THE HISTORY AND STRATEGIES OF ADDRESSING THE BLACK-WHITE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN THE U.S.

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Continuing Studies
and of
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

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Georgetown University
Washington, DC
April 10, 2018
THE HISTORY AND STRATEGIES OF ADDRESSING THE BLACK-WHITE ACADeMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN THE U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1960s, the academic achievement gap between black and white students in the United States has been prevalent. Black student academic achievement is on average two grade levels below whites. In the last 30 years, school policies and legislation have not had a large impact on closing the black-white achievement gap. The black-white achievement gap persists at every stage of academic development, from toddler shape recognition scores to chances of passing the State Bar Exam. White children score higher on aptitude tests before school. They outperform their black peers at grades 4, 8, and 12. They take more advanced course loads and are more likely to stay in high school through graduation. They score higher on the SATs and ACTs and pass more of the AP exams. They attend college in higher percentages, where they are more likely to graduate. White students are also proportionally more likely to attend and succeed at post-graduate education and the workforce.

Many policymakers, researchers, and educators have contributed many proposals on effective ways of reducing this gap. Frequently, policymakers look to deficient schools, ineffective teachers, or weak pedagogy as the cause for the
black-white achievement gap. Many legislative and judicial solutions have focused on the school environment. However, this thesis points to research that shows a more complex blend of social, economic, political, and cultural factors as the cause of the gap.

This thesis examines the black-white achievement gap in the United States, with the objective of presenting effective ways of addressing the gap. The ultimate goal of this thesis is to understand the current state of research regarding the causes of the black-white achievement gap, to determine how disconnects with legislation and judiciary decisions have led to an inability to close the gap, and to suggest options which might jump-start the narrowing of the black-white achievement gap. The conclusion of the thesis argues that narrowing the gap will require changing standards and expectations at schools, as well as shifting peer-group and community understandings of academic achievement and black identity. Changing the paradigm about academic success will require new ideas in communities, shared responsibility in child rearing, and a collective genuine effort to support all children.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my late parents, George J. Barnes Sr. and Ralene B. Barnes, who gave me all the love, support, spiritual direction and resources to live my best life.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to recognize my wonderful, supportive and gracious wife, Junetta Barnes, who read various versions and gave amazing advice. I would also like to acknowledge and thank my thesis mentor, Dr. Leslie R. Hinkson, who stepped up to help when my former mentor had to withdraw. I would also like to acknowledge the Georgetown University School of Continuing Studies who continued to provide support and opportunities for me to complete the program. I want to express my appreciation to my children, Taja, Todd and Caleb Barnes for their continued support. Lastly, I would like to thank every teacher I’ve had over the years at Georgetown University for their passion, care and intellectual stamina that inspired me to excel.
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CHAPTER I. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP

In the United States, gaining an education is considered one of the most efficacious means to achieve economic success. Education is important for all people, and is considered by many to be a right as an American citizen.\textsuperscript{1} It is important to understand how educational outcomes emerge from the American educational system, so that educational legislation, programming, and standards can combine to provide the best schooling for American children. This means observing and acknowledging that there are serious performance gaps between various groups in America, the most pernicious of which is the black-white academic achievement gap, which exists at nearly every measurable step in the progress of an American student.

The black-white academic achievement gap was first discussed in the US in the 1960s, but legislation and policy which has been designed to address the gap has largely failed to narrow it because this legislation has not been based on scholarly research or educational theory. After a period of improving performance by students in the 1970s and early 1980s, success in narrowing the black-white achievement gap stalled and even reversed in the 1990s, largely due to inconsistency at the legislative level. This thesis instead argues that the best approaches for addressing the black-white achievement gap will inevitably include a range of strategies for schools, students, and communities to use at the

local level. Schools and communities can and must tackle the black-white achievement gap; this thesis, after examining the scope and causes of the black-white achievement gap, explores how legislation has failed and local efforts can instead be utilized to finally address the gap. The need to educate upcoming generations of citizens is so important for the economic and social future of America that every state, the District of Columbia, and all territories of the U.S. require all children between the ages of 8 and 16 to acquire a primary and secondary school education. Recent research by Nicole Schneeweis, Vegard Skirbekk and Rudolf Winter-Ebmer showed the importance of mandatory education because it can account for long-term improvements in cognitive ability. Of relevance here, a study by Emily Rauscher showed that state mandatory education laws were also important, because they led to improved racial equality in educational achievement. Mandatory education is a small first step toward narrowing the racial achievement gap, but simply putting students in

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2 States require education, not necessarily local school attendance. Various states have different opt-out procedures from their respective local schools, which include private schools, religious schools, home school or other alternative education practices.


seats is not going to deal with the social and educational causes of the black-white achievement gap.

**Seeing The Achievement Gap**

The goal of racial equality in education achievement has not been reached. Despite the emphasis placed on the importance of primary and secondary education, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which measures student achievement in public schools, show an extensive academic achievement gap between blacks and whites.\(^6\) This gap persists in college entrance assessments, college performance, and post-graduate education.

The NAEP continues to show achievement gaps between black and white students' standardized test scores in both reading and mathematics.\(^7\) The achievement gap between blacks and whites has a long history, evidenced by a report in 1966 for the National Center on Educational Statistics (NCES), where author James Coleman said “…the deficiency in achievement is progressively greater for the minority pupils… particularly the Negro, schools provide little opportunity for them to overcome this initial deficiency.”\(^8\) In addition, Jon Valant

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7 Vanneman et. al. “Achievement Gaps: How Black and White Students…”

and Daniel A. Newark’s recent study showed that regardless of its cause, the black-white achievement gap may still be prevalent today because citizens in the U.S. are more comfortable addressing achievement gaps based on wealth disparities versus achievement gaps based on race.\textsuperscript{9}

The black-white achievement gap is perhaps best known to Americans because of the controversial discussions of race, intelligence, and capability in Richard Herrnstein's and Charles Murray's \textit{The Bell Curve},\textsuperscript{10} published in 1994 just as the black-white achievement gap was beginning to grow again. While their argument that intelligence, shaped by both inherent skill and environment, is an important factor in determining lifetime success has some merit, their claim that the black-white achievement gap is evidence of a mental inferiority of black students is controversial and racist. As this thesis will demonstrate, racial differences alone cannot explain the black-white achievement gap, and thus solutions which only focus on race will not be effective. Problematic and potentially racist as \textit{The Bell Curve} may be, it brought to the public's attention the undeniable reality that American society has been perpetuating the black-white achievement gap even after decades of legislative attempts to address it.

This thesis examines the black-white achievement gap in the United States, with the goal of exploring some potential ways of addressing the gap.


Though researchers have made advancements in understanding the multiple social factors which cause the universally acknowledged black-white achievement gap, progress toward closing that gap has largely stalled. Policy and legislation has had little impact on the black-white achievement gap in the last thirty years.\textsuperscript{11} In order to overcome economic and social challenges in the future, American society needs to try new approaches to restart the process of reducing the racial achievement gap. Before exploring the causes and consequences of the black-white achievement gap, it is worth establishing the boundaries of the discussion.

**Understanding The Achievement Gap**

The black-white achievement gap exists quantitatively at every measurable level of student progress. Black and white children experience gaps in shape recognition skills at age four, before they enter public schools.\textsuperscript{12} A gap in mathematics and reading test scores between blacks and whites grows from grade 4\textsuperscript{13} to grade 8, widening still to grade 12.\textsuperscript{14} White students still score on

\textsuperscript{11} In fact, the vast majority of advances in narrowing racial achievement gaps have occurred in relation to Hispanic-white achievement gaps. There, significant progress has been made in the past twenty years, while efforts to close the black-white achievement gap in that same time period have been much less successful.


\textsuperscript{13} Vanneman et. al. “Achievement Gaps: How Black and White Students...” 6.

\textsuperscript{14} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 59.
average over 100 points higher on the SATs than their black peers,\textsuperscript{15} with similar standard deviation on all subjects.\textsuperscript{16} Black students failed far more AP exams before entering college than white students.\textsuperscript{17} White students are more likely to complete high school\textsuperscript{18} and college,\textsuperscript{19} and with a higher GPA.\textsuperscript{20} White post graduates perform better on the MCAT,\textsuperscript{21} the LSAT,\textsuperscript{22} and the Bar Exam.\textsuperscript{23} That the black-white achievement gap exists, is detrimental to black students, and has not been significantly narrowed in fifty years\textsuperscript{24} are all facts which are accepted in academic works, policy debates, and governmental reports.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 82.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 86.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 77.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 41.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Many of the advances made in the 1970s and early 1980s to close the gap were reversed in the 1990s and early 2000s, meaning a negligible overall change. As is explained in chapter 4, this is largely because of poor legislative strategies at the federal level.
\end{itemize}
What there is less of a consensus about is the cause of the black-white achievement gap at so many levels. The causes of the academic achievement gap between blacks and whites continue to be well-studied.\textsuperscript{25,26} The existing literature on the achievement gap is broad and plays a vital role in identifying some of the factors causing the present black-white achievement gap.\textsuperscript{27} These causes will be explored more thoroughly later in this thesis.

A meta-study by Gary L. St. C. Oats sought to analyze five prominent explanations for the black-white achievement gap.\textsuperscript{28} The research looked at whether academic engagement, cultural capital, social capital, school quality and biased treatment had an empirical effect on academic performance. The research then sought to determine if the variables had an impact on the black-white academic achievement gap.

Oats’ defined academic engagement as students showing habits and values that correspond with academic achievement. Cultural capital refers to a student's access and participation in cultural enrichment institutions, where social capital refers to a student’s close individual social connections that result in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} George Bohmstedt, Sami Kitmitto, Burhan Ogut, Dan Sherman, and D. Chan. "School Composition and the Black-White Achievement Gap." (NCES 2015-018, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).


\item \textsuperscript{27} Mano Singham. "The achievement gap: Myths and reality." Phi Delta Kappan 84.8 (2003): 586-591.

\end{itemize}
personal benefits. The study also evaluated school quality, which included measures such as per-pupil spending, advanced-course offerings and the percentage of the graduating class that attended a 4-year college. Finally, the study looked at whether black students experienced biased treatment based on preconceived negative teacher-perceptions regarding black students.

The study concluded that its empirical data showed school quality and biased student treatment measures had a significant impact on the black-white achievement gap. Academic engagement, culture and social capital were less prominent in correlating with the achievement gap. This research measured student academic (dis)engagement by self-reported student Likert-type surveys, and had similar findings to other work that also found a correlation between academic disengagement and school performance.

