
Improving African American Student Outcomes: Understanding Educational Achievement and Strategies to Close Opportunity Gaps

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Abstract

This paper provides a review of research related to disparities in educational outcomes for African American students in the United States and research-based practices for closing the educational achievement gap. The paper presents National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data trends documenting the historic and persistent disparities in educational outcomes among African American students and other student groups. The author reframes the problem of disparities in educational achievement as an issue of unequal opportunity to learn (a longstanding “opportunity gap” in the U.S.) in an effort to help stakeholders understand issues related to racial disparities in educational achievement and practices for creating more equitable schools, an essential investment in the academic and life trajectories of African American students. Promising practices from high-performing, largely African American, low-income schools are discussed.

As a professor of teacher education, every quarter I engage my graduate students in critical discussions about our country’s history of, and persistent fight against, inequitable education. I teach a social foundations course, and we explore education in the United States as it currently exists and possibilities for improving schools in ways that will provide historically marginalized students access to quality education—an education to which they are entitled. I am fortunate to serve as a faculty member at an institution whose mission is rooted in developing leaders “for a more just and humane world.” That means my faculty colleagues and I teach to the expectation that our graduates will use the knowledge and skills gained in their education studies to work for justice and a more equitable world. Therefore, in our teacher education program, we spend

a significant amount of time trying to understand and dismantle the systems and structures in schools that consistently deny African American, Latino, Native American, low-income students, and many other marginalized groups, access to quality education.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2013) defines the educational achievement gap simply—“the achievement gap occurs when one group of students outperforms another group, and the difference in average scores for the two groups is statistically significant” (p.210). The disparity in achievement is usually between white and non-white students and the difference can be seen in standardized test scores, grade point averages, graduation rates, and college admission data (National Research Council, 2004). Although the achievement gap by income and gender is also



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studied and well documented in the literature, the term “achievement gap” and accompanying data has almost become synonymous with what urban education scholar Tyrone Howard (2010) describes as “the discrepancy in educational outcomes between various student groups, namely, African American, Native American, certain Asian American, and Latino students on the low end of the performance scale, and primarily White and various Asian American students at the higher end of the performance scale” (Howard, 2010, p.10).

Administered by the U.S. Department of Education since the 1960s, the National Assessment of Educational

Progress (NAEP) shows a clear and persistent discrepancy in educational achievement among student groups, with African American, Latino and American Indian student outcomes at the lowest levels of achievement. The NAEP assessment is the largest national, continuous educational assessment of student progress, and NAEP results have consistently shown a significant “gap” in the educational achievement of Black, Latino, and American Indian students compared to their White and Asian peers. Tables 1 & 2 show reading and math proficiency of 4th, 8th, and 12th grade students between 2005-2013.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of students at or above proficient in reading. National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reading achievement by race/ethnicity and grade: Selected years 2005 - 2013.

Grade & Year	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian/Alaska Native
4th grade						
2013	35	46	18	20	51	21
2011	34	44	17	18	49	18
2009	33	42	16	17	49	20
8th grade						
2013	36	46	17	22	52	19
2011	34	43	15	19	47	22
2009	32	41	14	17	45	21
12th grade						
2013	38	47	16	23	47	26
2009	38	46	17	22	49	29
2005	35	43	16	20	36	26

Source: U.S. Department of Education (2013); National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014).

Table 2. Percentage distribution of students at or above proficient in mathematics. National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) mathematics achievement by race/ethnicity and grade: Selected years 2005 - 2013.

Grade & Year	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian/Alaska Native
4th grade						
2013	42	54	18	26	64	23
2011	40	52	17	24	62	22
2009	39	51	16	22	60	21
8th grade						
2013	35	45	14	21	60	21
2011	35	44	13	20	55	17
2009	34	44	12	17	54	18
12th grade						
2013	26	33	7	12	47	12
2009	26	33	6	11	52	12
2005	23	29	6	8	36	6

Source: U.S. Department of Education (2013); National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014).

