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Long-Term Gains In Minority Education: An Overlooked Success?

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Amid the intense debates about how much progress the nation has made in raising student achievement and whether federal investments in education have produced results, one important trend tends to be overlooked -- namely, the notable gains made by African American and Latino students in reading and math achievement since 1971.

According to long-term trend data from the [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#), the most credible national measure of changes in achievement over the past four decades, progress varies by age group for students overall.

Between the early 1970s and 2008, 9-year-olds have made sizable gains in both math and reading -- increases of 24 points in math and 12 points in reading on the NAEP scale of 0-500. Thirteen-year-olds have made smaller, though still significant, gains of 15 points in math and 5 points in reading. For 17-year-olds, however, changes in achievement have been so small as to be insignificant -- 2 points in math and 1 point in reading.

But the record looks entirely different and much more positive when long-term NAEP trend data is broken out by racial/ethnic group. White, African American, and Latino students -- the three racial/ethnic groups included in the long-term NAEP -- have made greater achievement gains than the averages for students overall, in both reading and math and for all three tested age groups. For instance, between the early 1970s and 2008, reading scores for 9-year-olds rose by 14 points for white students, 34 points for African American students, and 25 points for Latino students -- more in every case than the average gain of 12 points for 9-year-olds overall.

This contrast between trends for students overall and for racial/ethnic groups is especially notable at age 17. Between the early 1970s and 2008, math scores at this age improved by 4 points for white students, 17 points for African American students, and 16 points for Latino students. Reading scores increased by 4 points for white 17-year-olds, 28 points for African Americans, and 17 points for Latinos. All of these gains by racial/ethnic

groups were significant, and all exceeded the insignificant overall change of 2 points in math and 1 point in reading at age 17.

Increases in achievement for African American and Latino students, in particular, were substantially higher than the average gains for students overall at all three age groups and in both subjects.

The broad conclusion bears repeating -- *in both reading and math and at all three ages tested, each of the three major racial/ethnic groups made greater gains in achievement than students did overall.*

But how is it even possible that each of these groups would improve more than the average? The reason has to do with dramatic changes in the racial/ethnic composition of the U.S. student population during the past few decades. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, white children comprised 74 percent of the school-age population in 1980; by 2008, the share of white children had fallen to 56 percent. During the same period, the proportion of African American students increased just slightly from 15 percent to 15.2 percent, while the proportion of Latino students surged from 9 percent to 22 percent. The remaining students are Asian American or other races/ethnicities.

Despite gains in achievement, African American and Latino students still score significantly lower in the aggregate than white students. In reading, white 9-year-olds scored 24 points higher in 2008 than African American students did. In math, white 17-year-olds scored 21 points higher in 2008 than Latino students did.

Thus, the higher-scoring group -- white students -- has significantly shrunk, while the two lower-scoring groups -- African Americans and especially Latinos -- have grown. When the overall population contains a greater share of students from lower-performing racial/ethnic groups, then achievement must go up even more to produce gains in the average score for all students. So, the gains in achievement made by all three racial/ethnic groups have not been sufficient to offset the demographic shift in the student population.

In short, U.S. schools have made mixed progress during the past four decades in raising achievement for students overall but have shown substantial success in improving performance for racial/ethnic groups. In the statistical world, this type of reversal in trends is known as "Simpson's paradox."

Although achievement is not where it should be, notable improvements have been made for white students, African American students, and Latino students. This success should encourage us to rededicate ourselves to helping all students to do better and to eliminate entirely the achievement gap between groups of students.