

Structural Racism Begins in Kindergarten

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Critical Race Theory (CRT) is currently under attack, by rabid Republicans, with a fury reminiscent of 1950's era red-baiting. Why does CRT generate such hysteria? Essentially, CRT distinguishes individual racism, expressed through words and acts of prejudice, bigotry, discrimination and violence, from structural or institutional racism, and concentrates on the latter by demonstrating how racist policies and practices embedded in U.S. institutions systematically disadvantage people of color. CRT provides a framework for analyzing the systemic racism that pervades our society.

Kindergarten in a Large Urban District, a recent study by Mimi Engle, Robin Jacob, Amy Claessens and Anne Erickson¹, analyzes and compares how time is used in kindergarten classes in low-income and higher-income schools in an unnamed urban school district. The study provides a classic example of structural racism at work.

Some initial cautions. The study is small: it focuses on observations of kindergarten time in 24 low-income schools and 8 higher-income schools in one district. As the authors acknowledge, the small sample of kindergartens in higher-income schools, added in the study's third year, is not fully comparable to the much larger sample of low-income schools. Because the study is primarily descriptive, potential causes of the differences the study finds in time usage between the two kindergarten groups are not explored, so disparities in funding, staffing, and administrative policy are not examined.



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On the positive side, the study's methodology is intensive, involving 82 full-day observations across three years in 47 kindergarten classrooms. The observations categorize all instructional and non-instructional time and distinguish learning modes within those categories, such as whole group and small group instruction, seat work, learning centers, transitional time, and outdoor activities. Moreover, the authors' ultimate question, "Does the use of kindergarten time differ in schools serving students from low-income and higher-income families?" raises fundamental issues of distributional equity.

Demographic differences across the studies' two groups of schools are significant. Students in the 24 low-income schools were 91% Black and Latinx; 14% were English Language Learners, 22% were in Special Education settings, and 93% were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. (The study spanned the academic years 2015-18.) The students in the 8 higher-income schools were 49% White, 3% were ELL, 15% were in Special Education settings, and 13% were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. The authors include one critical resource factor: the 24 Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) in the low-income schools raised an average of \$15,000 per year, while the 8 PTAs in the higher-income schools raised an average of \$780,000 per year.

The study found key differences in critical areas of teaching practice in the two groups of kindergartens. Higher-income kindergarten students experience significantly more instructional time each school day than low-income kindergarteners. Conversely, low-income kindergarten students spend much more time in non-instructional activities than higher-income kindergarteners. Kindergartens serving low-income students spent more time (39% of the school day) on literacy and math teaching than kindergartens serving higher-income students (28%). (Time spent on Science, Social Studies, Social/Emotional Learning, and Art and Music was very limited across both groups of schools.) But when time spent on students' gross motor skills (development of the large muscles crucial to everyday physical activities like walking, running, throwing, lifting, kicking) and what the authors characterize as mixed content activities (center-based learning, morning meetings, singing, and dancing) are categorized as instructional time, the higher-income kindergartens spent 67% on instruction, compared to 58% of the school day spent on instruction in the low-income kindergartens.

The higher income kindergartens spent 12% of the school day on developing students' gross motor skills through physical activity, compared to just 5% of similar activity in low-income kindergartens. The higher-income kindergartens spent 15% of the school day predominantly in center-based learning, compared to only 4% of the school day in learning groups in lower-income kindergartens.

Expressed in discrete minutes of school time, these differences are considerable. The low-income kindergartens' 58% of instructional time equates to 3 ½ hours, while the higher-income kindergartens' 67% of instructional time equates to slightly more than 4 hours, a good half-hour difference per day. Low-income kindergartens spent 18 minutes per day on physical activity, compared to 44 minutes per day in higher-income kindergartens. (The authors note that 32% of the low-income kindergartens did not engage in any physical activity.) Center-based learning used 2 minutes of the school day in low-income kindergartens and 33 minutes in higher-income kindergartens.

