhood, and, therefore, many low income Latinx families who comprise a big part of the neighborhood avoid it. The third school, which is a zoned school in a historically low-income black community that is experiencing rapid race and class-based gentrification, has a policy that targets only students in the city’s welfare system or who live in shelters. This school barely meets its numeric policy goals partly due to the dwindling numbers of families fitting the criterion in its restricted catchment area. And, like the second school, low-income families of color are hesitant to send their children to a school that serves a growing number of gentrifying families. The greater success of the choice school in a racially-ethnically mixed area in meeting its numeric integration goals contradicts the consensus in the literature that school choice consistently leads to greater segregation.

The metric of substantive integration that I use is parents’ perceptions of the school environment as one where all families feel welcomed, heard, and have a sense of belonging to the community. Contrary to work focused on race-based sources of the failure of integration (e.g. Lewis and Diamond 2015), I find that divisions among parents do not fall along racial-ethnic and class lines. I take cues from the sociology of culture (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999; DiMaggio et al. 2017; Lamont 1992; Lamont 2000) and show that the divisions between parents stem from families’ position relative to the priorities and mission of school leadership, and the school leadership’s definition of what is morally worthy in education. Parents from varied race-class backgrounds can be both closely aligned with and opposed to their school priorities. In the three schools I study, tensions among parents and between parents and administrators arise around educational perspectives, curriculum, and discipline. For example, conflicts erupt around preparation for standardized tests, the support the school gives to transgender students, how the school addresses bullying, and the school’s participation in race-awareness workshops. In all of these cases, the groups on each side of the debated issue cannot be strictly classified in race and class terms; rather, the race-class composition of parents are mixed on all sides of the debates. Yet, involved parents, teachers, and administrators consider the conflicts within the school as tightly linked with class and race. Because the way that the school community talks about and understand who belongs and who does not is based on race and class, the way conflict plays out on the ground threatens the substantive success of school integration, as it perpetuates race and class divides. These findings contribute to a recent call by scholars of diversity and integration (Abascal and Baldassarri 2015; Jack 2017) to redirect attention to the day-to-day aspects of creating integrated spaces in order to better understand the dynamics of school segregation. These findings also have important policy implications as they provide concrete guidance about issues communities should be ready to address when attempting to create substantively integrated schools and about how they should address them.
References