Among all 4th grade students in 2013, only 18% of Black students were proficient in reading while 46% of White students demonstrated proficiency. As students progress to higher grades, the gap remains persistent. At the 8th grade level, 17% of Black students demonstrated proficiency in reading compared to 46% of their White peers. The same discrepancy in reading outcomes is present at the end of high school. At the 12th grade level, only 16% of Black students demonstrated proficiency in reading while 47% of their White peers performed at the proficient level. These achievement gap trends also exist in mathematics outcomes (see Table 2).

The percentage of Black students who perform at 'below basic' in reading and math achievement is significantly higher than their White student counterparts.

In 2011, the percentage of Black 4th grade students who were 'below basic' in reading was 51% compared to 22% of White 4th grade students. In the same year, 41% of Black students in the 8th grade were 'below basic' in reading compared to 15% of White students. In 2013, 44% of Black students in the 12th grade were 'below basic' in reading compared to 17% of White students (see Table 3). The educational disparities in mathematics are even greater. In 2011, 34% of Black 4th grade students and 49% of Black 8th grade students were 'below basic' in mathematics compared to 9% of White students in the 4th grade and 16% of White students in the 8th grade. In 2013, the percentage of Black students in the 12th grade who were 'below basic' in mathematics was 62% compared to 25% of White students.

Table 3. Percentage distribution of students below basic in reading achievement. National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) select reading achievement levels by race/ethnicity and grade: **2011 and 2013.**

Grade & Year	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian/Alaska Native
4th grade						
2011	33	22	51	49	20	53
8th grade,						
2011	24	15	41	36	17	37
12th grade						
2013	26	17	44	36	20	35

Source: Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014).

Table 4. Percentage distribution of students below basic in mathematics achievement. National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) select mathematics achievement levels by race/ethnicity and grade: **2011 and 2013.**

Grade & Year	Total	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian/Alaska Native
4th grade						
2011	18	9	34	28	9	34
8th grade						
2011	27	16	49	39	14	45
12th grade						
2013	36	25	62	50	19	46

Source: Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2014).

The NAEP data presented here shows outcomes for only the most recent assessment years. However, this data is reflective of the historic Black-White achievement gap that has been documented over the last 30 years by the National Center for Educational Statistics (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Although some small gains have been made, the discrepancy in educational outcomes—the “achievement gap”—remains persistent. These significant disparities in educational outcomes have been so persistent that leading scholar on African American education, Gloria Ladson-Billings, has reframed the racial achievement gap discourse as an “education debt” that has accumulated over time. She defines this “debt” as an unfulfilled promise that America owes to historically underserved and marginalized student groups such as African Americans and other racial/ethnic minorities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The “education debt” reframes the discourse by removing the blame and shame of underachievement on standardized tests from students and families. The new discourse shifts the responsibility for ensuring every child has an equal opportunity to learn to America and all of its citizens. In progressive education circles, the achievement gap has become synonymous with the term “opportunity gap” in recognition of the unequal schooling practices in the U.S. that consistently deny racial and ethnic minority students equal opportunities to receive a high quality education.

Why Do Educational Opportunity Gaps Exist? The Issue of Unequal Access

The achievement gap or “opportunity gap” issue is complex, and educators and leading scholars in the field don’t always agree on the primary causes. However, most educators and scholars who study the achievement gap agree with a body of literature suggesting there are both “in-school” and “out of school” factors that correlate with student achievement. Out of school factors that have been identified in the literature as having an influence student achievement include hunger and nutrition, parent availability, and student mobility (Barton, 2004). More recent studies focus on in-school factors such as teacher quality, rigor of the curriculum, student engagement in academic tasks, and a school culture of high expectations (Delpit, 2012; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Howard, 2010; Landsman, 2004). In recent years, leading educational scholars have strongly rejected explanations that attribute low performance to factors such as poverty,

number of parents in the home, and parent participation (Delpit, 2012).

