

RACE, GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND SOCIAL CLASS

Dimensions of Inequality and Identity

SECOND EDITION

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HOW TRACKING UNDERMINES RACE EQUITY IN DESEGREGATED SCHOOLS

ROSLYN ARLIN MICKELSON

*This reading is the first of three to focus on the social institution of education. Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina–Charlotte, is one of the leading scholars in the sociology of education. This reading, "How Tracking Undermines Race Equity in Desegregated Schools," is an excerpt from Mickelson's chapter of the same title in the 2005 book Bringing Equity Back: Research for a New Era in American Educational Policy, edited by Janice Petrovich and Amy Stuart Wells. Mickelson uses a case study of schools in Charlotte, North Carolina, to survey the effects of racial desegregation in schools since *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Mickelson reports on the history of desegregation in this school district before turning her attention to contemporary data. She finds structural inequalities in education based on race, including the presence of second-generation segregation that occurs in many schools through racial tracking.*

Beginning with the Supreme Court's declaration in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that public schools separated by race are inherently unequal, school desegregation has played a central role in efforts to provide the equality of educational

opportunity that is essential to the American dream. The rationale for school desegregation rests largely on claims that it improves minority students' access to the higher-quality education more often provided to Whites. For this reason, desegregation has been

Source: Mickelson, Roslyn Arlin. "How Tracking Undermines Race Equity in Desegregated Schools." In *Bringing Equity Back: Research for a New Era in American Educational Policy*, edited by Janice Petrovich and Amy Stuart Wells. Copyright © 2005 by Teachers College, Columbia University. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the Publisher.

expected to improve both minorities' educational outcomes as well as their longer-term life chances. Consequently, since 1954, desegregation has been considered an essential tool in the struggle for race equity in education.

This chapter advances our understanding of the persistent barriers to equality of educational opportunity by presenting findings from a detailed case study of the relationship of school segregation and tracking to race equity in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS)—a district that, prior to the end of its federal court order in 2002, was considered to be one of the nation's most successfully desegregated school systems. In this reading I raise questions about the extent to which CMS actually deserved that reputation. I demonstrate that curriculum tracking resegregated students within the district's high school classrooms, thereby subverting much of the potential academic gains from school desegregation at the school level. At the same time, this study compares achievement outcomes of students who attended segregated and desegregated schools, and demonstrates that racially diverse learning environments are clearly better than segregated ones. In other words, this chapter offers empirical support for the use of desegregation at both the school and classroom levels to close the racial gap and provide more equal educational opportunities . . .

WHY RACE EQUITY IN EDUCATION REQUIRES DESEGREGATED SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS

The relationship between school desegregation and classroom tracking often is discussed in terms of first- and second-generation segregation. First-generation segregation generally refers to the racial segregation among schools in the same district, and it has been the focus of national desegregation efforts since *Brown*. Second-generation segregation refers to the relationship between race and the allocation of educational opportunities within schools, typically brought about through curricular tracking of core academic classes in English, math, social

studies, and science. Black and Latino students are far more likely to be in the low-track classes, where their opportunities to learn are limited relative to high-track classes.

Any serious discussion of desegregation must include the topic of tracking. In theory, tracking is designed to enhance teaching and learning through targeting instruction and course content to the student's ability and prior knowledge. However, there is no consistent evidence that, as implemented, tracking is the best form of classroom organization for maximizing opportunities to learn for the majority of students. On the contrary, ample evidence suggests that tracking hinders mid- and low-ability students' opportunities to learn, while there is a growing body of evidence that diverse learning environments maximize opportunities to learn for all students. Moreover, as I noted above, track placements are strongly correlated with students' race/ethnicity and social class. In racially diverse schools White students typically are disproportionately found in the top tracks, while children of color are disproportionately found in the lower ones. In this way, tracking limits Blacks' access to higher-quality education. The federal courts recognized that tracking has the ability to undermine the potential benefits of policies, such as busing, designed to eliminate racial segregation among schools (*Hobson v. Hansen* 1967).

The fact that tracking can subvert potential gains from desegregation is very important for understanding the relationship between school desegregation policy and racial equity in education. There is considerable unambiguous evidence that desegregation positively affects minority students' long-term outcomes such as educational and occupational attainment (see Wells and Crain 1994, for a review). Yet the evidence with respect to desegregation's effects on short-term educational outcomes like achievement is more ambiguous and contested (see Crain and Mahard 1972). Design flaws in desegregation programs, their implementation, and many of the studies that evaluate them contribute to this ambiguity (see Crain and Mahard 1983). Another reason for the ambiguity is that much prior school desegregation research did not examine the ways in which segregated academic programs or tracks

within desegregated schools affect race equity in academic outcomes.

