

THE GAP

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In 1954 the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka* ended legal segregation of public schools in this country. The vote was unanimous. Prior to this ruling the South had “separate but equal” schools for white and black students. Nobody believed they were equal but this had been the law since the Supreme Court ruling in 1896 in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*. Prior to 1954 there had been no legally enforced school segregation in other parts of the country, but segregation nevertheless was common.

In 1965, as part of the Great Society legislation, and addressing for the first time needs of the poor, the Elementary and Secondary School Act became law. It focused on inequality of school resources.

Overall achievement continued to lag and, alarmed by this the Reagan government passed *A Nation at Risk* legislation in 1983, based upon the recommendations of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. This commission concluded: “the education foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our future as a nation and a people”. It felt that much of the problem stemmed from a disregard of measurable educational outcomes. Over this issue battles continue to be fought up to the present day. Reformers think that academic performance, as measured by achievement tests, high school completion rates and international comparisons should be the principle bench marks for accessing success or failure of the system. Teachers Unions, school administrators and local schools boards have tended to resist, believing such benchmarks result in too rigid and structured an academic curriculum.

President Bush’s ambitious reform act *No Child Left Behind* became law in 2001. The sense of urgency is unmistakable in *No Child left behind*. Its central aim is to close the achievement gap principally between white and black students. It requires all States to test children in grades 3-8. For the first time scores are

broken down by race, ethnicity and the demographic characteristics associated with educational disadvantage.

Affluent school districts can no longer drift along hiding their low performing students in overall averages that make their schools look good. Implicit in this act, underachieving students can no longer be ignored or neglected.

Other standard based education reforms included in *No Child left behind* are:

1. High school graduation exams, 2. Reform math, 3. Inquiry based science, 4. Encouraging parent involvement, 5. Finding ways to limit bureaucracy and increase flexibility funding at the local level and 6. Giving students in poorly performing schools a choice of other schools.

Standard testing as measuring the important qualities of a well-educated person has been attacked from the outset. Some have felt the entire mandatory State curriculum frameworks are attacks on intellectual freedom. Others feel the tests are designed on middle class social and cultural values and are thus discriminatory against minorities and the poor.

This last concern has become less of an issue in recent years as these tests have largely eliminated the social and cultural biases. For example, studies have shown that black students perform at a level expected of them based on their SAT scores. In other words there is a positive correlation between SAT scores and college performance in this demographic group.

There is growing consensus that tests are important. As former Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, said: "If you think test scores are overrated, let me ask you: are good jobs overrated?"

Finally, President Obama had his school reform plan *Race to the Top* enacted in 2009, which was a component of the 2009 economic stimulus act.

Both *No Child left behind* and *Race to the Top* have in common concerns over poor student achievement, high drop- out rates among high school students and undesirable comparisons with other countries.

Naturally, efforts at reform have created tensions among the various players – local school district, states, the Federal Government and the very strong teachers unions. The main battle may be occurring between the reformers and the unions. The central goal of the reformers is to boost achievement, this being super-imposed upon the preoccupations with equity, disabled students and progressive pedagogics of earlier years. The consensus that created *No Child left behind now* seems to be unraveling. There is wide-spread anger toward the professionals responsible for this reform legislation. The critics argue that a single proficiency bar cannot be set focusing only on those students just below the bar, and neglecting those above or far below the bar.

The reforms are generally unpopular with the education establishment but public polls show a majority is in favor of some form of standard testing.

Race to the Top, President Obama's reform legislation, is interesting because it suggests gauging teacher's performance by student achievement. The National Education Association, the teachers union, doesn't like this. It would probably like for Washington to revert back to being primarily a funder rather than a reformer. The big question is should the Feds demand change for their dollars or continue the funding and allow States, the districts and communities to be the decision makers.

Race to the Top advocates school choice and encourages the establishment of Charter schools.

The anti- reform forces argue that 1. With national standards in place, States will lower State-developed standards in order to "pass" as many schools as possible. 2. States with high standards in the first place will receive less money than States who have lowered standards but achieve a higher pass rate. The curriculum will be narrowed to those courses most critical to passing the standard tests.

These battles rage on and no one should think that the topic of education in this country is anything but fiercely political. One might conclude that the students get lost in these battles. Education reform consensus seems to be exhausted. The anti-reform, status-quo defenders – the unions, the schools of education faculties, school board associations – are rallying. They don't like school choice or standard based testing. They are strongly opposed to Charter schools. This establishment might well want to restore the tranquility and hegemony it enjoyed before the early 1980's.

But that seems unlikely. There are serious issues – some politically hot – that must be resolved: 1. Greater or lesser freedom for States and parents, 2. More charter schools or fewer, 3. School-based accountability, merit pay or not, and most important in today's political climate: 5. Narrowing the achievement gap, referring mainly to black and white students and focusing specifically on black males.