Leading urban education scholars reject the “culture of poverty” theory largely because it is a deficit model that suggests something is wrong with the children. This theory is viewed as “blaming the victim” without acknowledging the unequal educational and social structures that deny African American and many other racial/ethnic minority and low-income students access to a quality education. Such explanations tend to “...blame students, their parents, and communities for failure and underachievement” (Boykin and Noguera, 2011, p. 32). However, there are significant achievement gap factors documented in the literature that are beyond the control of students and their families. Stanford University Professor, and leading education scholar, Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) identifies three key factors contributing to the opportunity gap and unequal schooling: resegregation of schools, unequal access to qualified teachers, and lack of access to high-quality curriculum.

In her book, *The Flat World and Education: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine our Future*, Darling-Hammond (2010) discusses the resegregation of schools as Civil Rights Era gains have steadily declined. Progress made as a result of the Civil Rights Movement allowed many ethnic minority students access to quality schools outside of their neighborhoods, and this meant that African American and other ethnic and racial minority students had access to well-funded schools with high quality curriculum and experienced, well-prepared teachers. However, these opportunities have steadily declined in the years following the Civil Rights Era in the United States. Darling-Hammond paints a clear picture of how the resegregation of schools is a critical factor contributing to a persistent opportunity gap leading to disparities in student achievement:

Deepening segregation tied to dwindling resources has occurred as African American and Latino students are increasingly concentrated in central city public schools, many of which have become majority “minority” over the past decade while their funding has fallen further behind that of their suburbs....in cities across the nation, a group of schools [has] emerged that might be characterized as ‘apartheid schools’—serving exclusively students of color in low-income communities....these schools have featured crumbling, overcrowded buildings, poor libraries, few materials, old

dilapidated texts so scarce that students must share them in class and cannot take them home for homework, and a revolving door teaching force with little professional expertise (p.38).

Although desegregation efforts of the 1960s resulted in more racially mixed schools, by 2000, resegregated schools were the norm with 71% of African American students and 77% of Latino students attending “majority ethnic minority” schools. During that time period, the majority of African American and Latino students attended schools with a majority low-income student population (students eligible for free or reduced priced lunch was 51% or greater)—73% of African American students and 59% of Latino students attended “majority low-income” schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Inequities related to access to well-prepared, high quality teachers and quality curriculum is also well documented. Nationally, unqualified teachers are disproportionately assigned to teach low-income ethnic minority children (Barton, 2004). With respect to various measures of quality such as certification, subject matter background/expertise, pedagogical training, selectivity of college attended, text scores, and experience, less-qualified teachers are disproportionately found in schools with greater numbers of ethnic minority, low-income students (Darling Hammond, 2010). In 2001, students in the most segregated ethnic minority schools California were more than five times as likely to have an uncertified teacher. The issue of access to a high quality teacher is important because research has consistently identified teacher quality as the most important school-based factor in student achievement (Rand, 2012; Hightower et al, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2000). Compounding the problem, Darling Hammond notes:

In addition to being taught by less expert teachers than their White counterparts, students of color face stark differences in courses, curriculum programs, materials and equipment, as well as the human environment in which they attend school. High quality instruction—which is shaped by all of these factors—has been found to matter more for school outcomes than students’ backgrounds (p.51).

Supported by annual report data from the National Center for Educational Statistics, studies have consistently found African American, Latino, and Native American students have less access to academic and college preparatory courses, but they attend schools that provide more remedial and vocational courses (Darling Hammond, 2010, p.52).

Boykin and Noguera (2011) expand Darling-Hammond’s discussion of the impact of the human environment. In their research on schools where race and class are strong predictors of achievement, very few Black and Latino students are enrolled in advanced courses (gifted or honors classes), but they are overrepresented in special education and remedial courses. Consistent with the literature, Boykin and Noguera found negative teacher beliefs and attitudes linked to complacency and lack of effort toward raising the achievement levels of racial and ethnic minority students. The authors describe the human environment in such schools as “[a place] where the link between race and achievement has been firmly established in the minds of educators....In such communities, the failure of students of color can become normalized as educators and others rationalize and accept low-performance as the by product of factors they cannot control” (p. 33).