The complicated relationships among race equity in education, desegregation, and tracking lie at the heart of this chapter in which I investigate their effects on the academic outcomes of students in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. CMS is an especially interesting district in which to study the effects of desegregation on the academic outcomes of students because of its pivotal role in school desegregation history. CMS's historical significance rests on its use of mandatory busing to desegregate its schools. This practice was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in its 1971 decision, *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools*. Since the mid-1970s, CMS has been considered one of the nation's premier desegregated school systems. For many years, CMS served as a model for other school systems of how to provide seemingly equitable, high-quality, desegregated public education using busing and other tools (Douglas 1995).

As of Spring 2002, however, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools were no longer under federal court orders to desegregate. In 2001, the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals declared the district "unitary," or legally desegregated, and in 2002 the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case, thereby leaving the Appeals Court's ruling in place. In Fall 2002, CMS began a student assignment policy based on neighborhood schools and parental choice. As a consequence of the new student assignment plan, levels of desegregation have decreased markedly since I collected the data for this study (see Mickelson 2003; Walsh 2002).

The return to a neighborhood school-based assignment plan makes this study highly relevant because it provides an assessment of the significance of the district's 3-decade-old effort to desegregate its schools. Indeed, what this study reveals is that despite CMS's laudable attempts to racially balance enrollment in its schools, the race gap in achievement persisted (Smith and Mickelson 2000). A central component of that gap is racially correlated curricular tracking. In 1997, when the survey data used in this study were collected, anyone familiar with the historical relationship between tracking and race who observed a math, science, social studies, or English classroom in any of CMS's regular high

schools or middle schools could accurately guess the academic level of the course simply by observing the racial composition of the students in it. Other key findings are:

- On a positive note, those Black (and White) students who experience desegregated education achieve more, have higher test scores, and hold higher future aspirations than their counterparts who experience segregated schooling.
- Yet 30 years after *Swann*, even though CMS was under a court order to eliminate all segregation from 1971 through 2002, both first- and second-generation segregation continued in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.
- Both forms of segregation harm academic achievement.
- The more time Black (and White) students spend in segregated Black elementary schools (first-generation segregation), the lower their high school track placements, grades, test scores, and future aspirations are compared with their comparably able peers who are educated in desegregated learning environments.
- Track placement (second-generation segregation) is influenced by a student's race as well as by degree of exposure to segregated Black elementary education. Black students are more likely to be in lower tracks than White students with comparable prior achievement, family background, and other individual characteristics, including self-reported effort.
- Track placement, in turn, has an extremely powerful effect on high school grades and scores on standardized tests, including the SAT.
- Resource differences between racially segregated and desegregated learning environments suggest some reasons why separate is not equal.
- The pattern of continuous segregation in spite of the 1971 Supreme Court *Swann* decision ordering the district to desegregate is important because CMS is considered by many to be one of the nation's most

successfully integrated school systems. Thus, Charlotte's failure to *implement* desegregation and to provide equitable education for all children is reflective of our nation's inability to seriously address the roots of the race gap in academic achievement.

Using the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools as a case study, my research shows why racially segregated schooling is inimical to race equity in education. It demonstrates how the full desegregation mandated by the *Swann* decision was subverted by the continued existence of school segregation and the pervasive resegregation of secondary students into racially identifiable tracked math, science, English, and social studies classes.

Because of the persistence of the race gap in academic achievement, and the many questions raised about the efficacy of desegregation to improve the academic outcomes of Black students, the findings from Charlotte offer important insights for understanding why so many desegregation programs seem to offer minority students such limited redress from the inequality in educational opportunities mandated by *Brown*. At the same time, the chapter also demonstrates why desegregation is an essential element of educational equity. The more that CMS students—both Black and White—were exposed to truly desegregated education, the better were their academic outcomes . . .

A SURVEY OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

The research reported in this chapter is part of a 14-year-long case study of school reform in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. The results come from a survey of high school seniors I conducted in 1997. A random sample of about 50% of the 1997 graduating class answered questions about their family background, school experiences, attitudes toward education, and plans for the future. Their answers were combined with information provided by CMS on their grades, test scores, and educational histories . . .

