



UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF *SES*, ETHNICITY, AND DISCIPLINE INFRACTIONS IN STUDENTS' STANDARDIZED TEST SCORES

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Abstract:

The goal of the current study is to examine the impact of students' social economic status, ethnicity, and discipline infractions on their standardized test scores in Indiana, the USA. Data from this study extracted from Indiana Department of Education. ISTEP is a criterion-referenced standardized test. It consists of items that assess a student's performance with respect to particular criteria that was established by the Indiana State Board of Education. Criterion-referenced test scores help us to understand where a student stands in relation to the cut scores based Indiana Academic Standards in English/Language Arts and Mathematics. In fact, the application of ISTEP might be helpful for schools to identify their students' strengths and weaknesses in these content areas. By doing so, they take necessary steps to plan appropriate instruction for students' academic development. However, the Indiana Department of Education's statistical data show that there was a statistically significant achievement gap between students. Accordingly, the current study findings point out that the effects of SES and Race varied among groups. Specifically, African-American students with low SES status had lower scores on ISTEP than their white peers did. In addition, a chi-square analysis showed that disproportionality among African American students appeared to be striking. Findings and educational implications are discussed.

Keywords: SES; ethnicity; standardized test scores; student achievement

1. Introduction

In the current environment of dissatisfaction with public education, the standardized test score has been the most important indicator of educational achievement and

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increase in students' test scores has been linked with educational improvement in American educational system. In fact, a growing pressure to raise test scores has been resulted in practices that pollute educational quality by nonstandard conditions that students with disadvantaged have to face (Haladyna, Nolen, & Haas, 1991). Standardized test scores continue to be the most important factor and challenge for these students because these days, if a school's standardized test scores are high, most politicians and educators consider both teachers and their students successful. In addition, the overarching reason that students' scores on these tests might not be provide an accurate benchmark of educational effectiveness regarding educational quality. In fact, it is widely recognized that elementary school students entering formal school life after early school years may face a variety of challenges and difficulties, including teacher – student relationship, peer relations, and a wide range of cognitive and academic tasks. At virtually every grade level, the individual's psychological, social, and emotional characteristics and the contextual factors play a critical role the development of academic competencies and success (e.g., Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003; Weinstein, Soule, Collins, Cone, & Mehlhorn, 1991). For instance, group differences among ethnic/racial groups on various educational measures and outcomes are well-established. In other words, African-American and Hispanic students generally substantially perform lower than white peers on the nationwide standardized tests, including ISTEP. Furthermore, differences in social economic status indicators (i.e., parental education and income) account for a large portion of achievement gap across educational measures and outcomes (Camara & Schmidt, 1999). Previous studies also showed that discipline practices in schools influence the academic and social quality of any educational environment (e.g., Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin; Wald & Losen, 2003). For instance, Skiba and colleagues reviewed the documented patterns of office discipline referrals in the 2005-2006 academic year. Descriptive and logistic regression data analyses showed that African American students were referred to the office of problem behavior three times more than their White American peers. The ratio of receiving expulsion or out of school suspension for students from African American or Latino background was higher than that of White American students. Unfortunately, African American Children were perceived by their teachers to have more serious externalizing and internalizing classroom behavioral problems. Therefore, these students are at risk of school failure and poor school adjustment (Piggott & Cowen, 2000). However, White children were perceived as having more competencies, less behavioral problems, and having more positive academic expectations regardless of teacher and child race match. In this respect, the goal of the current research was to

examine the role ethnicity, SES, and discipline infractions on students' standardized test scores (ISTEP).

