

The Racial Academic Achievement Gap



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Abstract

Closing the racial academic achievement gap is a problem that must be solved in order for future society to properly function. Minorities including African-American and Latino students' standardized test scores are much lower than white students. By the end of fourth grade, African American, Latino, and poor students of all races are two years behind their wealthier, predominantly white peers in reading and math. By eighth grade, they have slipped three years behind, and by twelfth grade, four years behind (Columbia University, 2005). Students' socioeconomic backgrounds and teachers' racial expectations are two factors that contribute to the academic achievement gap. In order to close the gap, there must be equivalent standards and expectations for high and low achieving schools, as well as regular evaluation of instruction. Creating rigorous curricula for all students and helping students catch up by offering "tried and true" intervention programs will assist in the closure of American's racial academic achievement gap.

*Much education today is monumentally ineffective.
All too often we are giving young people cut flowers
when we should be teaching them
to grow their own plants.*

- John W. Gardner

Introduction

Closing the racial achievement gap is an existing national, state, and local issue that educators should be concerned about. The groups that are being affected are mostly minorities, African Americans and Latinos decent. African Americans on average perform at a lower level than do their majority group counterparts (Caucasian students) in academic situations, stated Walton & Cohen. This discrepancy occurs on a daily basis in American's schools.

Facts and Figures

According to research performed by Columbia University (2005), the following are facts concerning the racial academic achievement gap.

- ❖ By age three, children of professionals have vocabularies that are nearly 50 percent greater than those of working class children, and twice as large as those of children whose families are on welfare.
- ❖ By the end of fourth grade, African American, Latino, and poor students of all races are two years behind their wealthier, predominantly white peers in reading and math. By eighth grade, they have slipped three years behind, and by twelfth grade, four years behind.

- ❖ Only one in 50 Hispanic and black 17-year-olds can read and gain information from specialized text (such as the science section of a newspaper) compared to about one in 12 white students
- ❖ By the end of high school, black and Hispanic students' reading and mathematics skills are roughly the same as those of white students in the eighth grade
- ❖ African American students are three times more likely than white students to be placed in special education programs, and are half as likely to be in gifted programs in elementary and secondary schools.
- ❖ Among 18- to 24-year olds, about 90 percent of whites have either completed high school or earned a GED. Among blacks, the rate is 81 percent; among Hispanics, 63 percent. However, a much larger share of blacks earn GEDs than whites, and only about 50 percent of black students earn regular diplomas, compared with about 75 percent of whites.
- ❖ Black students are only about half as likely (and Hispanics about one-third as likely) as white students to earn a bachelor's degree by age 29.
- ❖ One in three African American males will be incarcerated in state or federal prison at some point during their lives, and the rate is significantly higher for black men who do not finish high school. For Hispanic males, the rate is one in six; for white males, one in 17
- ❖ Homicide has been leading cause of death among African Americans aged 15 to 34 since 1978. The lifetime risk of violent death for young black males is one in 27, and for black females, one in 17. By contrast, one in 205 young white males and one in 496 young white females are murdered.

Reasons for the Racial Achievement Gap

There are numerous reasons for the development of the racial achievement gap including home environments of minorities, school-related causes, and political influences. Children from underprivileged backgrounds are less likely to be born into literacy-rich surroundings. Many disadvantaged children derive from homes where education is not a priority. They are often left to struggle through homework alone.

Many of these students feel alone at school as well when teachers do not offer them adequate educational experiences.

Nelson (2007) states, “Teachers, like all of us, are part of this society in which race, ethnicity, and class stimulate certain stereotypes, and teachers appear to have regarded their students through the lens of those prejudices. Children have terrible breaking through their teachers’ preconceived notions of their abilities and interests.”

Numerous teachers are not establishing high expectations for minority students. These students are not stimulated using higher level thinking questions. Many children of African American and Latino descent are viewed as inadequate by educators from their moment of arrival.