The authors note that in many low-income kindergartens,

both literacy and mathematics instruction were conducted in solid blocks that were composed exclusively of whole group instruction and seatwork, typically involving workbooks or worksheets. There was no break during these lesson blocks, aside from transitions to and from seats to the rug and time spent passing out worksheets and papers. There was virtually no interaction among peers.

Similar differences characterized the use of non-instructional time, which the authors define as starting or ending the school day, lesson transitions, moving to or from special activities, recess, lunch, and behavior management. Low-income kindergartens spent 43% of the school day, or slightly more than 2 ½ hours, on such non-instructional activities, while higher-income kindergartens spent 34% or 2 hours, a half-hour difference per day between the two groups of kindergartens.

The study provides two daily kindergarten observations:

Details from a kindergarten in a school serving low-income students

For the first morning activity, the teacher plays videos about the alphabet, months, and seasons while students sing along. Morning meeting includes a discussion about seasons, days of the week, and the date. The teacher plays a video to review sight words until the internet connection is disrupted, at which point she shifts to writing the words on the chalkboard.

The class discusses parts of a story and vocabulary to begin the reading lesson, which is interrupted by morning announcements and the pledge of allegiance. They return to reading and discuss parts of the story "Mouse and Lion". The teacher provides directions for a worksheet. Students return to their desks to complete the worksheet, drawing pictures to represent the beginning, middle, and end of the story. Students show completed work to the teacher and have a snack.

The class transitions to watching a movie, "Enchanted Forest," with a different teacher. The movie stops because the battery on the laptop the teacher was using died. The teacher rings a chime and asks the students to make a wish and share it with the class. Then they listen to a story about butterflies and draw pictures of them.

The children clean up and go to lunch. After lunch they go to the auditorium for indoor recess. The students are not physically active during this time. They play some games and watch other students dance. The lead teacher returns to bring the students back to the classroom and get settled.

To begin the math lesson, the teacher reads a book about comparing quantities at the market and using a number line to compare. She then engages students in activities about writing and representing the number eight. Students move to tables to work individually. They count 8 cubes and place them on a ten frame. They watch a video about counting. The students do a worksheet about different ways to compose the number 8, practice writing and spelling eight in their workbooks, and then find 8 items in a picture on the board. The math block ends and students prepare to go home.

Details from a kindergarten in a school serving higher-income students

Students begin the day in PE. Afterwards, the lead teacher walks them to their classroom. She takes attendance and they have morning meeting. Then, students work in small groups to play a math game where they roll dice and record the number. They clean up the math game and the teacher plays guitar while they sing a greeting song, followed by practicing songs that they will sing for an upcoming program. They discuss the schedule and the museum field trip they will be taking the next day, and also discuss the calendar.

The class moves to the science classroom where they engage in science centers and play games related to dinosaurs, which is interrupted by school-wide announcements. They continue the centers and then share what they learned before returning to the regular classroom.

The teacher again discusses the field trip planned for the next day, reviewing appropriate bus and museum behavior. The class has a snack, after which the teacher reads a book, "The Sleep Over". Students answer math questions related to the book. Then, students work in small groups discussing different ways to make 8 using a Rekenrek. The teacher continues reading aloud while the students create combinations of 8 on the Rekenrek.*

After math, students have free choice time with options including planting, building, drawing, playing with plastic animals, a dollhouse, puppets, and making jewelry. They clean up and go to lunch. Students, eat, clean up, and go outside for recess. After recess the class goes to the library. The teacher reads the book "The Seven Silly Eaters" aloud. Students are

then paired to discuss and draw pictures of their favorite foods. Then they check books out and read until the lead teacher picks them up.

The students return to their classroom and pack up for the day. The teacher reads a book about dinosaurs while they wait for dismissal.