2. Achievement Gap

The achievement gap is one of the most controversial issues in U.S. education. The achievement gap refers to the disparities in standardized test scores between African American, Latino, White students and students from high and low SES group. The achievement gap across racial/ethnic groups and social economic status differences in income has been a focus of educational research for 21st century. Although American educational policies and national discourse on ethnic and SES disparities tends to focus on academic outcomes in each school districts, low income and African American, and Latino students are usually subject to differential rate of discipline infractions. Furthermore, The achievement gap between children from high- and low- social economic status families is roughly 40 percent larger than among children born in 2001 (Jencks & Philips, 2011). According to the 2005 National Assessment of Educational progress results, the achievement gap in reading and scaled scores between Black and Latino and their White peers was more than 26 points (Education Commission of the States, 2005). Furthermore, in fourth- grade mathematics, White students performed 20 points more than their counterparts from African American and Hispanic families. It is clear that the achievement gap has been growing and has been showing a persistent trend (Education Commission of the States, 2005). While the primary focus of the current research paper is to discuss the achievement gap on standardized test scores, previous researches compared dropout rates, college enrollment, gifted placement, and taking advanced placement examinations (e.g., Ladson – Billings, 2006; Hunter & Bartee, 2003).

Scholars have historically offered a variety of explanations for the existence of the gap between African American, Hispanic, and White students. For instance, Hess and Shipman (1965) put forward that Black students were not successful because of their pathological lifestyles that hindered their ability to adapt the school successfully. In this sense, they stressed on the significance of placing these children of color in racially integrated classrooms. According to Coleman and colleagues (1966) proposed that the composition of a school, African American students sense of control of their environments, their verbal skills, and parental education or family background were also crucial influence on their achievement. In 1999, Steele posited that cultural mismatch and stereo-type threats might contribute to the achievement gap. However, multicultural education researchers (e.g., Gay, 2004) and curriculum theorists (e.g.,

Grant, 2003) suggested that the nature of curriculum and the school are the most important factors that explain the gap among children of color and White American counterparts. Recent studies have focused on the impact of the pedagogical practices of teachers as a contributor to either worsening or narrowing the gap (e.g., Pianta, 1999; Smith, 2004). For instance, Pianta (1999) emphasized on the beneficial role of teacher – student relationships in students' school adjustment competencies. Basically, he proposed that close and warm teacher –child relationship quality has a profound impact on the students' academic achievement whereas conflictual and clingy interactions among teachers and their students, especially minority children, worsen these students' success and increase the incidence of classroom behavioral problems.

Aforementioned, public schools and students from disadvantaged background face a variety of critical challenges in today's "standardized" educational systems although test scores are considered as the more objective and efficient means of assessing students' achievement and the accountability of schools, teachers, and administrators. According to National Scientific Council on Developing Child (2004, p.6) *"Children clearly need the social and emotional capabilities that enable them to sit still in a classroom, pay attention, and get along with their classmates just as much as they need the cognitive skills required to master the reading and math concepts taught in kindergarten"*. Accordingly, a strong and long-lasting impact of early school years poverty might contribute to the achievement gap between children from high income families and low-income parents (Evans & Rosenbaum, 2008). In other words, parental investments (e.g., cognitive enrichment in the home, parental involvement in the child learning) play a critical role in fostering cognitive development and narrowing the achievement gap; however families with low income are not able to provide enough opportunities for their children to enrich these students' school engagement (Holf, Laursen, & Tardiff, 2002). Unfortunately, persistent early exposure to poverty could give harm to children's cognitive development (Evans & Rosenbaum, 2008) and their school adjustment competencies (e.g., self-regulation, problem solving skills) (Pianta, 1999) It is not surprising that students from low-income parental background might be lack of cognitively stimulating materials compared to their peers from high SES family background. In this sense, Bradley and colleagues (2002) showed that low-income families are not able to provide developmentally appropriate learning materials and opportunities and therefore, students from low SES families perform less well than their counterparts with higher SES status (e.g., Edelson, Gordin, & Pea, 1999; Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik, & Soloway, 1997). Similarly, Reardon (2013) pointed out that low-income students usually perform less well than students from high-income families on

most standardized achievement tests, high school completion rates, college enrollment, and grades.