The study also acknowledges that, because various researchers are focusing on very different aspects of students' lives (from home environment to attitude to culture), they may come to dramatically different conclusions which may even seem contradictory or conflicting. Oats' work shows the complexity and

29 Oates. "An empirical test..."


difficulty of trying to account for varying contributing factors (such as socioeconomic status, geography, etc.) when identifying prominent explanations for the gap. The study by Oats also introduces us to the analysis of the cultural factors that can contribute to the black-white academic achievement gap; this analysis appears later in this thesis.

**Reasons to Care About The Achievement Gap**

The black-white achievement gap results in a segment of the American population that is not able to live up to its full potential. The social, cultural, political, and economic causes of the black-white achievement gap are only beginning to be addressed seriously in American society, and there is significant room for improvement. There is an obligation for American educators to pursue equal opportunity for all students, regardless of race, ensuring social justice. The implications for the American economy are significant: students who do not gain the mathematics or reading skills necessary to adapt in an ever-changing technologically-based economy will struggle to advance in the American workforce. Racially diverse countries, such as Singapore, which do not experience similar racial achievement gaps in schools, score better on global standardized tests, and will reap economic benefits. It is in the interest of all Americans to close the black-white achievement gap.

Biased treatment, either real or perceived, from teachers toward black students does not happen in a vacuum. Black students bring their societal race-based experiences, expectations and perceptions to the classroom along with
teachers. Racial tensions, which go back to the founding of the United States, must not be discounted in evaluating a race-based academic achievement gap. The black-white achievement gap is both a consequence of racism in America, and also a means by which racists are able to perpetuate ignorant ideas. By entrenching racial differences, society makes it harder for the next generation of students to grow into Americans with equal opportunity and tolerant compassion. The continued black-white achievement gap is a reminder of the work Americans still have ahead if we hope to reach a more tolerant, positive future. It also entrenches long term economic and social disparities from generation to generation.

One important reason to care about the stagnation and even decline relating to tackling the racial achievement gap is that the perpetuation of the gap may be a sign of resegregation or racial isolation in educational environments. George Bohrnstedt authored a 2015 report that looked at the achievement gap between black and white students contextualized in their school environments. This report, written from the NAEP uses student achievement data from recent national assessments and school demographics to determine if the proportion of black students at a school is correlated with achievement outcomes. The report argues that tracking the proportion of black students is important to identity if resegregation of schools is trending and to understand if racial isolation is linked to achievement.

33 Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman, and Chan. “School Composition and..."
This report uses the data from the 2011 mathematics grade 8 assessment scores and school demographics information. The study calculated the variable called black student density, which was the proportion of black students enrolled in the school. Bohrnstedt’s work also explores geographical regions where black student density is highest and if black student density is correlated with distribution of educational resources. The study presented two main findings; first schools with higher black density had lower achievement for both black and white students than schools with lower black density. Second, the report showed that when students’ socioeconomic status was factored, blacks still had lower achievement at high black density schools, versus low black density schools, but whites did not. These conclusions have moral implications for racial segregation and educational policy: socioeconomic class alone is not a sufficient answer to the question of the racial achievement gap, requiring educators and society to seek solutions that narrow performance gaps.

Not only is the black-white achievement gap an issue worthy of discussion on the national level, but also is worthy debating amongst local education administrators. A survey conducted involving the superintendents of large urban districts showed that the academic achievement gaps between the minority and non-minority students are a matter of major concern to many teachers.  

Additionally, most educators admitted to needing more practical guidance

regarding approaches for closing the academic achievement gap.\(^{35}\) So there is a recognition that more can be done by educators, but that knowing how to approach the challenge is still alluding administrators, educators, and policymakers.

**Solving the Black-White Achievement Gap Puzzle**

As noted above, the academic achievement gap between black and white students has been of national concern for many years. However, the issue is yet to be remedied, despite numerous studies on the causes and approaches for reducing its impact on the society.\(^{36}\) Policymakers, researchers, and educators have contributed many proposals on effective ways of reducing this gap.\(^{37}\) Often, policymakers blame faulty schools, poor teachers, or weak pedagogy for the black-white achievement gap.\(^{38}\) However, researchers have found a more complex mix of social, economic, political, and cultural factors to be behind the persistent gap.\(^{39}\)

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37 Timothy W. Schneider and Jack Klotz, The Impact of Music Education and Athletic Participation on Academic Achievement (presentation, Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association Bowling Green, KY, November 15-17, 2000).

38 Schneider and Klotz, The Impact of Music Education...

39 Schneider and Klotz, The Impact of Music Education...
Understanding the legislative and judicial history of addressing the black-white achievement gap began in the 1960s, and after a period of success in narrowing the gap, has reached a largely stalled state. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed, and Head Start was launched, which laid the foundations for legislative efforts toward addressing the gap. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, legislation and judicial decisions favored concerted efforts to address the quality of life factors that affect educational outcomes and racial achievement gaps. But beginning in the 1980s, progress began to stall and the Reagan administration adjusted America’s approach to educational funding, relying more on partisan views on spending than educational research to shape policy. The 1990s saw a period of score improvement stagnation and decline; the early 2000s were further marred by the disastrous No Child Left Behind policy. While the gap began to narrow again under the Obama Administration, it is unclear if legislative progress will be made under Secretary of Education DeVos, President Trump, or the conservative-leaning Supreme Court.

As a result, the best strategies for addressing the black-white achievement gap are to apply social and pedagogical approaches to changing the cultural understandings of race and learning practices in classrooms. This includes pedagogical efforts within classrooms, educational programming outside of schools, and adaptation of cultural understandings of education, race, and success. These strategies, which bring educators, families, and communities
together to combat the achievement gap, can be adopted across America, regardless of legislative situation, to address some of the core issues which underlie the black-white achievement gap. These strategies will address With hard work, these strategies might finally reverse recent 1990s declines and put American educators back on track for closing the many racial achievement gaps which plague America’s educational system.

Roadmap for the Thesis

What follows in this thesis are four main body chapters, each of which explores one aspects of the challenge of the black-white achievement gap. The ultimate goal of this thesis is to understand the current state of research regarding the causes of the black-white achievement gap, to determine how disconnects with legislation and judiciary decisions has led to an inability to surmount this gap, and to suggest options which might jump-start the narrowing of the black-white achievement gap in at least some of the myriad stages at which the gap manifests.

Chapter 2 of this thesis focuses on determining the starting point, limits, and scope of the black-white achievement gap as it has been researched and addressed since the 1960s. By interweaving discussion of legislative programs and judicial decisions, the chapter not only chronicles the efforts by Washington to address the black-white achievement gap, but also demonstrates the oscillating nature of the American government's approach to education, funding, and the definition of progress. Stalled progress starting in the late 1980s, a
backslide in test scores in the 1990s, and a rocky road to the current situation frame the largely ineffective legislative response to the black-white achievement gap and the limitations it puts on the notion of equality of opportunity in America.

With the black-white achievement gap's existence at every scholastic level confirmed, Chapter 3 explores the current research on the causes of the black-white achievement gap. There is a general consensus that the gap is caused by a combination of social and educational factors which cover schools, home environments, cultural differences, and societal norms, and the resulting literature proposes a number of theories for the black-white achievement gap. Negative eugenics theory and its adjoining biological explanations, and deficit theory and its matching psycho-social explanations, have both proven inadequate, based on pseudo-science and serving more as a political rallying cry than a desire to legitimately address the black-white achievement gap. Theories, such as teacher preparation theory, academic engagement theory, and stereotype-threat theory, help us to understand how cultural capital and social norms can shape how students interact with knowledge and education. The implications of these various explanations and approaches will manifest in

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chapter 5’s discussion of pedagogical approaches to addressing causes and problems.

After examining the literature on the scope of the black-white achievement gap, and with initial understandings of the many interconnecting factors which contribute to the racial achievement gap at nearly every level of assessment, the thesis then explores the legislative efforts that have been made in the past forty years. Chapter 4 progresses chronologically, beginning with the importance of the Civil Rights movement in the identification of the problem of the black-white achievement gap. The chapter then traces the successful and unsuccessful legislative milestones, along with judicial decisions of relevance. The lack of continuous and directed legislative policy to address the black-white achievement gap, caused by alternating Presidential politics, has resulted in a stalled impact on the gap.

Thus, the final chapter of this thesis explores pedagogical options and opportunities which could address the black-white achievement gap. First, efforts to improve classrooms through accountability and addressing expectations will be discussed. Then, the chapter will join a growing body of literature that suggests that changing the peer experience outside of schools can help students bridge existing knowledge and cultural gaps, as well as address some of the stereotyping and hostility toward education. Finally, the chapter will discuss some of the cultural approaches and programming that could shift how resources are utilized and understood in communities to maximize existing potential in all
students. Before discussing ways to address the black-white achievement gap, it is first necessary to understand what is meant by the gap, and to appreciate just how systemic and consistent the black-white achievement gap is at so many scholastic levels.
CHAPTER II. ANALYSIS OF ACADEMIC DATA

The black-white achievement gap has its study intertwined with the history of segregation and racial discrimination in America. The gap was first publicly reported in 1957,¹ shortly after Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954 argued that school segregation was unconstitutional. Data demonstrating the gap was used to argue that desegregation of schools would fail because Black students were not capable of performing at the same academic standards.² The argument, however, was not successful, and instead drew attention to a problem that would be researched in sociology and educational studies for decades to come.

The black-white achievement gap exists at almost every level of education at which it can be measured: elementary school performance, high school performance and outcomes, college entrance testing, college performance and outcomes, and post-graduate performance. Each of these will be examined to demonstrate that the gap between black and white students continues at all age levels, compounding the differences to result in significantly divergent experiences. However, what this literature review will also demonstrate is that, while the black-white achievement gap still exists at every possible level, some

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² Ogbu. “Black-American Students..."
progress has been made to lessen these gaps, though with some setbacks in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{3,4}

Elementary and Middle School Achievement Gaps

One of the challenges for understanding why there is such a large black-white achievement gap at various testing points during schooling is that the divide between black and white student performance occurs before children even begin moving through the American public educational system. Jencks and Phillips present data that demonstrates that black children score worse than white children on vocabulary tests at the ages of three and four.\textsuperscript{5} The NCES found, for the representative sample studied as the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort of 2001, that 37\% of white children are proficient with letter recognition by age 4; only 28\% of black children were proficient.\textsuperscript{6} 73\% of white 4-year-olds were proficient at identifying shapes and numbers, but this number drops to 55\% for black 4-year-olds.\textsuperscript{7} These differences immediately translate into

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7 Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 54.
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a gap between black and white students in reading and mathematics, which will follow students throughout their educational progress.

