

The Achievement Gap and The Schools We Need

Creating the Conditions Where Race and Class No Longer Predict Student Achievement

by Pedro Noguera

The achievement gap is the term commonly used to describe the disparities in academic outcomes and variations on measures of academic ability that tend to correspond to the race and class backgrounds of students. Though such disparities are by no means new, in recent years the effort to “close the achievement gap” has become something of a national crusade. Politicians and private foundations have exhorted educators to take urgent steps to close the gap and put an end to this social scourge. Former President George W. Bush went so far as to accuse those who thought the gap couldn’t be closed of practicing “the soft bigotry of low expectations”. While it’s not clear that the President understood what he meant by this, it is clear that he strongly believed it could be done.

With the enactment of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law in 2001 and its requirement for states to collect data on student achievement and disaggregate test scores by race and other demographic and educational characteristics, awareness about pervasive academic disparities has grown. As a consequence, student achievement data in schools and districts throughout the nation has been publicly revealed and discussed. Yet, bold public discussions have done little to actually close the gap, and Education Secretary Arne Duncan has recently announced that he does not believe schools in the United States will achieve the NCLB mandate of bringing all children to academic proficiency by the year 2014. Though there’s been no formal surrender, there now appears to be a growing realization that the achievement gap will not be eliminated any time soon.

For those who’ve been following the policy charade closely it was obvious long ago that it would take more than a clever slogan or public pressure to close the achievement gap. Unfortunately, under No Child Left Behind, slogans and pressure are about all that schools have received. Over the last eleven years, federal and state governments have readily mandated the use of standardized tests to hold students and schools accountable. More recently, policymakers have called for changes in the content of the curriculum, but they have provided schools with relatively little guidance on what they should actually do to reduce disparities in student achievement. More importantly, educational policy has not acknowledged that disparities in academic outcomes that correspond to the race and class backgrounds of students are actually a multi- dimensional phenomenon related to unequal access to early childhood education (the preparation gap), inequities in school funding (the allocation gap), differences in the amount of support well-educated, affluent parents can provide to their children versus poorer, less-educated parents (the parent gap).

Research also suggest that gaps in academic outcomes are sometimes related to strained relations

between students and their teachers and may be influenced by lower expectations, particularly for poor and minority students (the teacher-student gap). A related phenomenon is tracking, the practice of placing students into groups based on perceptions of their ability. Finally, as many parents know, there are often gaps between how well students do in school (as measured by grades or test scores) versus how well they might have actually done if they were motivated to work to their ability (the performance gap). All of these dimensions are important to understanding student performance but none are considered in most of the discourse about the achievement gap. Moreover, there is little evidence that our policymakers even consider how these dimensions interact and influence student learning.

As one who has studied this issue for several years, written extensively on the topic, and worked closely with schools and districts across the country on efforts to address these issues, it is clear to me that our nation's lack of progress is not merely due to a lack of effort. As a result of the pressure applied by NCLB and the strict accountability that has led districts to fire superintendents and principals when test scores don't improve, educators across the country have been scrambling, and sometimes even cheating, to find ways to raise student test scores and show that gaps in performance can be closed. By now it is clear that neither pressure nor a narrowed focus on test preparation has worked in eliminating the achievement gap or in substantially raising achievement levels for all students. NAEP scores (National Assessment of Educational Progress), also referred to as the nation's report card, have been flat, and in some cases declined over the last several years, graduation rates have barely improved, and on most international measures of academic performance, American children have fallen further behind children in other wealthy nations. Today in most of the nation's largest cities -- Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, St. Louis, etc. -- a dropout rates hover at fifty percent and higher. Clearly, something is wrong with the approach we've taken.