For instance, Burchinal and colleagues (2011) examined the achievement among Black-White and Low- and – High Income children by using the NICHD study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. They showed that the achievement gap in children's reading and mathematics school performance from early grades to elementary level was statistically and significantly larger in favor of high-income White American students. Therefore, they suggested that reducing the achievement gap might require early intervention to reduce income and race disparities in home and school during the infancy as well as the preschool years. It is clear that poverty and racial stereotypic thoughts as well as behaviors, unfortunately, affect the distal family and school characteristics (Reardon, 2013). In this sense, not surprisingly, children of color from low SES background are likely to start formal education with lower levels of achievements and cognitive skills. Thus, low-income African American and Hispanic children lag behind their rich peers academically and perform less well on the standardized achievement tests.

3. Discipline Infractions

Aforementioned, persistent inequalities in the educational achievement of public school students are critical force behind school reform policies. According to Hedges and Nowell (1999) racial and income disparities are still huge and it may take more than 30 years to close the achievement gap. Beginning with the Coleman Report (1966), extensive body of research indicated that the school characteristics (e.g., teacher quality, discipline policies, diversity) play a crucial role in the distribution of educational opportunity differently across schools. For instance, the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance school discipline, many schools continue to toughen their disciplinary policies, especially for students from disadvantage backgrounds (e.g., Gordon, Della, Piana, & Keleher, 2001; Reyes, 2006). Unfortunately, the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of students from different ethnic and SES background is very significant problem in each educational institutions (Russell, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). For example, Lewis, Butler, Bonner, and Joubert (2010) conducted a study to investigate the impact of discipline patterns of African American males and school district responses on standardized test scores by using a sample of more than 3,500 Black males in a Midwestern urban school district. Their findings demonstrated that about 29 % of African American Males were absent from the classroom because of out of school suspension. Moreover, fewer than 48 % these students performed at

proficient/advanced levels of reading in the state wide standardized tests. However, White American counterparts had lower level of suspension and expulsion rate, and their standardized test scores in reading was higher than students of color. They put forward that many problems associated with the disparities in disciplinary treatment and uneven sanctions to African American males appeared to be the critical factor to the gap in reading. Therefore, zero-tolerance discipline policy is not practical and developmentally appropriate for these student so to hinder the understanding of their culture, family background, and educational needs. Similarly, Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson (2002) examined the sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. They reported that differential pattern of treatment wherein Black male students were referred to the office for discipline infractions because of more subjective interpretation of their teachers and school administrators contributed to persistent failure in academic tasks, grades, and test scores. Bias in the administration of school discipline for students with disadvantageous might hinder their potential to be successful in school settings.

Together, the goal of the current study was to explore the role of race, SES, and discipline infractions in students' standardized test scores. It was expected that student of color and from low-income family backgrounds performed less well than their White peers on standardized tests. In addition, the proportion of discipline infractions for these populations was expected to be higher than Anglo American counterparts; therefore, students of color with higher rate of discipline infractions gained lower test scores in reading and mathematics compared to White students low-non discipline infractions.

4. Method

4.1 Data Sources

ISTEP provides information to what extent an individual student mastered the Indiana Academic Standards in English/Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies content areas. In addition, ISTEP data enable us to see where the students in a particular classroom, school, and corporation stand relative to the standardized performance levels by the Indiana State Board of Education. ISTEP as a criterion-referenced test consists of items to assess a student's performance with respect to particular criteria. In addition, it provides information to identify an individual student's strengths and weaknesses in particular content area to improve and plan appropriate instructions.

For the scope of the current study, the researcher obtained the data regarding how public schools' ISTEP test scores vary by race, social economic status, and discipline infractions in Lafayette School Corporation that consists of thirteen public schools. The current study conducted a descriptive analysis to explore the role of race, SES, and discipline infractions on students' tests scores in 2015-2016 academic year.