In 2009, the US Department of Education published a National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report which utilized data from national and state reading and mathematics assessments from 1990 to 2007 as well as some testing data reaching all the way back to 1978. The overall report was able to analyze both short term and long term gains for students, focusing on students grades 4 and 8. The report provides some insight not only into the black-white achievement gap at the elementary and middle school levels, but also illustrates how legislative efforts and programming have impacted the gaps by displaying long-term trends. The report’s findings were not entirely encouraging.

The report argued that average scores on both mathematics and reading have improved from 1978 to 2004, at both the grade 4 and grade 8 levels. However, the gap between black and white students’ mathematics scores shrank during this time period by roughly 16% for grade 4 students and 6% for grade 8 students, largely because black students’ score increases were greater than white students’ increases. In reading, black and white gaps in score decreased

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by 16% for grade 4 students and 10% for grade 8 students.\textsuperscript{10} In all cases, however, the gap still remained close to 30 points\textsuperscript{11} - the report demonstrates that every single state that provided data showed a significant gap between black and white students’ scores. The study also found that female students experienced a slightly smaller gap between black and white scores in both mathematics and reading than male students do.

Also, of note in the report is that students in both grade 4 and grade 8, when divided by socioeconomic status, still demonstrated strong black-white achievement gaps. In order to extract socioeconomic status, the report compared scores based on the students’ qualification for free or discounted school lunch. Interestingly enough, while students who did not qualify for discounted meals scored higher than their lower-socioeconomic-status peers on both reading and math at all age levels, the largest black-white achievement gaps appear in the wealthiest students’ scores.\textsuperscript{12} The 2009 NAEP report also demonstrated that, in all cases, there was statistically insignificant change in the black-white gap over time when grouped by socioeconomic class.

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\textsuperscript{11} The 30 point difference is on a 0-500 scale, meaning that black students score approximately 6% lower on both reading and mathematics tests.
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\textsuperscript{12} Vanneman et. al. “Achievement Gaps: How Black and White Students...”11 and 33.
\end{flushright}
Other studies have also shown that, even after equalizing out socioeconomic status, the black-white achievement gap persists, calling into question theories like the opportunity gap theory (discussed in the next chapter), which is heavily dependent theoretically on a correlation between poverty and poor scores. For example, George Bohrnstedt and his team found that, even controlling for socioeconomic status and classroom racial density, the achievement gap persists.\textsuperscript{13} The black-white achievement gap cannot be explained solely as the consequence of home socioeconomic environment. This means that targeted efforts to close the gap amongst America’s poorest have not had any greater effect than those targeting higher-income school districts. Other studies also have not produced encouraging results. A 2010 Educational Testing Service (ETS) report examined NAEP and other test data stretching back to the 1970s, and found that “most of the progress in closing the achievement gap in reading and mathematics occurred during the 1970s and 1980s. Since then, overall progress in closing the gaps has slowed.”\textsuperscript{14}

**High School Performance Gaps**

The same NAEP dataset used to examine 4th and 8th grade black-white achievement gaps can also be utilized to examine grade 12 students. According to the NCES, in 2005, 46% of black 12th graders scored below basic levels of

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\textsuperscript{14} Barton and Coley. “The Black-White Achievement Gap...”
reading competency, compared to 21% of white students.\textsuperscript{15} That same year, 30% of white students were below the basic level of proficiency in mathematics while a shocking 70% of black 12th graders scored below basic competency on the NAEP math test.\textsuperscript{16}

The NCES also examines the kinds of classes students take. In 2005, 29% of graduating white seniors had taken a full load of science courses (biology, chemistry, and physics), compared to just 21% of black seniors.\textsuperscript{17} 15% of white seniors in 2005 took calculus, the apex-level math class in American high schools, while only 5.5% of black graduating seniors completed the course.\textsuperscript{18} This is likely a result of cultural incompatibility – taking the final year of courses along the offered tracks, especially in mathematics, may be seen as 'acting white.' Race based academic tracking may also be an important cause of this. Yet taking upper-level courses directly impacts both college readiness and college acceptance chances, so it is important to close these kinds of gaps that are not grounded solely in assessment testing.

For decades, studies have demonstrated that black students drop out of high school without completing their diploma at higher rates than white

\textsuperscript{15} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 59.
\textsuperscript{16} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 62.
\textsuperscript{17} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 73.
\textsuperscript{18} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 71.
Studies of recent census and NCES data show that there is a narrowing of the black-white gap in high school drop-out rates. John Gramlick at the Pew Research Center found that, in 1996, 16% of black students did not graduate from high school, while only 8% of white students dropped out. The NCES reports that in 2007, 8% of black students dropped out, while 5% of white students did the same. By 2016, that gap had narrowed as 7% of black students drop out compared to 5% of white students. It should be noted, however, that during this same time period, Hispanic drop-out rates plummeted from 34% (1996) to 21% (2007) to 10% (2016): that is the racial attainment gap which has had the more significant closing in the last twenty years.

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22 Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 94.

23 Gramlich, “Hispanic dropout rate...”

24 Gramlich, “Hispanic dropout rate...”


26 Gramlich, “Hispanic dropout rate...”
College Entrance Exam Gaps

Several authors have examined gaps in the standardized college entrance exam scores of black and white students. The NCES has determined that the black-white achievement gap on the SATs has stayed level at around 100 points for over a decade. In 2008, this difference meant that Critical Reading score averages were 528 for white students and 434 for black students. In mathematics that year, the averages were 537 for white students and 426 for black students. In writing in 2008, the comparison yields 518 for white students and 424 for black students. Further updating these numbers, Reeves and Halikias, used publicly available College Board population data on seniors who took the 2015 SAT, and found that white students averaged a 534 on the math test, while black students averaged 428 - still a difference of over a hundred points out of a six-hundred point spread. These authors also note that there has been very little change in the past twenty years, with the gap remaining at approximately .9 standard deviations from the white and black mean score with little variation. This means that efforts to help black students close the gap in SAT testing have had little effect.

27 Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 82.
28 Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 82.
30 Reeves and Halikias. “Race gaps in SAT scores...”
Student scores on the ACT yield similar results. Using data from the 2016 ACT Profile, Reeves and Halikias found approximately a .9 standard deviation sized black-white gap, the same as they had found with the SATs. According to the NCES, in 2008, white seniors scored an average of almost 22 on the English section of the ACT, while black seniors scored a 16. For mathematics, students that same year scored an average of 22 for white students to 17 for black students. In both cases, the NCES stats for ACT scores show that these scores have not significantly improved in a decade (1998-2008), meaning that this black-white achievement gap for ACT scores goes back at least a decade with little impact caused by intervention efforts.

The 2010 NCES report also discussed the subject test scores of the ACT. In 2008, 33% of white students who took the ACT scored high enough on the science test to meet NCES's “college readiness benchmarks.” Only 5% of black students that same year met science benchmarks. In reading that same year, 61% of white students achieved college readiness benchmarks, compared to only 21% of black students. Most strikingly, when including all four categories

32 Reeves and Halikias. “Race gaps in SAT scores...”
33 Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 85.
34 Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 85.
35 Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 86.
36 Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 86.
(English, mathematics, reading, and science), 27% of white ACT takers in 2008 met all four benchmarks, while only 3% of black students could meet basic college readiness benchmark scores.\textsuperscript{37}

Another form of college entrance exam gap occurs with the Advanced Placement (AP) exams, which are given in a variety of subjects. Generally, scores of a 3 or higher are considered passing by the College Board and most universities. Here, again, the black-white achievement gap exists with some severity. NCES found that, in 2008, 37% of exams taken by white students received a mark of 2 or 1, both failing scores. Comparatively, 74% of exams taken by black students failed - with 48% scored with a 1.\textsuperscript{38} This means that AP exams taken by black students are twice as likely to be failed. In 2008, 14% of AP exams taken by white students earned a 5, the highest mark possible, compared to just 3% of AP exams taken by black students.\textsuperscript{39}

In addition, college entrance exam score gaps are only relevant insofar as students who take that test move on to college. Looking at data for the past twenty years, the NCES found that the gap between black and white 18-24 year old high school graduates attending college has been shrinking. In 1980, 20% of black 18 to 24-year olds were in college, compared to 28% of whites of the same

\textsuperscript{37} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 86.

\textsuperscript{38} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 77.

\textsuperscript{39} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 77.
demographic. In 2008, the gap was between 32% of blacks and 44% of whites. By 2016, that gap had shrunk to 43% of blacks to 47% of whites - the closing of the gap has primarily been because of gains for black 18 to 24 year olds.

There is even a gap in the length of time between graduating high school and entering college. 90% of white students who graduated in 2008 spent less than a year outside of school between high school and college; for black students, the percentage drops to 77%. On the other side of the scale, barely 3% of white students who graduated in 2008 had taken five years between high school and college, while over 11% of black graduates had taken over five years to transition to college.

**College Performance Gaps**

While attending college, black and white students maintain the academic achievement gap. According to the Department of Education, in 2008 75% of all white students graduating with a bachelor’s degree had a GPA of 3.0 or higher. That number drops to 55% for black graduates. 40% of white students graduate

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40 Gramlich, “Hispanic dropout rate..."

41 Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 120.

42 Gramlich, "Hispanic dropout rate..."


45 Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 41.
with a 3.5 GPA or higher. That number for black students, 19.5%, is less than half of their white counterparts.46

Students may attend college, but that is not the same as graduating. There is, unsurprisingly, a large black-white achievement gap when examining the issue of college degree completion. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, just over 42% of the 2005 starting cohort of white college students graduates in four years - for black students, that percentage is 21%.47 This gap is actually larger than the 1996 cohort, largely because white student graduation rates have increased by 6% over that decade, while black student graduation rates have stayed steady at 21%. Even at the six-year graduation rate, there is still a 20% graduation rate difference.48 Whites are significantly more likely to graduate college, even selecting for the black and white students who have actively elected to continue their education beyond the state-mandated level.

From another perspective, black students, on average, take longer to complete their college educations, another form of the black-white achievement gap. For 2008 graduates, nearly half (47.5%) of white students graduate in four


years or less. This drops to less than a third (32%) for their black peers.\textsuperscript{49} In contrast, 23\% of black graduates required over ten years to complete their bachelor’s degree; only 10\% of white students take over ten years.\textsuperscript{50} This should not immediately be assumed to be a marker of intelligence or capability - it is more likely that prolonged education, in many cases, is related to funding. Still, the longer a student prolongs his studies, the more likely he is to quit before completing them, making the concept relevant.