This study's design offers a number of advantages over previous research on the effects of desegregation.

Most important, my measure of the effects of segregation is unique in the history of desegregation research. It is an individualized longitudinal measure of the effects of segregation (from kindergarten through grade 6) on each student's academic outcomes. In contrast, cross-sectional studies of the effects of segregation examine the relationship of attending a segregated school to student achievement at the time when the student's achievement was measured. Also, the study utilizes an entire school system rather than a selection of schools isolated from the context of their larger societal and educational environments. Finally, the fact that CMS was under a mandatory desegregation order means there is minimal selection bias in either schools or students.

LESSONS LEARNED

The findings can be grouped conveniently into five categories: (1) trends in first-generation segregation; (2) direct effects of first-generation segregation on academic outcomes; (3) indirect effects of first-generation segregation on outcomes; (4) effects of second-generation segregation on academic outcomes; and (5) why segregated schooling negatively affects academic outcomes and undermines educational equity and why desegregated education has positive effects.

First-Generation Segregation

Although first-generation segregation in CMS was never fully eliminated, during the early 1980s, the district came very close to fulfilling the court's order to eliminate the dual system. By the late 1980s, however, the number of racially identifiable schools began to grow so that by the 1998–99 school year, about one-fourth of schools were racially imbalanced, Black or White, at the building level (Armor 1998; CMS 1970–1999; Mickelson 1998; Peterkin 1998; Smith 1998; Trent 1998).

In the early 1980s when CMS was approximately 38% Black, fewer than 5% of Black students attended schools whose Black enrollment exceeded court-mandated ceilings; in the mid- and late 1990s when

CMS was approximately 40% Black, the corresponding figure attending racially imbalanced Black schools was approximately 27% (Smith 1998). Ironically, this increase in school segregation at the building level occurred while Mecklenburg County became less residentially segregated than it was in 1971 (Lord 1999).

Until 2001, CMS was a majority-White school district. Court desegregation guidelines defined a school as racially imbalanced if it has fewer than 44% White students. Of the 1997 CMS seniors who participated in this study, 15% of Whites and 37% of Blacks had had some experience in segregated or racially imbalanced elementary schools that had Black student enrollments higher than the balanced schools . . .

Direct Effects of School-Level Segregation

Attending a segregated Black elementary school has direct negative effects on achievement and track placement. Even after I hold constant a number of individual and family background characteristics, the statistical analyses (multilevel regression) indicate that the more time students—both Blacks and Whites—spend in segregated Black elementary schools, the lower are their 6th-grade California Achievement Test (CAT) and 12th-grade End of Course (EOC) scores. Segregated elementary school experiences also lower their high school track placement. Given that CAT scores, the measure of prior achievement I used, and high school track placement are the most powerful predictors of grades and high school test scores, elementary school segregation's negative impact on students' academic trajectories is noteworthy. These findings are summarized in Figure 33.1. The arrows from each factor in the model to the next indicate the causal paths, and the positive or negative signs above the path indicate the direction of the relationship. For example, the arrow with a negative sign from segregated elementary schooling to CAT scores indicates that the greater the proportion of a person's elementary education that took place in segregated schools, the lower were his or her CAT scores, controlling for the student's race, gender, family background, peer groups, attitudes toward education, effort, and so on.¹ Similarly, the arrows with negative signs from

segregated elementary education to high-track placement and grades, EOC, and SAT scores indicate that as time in the former increases, values of the latter decrease.

