

School segregation still impacts African-Americans' minds decades later

May 11 2015

As the nation observes the May 17 anniversary of the Supreme Court decision that ended racial segregation in public schools, a new study has found that desegregated schooling is tied to better performance for certain cognitive abilities in older African American Adults.

This research is published in an article titled "[Education Desegregation and Cognitive Change in African American Older Adults](#)," appearing in the May 2015 issue of *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*.

"Our findings suggest that there is a slight, but statistically significant advantage associated with desegregated schooling for language and perceptual speed," said Adrienne T. Aiken-Morgan, PhD, a clinical geropsychologist at Duke University and the lead author of the study. "However, the intriguing part of the story is that study participants who attended desegregated schools did not show any advantage in rate of cognitive decline over time."

The data are based on participant interviews from the Baltimore Study of Black Aging—Patterns of Cognitive Aging and include cognitive measures from six domains of function as measured 33 months apart. The study sample included 420 urban, community dwelling African Americans age 50 and older. Of these, 118 had attended desegregated schools and 302 had attended [segregated schools](#) prior to the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision.

Each subject completed the series of tests, both at the baseline and follow-up assessments. The cognitive measures included global cognition, reasoning, memory, working memory, language, and perceptual speed.

Univariate analyses indicated that the desegregated schooling group scored significantly better on language and perceptual speed tests. The segregated schooling group, however, did not show a differential rate of [cognitive decline](#) over time. These findings suggest that early differences in schooling affect starting [cognitive performance](#) levels, but not necessarily rates of decline in performance.

"Desegregated schools tended to receive greater funding than segregated schools, which likely contributed to the observed cognitive advantages in our sample. We interpreted this in the context of the Cognitive Reserve Hypothesis," Aiken-Morgan said. "It is very interesting to observe the current patterns of desegregation among [public schools](#) in many states, including Maryland. Many schools systems are showing a trend towards re-segregation. Time will tell what impact this trend will have on [cognitive aging](#) disparities in the future."

Co-authors on the article included Alyssa A. Gamaldo, PhD, Regina C. Sims, PhD, Jason C. Allaire, PhD, and Keith E. Whitfield, PhD. This research and the Baltimore Study of Black Aging—Patterns of Cognitive Aging were supported by the National Institute on Aging through grant AG 24108; Whitfield is the principal investigator.

Provided by The Gerontological Society of America

Citation: School segregation still impacts African-Americans' minds decades later (2015, May 11) retrieved 9 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-05-school-segregation-impacts-african-americans-minds.html>

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