While minority children are dealing with their home situations and the prejudices of teachers at school, politics are also hindering their educational growth. Students of disadvantaged areas attend schools that have imbalanced resources for teachers and children. Funding per child is lower than that of students in affluent areas. Many of these schools receive Title I funds. Money from Title I goes to high-poverty schools; more than two-thirds is used for instructional purposes (Nelson, 2007). The terrible

issues that occurs is Title I funds are often cut, so programs for minority students are always disappearing due to political decisions.

Strategies for Closing the Racial Achievement Gap

- ❖ Have consistent standards for high and low achieving schools and evaluate the delivery of the instruction.
- ❖ Create rigorous curricula for all students.
- ❖ Help students catch up by offering “tried and true” intervention programs.
- ❖ Provide highly qualified teachers.

Project Responses

The academic achievement gap is a vital issue that must be corrected. Allowing other teachers to reflect is extremely beneficial. Through this process, educators are driven to analyze their personal and professional practices; and modify them accordingly.

Following are colleagues’ responses to the findings on the racial achievement gap.

- I agree that there is a major gap between minority students and their white pupils.

The problem can usually be traced back to the home life. However, in today's society so many of our children go home to a situation that is not ideal. It is becoming that the ideal home life with two parents that promote and encourage education is no longer the norm. Since the circumstances have changed, we (as educators) must change our approach. It is now our responsibility to be proactive to reach those students who go home to an environment that is not literacy rich.

(Devin Liferidge, 4th Grade Teacher and Varsity Basketball Coach)

- I agree that there is a crisis among our schools today in reference to the racial achievement gap. You continually hear people talk about the problems with the racial achievement gap, but talk doesn't alleviate any of the problems. It is the actions of the teachers in our classrooms that will make the difference. It is disheartening to hear some teachers make comments about a student "just being like that". What a pessimistic viewpoint! That's where a teacher's most important duty comes into play; doing what it takes to reach **all** of our students, regardless of race or economic status. Teachers must believe in the success of all of their students and plan their curriculums accordingly. Students will give you what you expect. If you expect less from one group, that's exactly what you will get. And, who gets hurt? The kids are the ones who suffer from biased attitudes. Motivate all children, challenge all children, reach all children, and make a difference in the lives of ALL of your children! (Crissie Stephens, 4th Grade Teacher)
- It just so happens that I did my thesis on African American Performance on standardized tests, including the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT). Studies found poorer kids consistently score lower than white ones. Studies also show the gap is established by the time students enter kindergarten, with minority and low-income students on average achieving behind white students. The gap widens as students progress through school. A big source of the problem is low expectations. Research shows that many of our children in poverty belong to African American groups. Poverty is related partially to their experience and exposure to fewer books, field trips, vacations, interactions with parents, low

expectations, equality, boring curricula, medical problems, social support and encouragement, gender, and positive relationships. All of these factors contribute to low test scores for African Americans. I also included some strategies in my thesis that are being implemented in school districts, including afternoon school, tutoring programs, and workshops on the academic achievement gap. (Genece Porter, 5th Grade Math Teacher)

- The Racial Achievement Gap is a problem affecting the academic performance of America's minorities. It has to end! Educators need to teach to the child and not to the color of their skin or their socioeconomic background. Children are in desperate need of educational reform and it is up to educators like me to make that important difference. In my class, all kids can and will learn! My expectations will make or break a child's success. I am dedicated to making children learn. (Lena O. Green, 5th Grade Math and Social Studies Teacher)

Analyzing information is critical in the process of diminishing the racial achievement gap. Understanding how and why this crisis exists will assist in the closure of the gap. As educators and politicians continue their investigative reviews of the racial achievement gap, policies and programs should be developed to end this serious dilemma.

Conclusion

It is evident that there is a substantial crisis concerning America's educational system. Children are being academically neglected because of their race, ethnicity, and societal class. The disparity of education in this nation is destructive to the future. In order to build an effective, productive educational system; high standards and

expectations must be established. Intervention programs and activities should be facilitated by highly qualified, dynamic educators.

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