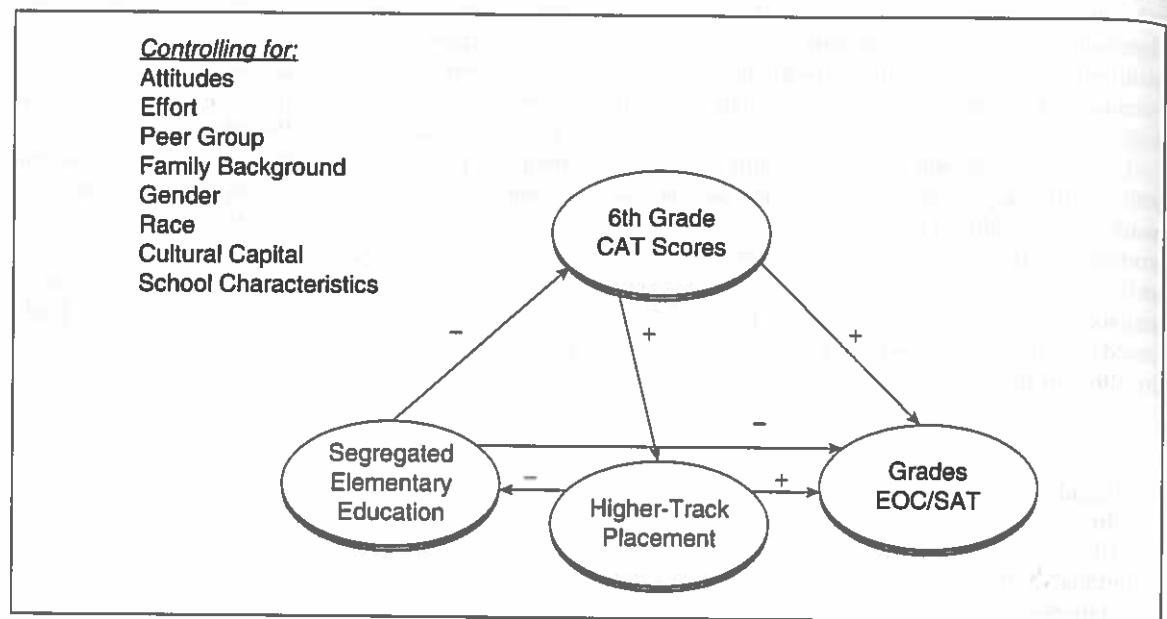
To be sure, the magnitude of the direct effects of elementary segregation on achievement is relatively small in comparison with the effects of track placement and prior achievement, the two most powerful influences on academic outcomes. What is relevant to our understanding of the effects of segregation, though, is that even after controlling for student and family background factors, elementary segregation still has a significant direct negative effect on both Black and White students' North Carolina EOC scores, the influential high-stakes standardized measure of what they have learned in high school.

Indirect Effects of School-Level Segregation

In addition to the direct effects of segregated elementary education on test scores and track placement, it also has an indirect effect on academic outcomes. As noted earlier, CAT scores and track placement are the most powerful forces underlying EOC scores, high school grade point averages, and SAT scores. If one traces the pathways in Figure 33.1 from segregated elementary education to achievement outcomes, one must pass through track placement and CAT scores. This is the reason school-level segregation has an indirect negative effect on high school seniors' academic outcomes.

Taken together, the results presented in Figure 33.1 indicate the consistent pattern of direct and indirect negative effects of segregated Black elementary education on student achievement and track placement. Whether the measure of achievement is local (grade point average), statewide (North Carolina EOC), or national (CAT and SAT scores), the greater the proportion of a 12th grader's elementary education that took place in a segregated Black school, the lower are his or her grades, test scores, and high school track placement compared with otherwise similar students whose elementary education took place in desegregated environments. These findings are true for both Black and White students alike, but because Blacks are more likely to have learned in a segregated environment, the results have a particular salience for Black students' opportunities for educational equity.

FIGURE 33.1 Schematic Model of the Effects of Segregation on Academic Outcomes.



Tracking, or Second-Generation Segregation

Tracking, or grouping that resegregates students within desegregated schools, is known as second-generation segregation. My analysis of the racial composition of all math, science, English, and social studies courses taken by the entire 1997 student high school population reveals that, within CMS high schools, courses were tracked.² In all CMS high schools, not only are core academic classes tracked, but irrespective of the racial composition of the schools—even within schools considered to be racially balanced—tracking resegregates students such that the lowest tracks (special education) are largely Black and the highest tracks (advanced placement and international baccalaureate) are overwhelmingly White. Thus, a majority of CMS high school students learned social studies, math, science, and English in racially imbalanced classrooms The most racially balanced discipline was English, with 46% of classes racially balanced, and the least was social studies, with only 37% racially balanced.³ Given that track placement is a

powerful influence on high school grades, EOC scores, and SAT scores, the presence of racially imbalanced tracks is relevant to questions regarding the efficacy of school desegregation policies to enhance students' equality of educational opportunities.

One might argue that track assignments merely reflect technical decisions to allocate opportunities to learn commensurate with student merit, and that any correlations with student race are coincidental. But students' track assignments *are* related to their race: . . . Black students are disproportionately found in lower tracks while Whites are disproportionately found in higher tracks.