**A Rekenrek is a calculating frame/arithmetic rack. It looks like a simplified abacus, featuring two rows of 10 beads, with each row in sets of five, similar to a 10 frame.*

Ultimately the study found that low-income kindergarteners spent less time on instruction and more time on non-instructional activity than higher-income kindergarteners, who spent more time on organized physical activity and group-based learning than students in the low-income kindergartens. What should we make of such differences? The authors conclude, “If, as our results suggest, young children of color and those from households with low income have more sedentary and restrictive classroom experiences, this may be one of a myriad examples of inequitable access to educational opportunities that contribute to persistent inequalities in educational outcomes.”

Research reviews indicate that intense concentrations of literacy and math instruction in kindergarten and the early grades often produce drill-like teaching which diminishes students’ capacity for attentiveness, engagement, and retention. Research similarly suggests that limited attention to developing students’ gross motor skills, and limited daily physical activity, diminishes students’ learning and developmental capacities. Finally, research suggests that whole-class instruction, seat work, and the relative absence of small-group learning centers and student-to-student interaction limits student intellectual and developmental growth. Whole class settings and daily periods of seat time rarely punctuated by physical activity, combined with considerable time waiting in line while transitioning, characterize the restrictive routines of too many schools serving low-income students of color. The learning loss, boredom, and apathy produced by such pedagogy have produced generations of disengaged learners.

How are these class and race disparities in learning opportunities between the two groups of kindergartens created? Some clues emerge from the observational vignettes. In the low-income kindergarten, the video the teacher screens to review sight words is disrupted by a faulty internet connection. Later the same day, a failed battery on the teacher’s laptop disrupts the movie she’s showing. The learning technologies this kindergarten relies on seem to be aging and/or poorly maintained.

The study does not provide data about funding or resources that might specify whether the two groups of schools and their kindergartens are differently resourced. Disparities in school-level resources in the same district stem from many sources, such as inequities in basic funding formulas and through add-ons such as gifted programs, enrichment activities, advanced classes, and differential class sizes. Note that the higher-income kindergarteners exercised a wide range of “free choice options” including arts, crafts, and gardening while the low-income kindergarteners seem to have few such choices available. Two additional clues from the study: the PTAs in the higher income schools raised more than 50 times the funding amounts than the PTAs in the low-income schools managed, and the higher income kindergarten had specialized teachers – a librarian and a science teacher – available to students. The substantial additional funding the higher income PTAs provided may well support or help those specialized teachers offer their students enriched learning opportunities.

Research also shows that poorly resourced schools and school systems are staffed by less experienced teachers with more limited training and less effective professional development. Those teachers are often assigned higher class sizes than more experienced teachers in schools serving more affluent students. Research has also documented the movement of experienced and effective teachers from schools serving low-income students to those serving more advantaged students. That movement may suggest why the study’s low-income kindergartens spent considerably more time managing student movement and transitions. The effectiveness of school administrators who support teacher development, mentor inexperienced teachers, and model the most productive uses

of instructional time in the higher income schools may also differ from the capacities of administrators in the low-income schools.

A detailed examination of expenditure, staffing, curriculum options, teacher hiring, and staff development across the district – a school-level equity audit – might specify the differences in resources that shape how differently time is used in the two kindergarten groups. Such an audit, combined with an analysis of the policies and practices that generate key differences in kindergarten time, as well as an examination of the extent of culturally relevant curriculum and instruction, are what Critical Race Theory has pioneered. CRT has taught us how to define and expose the race-and class-based inequities that warp the core practices of U.S. schooling. The inequities the study exposes in the quality of education in the kindergartens serving poor students of color are compounded, grade by grade, throughout students' thirteen years of public schooling. These inequities have produced the race and class-based achievement gap that has characterized U.S. education for at least the past sixty years. The frenzy underlying the attacks on Critical Race Theory is an effort to maintain and defend the myth of equality and the continued dominance of white privilege by silencing analyses of how inequity is structured and embedded not just in public education, but in all of the nation's public-serving institutions.

Endnotes

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