There is absolutely no evidence, however, that our lack of educational progress can be attributed to the fact that educators are not working hard enough. In my work with schools throughout the country, I am often struck by the frenetic pace at which teachers and school administrators are working. However, I am also struck by the fact that many educators are working hard without fully understanding the nature of the problem they are trying to solve. Without clarity and support, and without some willingness to look closely at the schools where progress is being made and without a willingness to learn from them, I am certain that we will not succeed in making much of a dent in closing the achievement gap. More importantly, to the degree that a school or district is mired in debates over who is to blame for the existence of the gap -- lazy and culturally deficient students, uncaring parents, inept teachers, etc. -- and there is a reluctance to share responsibility for finding solutions, there is little chance at all that we will make much progress in addressing the factors that perpetuate the achievement gap in the first place.

Understanding the Gaps

In the research literature, much of the attention on the role and significance of race in disparities in academic outcomes can be traced to a seminal book by Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips entitled *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. In the book, the authors documented what had been well known for some time: African American children, even those from middle class families, consistently perform less well than White children. Yet, while the book presented

numerous studies, most of them based on statistical analyses of large data-bases, it actually did relatively little to shed light on the phenomena other than to document its existence. Since its release in 1998, several other books on the subject have been written, but in most cases, aside from reminding readers of the existence of the gap, relatively little in the way of answers for what should be done to address it have been offered.

With little in the way of guidance from researchers, it is hardly surprising that there is so much confusion among policymakers and educators across the country about what should be done to close the gap, or even how race is related to it. As is true on other matters pertaining to race such as crime, voting behavior or immigration, once race is inserted into a policy discussion it often has the effect of distorting how an issue is perceived. Consider the fact that not all White students are high achievers. Indeed, in the Appalachian regions of Pennsylvania and southern Ohio, African American students often achieve at higher levels than White students. In states like Maine, Vermont and West Virginia where there are relatively few minority students, there are large numbers of White students who drop out of school, perform poorly on standardized tests and do not enroll in college. Yet, because the policy discourse about the achievement gap has framed the issue largely in racial terms, policy makers and many educators have overlooked the fact that many students across the country are not receiving an education that would adequately prepare them for college or adulthood.

A closer look at the evidence reveals that children from impoverished families from all ethnic backgrounds (with the notable exception of some immigrants) typically perform less well than affluent children. So too do children whose first language is something other than English, unless they are literate in their native language and were well educated in their home country. Likewise, children with learning disabilities, children in foster care, and children with incarcerated parents, all tend to do less well in school than children without these disadvantages. To some extent, this is because gaps in achievement are a reflection of disparities in other opportunities (i.e., income, parental education, healthcare, etc.). There are of course exceptions to these patterns -- poor Black children who excel, wealthy White children who don't, Asian students who are not good at math, etc. The exceptions are important because they remind us that there is nothing inherently deficient about students who happen to be low achievers, regardless of their backgrounds.

When disparities in academic achievement are studied closely, it becomes clear that in many ways the achievement gap is first and foremost an educational manifestation of social inequality. If educators fail to understand or fail to address the numerous ways in which other inequities -- in income, health, housing, etc. -- interact with learning outcomes, then much of what is done to ameliorate the problem will simply not work. We have known for years that these gaps in achievement generally show up even before students start formal schooling -- in their vocabulary, in social skills and even in their ability to sit still and listen to teachers. We have also known that family income and parental education are the strongest predictors of how well a student will perform on the SAT. Furthermore, we have known for years that when poor children of color attend under-funded, racially segregated schools they generally don't do so well. However, policymakers and the courts have done relatively little to incorporate what we know about inequity into strategies for improving student learning outcomes. Instead, they have offered public pressure and even condemnation of educators who have failed to produce results. More recently, educational leaders such as Arne Duncan and former New York Chancellor Joel

Klein have taken to offering moral appeals such as calling the effort to close the achievement gap the civil rights issue of the 21st century. Unfortunately, they have done very little to insure that all children, regardless of their backgrounds, actually have access to a quality education.