The relationship of a student's race to his or her likely track placement is also clear when I conducted a decile analysis comparing the 12th-grade English track placements of Blacks with those of academically similar Whites. For this comparison, I used CAT scores as a measure of prior achievement. I first divided students' 6th-grade CAT English battery scores into deciles. Next, I compared 12th-grade English track placements of Blacks and Whites

whose 6th-grade CAT scores fell within the same decile range. If race does not affect track placement, Blacks and Whites within a given 6th-grade CAT score decile should have similar 12th-grade track placements. Yet I found that among students whose 6th-grade CAT English scores ranged from the 40th to 49th percentile, 56% of Whites compared with 74% of Blacks were placed in regular English. Among the best students—those with 6th-grade CAT scores between the 90th and 99th percentiles—52% of Whites but only 20% of Blacks were in advanced placement or international baccalaureate English.

The findings from the decile analysis, taken together with the regression analyses I described earlier, indicate that achievement or merit alone cannot explain track placement. They suggest that subjective judgments—influenced by students' ascribed characteristics of race, gender, and family background—affect track placements.⁴

Why Segregation Undermines Educational Equity

There are specific reasons why segregated Black elementary schools and racially correlated lower tracks offer students fewer opportunities to learn. In Charlotte, as is true across the nation, segregated Black learning environments offer fewer material and teacher resources compared with desegregated ones. Both racially identifiable tracks and segregated Black schools suffer from similar teacher resource inequities. For example, Table 33.1 presents the correlations between percentage of Black students and various characteristics associated with teacher quality. Table 33.1 shows that the higher the percentage of Blacks in a school, the lower the percentage of the school's teachers who are fully credentialed, are experienced, and possess master's degrees (Mickelson 1998; Peterkin 1998; Smith 1998; Trent 1998).

Qualified, certified teachers are the most important resource available to children. Starkly different levels of material resources (up-to-date media centers, ample access to current technology, and newer buildings) are also related to the racial composition of a school, with fewer resources associated with

higher percentages of Black students (Gardner 1998; Peterkin 1998). In 1997, segregated Black high schools also had fewer advanced placement offerings, and racially identifiable Black elementary schools at all levels had proportionately fewer services for gifted and talented students (Mickelson 1998, Exhibit 1A-1H; Peterkin 1998). As late as 1999, racially identifiable Black high schools had far fewer formal classes and informal SAT preparation opportunities (after school, weekend, or at a Stanley Kaplan review course) than did either desegregated or racially identifiable White high schools. The fewer the Blacks in a high school, the more opportunities, both formal and informal, there are for SAT preparation (Mickelson 2003).

In addition to this, students in the highest tracks (academically gifted, advanced placement, international baccalaureate)—which are disproportionately White—are the most likely to have teachers who are credentialed and teaching in their field. Conversely, students in the lowest non-special education track (regular)—who are disproportionately Black—are much more likely to be taught by unlicensed, inexperienced instructors who are teaching out of their field. The consensus among the CMS high school

TABLE 33.1 Correlation Between Selected High School Characteristics and Percent African American in Student Population, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, 1996–1998.

<i>Selected Characteristics of High Schools (N = 11)</i>	<i>Correlation with % African American in Student Population</i>
% Gifted in Student Population	-.60
% Teachers with Full Licensure	-.72
% Teachers with MA Degree	-.43
% Students on Free/Reduced Lunch	.95
% ESL Students	.64

Source: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, electronic data files, 1996–1998.

principals who were interviewed about tracking, race, and opportunities to learn is that while students in the lower tracks may have fully licensed and experienced teachers with advanced degrees, those in the highest tracks always do (Mickelson 1998–1999).

In CMS, then, access to the greatest number of opportunities to learn is strongly related to the racial composition of the elementary school a child attends and the level of the secondary track in which the student learns. For these reasons, and others I do not discuss here because of space considerations, it is not surprising that segregated Black educational settings offer fewer opportunities to learn, and that those who learn in these environments are less likely to succeed academically compared with peers educated in desegregated settings . . .

