

# **Jim Crow Revitalized: What is the relationship between teacher working conditions and the opportunity gap?**

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## **Rationale:**

The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between teacher working conditions and student performance. Research has indicated that instructional approaches differ based upon students' socio-economic status (SES) and race in elementary schools (Battey, 2012, p. 127). A comparative study was conducted between two Ward Six District of Columbia Public Schools. Although these schools are in the same ward, they serve students with different socio-economic statuses and races. Moreover, working conditions in both schools impact teachers' performance differently. However, this study focuses on classroom conditions, workload expectations, and school culture. The question driving this research is, "What is the relationship between teacher working conditions and the opportunity gap?"

## **Literature Review**

The inception of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) required students to gain a deeper understanding of all content. These standards continually posed instructional concerns within Title I schools because many students were seemingly performing significantly below grade level. Current educational research discusses the impact of teacher working conditions on students' learning. Carter and Welner (2013) concludes that achievement gaps arise from opportunity gaps. Currently within DCPS, the teacher turnover rate is 25% (SBOE, 2018). Several statistical sources list working conditions as a contributing factor to teacher satisfaction.

Leithwood (2006) conducted a study that emphasized the teaching conditions that matter. In this study, six areas were highlighted; workload volume, workload complexity, culture, structures, community relations, and school operating procedures. Within each of the six areas, sub categories expounded upon how those areas could be addressed in the workplace "...when positive working conditions exist, it has a positive impact on students' performance."

Condron & Freeman (2013) conducted a study that also found that achievement gaps are related to working conditions. Further analysis of this study found that schools with poor working conditions also showed racial disparities. The Metlife Study of the American Teacher (2013) also investigated teacher working conditions. This study also showed a correlation between working conditions and students' socio-economic status.

Achievement gaps are measured by high stakes testing. Disparities in achievement show a comparison among the students' test scores in different schools and different districts. These disparities often reflect lower achievement for African American and Latino students (Carter & Welner, 2013).

Opportunity gaps are disparities in resources that are addressed by pro-active measures implemented to prevent achievement gaps. “Thinking about unequal opportunity highlights the causes” (Carter & Welner, 2016). The opportunity gap includes factors extending beyond standardized test scores, such as home environments, homelessness, access to healthcare, and teachers’ working conditions. Teachers with favorable working conditions are allowed more flexibility and resources that meet students’ specific needs. Battey (2012) found that student – teacher relationships in schools of poverty contribute just as much to student performance as teachers’ instructional practice. The study also highlights the increased negative reactions teachers had towards students in Title I schools, as opposed to students in non-Title I schools, which are schools that service low income students. Title I schools are Teachers’ interactions with students can only be addressed through professional development, which is a component of working conditions.

### **Methodology**

This study was conducted using a teacher survey and district test data. The teacher survey was completed by 27 teachers. Teachers answered questions that addressed three of the six areas identified by Leithwood (2006). The survey questions addressed the area of workload complexity, school safety, and school cleanliness. For example, teachers were asked if they were required to teach the curriculum with fidelity to address workload complexity and instructional autonomy. Using DCPS school profile data, a demographic profile was developed.

### **Analysis**

The teacher survey and district test data showed a strong correlation between teachers’ working conditions and student performance. School A serves a population of 82% Black and Non-Hispanic students. In school A, 14% of students were proficient in Math and 86% were performing below grade level. In English Language Arts (ELA), School A reported 12% of students proficient in ELA and 88% below proficient (My School DC, n.d.). Based upon the teacher survey results, School A reported inadequate facilities and 90% reported a lack of autonomy with instructional delivery.

School B served a population consisting of 69% White and Non-Hispanic students, and 18% Black and Non- Hispanic students. In School B, 77% of students were proficient or above in Math and 23% were below proficient. In ELA 78% of students were proficient or above in ELA and 22% were below proficient (My School DC, n.d.). Based upon survey results, School B reported adequate facilities and 80% reported autonomy with instructional delivery. “The evidence is strong that teacher working conditions matter, and that they influence the performance of teachers and therefore the learning of students “(Leithwood, 2006).

During this study an interview was also conducted with a teacher who taught in both locations. This teacher noted the drastic difference in working conditions between the two schools. The teacher stated that School A allows teachers more instructional autonomy and that the school was safer. She expounded upon an incident in School B when a parent came to her room to confront a student.

## **Recommendation**

Although, the research conducted was limited to a small group in DCPS, the study shows a correlation between working conditions and student performance. My recommendation is that this research be expanded throughout DCPS to determine the prevalence of working conditions that impede students learning and stifles teacher success.

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