In many schools, gaps between White and minority students grow wider even within the same cohort of children by the 3rd grade, and the disparities are more pronounced in higher-order skill domains such as deriving meaning from text, drawing inferences beyond the literal text, and understanding rate and measurement in mathematics. Again, the Black-White achievement gap has drawn the most attention, and been captured over time in results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, but it is important to keep in mind that depending on the composition of a school or community, patterns in achievement will vary considerably.

Achievement and attainment gaps are revealed through a host of schooling indexes, including grade point averages; performance on district, state, and national achievement tests; rates of enrollment in rigorous courses such as advanced placement and honors classes; and differential placements in special education and gifted-and-talented programs. Significantly, gaps that correspond to the race and class backgrounds of students are also manifest across behavioral indicators such as school dropout, suspension, and discipline referral rates. Typically, minority students who come from families that have the least in the way of financial resources receive most of the punishment in school. A recent Texas study entitled *Breaking School Rules* followed every incoming seventh grader in Texas over three year period, and in some cases beyond high school graduation. Its most shocking finding is that nearly 60% of the students in the study were suspended at least once (this includes in-school suspension), and an alarming 31% were suspended at least four times. African American students were over-represented among those who had been suspended and subjected to the harshest forms of discipline, including placement in alternative classrooms. A shocking 83% of African American males and 74% of Latino males in the study were suspended at least once, and one in seven students in the study was suspended at least eleven times. Obviously, students who are excluded from school for punishment tend to do less well academically, but the connection between the discipline gap and the achievement gap has drawn relatively little attention at all from policymakers. This is one more example of the way policymakers ignore the many dimensions of the achievement gap.

The Roots of the Achievement Gap in American History

Throughout the history of the United States, there have been striking, persistent and often predictable gaps in achievement between African American, Native American and Latino students (both boys and girls) and their White counterparts. This is hardly surprising given America's history of racial oppression and discrimination. The view of intelligence that prevailed throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries held that non-Whites, particularly Blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics, and even some Eastern Europeans, were genetically inferior and possessed lower levels of intellectual capacity than Caucasians, particularly those who originated in northwestern Europe. Such views about the relationship between race, ethnicity, and intelligence had considerable influence upon social science research, psychology, and the theories that guided the development of the I.Q. test and, more generally, the development of the comprehensive high school.

One could argue that the very notion that the achievement gap can and should be closed represents a step forward because it is in effect a repudiation of the notion that innate differences in intelligence would make equality in academic outcomes impossible. Yet, the history of beliefs about the relationship between race and intelligence in the United States continues to be highly relevant to current efforts aimed at closing the achievement gap because racist thinking about the intellectual capacity of different ethnic groups has contributed to the development of racist educational policies and practices. For example, maintaining racially segregated schools by law or social convention was practiced widely throughout US and premised on the notion that racially inferior children should be educated separately. This was true in most cases not only for African American children (both in the north and the south), but also for Mexican children throughout the Southwest, Asian children in California (Japanese Americans were required to attend racially segregated schools in San Francisco until 1947), and Native American children who were either educated on reservations or involuntarily taken from their families to be educated far away in boarding schools by missionaries. Even after such practices were effectively outlawed with the Brown Decision in 1954, schools throughout the United States to this day continue to be characterized by a high degree of separation on the basis of race and class.

What is especially important about this history is how it has coincided with the uniquely American approach to school funding. In most parts of the country, local property taxes are used to generate revenue for public schools. This typically means that wealthy communities are typically able to spend more money on their children than poor communities. Money is used to pay for teacher salaries, school facilities and learning materials. Hence, inequities in funding translate most often into inequities in educational opportunities. In general, we spend the most on the children who come from families that have the most resources, and we spend the least on those who have the greatest needs. In all of the talk about closing the achievement gap over the last eleven years, not one major policy figure has suggested that equalizing funding should be included as part of the strategy.

