

**The Achievement Gap Between African-American and
Non-minority Students: How Can We Close the Gap?**

Wayne D. Wells, M.Ed., BS Criminal Justice
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Kimberly Grantham Griffith, PhD
Associate Professor and Faculty Mentor
Lamar University
Department of Professional Pedagogy
College of Education and Human Development

William Allan Kritsonis, PhD
Professor
PhD Program in Educational Leadership
Prairie View A&M University
The Whitlowe R. Green College of Education
Member of the Texas A&M University System
Visiting Lecturer (2005)
Oxford Round Table (2005)
University of Oxford, Oxford England
Distinguished Alumnus (2004)
Central Washington University
College of Education and Professional Studies

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine and search various ways we can close the achievement gap between African-American and Non-minority students within the educational system in the United States.

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Success is achievable when given the right tools and proper preparation.
Wayne D. Wells

Introduction

Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, schools must demonstrate that all children are on the route to proficiency in the core subjects by 2014. Schools that fail to show adequate yearly progress face various sanctions including the requirement that schools offer certain students supplemental education services (Special Education Law Bulletin, March 2007, Volume 13, Number 3). Across America, the student populations are changing. Many schools face the same challenges when it comes to closing the achievement gap. The following research will explore possible ways to help close the academic achievement gap between African-American and non-minority children.

Purpose of the Article

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Why Are There So Many African-American Children So Far Behind?

Too often as educators we are constantly bombarded with questions such as “What’s wrong with America’s school system?” “Why are there so many African-American children who lag so far behind?” We soon discover answers like, it’s a lack of parental involvement, no school/home relationship exists, or they just don’t care about their education. There are some who would point the proverbial finger at the parents when it comes to why African-American children lag behind academically. The blame game does exist today. The high schools blame the middle schools while the middle schools blame the elementary schools and ultimately the elementary schools blame it on the home environment of the student. However, the reality is that teacher in classroom is certified, trained, and took an oath that mandated all students would learn regardless of their background. The reality behind all of this madness is that without a proper education, African-American children are more likely to end up in the penal system. A system that cost far more to incarcerate than it cost to educate. According to Dr. Alvin Poussaint, author of several books and Harvard School Psychology Professor, “ We are now facing a dropout rate among black males from high school over 50% in many cities around the country” (Hoke, 2006, p.1). Therefore, it is vitally important for educators, administrators, superintendents, communities, and stakeholders to focus on the most challenging issue that confronts us.

One of the most pressing and challenging issues that continue to plague the educational system in the United States is the achievement gap between African-American and Non-minority children. Educators are expected to close the gap by teaching to the needs of all children. It is apparent that we are living in the age of accountability. Schools are monitored to ensure the success of every child, be it African-American, Hispanic American, European American (white), Asian, etc. According to Anderson Franklin (2004), in *From Brotherhood to Manhood*, it explains how feelings of

alienation and ambivalence toward formal education are cultivated: What schools often provide for boys of African descent is a slowly nurtured understanding that being somebody is more directly attached to the peer culture than to the classroom. Our potential and ability are robbed by the climate in schools thoughtlessness...Such attitudes cultivated among black males by the school environment play into racially coded expectations that become self-fulfilling prophecy. Poorly equipped schools, school environments preoccupied with behavior problems, mismatches between acquired, marketable skills and career opportunities, and the resulting awareness of our increasing marginality as young adults—all contribute to the way society makes African-American men invisible and undermines their interests in learning. Many young boys of African descent fight a loss of faith, feeling that the outcome of education is not worth the humiliation (P. 94). Thus this sets up the reason to believe it is essential to compare student performance based upon subgroups or ethnicities.

Student Performance

Performance is often compared among types of students as well. Most school systems track performance on achievement tests by race (African-American, Hispanic American, Native American, Asian American, and White) in order to assess how different groups of students compare to one another (Mana Singham, *The Canary in the Mine: The Achievement Gap between Black and White Students*," Phi Delta Kappan, September 1998, pp. 8-15). Across the country, school administrators are well aware there are significant differences that do appear between different races of students. It is also established that nationwide African-American learners generally perform below their white peers on standardized achievement tests (Mana Singham, *The Canary in the Mine: The Achievement Gap between Black and White Students*," Phi Delta Kappan, September 1998, pp. 8-15). The news media and academic press continue to report about the black-white test score gaps and lags in minority achievement. The mistaken impression almost always left by national reports and the polemics of educational reformers is that gaps in performance are related to skin color (William L. Bainbridge, "Is the Test Score Gap Really Color Based?" *The School Administrator*, August 2000, p. 50). No single cause for these performance disparities have been determined, but no legitimate concrete evidence has ever been found that characteristics such as race affect students' cognitive ability (See Gould, Stephen Jay, *The Mismeasure of Man*, (New York: Norton, 1981); and R.C. Lewenton, Steven Rose and Leon J. Kanin, *Not in Our Genes* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

What Does Research Indicate?

Some research indicates the achievement gap may be linked to environmental issues. We know that it begins early; for instance, there is a link between vocabulary knowledge as children enter school. The more spoken language a child has, the greater the opportunities for success. Children who are submerged in a print rich environment tend to be more successful with academics. This confirms earlier findings that family and community differences have a significant impact on student achievement (Jencks, C., Phillips, M. eds. (1998). *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, Washington, D.C: Brookings

Institution). We also know what students are taught is one of the most powerful predictors of how they will perform on achievement tests (Porter, A.C. (in press). "Prospects for School Reform and Closing the Achievement Gap," In C.A. Dwyer (Ed.) Measurement and Research in the Accountability Era. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates). When minority students are given the chance to study a rigorous curriculum, they are more likely to be able to perform well on standardized tests. The quality of the teacher also plays a vital role in the success of minority students. Those teachers who are "highly skilled and qualified" are going to be able to teach to the needs of every learner.