Structural inequities in schools and the impact of teacher attitudes are well documented in the literature, and both of these issues are linked to unequal access to quality educational experiences. To illustrate the ways in which these issues present themselves in schools, I will share a recent experience. A few weeks ago, I received an email from one of my graduate students who was in the second day of a middle school observation experience that was part of a Master in Teaching course assignment requiring the teacher education students to examine and reflect on equity issues in schools. The student had been placed in a local middle school with an excellent reputation for its accelerated academic program for gifted and talented students, while also being known for the overrepresentation of historically marginalized racial/ethnic minority students in the general education and special education classes. Although my education students had been immersed in the literature on educational equity and social justice issues in schools for weeks, the student sent the email to me because she wanted to share how overwhelmed she was as she witnessed “two separate schools in one school.” She was outraged at seeing what she described as two “racially segregated” schools in one school building. She described the unequal educational experiences she witnessed. White and Asian students were placed in classes with rigorous academic content, engaging academic tasks, and high quality instruction. African American and other ethnic minority students, in her view, were being “locked out of those opportunities.” She described those classrooms as being driven by meaningless student tasks and worksheets, and a classroom environment primarily focused on teacher control

and student compliance. In her view and to her surprise, there was a stark contrast in both the academic content and overall climate. My graduate student was further astounded by the behavior and remarks of the veteran teacher she was observing. The teacher expressed a belief that the ethnic minority students (primarily African American) were not capable of higher levels of academic work, and he told her that he spent most of his time trying to get them to “behave like human beings”—words that he yelled at the students often, by her account. My student’s email message closed with words that eerily reflect what the ethnic minority students must be feeling as the receivers of the injustice, “I find myself at a real point of despair...[this] makes my soul hurt.”

My work as a professor in a social justice teacher education program means that my graduate students and I are constantly engaged in confronting, examining, and developing action steps to dismantle the pervasive and deeply rooted racial attitudes, discriminatory practices and systemic injustices in schools. Unfortunately, the experience this particular graduate student relayed to me is more common than not, and it supports Boykin and Noguera’s findings related to achievement gap factors.

Too often, attitudes and beliefs that contribute to the normalization of failure are unchallenged, and when failure is normalized, educators often grow comfortable seeing minority students underperform and fail in large numbers. In such schools, students of color may also grow accustomed to receiving failing grades, and they may actively avoid academic pursuits or challenging courses (2011, p.33).

The despair expressed by my graduate student turned into a fierce commitment to work for more equitable schools. Her intense emotional response actually deepened her own social justice and “teaching for change” commitments. In fact, as part of their teacher training, each of the graduate students in our Master in Teaching Program identify cases of inequity in schools and develop action plans to address the injustice(s). In this way, “teachers in training” are acquiring and practicing skills that will allow them to respond to inequity issues in constructive ways and contribute to the creation of more equitable schools.

However, my student’s experience with the veteran teacher who openly shared his bias against racial/ethnic minority students and her strong reaction to what she described as a “segregated school” is an important reminder that we cannot dismiss the power of teacher feelings, beliefs and attitudes. As shown in the

literature, unchallenged beliefs in educators can lead to complacency, acceptance of failure, and low teacher expectations for African American and other underserved student populations. The danger of unchallenged negative teacher beliefs about students of color is very clear, so it is imperative to acknowledge and address this issue in the achievement gap discourse.

Promising Practices for Increasing African American Student Achievement and Closing the Gaps: Evidence-based Strategies from High-performing, High-Minority, Low-income Schools

It is with good reason education scholars reject the “culture of poverty” theory as an explanation for poor academic performance. Using poverty as an explanation for low performance has been disproved with evidence from a number of high performing schools with student populations that are predominately low-income and high racial/ethnic minority. In her book, *Multiplication is for White People: Raising Expectations for Other People’s Children*, Lisa Delpit (2012) makes this point well, “...we educators too often assume there is something deficient in low-income children or their families that stunts learning. We fail to pay sufficient attention to what we can control—what does or doesn’t happen in classrooms” (p.56). In her research, Delpit visited a number of low-income, largely African American schools that were high-performing to the degree that the students outperformed students in more affluent communities on standardized academic assessments. She compared the “high performing” low-income African American schools to “low performing” schools that served the same population of low-income African American students. The following characteristics were present in all of the high performing, low-income majority-minority schools: *meaningful learning experiences, academic rigor, cultural connections, and profound belief in students’ capabilities*. Each of the characteristics are discussed below as strategies for increasing African American student achievement and closing opportunity gaps for historically marginalized and underserved students.