None of this should be new or surprising to anyone who has even a cursory understanding of American history, yet recognition of our history of unequal treatment is not reflected in current education policy. In fact, NCLB is based on a perverse form of equity. In states across the country, we hold all children regardless of their backgrounds, where they live, or the kinds of schools they attend to the same standards. Children in the South Bronx and Watts take the same exams as children in Scarsdale and Beverly Hills, even though we know they do not receive the same kind of education or receive similar types of support for learning at home. We pretend that we can create a level playing field without doing anything to address the history and current reality of racial inequality. Not surprisingly, it hasn't worked.

Learning from the Schools Where Gaps are Closing

Advocates of NCLB, and this includes many of the national civil rights organizations, have aggressively called for common standards and defended high stakes testing. They fear that if we lower standards for some students we will effectively condemn them to an inferior education and that standardized tests are the only way to insure accountability. Their concern is understandable given that prior to NCLB it was not uncommon for students to graduate from schools in the US

with minimal skills and unprepared for college or work. But NCLB hasn't solved this problem. In fact, throughout the country there are large numbers of students who have passed state exams but are required to take remedial courses in college because they lack basic writing and math skills.

More importantly, the NCLB defenders fail to see that there is an alternative to the narrow use of standards and accountability. Rather than lowering standards for some students to compensate for their inadequate learning opportunities, we could do far more to level the educational playing field by focusing on creating optimal learning conditions for all children.

This is the approach that a handful of schools and districts have taken, and in several cases, it's working. For example, at Brocton High School in Massachusetts, a school where over 70% of students are from low-income, minority families – many of which do not speak English as the first language at home – over 80% of students score at proficiency on the state exam, and this past spring over 90% passed the exam. This is particularly noteworthy given that the Massachusetts exam is widely regarded as the most rigorous in the country. What makes Brocton High School's even more impressive is the fact that with over 4,100 students it is the largest school in the state and still ranks in the top 90% of all high schools in Massachusetts. The school has obtained these impressive results by methodically providing targeted help to students who have been struggling, and training teachers in all subjects, including science, math and physical education, to develop the literacy skills of students in their classes.

Similar results have been obtained at Osining High School in New York. Like Brocton, Osining is also very diverse but it has been ranked as one of the country's top 100 high schools for three years in a row. The superintendent Dr. Phyllis Glassman, attributes the school's success to a relentless focus on meeting the academic needs of students. Unlike some schools that make it difficult for students from low-income backgrounds to enroll in challenging honors and advanced placement courses, Osining HS activity encourages all students to take such courses, and it provides tutorial support after school to students who struggle and lack support at home. In a controversial move, the school set up a special mentoring program for African American male students when it found these students consistently lagging behind their peers. Called Project Earthquake, the program provides mentoring, visits to local colleges and universities and positive peer support to create a climate where Dr. Glassman believes "they no longer accept the negative stereotypes that have been projected onto them".

Schools like Brocton and Osining High Schools may be the exceptions, but they are by no means alone. Emerson elementary school in Berkeley, South Huntington School District in Long Island, NY, Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland and many others are all showing that significant progress can be achieved when educators focus on expanding learning opportunities for students. This requires them to recognize that students who receive less support at home will need more in school, that students who don't come from middle class families will need to be pushed and encouraged to take challenging courses and need greater support when applying to college, and that teachers will need to work collaboratively to share instructional strategies and discuss ways to overcome the learning obstacles their students face.

What these schools have accomplished is noteworthy; they have created learning environments

where children's race or class doesn't automatically predict how well they will do. Not all poor and minority students are excelling, but many of them are, and when patterns of achievement become less predictable, the expectations of students and their teachers also begin to change. However, it is important to acknowledge that the success of these schools does not mean that the achievement gap has been eliminated, or that disadvantages related to income and parental support are not still in play. The latest results (2009) of the international student assessment test administered by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), hardly a left-leaning think tank, demonstrate convincingly the relationship between achievement in math, science, and reading and both the quality of education and social-economic factors like education and income level of parents and a country's distribution of income and its social safety net for children. The United States does not fare so well on these measures. Good schools can help reduce the effects of poverty, but more is needed.