To tell this story I go back to 1954 and the Supreme Court striking down school segregation. It would be difficult to overvalue the importance of this ruling. It led in the following 20 or so years to one of the most important social revolutions and upheavals in the history of the United States.

Since 1960 an astonishing and largely peaceful revolution in the status of blacks and race relations has transformed this country. But the achievement gap between white and black students has proved to be resistant to change and sustained improvement. It began narrowing after the 1954 Supreme Court decision especially in the 70's and 80's, although overall academic achievement began lagging behind other industrialized countries. This led to the 1965 and 1983 Federal legislation.

And then in the mid to late 80's something unexpected happened. The achievement gap began to widen and dropouts among black high school students increased. This overall trend has not been reversed in the past 25 years and the results are alarming. What happened?

There are cruel ironies involved in at least part of the explanation. The large black migration in mid-century occurred with blacks moving away from the oppressive environment of the rural South into the large industrial cities of the Northeast and upper Midwest. Urban city whites took flight to the suburbs at the same time leaving the blacks in ever-enlarging ghettos and poverty stricken areas and still essentially segregated from mainstream white, affluent society. Schools in these areas became poorly funded and essentially deteriorated. Ironically every inner city has schools named for the great civil rights leaders of earlier generations – Booker I. Washington, Fredrick Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois, Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. These schools became warehouses for the poor minorities and are nearly 100% segregated today.

At about the same time in the mid to late 80's crack hit the streets or the ghettos and suddenly the already fragile family structure became even more so, as young women as well as men began using crack. The “crack baby” came into being at this time.

Joe Marshall, the founder of the Omega Boys Club in San Francisco states that the two worst days in the history of African Americans were the day they arrived here as slaves and the day crack hit the streets. This occurrence can't be underestimated in importance.

Looking back over the past 25 years the old civil rights leaders might ask: was the struggle worth it? - the lynching, church burnings, police brutality, sitting in the back of the bus, separate water fountains, the struggle to win Brown vs. Board of Education. Was it for this, they ask – high high school dropout rate, high crime and drug use, high teenage pregnancy rate, Rap music, the deterioration of family – that we struggled and won the civil rights movement of the 50's, 60's and 70's?

There is growing agreement that the best way to attack these societal ills and cure them is through education, specifically eliminating the achievement gap that exists mainly between blacks and whites, but also between Latinos and whites.

The greatest concern, though, is for black males, by far the highest risk of all the demographic groups.

The definition of achievement gap is the educational disparity in performance of groups of students, especially groups defined by gender, race/ethnicity, ability and socio-economic status. It is observed in standardized test scores, GPA, dropout rate, college enrollment and college completion rates. These gaps have been used to illustrate social injustice and to justify actions based on eradicating them.

There is hard data to support the existence of a black-white achievement gap:

1. The early childhood longitudinal study, Kindergarten class (ECLS-K), administered by the US Dept. of Education, has been tracking the progress of a national sample of children who entered Kindergarten in 1988-99. There is a difference in reading and math skills between black and white children at the point of school entry, but the difference is small. This difference grows, however, during elementary school and the gap widens.

8th grade basic level of reading proficiency for black students was 55%.

The percentage of white students at that level was 84%.

In math 47% of black 8th grade students performed at or above basic level of proficiency compared to 82% proficiency of white students.

This gap varies from State to State and school district to school district – higher in Pennsylvania than in Arizona, higher in Washington DC than in Boston. The reading & math proficiency for 8th grade black students is much closer to that of white 4th graders than white 8th graders.

2. Let us look at high school graduation rates:

Studies done in 1998 and 2002 showed that 78% of white students and 56% of black students who had entered the 9th grade 4 years earlier graduated.

The graduation rate among black males is lower. In the San Francisco Unified School District, only 35% of black males entering the 9th grade will ultimately graduate. In Oakland the graduation rate is 25%.

3. College readiness

Three criteria must be met: High school graduation, pre-requisite pre-college courses and demonstration of basic literacy skills.

Nationally 40% of white graduates and 23% of black graduates are college ready.

In 2008 the average SAT score for white students was 1065, for black students 856. The black SAT scores were the lowest among all major ethnic groups in the US. Locally at Chabot Community College 80% of incoming freshmen are not ready for college level English and Math.

4. College enrollment:

36% of white students enrolled in college get degrees compared with 20% of black students.

So, there is no question that there is a black – white achievement gap. What are the consequences of this gap?

Inadequate schooling correlates positively with unemployment, drug use, prison and early death.

