Closing the Achievement Gap As Addressed in Student Support Programs

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Abstract

This research will focus on three components: (1) factors contributing to the achievement gap, (2) common errors made by policy makers with regard to school reform, and (3) recommendations to educators, policy makers, and parents on closing the achievement gap through results-based student support programs. Examples of each of the three components will be presented with cross-references for further research. The first part of the research will focus on data collected by researchers in the fields of education, psychology, and health who have contributed their ideas to the challenges of education and society. The design of this first part of the research presents information collected from 10-30 years by individuals addressing possible factors contributing to the achievement gap and focuses on that background information in order to establish a foundation of the current information presented. The second part of this research is reflective of current thinking on the modern American school's role in closing the achievement gap as addressed in student support programs.

Closing the Achievement Gap as Addressed in Student Support Programs

Perhaps the debate of closing the achievement gap is as old as the birth of this nation we call the United States of America. The founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin both shared their unique perspectives of education at that time. Thomas Jefferson believed that "the primary purposes of education were the development of literacy and informed citizenship in order to effectively conduct the processes of democratic government and of meritocracy." He believed that education for an informed citizenry needed to emphasize the classical, academic, or liberal education subjects" (Best, 1962). Whereas, Benjamin Franklin believed that "education should, in addition, foster economic development and that students should acquire that knowledge which is both 'ornamental and practical'" (Best, 1962, p. 133). Benjamin Franklin believed in schools having vocational training based on the operational definition of vocational training in his day (p. 133).

There are a variety of education reforms. Some education reforms concentrate on teachers (i.e., testing of new teachers in their respective content area, teaching by technology performance standards, better teacher pay, and additional in-service and professional development opportunities with longer career ladders for teachers with more incentives for promotion and merit pay) (Shanker, 1990). Some education reforms are directed at students (i.e., national standards in specific academic subjects to be met by students at specific grade levels usually 4th, 8th, and 12th grades; high stakes or exit testing to determine whether students should or should not graduate; stiffer academic standards; more courses taken by each student in science, mathematics, language; no more social promotion; more frequent standardized testing; and more homework (1990).

According to Herr (2002), "school reform proposals have largely focused on the structure and content of schools, not on the changing circumstances that affect the development of children and youth." Some policy makers and a few members within our society believe that children are unaffected by other variables such as social and economic conditions which do impact children's needs (2002). The assumption is that schools operate in a vacuum and are therefore not affected by these variables. "Some school reform proposals seem to suggest that if the content of schooling could be made harder and teachers were more accountable, children would learn and the problems of education would be solved" (p. 5).

However, unfortunately, the factors contributing to the achievement gap are as diverse as the population of individuals impacted by them. In order to understand and to respond appropriately to closing the achievement gap, one has to be knowledgeable of those factors causing the achievement gap and learn about the common errors which policy makers of school reform make in order to prevent from repeating those errors. According to Herr (2002), "views of school reform do not factor into their propositions that, in many cases, because of deteriorating situations in homes, schools have become child-rearing institutions, one of the few places in their lives where many children find predictability, safety, support, and food" (p. 5). Schools are one of the few places that allow children to escape violence in the home and in the community, the increasing lawlessness of gangs and cults, physical or psychological neglect in their home, or lack of family presence and support as they return home from school to empty houses, or to homes where chemical dependency robs parents of their ability to be responsible for their children (Herr, 2002, p. 5). "Many children are experiencing the multiple conditions of disintegrating families, the special tensions associated with the rise of

blended families, the growing pockets of child poverty and child malnutrition, and the growth in the number of single parents and grandparents raising children" (p. 5).

In the 1950's and 1960's there was a traditional "nostalgic" view of the "typical" American family unit where "mother, father, and two children coexisted in a well-ordered, stable, and loving relationship, with the father the unquestioned breadwinner and the mother the nurturing caregiver, is rapidly fading" (p. 5). Herr (2002), stated that the nurturing family unit, rather than being the most common pattern, is rapidly becoming the exception (p. 5). He suggested that the following factors are variables to be considered in understanding the possible causes for the achievement gap and the ineffectiveness of some school reforms to address the achievement gap. Herr stated that some of the factors include: dislocated workers, the need for two-earner families to survive economically, the sexual revolution, delaying of marriage or parenting to pursue career goals, blurring of traditional sex roles, shifts in the system of roles and relationships, comprising family units (p. 5).