CONCLUSION

For more than 50 years, communities across the United States have grappled with *Brown's* mandate to provide equality of educational opportunities to Black children—to all children—by ending segregated schooling. Yet despite significant narrowing in the past quarter-century, the Black-White gap in achievement that existed in 1954 continues today. And today, even thoughtful observers question the efficacy of school desegregation for closing that gap. Other critics lament the social, educational, and political fallout from it. They point to a host of adverse consequences to the Black community, including job losses, removal of cultural integrity in the curriculum, and destruction of extended caring communities that were integral to the well-being of Black children and their education during Jim Crow (Anderson 1998; Walker 2000). Although it is important to acknowledge these losses, it is also important to avoid romanticizing segregated Black schools. To do otherwise is to substitute an idealized conception of segregated education for the brutal realities of grossly inferior opportunities to learn that characterized segregated Black schools in Charlotte and elsewhere (Anderson 1988; Douglas 1995; Walker 2000).

As I pointed out earlier, while there is considerable unambiguous evidence that desegregation positively

affects students' long-term outcomes, such as enhancing educational and occupational attainment, the situation with respect to short-term educational outcomes has been more ambiguous and contested. Contributing to the ambiguity are design flaws in many desegregation programs, in their implementation, and in the studies that evaluate them. Based on my findings, I suggest that one reason for previous studies' ambiguous conclusions regarding the academic benefits of desegregated schooling is that the studies typically did not examine whether second-generation segregation undermines the benefits of first-generation desegregation. My research does precisely this, and I find that second-generation segregation, in the form of tracking, undermines or subverts much of the potential of first-generation desegregation to close the racial gap in equity in educational opportunities and outcomes.

This study's distinctive design addresses many of the shortcomings found in previous research on the effects of desegregation. The unique design includes a longitudinal measure of exposure to segregated Black elementary education, multiple indicators of educational outcomes, measures of track location, numerous control variables, and a large representative sample of 12th graders from an entire school system. The fact that even with this conservative methodology the study demonstrates both direct and indirect effects from segregated education, indicates, to paraphrase Cornel West, that with respect to educational equity—race matters. This chapter, then, moves us toward a greater understanding of the contributions of segregated schooling to maintaining the racial gap in academic achievement, by demonstrating how first- and second-generation segregation jointly affect academic outcomes for all students, and how—even in an ostensibly desegregated school system—Whites retain privileged access to greater opportunities to learn.

At the same time, the findings offer hope. The results of the analyses also show clearly that for all those students who experienced it, desegregated education had a positive effect on their academic outcomes. Effectively implemented desegregation, then, is a prime example of a successful equity-minded reform. This is an especially important finding with

regard to Black students. Both the scholarly and popular literature is replete with claims that desegregation fails to improve the academic achievement of Black students. The findings presented in this chapter demonstrate otherwise. They show that Black students educated in desegregated learning environments do better than their comparable peers schooled in segregated ones. This is true even when holding constant school- and individual-level factors such as family background, individual effort, peer group influence, attitudes toward education and the future, and prior achievement—social forces that typically confound the effects of desegregation.

The findings also suggest the importance, once again, of attending to educational policy implementation issues. The policy of desegregation—no matter how well crafted and designed—is of little value if it is unevenly implemented and if it coexists with other initiatives, policies, and practices—like tracking—that counteract or subvert desegregation's intent.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Mickelson mean by the term *second-generation segregation*? Why is this term significant in studying the institution of education in the United States?
2. How does Mickelson's study of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) point out the major flaws of previous studies of the use of desegregation as a means of achieving racial equality? What is the role of tracking in subverting the gains of first-generation desegregation?

NOTES

1. The effects of segregated Black elementary education on CAT scores are still important even though their level of significance is only slightly larger than that of conventional standards ($p < .06$). It is worth noting that the sample does not include a sizable portion of the CMS student population that is most likely to have had extended exposure to segregated Black elementary education—those who dropped out of school before reaching 12th grade and those who, as 12th graders, were enrolled in special education classes, special programs, and special high schools. Consequently, this regression model likely underestimates the effects of elementary segregation on CAT scores.
2. A CMS document showing the course name, track level, student count by race, period, and teacher name for every course offered in each of the 11 high schools provides the data for this analysis (CMS 1996–1999).
3. I considered a high school classroom to be racially balanced if its percentage of Black students lay within plus or minus 15% of the specific school's percentage of Black enrollment. This standard reflects an extrapolation to the classroom of the standard used to determine whether a school was racially balanced. The 38-page table that presents this analysis is available from the author upon request. It appeared as Exhibit A1-H1 in my expert report in the *Capacchione* case (Mickelson 1998).
4. Four years after I collected the survey data discussed in this chapter, CMS was still engaging in course selection and placement processes that resulted in comparably able Blacks and Whites being assigned to different tracks, with Blacks more likely than Whites to be in the lower ones