1. Second class students become second class citizens. When black students leave high school barely knowing how to read or write, their future and the future of our nation is in jeopardy. Currently another generation of black children is drifting through school without acquiring essential skills and knowledge.
2. The achievement gap is not only an educational crisis; it is the main source of ongoing racial inequality, the national wound that

remains unhealed. For too long the racial gap in achievement was treated by civil rights leaders, the media, even scholars as a dirty secret. As Bill Cosby has said: "this dirty secret gets out of school every day at 2.30 pm." The civil rights leader of past years, Robert Moses said: "Algebra is the gatekeeper to citizenship", and he could have thrown in reading as well.

3. There were 1.7 million dropouts from the high school graduating class of 2007. Of course, not all were African American males but a significant percentage was. The US economy will lose \$330 billion income over their life time.

4. The gap strengthens the "blacks are intellectually inferior" stereotype. This burden blacks have had to bear since arriving here in the early 17th century. The American Anthropological Association and the American Psychological Association have both issued strong statements declaring there is little evidence of a link between race and intelligence. What little there is fails to support the genetic hypothesis. Nevertheless many people believe in black intellectual inferiority. Many blacks believe this with resulting harmful effects. The continued black-white achievement gap reinforces the stereotype of racial inferiority. Among blacks this feeling of inferiority lowers expectation leading to lower achievement and expands the gap.

5. The achievement gap slows down the accumulation of African American wealth, creating another gap between whites and blacks. There will never be racial equality and social justice as long as wide gaps exist in income and wealth. Many assume that this income discrepancy is the result of racial discrimination in the work place and there is no question that this exists, but the most important factors are not discrimination but the skills and achievement gap. 8 of 10 jobs now require some post-secondary education. Studies have shown that the

income gap closely tracks the educational gap. Simply comparing black incomes with education levels is revealing. The yearly household income of a black high school dropout is \$23,000, for a high school graduate \$35,000, with a college degree 76,000.

6. The achievement gap results in more African Americans in prison and dying early.

70% of jail inmates are high school dropouts. An AA high school dropout is 60 times more likely to go to jail than an AA college graduate. 45% of the jail population is black. The annual cost to educate a public school student is about \$10,000; to house an inmate is \$25,000. Black male high school dropouts live 9 fewer years than black male high school graduates and have more cardiovascular disease, diabetics and cancer.

Now we get into a difficult area – what is the cause or causes of this achievement gap?

Remember, in the 60's and 70's the achievement gap was slowly narrowing but that narrowing peaked in the years 1985-88?

1. Socio- economic factors correlate highly with academic performance. The argument is that the gap is caused by a long history of racial disparities going back to slavery. Blacks were prohibited from learning to read during slavery and later forced to attend poor segregated schools and forced to work in the fields when white children were in school. Language development is overwhelmingly correlated with socio economic status. Some feel the socio economic factor is indelible. This attitude could in fact contribute to the problem. It could alter a teacher's effort in dealing with a challenging problem.

2. Socio pathologic culture

Advocates of this explanation believe there is something inherent in the black culture that militates against academic achievement. Social ills that many believe are at the root of poor performance include:

Unstable families, poor parenting skills, lack of ambition, negative peer pressure, poor choice of role models, high level of teen pregnancy, drugs and crime and low level parental involvement in children's education. 70% of black children are born to single mothers. 65% of African American children live with single parents. Children in these families are more likely to drop out of school and more likely to become welfare recipients. Single parents exert less control over the behavior of adolescents. Daughters are more likely to become unwed mothers and single parents.

Adverse effects from fathers absent and birth outside marriage are:

- Less academic success

- Behavioral problems

- Substance abuse

- Contact with police

- Sexual relations at earlier age

- Poor as adults

- Less physical and psychological wellbeing as adults

Black parents spend less time with their children than white, Asian and Latino parents. TV, video & computer games are raising their children. It has been estimated that black students spend 7 hours per day watching TV and playing games. That's more time than they are spending in school.

Many Conservatives favor this explanation. They feel the solution to the achievement gap lies within the control of AA themselves.

Supporting this view, research shows home and family variables have a strong impact on children's cognitive development. Perhaps more damaging, however, is the educators tendency to focus on these negative forces rather than on the strength children have.

Racist characterization of black students as lazy, violent and lacking in moral character has led to a negative self-image, which is extremely damaging. The lessons of an oppressed people from slavery to freedom are in danger of being forgotten. A century's worth of progress seems to be in peril.

3. Genetics

If this were the explanation there would be no solution to the achievement gap. As stated earlier, this has been repeatedly repudiated by most scientific groups, but the notion remains deeply ingrained in the American population both white and black. This has been hugely damaging to the cause, not just in eliminating the achievement gap, but also to racial inequality. So long as this belief is so prevalent in our culture the prospect of racial harmony is bleak.

4. Black Identity

Low performance among African American students derive from forces within the AA community

Black folk theories about effort and reward involve the view among blacks that hard work does not pay off, the opposite of "so called" effort optimism.

