SCHOOL DESEGREGATION AND RACIAL ATTITUDES:
1964-1979*

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ABSTRACT

Data on desegregation attitudes of adolescents were gathered in 1964

and 1979 (367 and 459 respectively) in a Northeast Texas community composed

of one-third blacks and two-thirds whites. Desegregation occurred in the

school system in 1970. It was hypothesized that more favorable interracial

attitudes would evolve after desegregation. While black students' opinion

on attending school with another race did not change over time (less than

10 percent objected to desegregation in both 1964 and 1979), whites'

opinions changed significantly as over 75 percent objected to desegregation

in 1964 and less than 15 percent objected in 1979. It is suggested that

contact between the races has reduced the negative stereotypes of blacks

held by whites.

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Studies on the effects of desegregation in public schools reveal

mixed results. Schofield and Sagar (1977) state that although numerous studies

suggest that school desegregation can have a positive impact on intergroup

attitudes and behavior, a greater number reveal no effect or even a negative

effect (See Carithers, 1970; St. John, 1975; Cohen, 1975; Gottleib and

tenHouten, 1965; Amor, 1972; Green and Gerard, 1974; Horowitz, 1952;

Silverman and Shaw, 1973; and Williams, Best and Boswell, 1975). Webster

(1961) found that desegregation reduced prejudice for blacks toward whites

while Sheehan (1980) reports a "modest improvement" in students' attitudes

after desegregation in the Dallas school system.

Pettigrew (1967, 1973) suggests that most of the research on the effects

of school desegregation has been in schools which do not meet Allport's

criteria (1954) for promoting positive interracial attitudes and behavior:

equal status within the contact situation, shared goals, cooperative dependence

in reaching these goals and the support of authorities, law and customs.

There is support for Allport's contention that mere desegregation (simply mixing

of students and not as set forth by Allport) does not necessarily result

in more positive intergroup attitudes (Amir, 1969).

Simpson and Yinger (1965: 505) state that prejudice is sometimes ex-

plained as a result of the lack of contact with members of a minority group

and sometimes as a result of the presence of such contact. Unpleasant

contacts probably increase the strength of prejudice while certain kinds of

contacts are effective in reducing the strength of a tradition of

prejudice.

There is good evidence that what might be called "stereotype breaking contacts" reduce prejudice. In a study almost three decades ago, Deutsch and Collins (1951) found that in integrated housing projects in which blacks and whites were scattered indiscriminately, agreeable relations between whites and blacks were much more common than in two segregated projects. Another survey by the United States War Department (1947) concluded that two months after desegregating soldiers in U.S. Army platoons in Europe in 1945 over 75 percent of white officers and noncoms expressed more favorable feelings toward blacks.

With inconclusive evidence regarding the results of desegregation in public schools, further research is needed in this area. The present study is a follow-up of an earlier investigation in 1964 of a high school system in a Northeast Texas community with a population of 5000 and a racial composition of two-thirds white and one-third black. The school system was desegregated in 1970.

Although desegregation occurred in this school system nearly a decade ago, racial segregation remains throughout the community in churches, residential areas, government, and jobs. While mixing of the races tends to be largely limited to school-related activities, Dickinson (1975) reported in a 1974 follow-up of the 1964 study that changes for black adolescents' behavior over time are evident and in the direction of whites' behavior. The changes reveal more homogeneous patterns for black and white adolescents after desegregation. It was suggested that through social participation the perspectives shared in a group are internalized.

With black and white adolescents being placed in the same social milieu of the desegregated school and therefore being in situations like sitting in the same classroom, eating in the same cafeteria, having lockers next

to each other, playing on the same athletic teams, participating in the
same musical groups, serving on school committees together, and being members
of the same voluntary organizations, it is assumed that interaction between
racial groups will have increased over previous levels when segregation
occurred. With more contact between the races in school since desegregation
in 1970, it is hypothesized that more favorable interracial attitudes will
evolve.

Methodology

A questionnaire was administered during the school day by the author
in all English classes of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades in the
segregated schools in 1964 and the desegregated schools in 1979. Fifty-six
questions were asked in 1964 and 30 in 1979 (only a portion of the questions
relate to the subject of this report). The number of respondents in 1964
was 367 (260 whites and 107 blacks) with a total of 459 adolescents (296
whites and 163 blacks) responding in 1979. The respondents in both studies
constituted over 85 percent of the student enrollment. Less than one percent
of the students present on the days of questionnaire administering refused to
complete the survey. The other students were absent on these days. No
effort was made to follow up the absentees. The Chi-square test of signifi-
cance was used in data analysis.

Findings

In the 1964 questionnaire the students were asked "Would you object to
attending school with a person of a different race?" and in 1979 they were
asked "Do you object to attending school with a person of a different race?"
They could answer either "Yes" or "No" and then were instructed to explain
their answer.

A statistically significant difference over time was found for white males and females' opinion on attending school with another race as is shown in Table 1. In 1964, prior to desegregation, over 75 percent of whites objected to attending school with a person of a different race. However, in 1979, nine years after desegregation, less than 15 percent of whites objected. No statistically significant difference was found over time for black males and females' opinion on attending school with another race as they remained fairly consistent in their attitudes over the fifteen year period. Less than 10 percent of blacks in both 1964 and 1979 objected to attending school with a person of a different race. Thus, as interactions increased, more favorable feelings by whites toward attending school with blacks have emerged.