Conclusion: Changing the Focus of National Educational Policy to Obtain Better Results

In 2008, a coalition of scholars, policy makers, and educational leaders issued a policy statement that called for three major revisions in federal education policy: expanded access to learning time through quality after-school and summer school programs, universal access to pre-school, and universal healthcare for children. Called the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education (BBA), this ambitious reform project was launched as an attempt to develop a comprehensive school reform strategy that could address issues and challenges arising out of the distressed social contexts that poor families and public schools are situated within. The goal of the BBA was to shift the focus of educational policy away from a narrow focus on standards and accountability, and toward a recognition that social services, child development and civic engagement were essential to insure that all children received the educational opportunities they deserved. (For a detailed discussion of the BBA plan go to www.boldapproach.org.)

The BBA reform agenda is part of a larger national effort to change the focus and direction of educational policy to address the social and economic factors that often undermine schools and children. In cities like Newark where this strategy is presently being implemented in seven schools in the Central Ward, systems are being put in place to address the effects of concentrated poverty and the social conditions that are often associated with it: poor health, high crime rates, substance abuse, etc. The BBA approach calls for schools to be provided with the resources and support to mitigate the risks that might otherwise undermine their efforts to meet the learning needs of students. It is based on the premise that fixing schools in high poverty neighborhoods must include strategies that make it possible to respond to the wide range of challenges that affect child development and learning. Breaking with past precedent, proponents of the BBA in cities such as Orlando, Florida and Syracuse, NY have embraced a strategy that should make it possible to address what we have known for years: children's lives are situated within ecological systems that invariably shape their development.

Such an approach is the only way we could realistically begin on a broad scale to reduce gaps in student achievement. In a society as inequitable as the United States, where disparities in income and wealth are growing and typically reproduced across generations, schools cannot be expected to serve as the only force for equity. Still, if we hope to use education as a vehicle to counter

social inequities and to create a more equitable society -- and as long as we remain unwilling or unable to adopt more far-reaching measures such as redistributing wealth through a more progressive tax system -- then the BBA strategy is at the moment our best bet.

Not surprisingly, such an approach has critics and opponents. Shortly after BBA was announced, another national group of educational leaders and policy makers launched what they called the Coalition for Civil Rights and Education (CCE). Led by an unusual combination of prominent public figures, Joel Klein, Chancellor of New York City Schools, Newt Gingrich, former House Republican Leader, and civil rights activist, Reverend Al Sharpton, the CCE described education as the most important civil rights issue of the twenty-first century and called for affirming the principles of NCLB: standards-based reform, accountability through high stakes testing, etc. The CCE also suggested that any effort to shift the focus of school reform to an effort aimed at reducing poverty or improving the health and welfare of children would be nothing more than an attempt to use poverty as an excuse for not educating all children at high standards.

Despite its critics, the BBA strategy is moving forward and gaining momentum as a broad array of stakeholders across the country agree to support it. This will not be easy. In the absence of explicit state and federal policy that encourages a more integrated and holistic educational strategy, local leaders face major challenges bridging complex interests in ethnically diverse communities, and overcoming entrenched bureaucratic patterns within school districts and municipal governments that have been accustomed to operating in silos. Nonetheless, slow but steady progress is being made in communities that have been willing to embrace the BBA strategy largely because they acknowledge that all other approaches to reform have failed.

For the last thirty years or more the schools-alone strategy has been pursued by educational policymakers. Billions of dollars have been spent on plans to revamp school curriculum, re-train teachers, introduce new technology and make schools smaller, but none of these costly measures have had the impact upon academic and developmental outcomes of the most disadvantaged children that was expected or hoped for. The history of failure in past school reform efforts has made it clear that a reform strategy based upon a more holistic framework that explicitly tackles inequality is the only way that sustainable progress in public education will be achieved.

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