Meaningful learning experiences for students are an essential component of the high performing schools in Delpit’s research. Teaching is situated in a context of real experiences, and students have multiple opportunities to use the knowledge/skills they are acquiring. In literacy instruction, students have multiple opportunities to use new words and skills in reading, writing

and discussion. Literacy skills are explicitly taught but embedded in real writing, reading, and communication. In low-income, high minority elementary schools, children are often relegated to “senseless instruction divorced from any real literacy activities” (Delpit, 2012, p.63) where students can be found doing fill-in the blank worksheets or isolated drills/exercises on phonemic awareness. However, Delpit found that high performing schools engaged students in *meaningful use* of the literacy skills they were learning. For example, “teachers engage students in exciting thematic units that are ongoing...reviewing important domain knowledge, and developing vocabulary through repeated oral and written use. Students are then asked to explain what they have learned to others” (p. 69). In these learning environments, literacy skills and vocabulary are taught in the context of real experiences.

Rigorous academic instruction is the foundation of the curriculum in high-performing, high-minority schools. This is an essential element because African American and other historically marginalized students are well aware when they are the recipients of sub-par content and instructional practice, and they are likely to resist or disengage. Successful schools are committed to engaging students in challenging academic content, that is constant, integrated across disciplines and designed for use beyond the classroom. For example, teachers engage students in cross-discipline project-based learning where students identify, investigate and propose solutions and/or take actions to address real world problems or controversial issues they care about (i.e., stand your ground legislation, gun violence, climate change, texting while driving, food desserts/food justice). Students research various aspects of the issue/problem, bring together information and skills from other disciplines, synthesize and demonstrate their learning for a real world audience such as a government agency, non-profit, or community organization that is working on the same problem or issue. This type of project-based learning is both rigorous and meaningful for students, and students gain skills that are clearly useful beyond their classroom experiences.

Cultural connections are another essential practice of high-performing schools. Teachers are intentional about making connections between new information that is being presented and students’ existing knowledge and cultural frameworks. For example, Delpit found vocabulary development in high-performing schools began with “integration”—connecting new vocabulary words to students’ prior knowledge. This practice is very different than vocabulary strategies such as looking

sentences up in the dictionary and writing sentences with the new words before any discussion or study of the words—techniques that have not proven successful with low-income children of color but are consistently employed in classrooms. An essential component of the *cultural connections* practice of high performing schools is that teachers and administrators focus on and celebrate what students *do know and can do*, rather than building curriculum based solely around what students *can’t do or do not know*. Educators in high performing schools value and acknowledge the knowledge and skills students *do* have and bring with them to the classroom, and they help students make connections between new information and students’ existing knowledge and experiences. Literacy instruction, for example, includes “activities that [require students to] use the information and vocabulary in both creative and analytical ways... [students] create metaphors and art work that connect new words or concepts to knowledge from their own experiences” (p.69). According to Delpit, one reason African American students “...are not achieving at levels commensurate with their abilities has to do with curricular content. If the curriculum we use to teach our children does not connect in positive ways to the culture young people bring to school, it is doomed to failure” (p. 21). By building on the knowledge and experiences students bring to school, successful schools take an “asset-based” approach and design curriculum based on student strengths or assets, which is an essential practice for increasing student learning and achievement.