**Post-Graduate Outcomes**

The black-white achievement gap continues after students earn their bachelor’s. A study found that the average black student scored a 142 on the 2013-2014 LSAT, compared to the average white student’s score of a 153.\textsuperscript{51} Since the LSAT score is a significant factor in law school acceptances, a standard deviation of 1.06\textsuperscript{52} in LSAT scores is important.

In addition to LSAT scores, law students have to deal with the pass/fail stressor that is the Bar Exam, and again, the black-white achievement gap can be found. The 1998 Law School Admission Council National Longitudinal Bar Passage Study examined the bar passage rates along various axes, including

\textsuperscript{49} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 66.

\textsuperscript{50} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 66.


\textsuperscript{52} Reeves and Halikias. “Race gaps in SAT scores...”
race. It found that, for the law school class of 1991, the first-try bar exam passage rate was 92% for white students, while only 81% for black students.\textsuperscript{53} This is a significant gap, as failing the bar exam the first time one takes it can significantly decrease initial earnings, important for law students with significant student loans.

Similarly, this gap can be found in MCAT scores.\textsuperscript{54} The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) has collected and aggregated data on MCAT scores.\textsuperscript{55} According to the AAMC, white 2016-17 medical school matriculants scored an average of 510 on the MCAT, while black matriculants scored an average of 502.5.\textsuperscript{56} Among this same population, white matriculants had a science GPA averaging a 3.68, while black matriculants had a 3.38 GPA.\textsuperscript{57}

Black and white students do not attend graduate schools in equal proportion either, though this gap is closing over time. In 1976, 85% of students entering graduate study (master’s, first-professional, and doctoral) were white, 

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
Year & Percentage of White Students \hline
1976 & 85\% \hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Proportion of White Students in Graduate Study, 1976}
\end{table}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
Year & Percentage of Black Students \hline
1976 & 15\% \hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Proportion of Black Students in Graduate Study, 1976}
\end{table}


\url{https://www.aamc.org/data/facts/applicantmatriculant/157998/factstablea24.html}

\textsuperscript{56} Scott Jaschik, “Diversity and Medical School Admissions,” Inside Higher Ed, December 4, 2017, 
\url{https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2017/12/04/medical-schools-have-become-more-diverse-primarily-because-asian}

\textsuperscript{57} Jaschik, “Diversity and Medical School Admissions”
while only 6% were black.\textsuperscript{58} By 2008, the gap had shrunk, with only 64% of incoming graduate students identifying as white compared to 11.5% who were black.\textsuperscript{59} Of the most popular subjects of study, white graduate students earned a larger portion of diplomas than black graduates in all categories except business, where black graduates earned more master’s and doctoral degrees (though it should be noted that Hispanic and Asian students earned degrees in business than white students as well).\textsuperscript{60}

The black-white achievement gap then translates into long-term economic differences. According to the NCES, in 2008 33% of white adults have at least a college degree, compared to just 20% of black adults.\textsuperscript{61} That same year, unemployment averaged 9% for black Americans to 4% for white Americans on the whole.\textsuperscript{62} But, that gap narrows significantly when factoring in a bachelor’s degree - for those with at least a bachelor’s, white Americans averaged 2% unemployment to black Americans’ 3.5% unemployment.\textsuperscript{63} While there are several other gaps between blacks and whites (pay/earnings, life expectancy, etc.), these are beyond the scope of the academic black-white achievement gap.

\textsuperscript{58} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 125.
\textsuperscript{59} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 125.
\textsuperscript{60} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 138.
\textsuperscript{61} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 141.
\textsuperscript{62} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 144.
\textsuperscript{63} Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 144.
Conclusions

The data presented here leads to an undeniable conclusion which cannot be escaped: there is a black-white achievement gap at every age level students are evaluated at. White children score higher on aptitude tests before school. They outperform their black peers at grades 4, 8, and 12. They take more advanced course loads and are more likely to stay in high school through graduation. They score higher on the SATs and ACTs and pass more of the AP exams. They attend college in higher percentages, where they are more likely to graduate. White students are also more likely to attend and succeed at post-graduate education and the workforce.

The black-white achievement gap that exists on every level is broadly accepted as reality; the focus in recent years has been first understanding why that gap exists and then remedying the causes so as to eliminate the gap, ensuring that students of all races prepare and perform at equal rates. Thus, to better respond to the factors which cause the black-white achievement gap, researchers must understand the multi-variant conditions which may lead to disparate performances. With the black-white achievement gap occurring at every level, it is unlikely that a single factor, such as student socioeconomic background, single vs. dual parent household, class size, racial density of schools, or even cultural misconceptions can entirely explain the gap. Before examining how to address the black-white achievement gap, we must examine the literature explaining why the gap occurs in the first place.
CHAPTER III. DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH AND CAUSES

In the previous chapter, I established that the black-white achievement gap has been long-lasting and pervasive. It appears at every level of assessment and measurement, beginning before little black and white children even start preschool. The gap persists, in some form or another, through assessment tests, placement exams, graduation rates, and post-graduate performance. Finding a solution to the problem of the black-white achievement gap requires understanding its causes. Those who use biological explanations might seek an easy single answer, but their efforts are wrong. Rather, a mix of economic and complex cultural causes create the necessary social and educational situation in America to perpetuate the black-white achievement gap for decades. The various gaps described in the previous chapter are the products of multiple social issues, and thus a variety of contexts must be explored to fully encapsulate the issue at hand. This chapter will examine some of these researched causes, broadly grouped into categories of biology, economics, and culture, though this list is hardly exhaustive of the massive body of literature which has examined this topic.

Biological Explanations

Because most social understandings of race are based on beliefs about the physical body, it is not surprising that there is an extensive body of literature which argued that the basis for the black-white achievement gap is biological or
genetic realities. Essentially, this belief was based on the idea that whites are superior to other races with regard to intellectual capacity.¹

Taking this a step further, negative eugenics is the perception that those with unwanted genetic traits should reproduce less or not be invested in by the society. Those without potential should be less-focused on and those with potential should be given greater opportunities. Beginning in the 1920s, there was research, at the time viewed as legitimate science, and a body of literature that reinforced white supremacy as a reasonable explanation for any perceived gaps in student performance.² Thus, while minorities in the 1920s attended schools and institutions that were under-funded, segregated, and under-resourced, these factors were all but completely ignored when racial differences were discussed. Negative eugenics was used to explain and justify systemic racial inequality.

As people continued to push for equality for educational access, many who supported segregation used the negative eugenics 'science' as their justification.³ Negative eugenics proponents argued that segregation was not immoral because minorities have lesser intellectual capacity and therefore,

² Selden. Inheriting Shame...
increased funding, segregation, and more resources would only be fruitless and unproductive activities.⁴

Although research has shown that there is no creditable race-based biological foundation for the academic achievement gap, there are some who believe that the remnants of this sentiment still have value in the 21st century.⁵ The belief is not expressed as direct articulation of negative eugenics, but instead insidiously in the form of low expectations, subtle expressions of inferiority, and consistent omissions of whole-hearted attempts to address academic issues in minority communities.⁶ Thus, while it is unfortunate to have to address such a repugnant argument, it still exists and impacts policy-making, and therefore requires attention.

The most famous example of biologically based explanations of the black-white achievement gap came from Hernstein and Murray's (1994) *The Bell Curve*⁷ already discussed in the introduction of this thesis. Within an argument that life outcomes could be predicted by looking at intelligence and academic performance – itself not a controversial idea – Hernstein and Murray made some rather surprising arguments that the gap between black IQ scores and white IQ

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scores was based solely on genetic difference. Though the book has been largely dismissed in both biological and educational circles (or at least that argument of it has been), *The Bell Curve* was a best-seller and has had wide exposure to the public at large, giving it undue influence in the debate over the black-white achievement gap.

It is clear, based on recent and widely-accepted research, that there is no biological basis for the black-white achievement gap. Administrators, policymakers, or scholars who operate with a belief that the racial achievement gap is biologically based are misinformed at best, racist at worst. As biology is not an explanation for the racial achievement gap, attempts to address the black-white achievement gap should be focused on other avenues for change. If biology holds no explanation, perhaps economic approaches will be more relevant.

**Economic Explanations**

For much of the 1970s and 1980s, the dominant explanations for the black-white achievement gap were economic: black kids performed poorly because they were poor.\(^8\) This argument manifest in a variety of studies, looking at everything from paternal involvement to parents’ work habits to school district funding to poverty and beyond. But, while the evidence is not remotely conclusive, and likely never will be since the black-white achievement gap is a

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complex social phenomenon with many explanations, the power of economic explanations to justify the continued black-white achievement gap is waning. Economics alone may not be an explanation.

The opportunity gap theory looks at a pattern of institutionalized racism and the compounding disadvantages experienced by racial minorities in America. Generations of minorities in the United States have missed educational opportunities, and have experienced economic deficits that have propagated inequality. This has created minority communities and schools that lacked adequate resources to address the widening gap in achievement. Some researchers view these historical inequalities as the cause for gaps in achievement outcomes.9 For example, Darling-Hammond says, “educational outcomes for students of color are much more a function of their unequal access to key educational resources…than they are a function of race.”10

Another key proponent of this theory is Ladson-Billings, who argues that we should focus more on what students are not receiving than on what students are not achieving.11 She says that we must examine the factors that have contributed to the academic achievement gap in a more appropriate context.

9 Gary Orfield, Daniel Losen, Johanna Wald, Christopher B. Swanson. “Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis,” (The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2004).


They include (1) the funding debt/disparity between white and non-white schools; (2) the historical debt of inequalities surrounding race, class, and gender; (3) the sociopolitical debt of excluded minorities from the civic process; and the (4) the moral debt of the failure to treat all citizens in the United States fairly.¹² These contextual factors cannot be ignored as they play a vital role in how the academic achievement gap is disseminated across the minority communities in the United States.