Table 1 Here

The results of the open-ended question asking the students to explain their answers is shown in Table 2. The most frequently cited reasons by whites for objecting to attending school with the opposite race in 1964 were: "God separated us and meant for us to stay separated," "each has good schools-- should go to them," "it will not work -- too much difference," and "violently opposed." Reasons most cited by blacks for not objecting to school attendance with one of a different race in 1964 were: "all are equal," "if they desire to learn," and "could become better friends." Whites in 1964 cited "all are equal," and "if they stay in their place" as major reasons for not objecting to desegregation.

Table 2 Here

The reasons stated in 1979 by whites for being opposed to desegregation were: "I'm very prejudiced and simply do not like the opposite race," "too

much difference produces a strain," and "conflict results." Both whites

and blacks responding in 1979 and not opposed to attending school with one

from a different race most often cited the following explanations: "everyone

is equal no matter the color," "should have equal right to an education,"

"good friends in opposite race," "it is good to get to know different

kinds of people," "doesn't matter," "God created us all," and "should

cooperate with everyone."

Conclusions

These findings run counter to most of the results of desegregation

studies cited above. White attitudes toward attending school with blacks

have definitely improved after desegregation. Nine years after desegregation,

over 85 percent of these white and black high school students do not object

to attending school with another race. In explaining their feelings, they

stress equality of the races, equal opportunity, becoming better friends,

cooperation, why not?, and the importance of heterogeneous relationships.

The few who are opposed admit being prejudiced and feel the differences

are too great resulting in stress and conflict. In 1964 the "deemed by

God explanation" supported segregation while in 1979 it tended to support dese-

gregation.

Something in this fifteen year period has caused an about-face in the

attitude of whites toward blacks in this school system. Stereotype breaking

contacts must be operating here.

In explaining how school desegregation might better work, Miller (1980:

334) presents a cognitive sophistication interpretation as suggested by Glock

(1975). This view emphasizes the role of cognitive complexity, sophistication,

and cynicism in curtailing the development of prejudice and builds upon

stereotypes which emphasize their substantial basis in truth. In addition to

representing an explanation of group difference by way of completion of self-fulfilling prophecies, prejudice more fundamentally rests on the perception that true group differences do exist. Miller says that cognitive sophistication promotes immunity to prejudice by enabling one to deal more effectively with the truth component of stereotypes. It allows one to discriminate between relative versus absolute differences, to reduce their overgeneralization, and by increasing one's understanding of how differences arise, to resist prejudicial responses to them.

Maybe Miller's explanation applies in this school system after nine years of contact between the races. The stereotypes of blacks expressed by whites in 1964 of being too different and socially unfit subsided in 1979 and were replaced with more favorable descriptions of blacks. Stephan and Rosenfield (1978:678) suggest if desegregation has positive effects, it is probable that "more than a year or two" is required for them to evolve. More than a "year or two" has passed -- more than "mere desegregation" seems to be occurring.

TABLE 1.   RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: "DO YOU OBJECT TO ATTENDING SCHOOL WITH
A PERSON OF A DIFFERENT RACE?" (IN PERCENTAGES)   BY YEAR, RACE, AND
SEX.*

Object to Attending with another race	White Males		White Females	
	1964	1979	1964	1979
Yes	77	16	76	11
No	23	84	24	89
N	(138)	(136)	(109)	(155)

$$x^2 = 101.18 \qquad x^2 = 115.52$$
$$df = 1 \qquad df = 1$$
$$p < .001 \qquad p < .001$$

Object to Attending with another race	Black Males		Black Females	
	1964	1979	1964	1979
Yes	6	12	7	2
No	94	88	93	98
N	(50)	(65)	(55)	(97)

$$x^2 = 1.293 \qquad x^2 = 2.513$$
$$df = 1 \qquad df = 1$$
$$p = ns \qquad p = ns$$

*The question in 1964 prior to desegregation asked "Would you object to
attending school with a person of a different race?"

TABLE 2.   FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF EXPLANATIONS AS TO WHY STUDENTS OBJECT/DO·
NOT OBJECT TO ATTENDING SCHOOL WITH A DIFFERENT RACE BY TIME AND
RACE.

Reasons for Objecting to A Desegregated School	1964		1979	
	Whites	Blacks	Whites	Blacks
Prejudiced[1]	107	--	16	--
Produces Conflict	--	--	19	--
God's Will	35	--	--	--
Intermarriage	8	--	--	--

Reasons for Not Objecting to A Desegregated School	1964		1979	
	Whites	Blacks	Whites	Blacks
Equality[2]	15	44	95	55
Conditional Yes[3]	20	15	24	4
Cooperation[4]	6	13	23	15
Why Not?[5]	3	--	29	15
Educational Experience[6]	--	--	13	8

[1] Responses like: I'm prejudiced, we're too different, socially unfit, strongly opposed, and good separate schools-use them.

[2] Responses like: all are equal, equal rights to education, God made us the same, and skin color is no judge.

[3] Responses like: if all cooperate, if they don't act superior, if they don't cause trouble, if they stay to themselves, if they stay in their place, and if they desire to learn.

[4] Responses like: should get along with all, good friends in opposite race, could become better friends, and get along fine with opposite race.

[5] Responses like: doesn't matter to me, no choice, I'm not prejudiced, have been doing it all my life, and have to learn to live with them sometime.

[6] Responses like: good to know other races and helps adjust to society.

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