Finally, *Profound belief in students* was evident in each of the high-performing schools. Teachers assumed the children were brilliant and capable, and they taught accordingly. The teachers Delpit studied never questioned whether students had the capacity to learn. They simply taught them. The author makes a link between this school cultural norm and African traditional thinking and the Freedom Schools of the Civil Rights Movement. Educators in high-performing schools are convinced of their students’ brilliance, humanity, and inherent intellectual capability. As a result, their instructional approaches are aligned with these beliefs. The teachers design rigorous, intellectually challenging curricular experiences that are more likely to engage students. In addition, because they believe their students can achieve at high levels, they set high expectations for performance and support students toward their success.

The findings from Delpit’s research on high-performing, low-income African American schools are consistent with broader school reform and achievement gap literature which offer the following key elements

of high quality teaching that support increased academic performance: 1) high expectations—all students, regardless of perceived ability or circumstances, are held to high standards for learning; 2) student engagement—teachers create a classroom environment and learning experiences that promote student engagement in the learning process; and 3) relationships—drawing relationships between the material being taught and the lives of students is essential, and establishing and maintaining relationships between people in the school community to support student achievement is critical. Academic content must be linked in meaningful ways to the lives of students, and positive collaborative relationships must be the norm in the school. If one were to enter the school, there is evidence of positive relationships between teachers, students, and their families, and there are structures in place to develop and maintain a collaborative school culture including positive peer relationships. Finally, the school culture includes the practice of teachers working together to support all students to high levels of achievement (Wagner, 2003; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Delpit, 2012).

Conclusion

The U.S. Department of Education's Equity and Excellence Commission (2013), recently published a report expressing a clear commitment to policy changes that will eliminate disparities in access to high quality teachers and curriculum. The Commission's charge was to make recommendations to address "disparities in meaningful educational opportunities that give rise to the achievement gap" (p.3). Recommendations from the Commission include: 1) attracting top talent to the teaching profession, 2) supporting and retaining effective teachers, and 3) access to high-quality curriculum and learning opportunities. The Commission's focus on teacher quality is important because literature on student academic achievement suggests "quality of teaching" has six to ten times as much impact on achievement than all other factors combined (Mortimore, 1987). The findings and recommendations in the federal report are clearly stated, "All students must have access to high-quality instruction....Highly effective, well qualified teachers must be equitably distributed across districts and schools" (p.21). The Commission does not dismiss the issue of poverty and its potential impact on a student's path to academic achievement. However, the report recommendations focus on mitigating poverty's effects with equitable access to high quality instruction,

early childhood education, and other support services to promote student success.

Shifting the focus away from what scholars refer to as "blaming the victim" theories, researchers and policymakers have helped create an important shift in the discourse around achievement and the socio-economic status of students and families. No one would disagree that poverty produces conditions that have the potential to impact student learning. However, the evidence from high-poverty, high-performing schools presented in this paper tells us that all schools can implement educational practices that have been effective in helping students reach high levels of academic success. This shift in the way we understand, discuss, and consider strategies to close opportunity gaps in this country is vitally important because poverty-related factors are factors that schools cannot change. However, all schools can implement practices and structures that have been shown to increase the academic performance of students from low-income and historically marginalized communities.

Actions Steps for Community Members, Parents, Students, and Other Stakeholders

Schools are situated within the context of local communities. Therefore, ensuring educational equity and eliminating opportunity gaps will require collective action at the local level. All stakeholders can engage in the following ways.

- Get involved with education reform groups locally—many cities and states have active groups that work to advance efforts toward equity education.
- Stay informed on the issues, and shares your views with school board members and state policymakers—sends emails, make calls, write letters. Remember, school boards influence education policy at the local level. Research and vote for your local school board candidates.
- Attend school board meetings and education forums in your area.

Taking action to work for a more equitable and just education system is critical for the African American community and other historically marginalized and underserved groups. From a national perspective, achievement gaps weaken America as a whole, on mul-

multiple levels—internationally, economically, and morally (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). “In America, we believe that fate is not fixed by the circumstances of birth [but rather] educational opportunity [is] the birthright of each and every child” (p.39). It is time

to take action toward the fulfillment of this birthright. As Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings might say, America’s education debt is past due.

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