Opportunity gap theory encompasses another idea called Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT contends that laws propel resource-gaps, these gaps serve as a manifestation of a greater power struggle between races.¹³ Ladson-Billings, also a leading voice of CRT, argues that even when attempts are made to discount race in inequality, race still matters because racism extends beyond systemic economic prejudices.¹⁴ Proponents of CRT see that white privilege as a foundational cause of inequality and that “colorblind” laws don’t exists; thus, the black-white achievement gap is an economic outcome of legislation that almost automatically discriminates against black students. Liberalism and meritocracy

¹² Ladson-Billings. "From the Achievement Gap..." 9.


are used as a means of fairness, but only those with privilege (i.e. white privilege) will benefit where merit is rewarded.\textsuperscript{15}

Economic explanations often look at the quality of schools as the economic determining factor for the black-white achievement gap, but this is to varying success. Studies which have examined student density find that controlling for student density, black student density, or student-teacher ratios\textsuperscript{16} still result in a black-white achievement gap.\textsuperscript{17} In fact, only significant changes in class size\textsuperscript{18} seem to have any significant effect on the black-white achievement gap. Studies which look at funding per student, once that is controlled for, still find a black-white achievement gap.\textsuperscript{19,20} And of course, those who focus on economic inequalities in schools have a weak argument for explaining why the gap begins at such an early age (four years old), as discussed at the beginning of the previous chapter.

\begin{footnotes}


\textsuperscript{20} Mark Dynarski and Kirsten Kainz. “Why federal spending on disadvantaged students (Title I) doesn’t work.” Brookings Institute Evidence Speaks Reports, 1(7), (2015).

\end{footnotes}
Even studies which look at the student's life outside of school cannot fully explain the black-white achievement gap solely through economics. Studies which examined single-motherhood, family socioeconomic status, use of free-lunch programming, and other markers of economic difference still consistently found a black-white achievement gap, even after factoring out socioeconomic considerations. While it may be difficult to manage in terms of objective measurement or policy-development, economic explanations must give way to cultural explanations for the persistence of the black-white achievement gap.

**Cultural Explanations**

At the end of the day, if poor white students, growing up with similar economic opportunities as their poor black peers, still consistently perform better than those black peers, then economics alone cannot justify the black-white achievement gap. Cultural explanations, which focus on the differences between black and white children’s experiences, remain. One of the dominant cultural approaches to the question of the black-white achievement gap is deficit theory, which itself has several relevant variants to be discussed.

Deficit theory argues that poor performance in school is rooted in cognitive, psychological, emotional, and cultural deficits, often due to poor

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infrastructure and social norms. This theory attributes the causes of the academic gap to a 'culture of poverty', negative beliefs about education, and poor reading and language development, leading to an intellectual deficit. Struggling minority students are labeled as having an intellectual deficit because they are not taught better (as opposed to a biological flaw or economic lack), and failings are attributed to the context which shapes the student. Other studies focus on teachers’ expectations with research showing that students and their achievement have been impacted. This has led to researchers showing that minorities do not have an intrinsic intellectual deficit but have been subject to a different cultural context, meaning that the context is deficient, not the student.

Cultural incompatibility theory also emphasizes that the teaching class, which is largely white and middle class, does not understand or compliment

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26 Tyrone C Howard, Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Classrooms (Teachers College Press, 2010).


minority black culture.\textsuperscript{29} Teacher preparation must go beyond technical execution to understand the context of the students. These ideas argue that closing the achievement gap is aided by teachers being prepared to execute a culturally responsive pedagogy. This perspective views cultural differences as positive and as “rich, unique and complex.”\textsuperscript{30} Researchers that see this variable as vital to closing the academic achievement gap see culturally relevant language as an asset and specific cultural home environments as capital to be built upon, not transformed. When teachers are better-prepared for cultural differences, students perform better academically.

Some researchers have proposed that the academic achievement gap between minorities and whites is due to cultural differences, arguing Euro-centric white culture and African-American culture are worldviews that are incompatible. This variant of deficit theory known as cultural incompatibility theory, which argues that cultural change is necessary to address problems that certain demographic groups face in educational settings. Gay argues that cultural “incompatibilities are evident in value orientation, behavioral norms, expectations, and styles, social interactions, self-presentation, communication and cognitive

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\textsuperscript{30} Howard. Why Race and Culture Matter... 69.
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Researchers who espouse such a theory believe that teacher preparation, especially cultural competency, is vital.

Some proponents of cultural incompatibility theory ultimately see minority students as the challenge, arguing that black culture does not support ideas of educational excellence. Solutions range from culturally responsive teaching strategies (which will be covered in the teacher preparation section) to better assimilation among minority students. The differences are emphasized with regard to whether the academic achievement gap is closed by either changing the child or changing the school. Specifically, the range of ideas that fall under Cultural Incompatibility Theory claim that these students’ “culture is abnormal” and the “home environment is pathological” or that their “language is a deficit.” The cultural incompatibility model is a version of the deficit model, one which specifically focuses on the minority child’s culture – in this case, black culture in America – as the root of the deficit, rather than other social or cultural factors.

John Ogbu was an anthropologist who conducted research on race, culture, and educational achievement and developed the racial academic disengagement theory, which would come to shape much of the debate over the cultural causes of the black-white achievement gap. He argued that the racial

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32 Howard. Why Race and Culture Matter... 69.

33 Howard. Why Race and Culture Matter... 69.
disparities in America's racial caste-like culture led to social stratification with blacks at the bottom, which has since resulted in academic deficiencies. He argues that owing to disparities, many in the black community have internalized that formal academic achievement is not part of their societal identity and thus, pursing it would be “acting white.”

Ogbu found that beliefs held by black students that they were 'not good at school' then led those students to believe that being fully engaged in formal educational was not beneficial or necessary. These students often focused more on the perceptions of their group as inferior, which in turn creates disengagement and leads to poor performance. Ogbu associates the disparity in the academic performance to the lack of a serious attitude towards academic excellence.

Ogbu's work distinguishes between blacks in America who came directly from Africa versus those who came from the Caribbean as immigrants. He argued that the latter group may have similar economic restraints when they arrived in the United States but do not have the same academic achievement gap because they did not internalize the social stratification from the history of African Americans in the United States.

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that it is necessary to consider community forces and racial dialogues, ethos, and worldview when trying to understand why different black communities in the US (African-Americans vs. Afro-Caribbeans) had different educational experiences.

The main problem with Ogbu's work is that not all minorities, or even all black students, view education negatively. Mickelson found, instead, that what matters more is not the race of the student, but how much the student connects education with concrete future success.\(^{38}\) Education is seen as less beneficial and thus less important to students who only saw schooling as abstractly beneficial. Black students who can see that education has positive concrete value will be more positive;\(^ {39}\) this calls into question the association between education and 'acting white'.

Related to Ogbu's work is stereotype threat theory, which argues that students internalize racial stereotypes and that these stereotypes affect the psychology, emotional state, and behavior of students. When society perpetuates stereotypes as social norms, children internalize these stereotypes and feel compelled to perform the social norm, thus perpetuating the stereotype, reinforcing the stereotype within the community. Steele and Aaronson introduced the term in their study that indicated that black college freshmen and


sophomores tend to exhibit poor performance on standardized assessments when they believed in the stereotype that black students perform worse. The findings of the survey showed that an awareness of negative stereotypes usually harms the academic performance. The study confirmed that the stereotype knowledge often plays an essential role in widening the achievement gap.

Negative stereotypes often raise inhibiting doubts and increase the levels of anxiety among students before taking tests. Steele’s research suggests that acts as simple as reminding students that they are of a particular social group often play a significant role in wreaking havoc in tests involving academic achievements. The former study and many others undercut the assumption that cultural or genetic differences solely contribute to poor academic performance in standardized academic tests. Steele and Aaronson mainly focused on the examination of how the group stereotypes often threaten performance which then, in turn, alters students' academic identities and intellectual ability. Such


social-psychological dilemmas often significantly contribute to overwhelming any member of a group against whom negative stereotypes exist.

**Conclusions**

This chapter looked at the most relevant causes of the black-white achievement gap as it is currently understood. The plethora of causes demonstrate that narrowing down to a singular cause for explaining the gap is not likely. The complicated intersection of history, resource allocation, group psychology, and educational pedagogy discussed here is still only a partial picture of this ongoing debate. Early theories that were based on the inferiority of blacks proved incorrect, and studies with black middle-class and poor white students show that income and resources do not completely answer for the gap either. Thus, cultural factors must be of some significant importance: both the culture of black students that questions the value of education and resources available; and the culture of American society which accepts and ignores continued racial inequality in education and beyond. The next chapter surveys the policy strategies, judicial decisions and remedies that have been used over the years to close the gap, most of which, it will be argued, completely ignore many of the theories and ideas that have just been laid out here in this chapter.
CHAPTER IV. LEGISLATION AND JUDICIAL DECISIONS

This chapter traverses the history of educational policy which has been proposed and enacted, with varying success, to address the black-white achievement gap. It also surveys relevant major judicial decisions. As many scholars note, early progress toward eliminating racial achievement gaps in the 1970s and 1980s gave way to stagnation and setback in the 1990s.\(^1\) Starting in the 21st century, however, mixed efforts have reignited the process and, as discussed in the previous chapters, more efforts have been made to understand and address the complex social circumstances that come together to cause the many forms of the black-white achievement gap.

1965: An Important Beginning Point

In 1964, the Johnson administration passed the Civil Rights Act, and the government began examining ways to improve social, economic, and political conditions for minorities who were being discriminated against. The United States Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, and the Head Start Program all sought to increase student achievement and close the racial educational gaps. *Brown vs. Board of Education* was a response to the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision that took place in 1896 and allowed states to initiate racial segregation in public school. Although the jurisprudence for overturning the

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*Plessy vs. Ferguson* ruling was a volition of the 14th amendment of the United States Constitution, the arguments were rooted in advocating for equal education. The plaintiffs argued that segregation fostered inferior educational institutions for African-Americans, which lead to educational gaps.

The court’s unanimous decision in *Brown* was influenced by the research of African-American psychologists Dr. Kenneth and Mamie Clark. After reading their research, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote, “To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone.”

The Clarks conducted studies that showed that when schools were segregated, non-Black children showed a racial bias when choosing black versus white dolls in play. Minority students at segregated schools experienced unequal educational opportunities, which led to the academic achievement gap. By 1965, minorities were pushing for equality though the Civil Rights Movement and education was front and center in this struggle. More than a decade after the 1954 desegregation of schools, the academic achievement gap now openly documented and acknowledged in primary and secondary schools.