Brown vs. Board of Education

The United States Supreme Court case *Brown vs. Board of Education* marked 50 years in 2004. Yet despite half a century of efforts to improve educational opportunities for African-American students and other minorities, a large achievement gap persists (National Assessment of Educational Progress (1999). Long-Term Trend Assessment, Washington, D.C: U.S. Department of Education; National Assessment of Educational Progress (2003). Trial Urban District Assessment, Washington, D.C: U.S. Department of Education; National Center for Education Statistics (2001). Educational Achievement and Black-White Inequality, Washington, D.C: U.S. Department of Education). By 12th grade, the average African-American and Hispanic student can only do math and read as well as a white eighth grader. In addition, high school completion rates remain markedly lower for students of color (Orfield, G. Losen, D., Wald, J., Swanson, C. (2004) *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Civil Rights Project at Harvard University). The reality behind all of this simply suggests that we are not closing the gap between our minority and majority learners.

Many educational reformers believe there are factors that determine which ethnic groups will be successful during their voyage through the educational system. Debates range from environmental influences to societal and intellectual competency. Some believe that children are a product of their environments and this can either cause them to be successful or unsuccessful with learning. Environmental factors can be a serious problem with student achievement. On the contrary, some reformers or critics choose to believe the teachers can make a difference in the lives of those students who come from environments that are not productive and conducive for learning. There are many examples of highly successful (resilient) people who grew up in poverty and found mental stimulation and protein by good fortune, research continues to indicate a direct correlation between the education level of the people in the home and the amount of protein in the diet and student success in school (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) – U.S. Department of Education, "Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99"). We do know that children who come from high socioeconomic backgrounds have great advantages in completing schoolwork and they are certainly going to have access to learning devices such as computers, Internet access, and other manipulatives that will enhance or accelerate learning. Some surprising findings have indicated that the effects of poverty extend beyond individual families (Viadero, p. 18-19). In schools with 25% of the student body living in poverty, all students, whether poor, affluent, or in between, tend to achieve less than students from

schools in affluent communities. Furthermore, even after a family has achieved higher income levels, the effects of poverty can linger.

How Can We Use What We Know to Effectively Narrow the Academic Achievement Gap?

As educators we must focus on the realities that face many of our children on a daily basis. Without giving careful consideration and attention to the societal and environmental factors that plague many of our minority learners, we will continue to be frustrated. Our society must go further than the classroom to stop the epidemic of student failure. We must focus on educating those in our communities. There will be success to some extent. However, the issues that many of our learners face are social and economic in nature. Justice must prevail in these two arenas in order to make a lasting impact on the educational system in America. Consequently, we have become even more diverse in our populations here in the United States. As our student populations continue to grow, our cultural backgrounds and heritages in our schools are also increasing. Teachers and school leaders must become innovative in the way we teach, engage, and motivate our various student populations. Our sensitivity to the needs of these diverse groups of students is required in order for student achievement to become a focal point. The focus must be given to those who are most economically disadvantaged as well as educationally disadvantaged. These students must have access to the best resources possible. Time and effort must be spent in planning activities that will engage the learners. There is a direct correlation between understanding the relationship between poverty, levels of family education, and achievement of race. School leaders can become more effective when closely examining the interrelationship of these factors.

A few researchers have identified changes in classroom management for early grades which, compared to standard practices, can help both black and white children, but appear to benefit black children from households of lower socioeconomic status the most (Ronald F. Ferguson, "Can Schools Narrow The Black-White Test Score Gap?" In Christopher Jencks and Meridith Phillips (eds), *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, pp. 318-374, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C. 1998, p. 367). The buzzword in education these days seems to be ACCOUNTABILITY. Schools are graded on whether their students are successful or not. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and State Accountability Systems believe schools should be compared to other schools. However, it would seem fair to compare "oranges-to-oranges" and "apples-to-apples". According to

(Singham, p. 11-15), using community poverty and adult education levels as primary characteristics would be more attainable and would produce more accurate gains in achievement. Research shows the gaps in achievement levels can be narrowed and learning can be improved for all groups of students (Singham, p. 11-15). Teachers can become more culturally responsive in their approach to teaching minority students. With this approach, teachers should remove barriers that cause minority students to not be challenged or not have high expectations. The focus would then shift to students and teachers learning how to engage in dialogue that would produce cultural responses. This would strengthen the students' ability to assess their own learning.

Teachers need to participate in ongoing learning institutes that will afford them opportunities for professional development and growth. Professional development sessions must yield to current trends in educating minority students who are economically disadvantaged. The need to implement new research-based strategies becomes the driving force in the classroom.

Concluding Remarks

The achievement gap has always been a problem area in our educational system in the U.S. The daunting task of closing the gap is neither unproblematic nor easy on the pocket. We are familiar with *Brown vs. Board of Education* and all of its legal ramifications. We believed the unanimous decision would remedy the problem in the school system. We were certain the educational system would meet the needs of all students. The system assumed all students entered school with the same ability and on a level playing field. Consequently this became the thorn in the side of many school systems across America. We've seen some students become successful while others have been unsuccessful and even some have become a burden to society by simply dropping out of school. In order for the achievement gap to be closed, our approach will have to become innovative and diverse. It is going to require total commitment from a societal standpoint. We have to find ways to make sure all of our learners will be successful. When children start school we must ensure that we are going to give them all of the resources they need in order to be successful. The primary responsibility to educate children rests upon the shoulders of teacher, administrators, counselors, superintendents, and those who are stakeholders. Yes, parents are responsible as well. But, if there is no responsible parent, the school must find a way to make a difference in the lives of those who are by far underprivileged and underrepresented.

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