A total of 7,743 elementary and high school students data used in this research (see Table 1). The most prevalent race in Lafayette School Corporation is white (86.82%), then Hispanic (11.58%) and Black (7.42%). Attendance rate was % 96. In addition graduation rate was. % 88.2. The number of discipline infractions (i.e., school suspensions, bullying incidents, expulsions) was about 2.345. The number of students receiving free or reduced price lunches was 5,151 (% 66.5). More strikingly, % 64 of the students who received free or reduced lunches were students of color from low-income family backgrounds.

Table 1: 2015-2016 Lafayette School Corporation Descriptive Information

Indicator	'15-'16
A-F Accountability Grade	C
Student Enrollment	7,743
College and Career Readiness Rate	N/A
Percentage of Career and Technical Diplomas	0
Number of Certified Teachers	474
Number of National Board Certified Teachers	0
Total Expenditure Per Pupil Three Year Average	\$13,805
Percent Academic Achievement Expenditures	51.7
Percent Instructional Support Expenditures	10.6
Percent Overhead and Operations Expenditures	19.3
Percent Non-Operating Expenditures	18.4
Teacher Salary Range - Minimum	\$33,323
Teacher Salary Range - Maximum	\$70,484
Number of Students in Special Education	1,503
Percent of Students in Special Education	19.4
Number of Students in Gifted and Talented Education	952
Percent of Students in Gifted and Talented Education	12.3
Percent of Instruction Delivered Through Career and Technical Education	5.1
Number of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Lunches	5,151
Percent of Students Receiving Free or Reduced Price Lunches	66.5

Number of Limited English Proficiency Students	842
Percent of Limited English Proficiency Students	10.9
Total ISTEP+ Remediation Funding	N/A
Number of Students in Alternative Education	0

5. Results

The goal of the current study was to document and understand the impact of race, SES, and discipline infractions on students' ISTEP test scores. Accordingly, 2015-2016 academic year, Lafayette School Corporation ISTEP results by Ethnicity was demonstrated in Table 2. A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relation between ISTEP success and ethnicity for ELA, $X^2 (1, N = 2418) = 87.66, p < .05$. For mathematics, the chi-square test of independence showed African-American students were less likely to pass on the ISTEP mathematics test than White counterparts, $X^2 (1, N = 2441) = 104.86, p < .05$. Basically, the relation between these variables was significant. Based on the statistic, Black students performed in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics less well than their Hispanic and White peers. In other words, while only 247 (43%) students passed on ELA test, 201 African American students (34.8%) were successful at Mathematics. In addition, 28.1% of these students performed well on both tests. On the other hand, White American students performed better on both ELA and Mathematic tests compared to Hispanic and Black counterparts.

Table 2: The Descriptive Statistics of Lafayette School Corporation ISTEP Results by Ethnicity

Race	ELA Pass	ELA Percent	Math Pass	Math Percent	Both Math and ELA Pass
	N	Pass	N	Pass	Percent
American Indian	**	**	***	***	***
Black	247	43.0%	201	34.8%	28.1%
Hispanic	609	56.7%	564	52.2%	43.3%
White	1196	64.9%	1101	59.1%	52.5%

The researcher also documented the distribution of ISTEP performance by SES by conducting the chi-square test of independence. The researcher used paid or reduced/free meal variable as an indicator of social economic status. The findings indicated that reduced/free meal group students were less likely to perform well on the ELA test than their peers from paid meal group, $X^2 (1, N = 5151) = 563.41, p < .05$. In

addition, the researcher observed the same trend for mathematics test score, $\chi^2(1, N=5151) = 428.91, p < .05$. As expected, students with reduced/free meal group had lower pass rate of ISTEP scores in ELA and Mathematics. Moreover, only 38.9 % of the students from low-income parents passed on both math and ELA tests. However, 62 % of paid meal student groups performed well on both tests.