According to Farley (1996) and the National Center for Health Statistics (1995), there is an obvious shift from the traditional family unit to an imbalanced family structure. The following are some brief statistics comparing families of the 1990's before the turn of the 21st Century, with families from the 1960's.

- In 1993, 72% of all teenage mothers were unmarried compared to 1960 when only 15% of mothers were single (Farley, 1996).

- By 1993, unmarried mothers accounted for 31% of births.

- In 1994, 61% of married couples had wives in the paid labor force, compared to only 30% of married couples in the 1960's. "The most common American family is now one in which both spouses work" (Farley, 1996).

One can observe based on verifiable data that proponents of school reform need to view and take into consideration the entire perspective complete with every possible variable of factors which adversely impact families in general and children specifically when constructing and implementing school reform. According to Hernandez (1993), "child poverty is a persistent problem in the United Sates." In 1993, 15.7 million children lived in households with income below the poverty line (1993). Hernandez stated that "childhood poverty is clearly associated with the nation's shift away from two-parent families, to lower income, single-parent families, usually headed by the mother (1993). Almost one-half of all children in mother-only families are impoverished (1993). In 1960, 90% of children under age 18 lived in families with a father and a mother. By 1993, 70% of children lived with a father and mother (Hernandez, 1993).

According to Mc Lanahan & Sandefur (1994), "the termination of a two-parent or the absence of the father from the home clearly has negative consequences for children." The statement that a father's presence in the home is vital to the stability of the lives of their children corresponds to a documentary shown on the local television stations in the U.S. Virgin Islands entitled, "Gangs in Paradise." This documentary featured children, adolescents, and young adults who began participating in a life of crime with the respective gangs as early as nine years of age. Many of these youths (mainly boys) came from single-parent homes where the mother was the only parent. There are a number of other variables which also contributes to a child who decides to choose an at risk life style besides living in a single parent home. "Estimates place the number of children who come home from school to an empty house each day, so called latch key children, at more than 4 million" (Herr, 1999). Although the changes in the family structure is not necessarily linked to at risk behaviors among adolescent students,

the change in society regarding the family structure and the manner in which children are raised tend to affect the preparedness of these children to focus on school (1999). According to Herr, "an increasing number of children seem to be vulnerable to psychological, interpersonal, and economic difficulties which may affect their attitudes and behaviors at school" (1999).

Dryfoos (1997), studied reasons which placed adolescents in a high risk category vs. gaining and education, getting a job, parenting effectively, or being able to participate in the political process. The factors which he found to determine high risk behavior and that seemed to occur together include the following:

- Family-lack of supervision, lack of attachment and bonding, parental substance use, abuse and neglect, absence of cultural resources, and frequent moving.

- School-low expectations for success, little commitment to education, being behind in school, and low grades.

- Community-poverty, gangs, and access to guns.

- Individual-susceptibility to peer influences, lack of social competency, and tolerance of deviance/unconventionality (1997, p. 38).

Some researchers believe that the problems affecting students within schools begin before the students even enter school. Label, & Hirchfield (1984) stated that "for several decades, researchers have been acknowledging that adolescent at-risk factors related to school or general social behavior tend to occur early in the child's life, often before they enter school" (1984). Compas, Connor, & Wadsworth (1997) agreed with Label, & Hirchfield (1984) concerning younger children in elementary school who have already begun to exhibit at risk behaviors in schools. "There appear to be increasing proportions of elementary

school children who have attachment disorders, problems of parent-child bonding, failure to thrive, clinical depression, anxiety, and disruptive behavior disorders" (1997). Bloom (1996), and Kazdin (1987), also believed that "oppositional disorders and other antisocial behaviors such as disobedience, opposition to authority figures, and attacking and bullying other children begin to occur as early as 3 years of age and continue through elementary school and into adolescence."

According to Herr (1999), there are many other reasons why many school reform proposals that focus only on "changing the structure and content of schooling are, at best, partial solutions to the problems that schools face." Schools are a microcosm of the communities which are represented by the students which results in a reflection of the social, political, and economic problems of those communities which usually become problems for the schools, and not problems which were caused or fostered by the schools (1999). "The problems that teachers and other educators deal with on a daily basis often come to a school with the children as they act out the stresses and strains of their homes or neighborhoods" (Herr, 1999).