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Also, in 1965, the controversial “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action”\textsuperscript{5} White Paper, more commonly known as the Moynihan Report, was leaked, which painted a scathing and troubled portrait of black-white inequality, arguing that poverty within black communities was not caused by a lack of economic opportunity, but by “ghetto” culture which black communities chose to perpetuate. Then in 1966, sociologist James Coleman published his "Equality of Educational Opportunity" Report,\textsuperscript{6} more colloquially known as the Coleman Report, which was based on research of desegregated schools. This report is most commonly discussed in sociology and educational studies for its conclusion that student home environment and background is more important to learning outcomes than actual school quality. But within this report was evidence of a wide black-white achievement gap, which Coleman further connected to regional differences in educational standards. Both of these reports forced the Department of Education, and President Johnson, to address the significant experiential gap between the lives of young black and young white Americans. The Coleman Report would also be the inspiration for the analysis of socioeconomic background in determining the causes of the black-white achievement gap, as was discussed last chapter. In addition, Erik Hanushek notes, “the largest impact of the Coleman Report has been in the linkage of


education research to education policy. It is difficult to find other areas of public policy where there is such a clear and immediate path from new research to the courts, to legislatures, and to policy deliberations. It is not unusual for research findings of working papers still with wet ink to be offered as proof that a new policy must be enacted.”

This reality is the subject of this chapter and the next.

Also, in 1965 the Head Start Program began for preschool-aged children of low-income families. Initially, the program was designed to provide low-income children a few weeks of summer school programming to prepare them with any material they would need to start elementary school. While focused on low-income families, the majority of the students who used the program were minorities, including significant numbers of black students. The program would cover a variety of efforts to tackle inequalities faced by low-income students, including nutritional programs, out-of-school programming, and even the creation of Sesame Street as an educational show for children on public access television. Head Start largely focused, and continues to focus, on improving quality of life and access to resources as the main vector along which to combat the black-white achievement gap.

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The ESEA and Title I

Also following from the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the most important legislative act in United States' history to address the academic achievement gap was passed in 1965 – the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). It was created and championed by President Lyndon Johnson as part of his “War on Poverty” agenda. Research tying poverty and low academic achievement was the cornerstone of academic improvement strategy. Subsequently, the ESEA adopted an aggressive approach towards low-income students. Under Title I in the act, schools with at least 40% of the students classified as low-income could receive significant federal financial assistance. These schools received funds to create programs that would target, throughout the reauthorizations, academic improvement, dropout reduction, test score improvement, and greater parental involvement.

The ESEA Title I provision has been altered and adjusted throughout its reauthorization history. As law-makers sought to increase the program’s effectiveness, they added more restrictions on how funds were used. As the program did not seem to have any drastic changes in improving the academic

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achievement gap within the first 5 years, discussions of change started taking place.

By 1978, new rules were added with the aim to increase effectiveness. One change was that Title I funds would be more restrictive with regard to how schools could use it. Additionally, academic achievement improvements were added as specific measures of the program’s success.¹¹ During the 1970s, the legislation also added punitive measures to encourage uniformity in the distribution of funds.¹² Through these amendments, policy makers showed that they believed that funds spent on low-income students would be the key solution to closing the gap between students. The belief and the way the research was interpreted was that low-income students were the students holding back the national- and city-level academic achievement scores and needed to be remedied.¹³

As exhibited in the early legislation, the key strategy of the Title I program was aimed at funds being used on specific students. This targeted approach sought to address students with issues based solely on their economic status. Funds could only be used for students classified as low-income, and other


students could not receive any resources that came from federal Title I finance. However, by 1978, critics were growing increasingly skeptical of this individualistic approach; and measures were added stating that if 75% or more of the student body belonged to the low-income group, a school-wide approach could be used.\(^4\) Today, nearly 25 million American students study in schools which receive funding under Title I’s “75% low income” policy, and the Brookings Institute estimates that approximately $600 more is spent per year per each of those students under Title I, though how that money is spent entirely depends on the discretion of the school district or even school itself.\(^5\)

In 1981, the ESEA was reauthorized with further Title I changes. After 15 years, the pervasive academic achievement gap was still prevalent despite such a massive effort having been undertaken. President Ronald Reagan had been newly elected and believed that government regulations needed to be reduced in general, including educational legislation.\(^6\) The Reagan administration and the new Congress made changes to the Title I that reduced federal restrictions and gave more control to states.\(^7\)

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\(^6\) Gardner. “A Nation At Risk…”

In 1987, as achievement gaps in low-income schools were still prevalent, the focus moved toward student achievement and school improvement. In 1988, the reauthorization included new initiatives in Title I that elevated the academic standards to push for advanced studies and created measures, known as the Hawkins-Stafford Amendments, to get parents more involved.\(^{18}\) Additionally, the legislation allowed for more school-wide programs as opposed to student-specific approaches by reducing school-wide restrictions. The years since 1965 have seen the ESEA move from funds for low-income students to more federal control to now less federal control, all in hopes of reducing the academic achievement gap. However, the efficacy of such action would become questionable as the 1980s wore on.\(^{19}\)

Other Milestones in the 1970s and 1980s

In 1971, a landmark California Supreme Court case had economic implications for reducing the black-white achievement gap. In *Serrano vs. Priest*,\(^{20}\) a California judge determined that all California school districts had to spend the same amount per student across the entire state. This meant that each district was allocated the same funding, which would hopefully mean that resources would be distributed fairly, diminishing some of the structural

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20 California Supreme Court: Serrano v. Priest, 5 Cal.3d 584 (1971)
inequalities viewed as causing the black-white achievement gap.\textsuperscript{21} As will be discussed later, it is unclear how successfully \textit{Serrano vs. Priest} has been implemented in the last 45 years.\textsuperscript{22}

The black-white achievement gap has also been present at the post-graduate level, as discussed in chapter 2, for many years. But policies to address these disparities began as early as the 1970s. Walter Leonard, Assistant Dean at Harvard Law School during the 1960s and 1970s,\textsuperscript{23} developed what came to be known as the ‘Harvard Plan’ - a calculated effort to deemphasize LSAT scores and GPA during admissions decision-making regarding minority applicants, and actively seek to accept larger numbers of black candidates. Leonard’s Harvard Plan would be considered pivotal in opening the door to diversity in graduate education when it would become the basis for the Supreme Court’s vision of Affirmative Action in 1978.

President Nixon signed the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) in 1974. This act prohibits any kind of discrimination against faculty or students at any educational level. This has obvious implications for school desegregation but has over time come to relate to everything from funding of schools to access to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Hanushek. “What Matters for Student Achievement.”
\item \textsuperscript{22} Kacey Guin, Betheny Gross, Scott Deburgomaster and Marguerite Roza. “Do Districts Fund Schools Fairly?” Education Next, 7, no 4 (2007).
\end{itemize}
AP classes and standardized testing sites. The law specifically requires school
districts to address disparities and discrimination.

1974 was also a year for some tumultuous judicial decisions regarding
racial integration of schools. Boston, a heavily segregated city, saw public riots
when District Court Judge W. Arthur Garrity ordered the busing of black students
to predominantly white schools throughout the city in order to achieve racial
integration of public schools. Lower-income white families, particularly in the
neighborhood known as “Southie,”24 protested for nearly two years. Over in
Detroit, another racial segregated urban center, conflicts over busing black
students to the suburbs where schools were higher quality resulted in the US
Supreme Court *Milliken v. Bradley*25 decision, which essentially argued that
suburban schools were not responsible for the racial composition or outcome of
urban school districts.

In 1978, another Supreme Court decision set rules by which higher
educational institutions could attempt to compensate for the black-white
achievement gap. *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*26 was a ruling
which upheld earlier legal notions of Affirmative Action, codifying the concept to
mean that race could be a factor that was taken into account during the

24 J. Brian Sheehan. The Boston School Integration Dispute: Social Change and Legal


admissions process, but that specific quotas were not an acceptable part of that admissions process. The arguments in support noted the success of Leonard’s Harvard Plan in using Affirmative Action in law school admissions. This decision, by delineating the limits and general spirit of Affirmative Action in educational admissions, set the stage for what continues to be a contentious debate in American politics.27

Under the Reagan Administration there was a general push to move resources from the federal to the state and local levels, including in the realm of education. Under Reagan, Congress passed the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act (ECIA)28 in 1981, which renewed the ESEA but also moved responsibility to the states for educational oversight. This deregulation heavily emphasized fiscal responsibility of schools and overall reduced spending. The ECIA was followed in 1988, the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Act,29 which among many additions increased funding for programs for dropout prevention and secondary school basic skills improvement, both important for addressing black-white achievement gaps.


28 Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981 (H.R. 3941)

The 1990s: A Period of Stagnation

It appears that the policies of the Reagan administration not only did not lessen racial achievement gaps, but may even have exacerbated them. In 1993, the Department of Education was becoming aware that there was a slow-down in progress made, both in terms of reducing the black-white achievement gap and generally improving black students’ scores and outcomes. The NCES released a 1993 report on “The Condition of Education” and the outlook was not ideal. Not only were student scores’ leveling out in almost all categories, in some cases, the black-white achievement gap had begun to grow since 1989 because black students’ scores in many subjects were dropping. The result was a significant popular demand for educational reform from the newly elected President Clinton.

In response, in 1994, President Clinton reauthorized the ESEA of 1965 through a new piece of legislation known as the Improving America’s Schools Act (IASA). The IASA reforms for Title I by increasing federal funding. The new legislation allowed schools more control over their funding, added stricter standards for reading and math, and reduced the low-income student threshold.

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31 Aud et. al. “Status and Trends in the Education...” 41.

for implementing school-wide improvement programs. This added new testing and assessment requirements for schools to ensure all students were taught according to the new national standards. This would provide accountability to schools, which was intended to ensure that low performing schools would elevate their standards.

The IASA would be supplemented in 1998 with the Higher Education Act,\textsuperscript{33} which provided funding for some programs which were designed to, in part, make college more accessible to low-income blacks to close racial achievement gaps. This included the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program, or “GEAR UP”, which helped low-income students gain access to resources and grants for college study. By 1998, however, Jenks and Phillips would argue that the single largest remaining factor causing racial inequality was the black-white achievement gap,\textsuperscript{34} a pessimistic conclusion to say the least.

\textbf{The 2000s: Lots of Children Left Behind}

Married to a school teacher himself, President George W. Bush was eager to open his first term with a major legislative victory in the field of education. After being negotiated for much of 2001, the controversial No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law in January of 2002. The law again reauthorizes the ESEA of 1965 but marks a fundamental shift in approach - the main focus of the

\textsuperscript{33} Higher Education Amendments of 1998. (H.R. 6)

legislation is to close academic achievement gaps between groups of children by ensuring that all schools are up to high standards through state-mandated annual assessment. Federal standards would determine which schools were succeeding, and which were failing. Punishments for schools which failed for enough consecutive years would be delivered from the federal level, including the closing of many schools.