Table 3: The Descriptive Statistics of Lafayette School Corporation ISTEP Results by SES

SES	ELA Pass	ELA Percent	Math Pass	Math Percent	Both Math and ELA Pass
	N	Pass	N	Pass	Percent
Reduced/Free Meal	1406	52.3%	1296	47.9%	38.9%
Paid Meal	791	74.9%	702	66.5%	62.0%

To answer the final research question of the study, the researcher analyzed the disproportionality on various disciplinary indices by race and socioeconomic status. Table 4 presents descriptive comparisons of disciplinary measures broken down by race and SES as represented by free-lunch status. For aim of comparison, enrollment percentages were used to calculate the percentages of discipline infractions by race and SES. Based on the findings, black students were overrepresented on all measures of school discipline (i.e., suspension, expulsion, and referral) in Lafayette School Corporation. A chi-square independence test results demonstrated that all comparisons were statistically significant at the $p < .01$.

Table 4: Descriptive Comparisons of Disciplinary Measures Broken Down by Race and SES

Discipline Infractions	Racial Status		Free/Reduced Lunch Status	
	Black	White	Free/Reduced	Paid
Referred	66.1%	32.7%	65.1%	8.1%
Suspended	68.5%	32.9%	72.4%	7.1%
Expelled	79.7%	17.2%	76.5%	7.6%

5. Discussion

The results of the current study were consistent with a growing body of research examining the impact of racial, SES, and discipline infractions across a variety of school outcomes including standardized test scores. Previous studies have shown that there was persistent disparities in standardized test scores among students of color and their White counterparts (e.g., Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin; Wald & Losen, 2003). Across the U.S, the achievement gap is one of the most pressing educational issues that states currently face. According to National Center for Education Statistics

(2005), there is still an achievement disparities as measured by standardized testing between minority and disadvantaged students and their white peers. While this paper merely focused on showing the gap by means of standardized testing, the achievement gap also exists when we closer look at dropout rates and relative numbers of students who enrolled in honor classes and college admissions as well as disproportionate of number of discipline infractions for students of color and low-income family background (e.g., Coleman & Schmidt, 1999; Burchinal et al., 2011). Unfortunately, Reardon (2013) put forward that low-income students as a group have performed less well than high-income students on standardized test scores. More seriously, the reading achievement gap among these students has been growing about 40 percent compared to several decades earlier. Although the trend in income achievement gap is still persistent, it is even more critical when the black-white achievement gap is scrutinized. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the college completion rate for students of color and low-SES background was significantly lower than their white counterparts from high-income families (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In addition, Jacobson et al., 2001) examined the relationship between African American and White differences in educational attainment and achievement across states. Unfortunately, African-American children usually scored lower in mathematics and reading tests, and the achievement gap widens as these students continue through the K-12 unless the policymakers and educators revise today's social and educational policies including standardized tests that are used to only criteria to assess the students' performance and teachers' effectiveness.

Furthermore, the disproportionate discipline of African-American and low-SES students has been extensively examined and documented (e.g., Gay, 2004; Gordon, Piana, Keleher, 2001). Consistent with these well-documented findings, the current research results demonstrated that racial and SES disparities in office referrals, school suspension, and expulsions was still persistent in today's educational settings. Although, the current study could not demonstrate the impact of discipline infractions on students' standardized tests scores, aforementioned, students of color were more likely to have the discipline referral, suspension, and expulsions. In addition, African American students performed well less than their White peers in reading and mathematics scores.

Although the concern of closing down the achievement gap is not a domestic problem, the ability of the American educational system to continue as a powerful asset should renovate their policies to increase equality and quality in education. In light of these reasons, the implementation of a successful learning and teaching system must consider the cognitive and the noncognitive factors (e.g., culture, teacher – child

relations, parental involvement) that play a critical role in students' academic, social, and emotional well-being in today's classrooms. In this sense, American educational policies should be closely monitored at each educational stages and educational standards must be revised for students of color and different cultural as well as economic background to ensure the academic achievement and educational attainment of minority and disadvantaged students.

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