Ohanian (2000), illustrated the point concerning common errors made by policy makers with regard to school reform when he demonstrated that the national goals for education pertaining to school reform continues to ignore the contexts in which schools operate and where children live. For example, the first goal of the national effort was called America 2000 and was initiated by former President George H. Bush and then was later adopted by former President Clinton and renamed Goals 2000: Educate America Act. This national reform states in Goal 1: "All children in America will start school ready to

learn." Ohanian stated that in an "idealized sense that is a worthy goal." However, "in more pragmatic terms, the information discussed previously about many children coming to elementary school with clinical depression, attachment disorders, or conduct disorders suggests that many children will not start school ready to learn; their parents will be unable to help them (Goal 8), and many schools will be unable to offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning (Goal 7)" (2000). Ohanian asserted that the data discussed "do suggest that a sizable number of children grow up in family and community conditions that are not conducive to or reinforcing of learning" (2000). School reform proposals should also include students with multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1985), and emotional intelligences (Goleman, 1995) instead of focusing only on improving the structure of the school, raising academic standards, and incorporating high stakes testing for both teachers and students (Ohanian, 2000).

Herr summed up the common errors made by policy makers with regard to school reform by stating, "to advance proposals that do not attend to the variability in students' needs but instead emphasizes that 'one size of schooling fits all' is to risk the loss of greater numbers of students through dropping out or non-engagement with the academic content offered to them" (1999).

Johnson, Johnson, and Downs (2006) clearly articulated recommendations to educators, policy makers, and parents on closing the achievement gap through results-based student support programs. In order for educators, policy makers, and parents to close the achievement gap, they first have to ask the right question. Instead of asking the question, "What do counselors do?" which, according to Johnson, Johnson, & Downs leads to an "endless circle of describing a variety of process change" the new question to be asked should be,

"How are students different as a result of the student support program?" (2006, p. 8). Students can benefit from a guidance program by acquiring new knowledge of skills (p. 8). Johnson, Johnson, & Downs compared the results-based programs model with the process-based services model to demonstrate that the results-based programs model effectively and efficiently addresses the diverse population and personalities of students enrolled in the public schools from K-12. In their book, *Building a results-based student support program*, Johnson, Johnson, & Downs showed the benefits of results-based student support programs in comparison to process-based services model in these following areas: services vs. program, helping vs. teaching, what counselors will do vs. what students will learn, process vs. results, reacting vs. planning ahead, individual assignment vs. teamwork, deductive vs. inductive needs assessment, user satisfaction vs. student results, reactive vs. proactive, complying with administration expectations vs. achieving results, and equal opportunity for students vs. student equity (pp. 11-16).

The schools' focus should be on meeting students where they are mentally, socially, academically, and emotionally and assist them to achieve their fullest potential through a team effort of professionals working at the school who are focused on the students' achievements based on verifiable data. According to Rowell (2006), "when counseling policies and practices do not empower people, they should be subjected to change." Furthermore, states Rowell, "it is overall preferable to have practitioners working in solidarity with youth and families to take the lead in realigning school reform with a more humane educational agenda than to pursue aligning with school reform narrowly focused on raising test scores." The current trends of today focuses on results-based student

support programs and teams through the guidance of an advisory council to assist in students' achievements and results substantiated by data.

In conclusion, in order for educators, policy makers, and parents to be able to address the issue of closing the achievement gap through results-based student support programs, the operative principle needed is accountability. According to the American School Counselor Association (2003), accountability has moved from a focus on teaching (inputs) to a focus on learning (outcomes) (2003). It is the "show me attitude that is used to answer the questions that concern what difference individuals or their programs have made to students, families, teachers, schools, and districts" (2003). However, that accountability needs to begin first at home with parents assuming their rightful responsibilities by educating their children as early as when their baby utters his/her first cry and is attended to by the parents. Schools will continue to fulfill their respective roles and responsibilities by ensuring results-based student support programs focused on students' growth and achievements. However, parents need to realize that schools are only an extension of the home and do not replace the home. Therefore, providing an environment at home which protects and preserves children's self-efficacy through education, love, discipline, accountability, and an awareness of God are the building blocks of closing the achievement gap.

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