Blacks have developed an oppositional culture. The idea of doing well in school is "acting white" and involves AA students doing less well than they could so as not to stand apart from their black identity. The negative connotation of "acting white" is learned in the black community and boils down to peer pressure, one of the most powerful factors shaping adolescent behavior.

Some scholars believe a wariness of academic endeavor is the primary cause of the persistent achievement gap – so called “anti- intellectualism” which is inherited from being denied educational opportunities through the centuries. This conflict between academic achievement and black identity is one of the most important reasons for the gap.

5. Educational deprivation

“This exists when a child is deprived of fundamentals essential to sound cognitive development, especially high expectations and great teaching”

Those holding this view don’t necessarily discount the importance of the other explanations, except for the genetic argument. They just feel educational deprivations is the most powerful for the gap. They believe effective educational practices can overcome the other problems.

Kenneth Clark, a major contributor to the strategy that won Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, places responsibility for academic failure and the achievement gap directly with the teachers and administrators. To Mr. Clark all the assumptions associated with “cultural deprivations” are alibis for educational neglect. The result in placing the blame elsewhere is lowered teacher expectation and neglect. Teachers don’t expect the poor and especially AA students to learn. He believes the achievement gap will disappear when teachers are motivated to teach effectively. Good teachers are more important than classroom size, and more important, than mediocre teachers in good high schools. 4 years with good teachers can erase the black-white testing gap. There is no correlation between teaching effectiveness and teacher’s certification or level of graduate degree. Unfortunately the best teachers tend to teach the more privileged students and the least effective teachers teach the more disadvantaged students.

His point of view has large and important support including “Teach for America” where alumni have espoused similar views as Mr. Clarks.

A 2005 survey of the TFA corps resulted in three important findings:

1. Educators have the power to close the achievement gap
2. Expectations of students by teachers, parents, the general public and students themselves can be both powerful tools and powerful obstacles. Low expectations are a significant cause of the gap.
3. The general public has a poor understanding of issues related to the achievement gap. Blame is misplaced on students and families and much of the public is simply unaware of the problem.

The Education Trust, a Washington DC independent non-profit organization, also supports the view that educational deprivation is the primary cause of the gap.

Schools reflect social setting and class of their locations. Affluent students attend schools that improvise, innovate and score well on standard tests. Poor students are captive to more rigid lessons and schedules. Time spent on basic skills, rote learning brings poor test scores. This phenomenon is as much class difference as it is race.

“Educational apartheid system” means one method of instruction for the poor, another for the rich. Many believe poor students need as much structure and top-down direction as possible.

It is argued that different educational experiences and curriculum knowledge are offered to students in different social classes. The working classes are rewarded for obedience and docility, the managerial classes for initiative and assertiveness. Knowledge and skills leading to social power are made available to the advantaged social groups but withheld from the working classes who are offered a more practical curriculum (manual skills and clerical knowledge). A hidden curriculum is tacit preparation for life in the social class from which the student comes. This may be a bit of an overstated generalization, but it seems probable that a student from a

lower class background will not compete well with the student with a higher class socio-economic background.

Why does the achievement gap persist?

The achievement gap persists because it is a problem nobody owns. Black leadership has failed to identify it as a problem worthy of its full attention. As a society we tolerate this ongoing tragedy and embarrassment. The black students are largely hidden from public view, tucked away in inner city schools in those areas of the city we largely avoid. The government throws money at the problem without much improvement seen and seems to lack the political will to solve the dilemma. The education establishment appears to be more obstructionist than willing to face the reality of the problem.

Can we close the gap?

The need to close it has emerged as the civil rights issue of today. The old barriers to equal rights and social justice for African Americans have been largely overcome through the struggle of civil rights leaders of earlier years. Current leaders need to take on the achievement gap as the struggle of this generation.

The gap was closing the 70's and early 80's, so it is not a fixed phenomenon. There are numerous isolated schools across the country where the gap is narrowing. The common theme in these schools is a combination of involvement and intervention from school, parents and community to achieve good results.

To many of those studying the problem, the teachers unions have become the culprits and have significantly contributed to the problem with their insistence on traditional teaching credentials, opposition to merit pay, opposition to alternate school options, and rigid rules about hiring and firing.

Principals need more control over budget, power to hire unlicensed but strong teachers, authority to restructure the school day, freedom to shape the curriculum.

Parents should be given a choice where their children go to school. Choice should not be a class-based privilege.

The government has tinkered with the system since 1965 and accomplished little. *No Child left behind* and a *Race to the Top* alone will not solve the problem.

The nation's education system needs to be fundamentally altered. The alternative is large numbers of black students continuing to leave high school without a sound preparation for life and resulting in a continued perpetuation of old inequalities.

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