NCLB added yearly tests that assessed the teachers as well as the students. It also mandated that all schools publish annual report cards, outlining student achievement, student demographics, and the proportion by which the school’s population met those requirements. NCLB also added more punitive measures for schools that failed to meet the assessment requirements and placed higher provisions for educators who were paid with federal Title I funds. The goal was to quantify success, and then use those measures to rank, compare, and understand schools. In theory, NCLB, by being based on a numerical premise, held great promise for closing the black-white achievement gap. Resources could be better allocated to schools in need of improvement. Pedagogically, the impact of resource distribution could be studied, and schools which did succeed at closing the gap could be singled out and studied, both possibilities which might jumpstart the largely stalled process of racial educational equality.

The problem with NCLB, however, was that it was performance oriented, but operated under the notion of negative sanctions (punishing bad schools
rather than promoting good schools). The NCLB Act sought to fix failing schools and the achievement gap by providing “punishments” that would motivate schools to close the gap and ensure students obtained higher scores.\textsuperscript{35} This led to what many described as “teaching to the test”, where many educators focused on getting students to be proficient in state-wide tests to avoid negative federal consequences. Data showed that this strategy was overall ineffective, except in most extreme cases, where a school failed for several years.\textsuperscript{36} Although it did have a positive impact on African-American math test scores, it did not close the achievement gap and had no significant effect on reading scores.\textsuperscript{37}

The Higher Education Act of 1998 led to several efforts to close black-white achievement gaps at various levels, as well as other racial achievement gaps. But five years later, in 2003, the Higher Education Act was set to expire and with the already problematic roll-out of NCLB, Congress was not interested in significant change to existing policy. Expiration became a serious concern as the Senate failed to negotiate a reauthorization. The Alliance for Equity in Higher Education, a multi-racial\textsuperscript{38} educational partnership, lobbied Congress for more

\textsuperscript{35} Thomas S. Dee and Brian Jacob, “The Impact of No Child Left Behind on Student Achievement,” Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. 30, no. 3 (2011): 418-446.


\textsuperscript{37} Dee and Jacob, “The Impact of No Child Left...”

\textsuperscript{38} The Alliance for Equity in Higher Education consists of a partnership between the which consisted of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), and the National Association For Equal
spending on programs that would specifically address the black-white achievement gap at the university and post-graduate level.\textsuperscript{39} Most of the requests were denied and the Higher Education Act was begrudgingly renewed in 2003. Subsequent budgets were contentious; for example, President Bush vetoed NCLB funding in 2007 because it was part of a larger budget battle. When the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) was funded in 2008, it continued many pre-existing policies with little innovation or change, showing an unwillingness to update strategies that had led to stagnation in test scores for nearly a decade and a half.

One of the programs which directly addressed the black-white achievement gap that was expanded under the Bush Administration was the Head Start Program. 2007’s Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act expanded Head Start, increased standards for teachers and staff, and helped to bring disparate state standards into alignment at the federal level.\textsuperscript{40}

**The Obama Years: Restarting the Drive**

By the time Barack Obama became president, it was clear that No Child Left Behind was not a successful policy, providing little in the realm of results while creating massive bureaucratic problems at the state level. In 2010, several


\textsuperscript{40} Office of Head Start. “History of Head Start.”
districts across the country had begun complaining that it was impossible to meet state standards by any affordable measure; the financial crisis of 2008-2009 had left many school districts on the verge of bankruptcy. As a result, President Barack Obama announced\textsuperscript{41} in September of 2011 that the states would be allowed to request flexibility and even exemption from some requirements. By the end of the following year, a staggering 33 states (and the District of Columbia) requested and were granted exemptions and waivers for significant requirements of NCLB. The failure of the program was very evident; as a result, the Obama administration began considering total replacements (rather than reauthorizations) of NCLB.

In 2012, President Obama signed an executive order\textsuperscript{42} titled White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans. The initiative was housed in the Department of Education and the Executive Director of the initiative, was appointed by the Secretary of Education. The goals of the initiative, included “increasing general understanding of the causes of the educational challenges faced by African American students,” “ensuring that all African American students have comparable access to the resources necessary to


obtain a high-quality education,” and “increasing college access and success for African American students.” The initiative was composed of a team of educators and stakeholders from around the country that would create policy recommendations and create resource guides for closing the black-white academic achievement gap.

In 2013, Affirmative Action would be tested at the Supreme Court in the case of Fisher v. University of Texas. Fisher, whose poor test scores failed to earn her an automatic spot at the University of Texas, unsuccessfully sued the university for considering race in their admissions policy. The court ultimately concluded that it was constitutional for race to be taken into account during admissions as long as that consideration was “narrowly tailored.” The case, and subsequent iterations as Fisher continues to fight the decision, have been considered a victory for the continuation of Affirmative Action in university admissions.

The latest reauthorization of ESEA, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act, was signed by President Obama in 2015 and is the most recent reauthorization that aims to swing the pendulum of control back to the states. The law was passed with bipartisan support and added provisions that limit the

43 Office of the Press Secretary. “Executive Order...”

44 Fisher v. University of Texas, 570 U.S. (2013)

federal government’s role in public K-12 education and allowed local districts and states more control to develop standards. The federal law maintains the standards which define schools as failing, but states can choose how to deal with those failing schools. Although the latest reauthorization of ESEA limits the federal government’s role in public education, like its predecessor, it does have annual nation-wide assessments that measure the progress of students from grades 3 through 8. However, since states define the goals of a successful school as well as the consequences when goals are not met, there is a possibility that some states will have a relatively weaker response to addressing low school achievement.

Since becoming President in 2017, Donald Trump has not addressed the black-white achievement gap in any direct manner. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has put forth policy which supports the voucher programs and for-profit college movements, both of which tend to re-segregate students. Additionally,


the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans has not been reauthorized or planned for reauthorization.

**Conclusions**

While it would be encouraging to say that, ever since efforts to close the black-white achievement gap began in 1965, steady progress has been made, this simply is not the case. “Over the past thirty to forty years, our country has seen first a period of remarkable progress in narrowing black-white achievement gaps, then another in which these gaps notably failed to converge, and then yet another in which progress in closing the gaps resumed.”50 This chapter has reviewed the legislation and policy that have paralleled forty-year history of staggered progress.

Originating in Johnson’s “War on Poverty” and the legacy of educational desegregation, legislation like the Elementary and Secondary Education Act would pave the way for addressing the black-white achievement gap. Programs like Head Start, which also originated and developed in the mid-1960s, addressed racial achievement gaps as the products of a complex set of social, economic, and educational issues, even before the causes of the black-white achievement gap were being seriously researched. The development of Affirmative Action and other institutional policies to address racial achievement gaps had a positive if controversial impact. Early emphasis on the culture surrounding educational inequality produced quantifiable reductions in black-

white achievement gaps in the 1970s and early 1980s. But as the 1980s dragged into the 1990s, progress began to slow.

Then the struggles of the 1990s, including the widening of the gap due to declines in black students’ scores, were not properly addressed in the early 2000s legislatively. This was primarily because of poor planning and execution of the No Child Left Behind Act, which ultimately did more to fail schools than help students. The emphasis on standardized testing, without adequate multi-level approaches toward lessening racial achievement gaps, only served to record gaps that the Department of Education already knew existed.

Under President Obama, the disastrous NCLB was terminated in exchange for a new version of the ESSA, the Every Student Succeeds Act. Combined with recent changes to Head Start, continued progress toward narrowing racial achievement gaps is possible, though not inevitable. It is yet to be seen what will happen during the Trump Administration, but it has been made clear that education is not a priority of the current government, and so expectations regarding the black-white achievement gap should likely be dialed back.

This chapter has walked through the policy initiatives and governmental mindsets that have shaped the legislative effort to cope with the black-white achievement gap. The previous chapter examined many of the explanations for the gap and the theories developed to address the achievement gap, yet this chapter has largely demonstrated that the legislative efforts to deal with the gap
have been designed with little to no reflection on the theories which explain the black-white achievement gap. Legislative attempts to address problems in education are often not given more than eight to twelve years to have an impact before being significantly reoriented, negating any chance of long-term success.

The result is that most of the legislation discussed in this chapter has been ineffective because it is based on politics, not theory, and does not last long enough to have a serious effect. One consistent trend that has dominated the legislative attempts to address the black-white achievement gap is that, regardless the party of leadership, funding efforts are more directed by partisan politics and ideologies about taxing and spending than by educational research. Still, there are some worthwhile options for addressing the black-white achievement gap that have been proposed or tested in recent years; these, along with new ideas, are discussed in the next chapter. By basing these suggestions on theory, I hope to provide more impactful alternatives than the policy suggestions that were reviewed in this chapter.
CHAPTER V. PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES AND SUGGESTIONS

In order to explore the potential pedagogical and social strategies for narrowing the black-white achievement gap, I have chosen to focus on three main areas: approaches that occur in the classroom or educational setting; potential opportunities for shaping how black peer groups can address the gap, and community-oriented efforts which can help narrow the racial achievement gap. This discussion is not meant to be seen as complete: there are plenty of options for designing new pedagogies and approaches at the school-district, classroom, community, and family level that can contribute to the all-around cultural shift necessary to finally address the black-white achievement gap. But while this discussion is not exhaustive, it does point to some broad directions and ideas that I have felt are both interesting and relevant.

It is worth pausing briefly. Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips make a point that is obvious even if not ideal; namely that “policies that reduce the black-white gap will not, of course, be politically popular if they improve black children’s test scores at white children’s expense.”¹ They argue, however, that this perception or implication can best be avoided by pursuing strategies which benefit all children, and just benefit black students more, such that the black-white achievement gap is narrowed by raising black test scores at a faster rate than those of white students. Jencks and Phillips continue, “any politically

workable educational strategy for reducing the black-white test score gap has to promise some benefits for whites as well as blacks. Reducing class size, requiring greater academic competence among teachers, and raising teachers’ expectations for students who have trouble with schoolwork all meet this test.”\(^2\) Thus, many of the suggestions made in this thesis would benefit all students, but would help black students achieve more.

**Reimagining Classrooms to Address the Gap**

Much of the effort to address the black-white achievement gap at the classroom level have focused on getting as many resources distributed to struggling schools and determining how to use resources most effectively. The idea, for a long time, was that black students had lower scores because their schools were sub-par, lacking resources, staff, and materials needed to raise test scores. But subsequent data has found that black students in well-resourced school districts still scored below white students, and that throwing large amounts of money at the problem actually did little to change test scores, meaning that opportunity gap theory can only take us so far.

