



Integrating the Desegregated Classroom: Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Robert E. Slavin

Eight years of research show there is a way to improve race relations in desegregated schools.

Walk into a desegregated secondary school's cafeteria at lunch time. What you will see will be disheartening: white students will be talking mostly with whites, blacks with blacks, Chicanos with Chicanos, and so on. It's obvious that the integrated society we've hoped and bused for is not being formed in our schools.

What can we do to achieve the socially integrated schools we hoped for early in the desegregation movement? At Johns Hopkins University, we have been working for several years to find programs that can integrate the desegregated school, and we've discovered that when it comes to improving race relations, actions speak louder than words.

Campaigns to Reduce Prejudice

Let me explain. When a school district prepares to desegregate or wants to improve race relations among its students, it typically gets teachers and other staff together for workshops. These workshops usually involve a program designed to reduce the participants' prejudice and prepare them to work with new students. School districts also set up minority history classes, buy new books that show people of different races in positive roles, and so on. In other words, if prejudice is the problem, reduce everyone's prejudice and everything will be fine.

Except it doesn't work. We did

an analysis of data collected by the Educational Testing Service in 1974, and found that teacher workshops, minority history, multiethnic texts, biracial student advisory committees, and similar school programs made no difference in the racial attitudes or interracial friendships of high school students. From our analysis, which was based on 51 desegregated high schools all over the country, it was clear that the human relations programs did little for student race relations. Talking to teachers and students didn't seem to make much difference.

Provide Interaction

However, one variable measured in the ETS data made a strong and consistent difference—the question asked of students, "How often has your teacher assigned you to work on schoolwork with a student of another race?" This variable had a strong impact on the number of interracial

friendships in the school, on positive attitudes toward integration and toward other races, and on students' feelings of being comfortable with students of other races. Schools in which interracial cooperative contact was encouraged had good race relations, and those in which contact was not encouraged did not. Further, students who had been on an interracial sports team or had worked in class with a member of another race had more positive interracial attitudes than other students.

What we had learned from this study was that talking to teachers and talking to students about race was not an effective way to influence students' attitudes and behaviors. Instead, we need to set up situations in which students of different races interact cooperatively to meet their goals.

I can't say that we were surprised. For eight years, we have been studying ways of structuring cooperative interaction among students.



In our studies, we assign students to four- to five-member, multiracial learning teams. In these teams, students work together to learn academic material. The students are quizzed individually, and their quiz scores are contributed to form a team score. A class newsletter recognizes the most successful teams. In one of the techniques, students play academic games to show their learning instead of taking a quiz.



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For improving race relations, our results have been phenomenal. In seven field studies in desegregated schools, most of them inner-city Baltimore junior high schools, we found that team learning classes had much better racial attitudes and behaviors than traditional classes. In many cases, when we asked students to name their friends, they named as many or almost as many friends of other races as they would have if race were not a criterion. This was quite different from our pretests in these classes and in our control classes; in fact, in most of our control classes there were fewer crossracial friendships on the posttest than there were on the pretest.

Improved Learning

In addition to positive effects on race relations, the team classes learned as much or more than the traditional classes. In five of the seven studies in desegregated schools, the team classes learned significantly more language

arts and mathematics than did the traditionally taught students. In many of the studies, students in the team classes engaged in less off-task behavior than did control students. This indicates that team learning techniques may also improve discipline in desegregated schools. Team learning techniques don't have to cost anything, and they are easy to learn and use. Instead of the usual one-day workshop in which speakers try to reduce teachers' prejudice, we can spend the same time to teach teachers to use an instructional system that is far more likely to improve students' racial attitudes and behaviors as well as their achievement.

Why has this research been so successful? The answer is apparent. We make friends in small, cooperative groups, not large and faceless ones. A soldier's "buddies" are his squadmates, not his battalionmates. When a school is desegregated, why should the mere presence of students of different races in the same building break down long-held racial barriers? If anything, the impersonal structure of the traditional secondary school would encourage staying in one's own racial group.

When we assign students to a cooperative team, however, we create a structure in which every team member's efforts help the group to be successful. This makes every member important to his/her groupmates, and increases positive feelings and respect among teammates. The interdependence among teammates also motivates students to help one another learn.

If we want our desegregated schools to help us achieve a harmoniously integrated society, we must take action. Words and good intentions are not enough. Our research has shown that the action that is most likely to produce results is the creation of multiracial, cooperative learning teams in classrooms.

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