Another approach is necessary. Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips argue that, “instead of looking mainly for resource differences between predominantly black and predominantly white schools, successful theories will probably have to look more carefully at the way black and white children respond

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to the same classroom experiences.” Therefore, it is possible to explore strategies which change the way black students experience the classroom as a way of addressing the black-white achievement gap. Several factors appear to be especially relevant for closing the black-white achievement gap: class size, teacher competency, teacher bias, attendance, and some other, smaller issues.

One way to address the black-white achievement gap is to reduce class sizes, which have been shown to benefit both white some and black students. Frederick Mosteller conducted a massive study across Tennessee, collecting data on over 6,500 students at 76 schools. He found that cutting class sizes by a third for students from kindergarten to third grade would improve test scores for all students. But he found that black students’ scores improved by twice as much as white students' scores, and that these improvements, though diminishing over time once students moved to larger classes in middle school, could still be recorded for years to follow. Thus, efforts to reduce class size could have a serious impact on the black-white achievement gap, especially if enacted early in a student’s academic career. Ronald Ferguson also argues that reducing class


size would be an effective approach to addressing the black-white achievement gap.  

Taking a practical approach to assessing and making teaching personnel decisions based on competency exams is one possible strategy for addressing the black-white achievement gap. As Ronald Ferguson notes, teacher competency on teacher tests is one of the best indicators of a student’s experience, and students’ tests scores are more likely to increase if their teacher scored well on qualification and competency exams.  

Jencks and Phillips agree, noting that “using competency exams to screen out low-scoring teachers will help children in the long run. Screening out teachers with low scores should benefit blacks even more than whites, because black children are now considerably more likely than whites to have teachers with low scores.” Again, the most effective strategies long-term will be those that will be immune from politicization because they will benefit both white and black students, just black students more.  

While this idea utilizes opportunity gap theory to also address cultural incompatibility theory, the problem with using competency exams for teachers is that most school districts already do, and the standards are so low that they have

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little relevance, meaning that this suggestion works well in theory, but not so much in real world practice. Jencks and Phillips argue that “competency exams will not do much to raise students’ test scores unless the passing score is high enough to eliminate a substantial fraction of potential teachers. At present, few states or school districts set the cut point on competency tests very high.”

Making the testing requirements more stringent would also exacerbate an already existing teacher shortage problem. Thus, while this could be a viable strategy for addressing the black-white achievement gap, it requires at least some input at the district or state level and comes with many strings attached. Also of note, Laura Desimone and Daniel Long found that in many schools that use sorting programs to group students based on academic achievement will assign lower-performance students to younger, more basic, or less passionate teachers, while advanced students were assigned to more senior, more respected, more advanced teachers. This is not necessarily intentional: higher caliber, more qualified teachers like to spend their time talking about more advanced topics, so ask/strive to be assigned to work with advanced students. When coupled with racial sorting bias that leads many black students to be unfairly sorted down into lower-achievement groups, this means that many black


students are assigned to less qualified teachers, exacerbating high school or college preparation gaps.\textsuperscript{10} Perhaps by changing the way classes are assigned at the individual school level, to ensure that the students who need the most assistance catching up to their peers are assigned the most qualified faculty, the black-white achievement gap can be reduced.

Ronald Ferguson has written extensively on the various ways that racial bias against black students shapes the way teachers approach education, from biases in sorting\textsuperscript{11} to lowered expectations for black performance\textsuperscript{12} to assumptions about discipline and behavior.\textsuperscript{13} He argues that addressing educator bias toward black students could have a major impact on black-white achievement gaps. But he also reminds us that, “Simply cajoling teachers to raise their expectations for Black children, using phrases such as “all children can learn,” is probably a waste of time. However, good professional development programs can make a difference.”\textsuperscript{14} Improved professional development and training for educators at all levels could make an impact on the black-white achievement gaps and could be a strategy that is targeted at schools which show greater disparities in black and white scores.

\textsuperscript{10} Desimone and Long. “Teacher Effects and the Achievement Gap…”
\textsuperscript{11} Ferguson. “Can Schools Narrow…”
\textsuperscript{13} Ferguson. “Teachers’ Perceptions and Expectations…” 479-482.
\textsuperscript{14} Ferguson. “Teachers’ Perceptions and Expectations…” 494.
Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp argue that a pedagogical approach which addresses issues of attendance and student engagement directly narrows the black-white achievement gap. Their work at a racially diverse high school demonstrates that showing up and contributing to the learning process increases black students’ test scores. By instituting a program of mailing letters home when students missed class\(^\text{15}\) and celebrating students with exemplary attendance in public,\(^\text{16}\) the researchers were able to increase literature and math scores for black students. They also found that by utilizing discussion techniques that encouraged students to speak by decreasing the amount of time the teacher was talking and increasing the amount of time students led discussion, students’ engagement increased and test scores improved.\(^\text{17}\)

Finally, perhaps the most successful way to close the black-white achievement gap is to have exceptionally high-quality schools. This has been accomplished on the small scale at high-caliber charter schools,\(^\text{18}\) such as the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ), which is a NYC project which combines both a


charter school with a community based program. Will Dobbie and Roland Fryer\textsuperscript{19} found that, by educating students chosen by lottery system at a premier charter school with a surrounding “from cradle to college” community program, Harlem Children’s Zone was able to close the black-white achievement gap in middle school mathematics.\textsuperscript{20} For students who began attending Harlem Children’s Zone in elementary school, Dobbie and Fryer found that the school was able to close the racial achievement gap in both mathematics and reading.\textsuperscript{21} The results of this study link to opportunity gap theory, as the charter school was able to offer more resources to its students, and demonstrate that the achievement gap can be closed with the right kind of programming that is based on educational research. However, exporting success at an individual school to entire districts or larger, where resources are far more limited, is the challenge. In some cases, the best approach may be from outside the classroom entirely.

\textbf{Beyond the Classroom: Addressing the Gap with Peer Groups}

One of the most promising strategies for addressing the black-white achievement gap beyond the classroom comes from John Ogbu. As the writer who is largely responsible for much of the academic discourse surrounding the


\textsuperscript{20} Dobbie and Fryer, "Are High-Quality Schools Enough..." 179.

\textsuperscript{21} Dobbie and Fryer, "Are High-Quality Schools Enough..." 177.
idea of academic achievement as “acting white,” Ogbu has been one of the most prominent discussants arguing against adapting classroom pedagogies for black culture. Instead, Ogbu argues that comparisons between African-American black students in the US and the immigrant children of African or Afro-Caribbean black families shows that it is African-American culture specifically that is the cause of the black-white achievement gap. However, he notes, this can be addressed by changing the attitude of African-American communities to be more like black immigrant communities (thus, achievement gaps are not actually caused by race, but by the specific African-American experience). This is accomplished, he argues, by changing the paradigm outside of classrooms. Families need to associate education with getting a job, and parents have to associate cooperating with their children’s schools as a positive action. It makes sense that Ogbu would make this kind of cultural deficiency argument, considering that his work so heavily shaped cultural incompatibility theory.

Ogbru suggests that black communities in America develop out of school, community-based programming which will change the way that black children think about achievement, accomplishment, and success. He notes that, “one of the most serious features of the educational strategies of Black students is the


23 Ogbru. “Black-American Students…”


‘norm of minimum effort.’ Black students, in the inner city and in the suburbs, lack the ‘effort optimism’ or ‘norm of maximum individual effort’ in schoolwork characteristic of several immigrant minorities. It is time for them to develop the norm of maximum academic effort as a part of their cultural heritage.”

He suggests, for example, clubs where membership is tied to good academic performance, so that peers work together to study and celebrate academic achievement. While his proposals should be put into the greater context, in which subsequent research has demonstrated that notions of 'acting white' have been found to be more complex and nuanced than Ogbu initial understood, it is still worthwhile to suggest that positive role modeling in peer groups is likely to have some positive affect on educational outcomes.

Several studies have also demonstrated that when students associate with other students who positively value schooling, knowledge, and learning, their test scores go up. Endya Stewart argues that, “as adolescents associate with friends who value education and are committed to academic pursuits, they create attachments to school and conform to the ideals associated with it. Further, positive peers provide important reference points for students and help them invest in their education.”

Erin Horvat and Kristine Lewis found that black students were able to simultaneously maintain a black identity and achieve well


academically by finding other like-minded black students to enjoy their successes with, but also camouflaging while interacting with black friends who were not as supportive of academic achievement. While some respondents in Horvat and Lewis’ study were accused of ‘acting white,’ many found they were able to ignore the label as long as they associated their achievement with their black academically-motivated peer group. Some even considered the code-switching to be an “asset” because they could converse with a larger group of people. Black students with black academically-minded peers ultimately performed much more similarly to white students than non-academically oriented black peers.

Programming which helps black students develop positive associations between learning and black identity may help break the concept of high academic achievement as “acting white.” Pairing study programs with athletic out-of-school programming may help black students already building peer groups to associate study as positive within that peer group. Community centers, programs, and schools which offer student tutoring could encourage older black students to tutor younger ones to create peer-networks which encourage academic achievement.


30 Horvat and Lewis. "Reassessing the "Burden..." 270.

31 Horvat and Lewis. "Reassessing the "Burden..." 265-280.

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However, the experience of African-Americans and the subsequent cultural realities must also be respected and understood to address the academic achievement gap. Young people of any race, are often inspired by, and attracted to role models in professions they can identify with. Professions associated with high educational attainment are under-represented by blacks in the US.\textsuperscript{32,33} However, the majority of young blacks see role models in sports\textsuperscript{34} and music entertainment\textsuperscript{35} as both adequately represented by blacks (of which they consume) and not associated with high educational attainment.\textsuperscript{36} This leads many blacks, particularly males, as seeing their likely path to success through sports\textsuperscript{37} or music entertainment\textsuperscript{38} and not academics.\textsuperscript{39} Not only do a large

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proportion of young blacks subscribe to this paradigm, but their families as well. This perspective in the black community can dampen the drive to see academics as the best probable means for success, and contribute to a self-fulfilling prophesy in the achievement gap.

**Strategies for Shaping Parenting to Narrow the Gap**

Many strategies for addressing the black-white achievement gap view parenting as an essential part of the academic process, and so addressing children’s intellectual environments requires examining how parenting can improved strategically to narrow the achievement gap. In Chapter 2, I mentioned that the black-white achievement gap must transcend educational influences because there is a gap between black and white 4-year olds’ ability to identify shapes, letters, and numbers. As a result, it is undeniable that any overarching strategy to tackle the black-white achievement gap must include a discussion of parenting strategies at the very beginning of children’s lives. Several studies discuss the importance of talking to children extensively, including reading aloud to them, is a major part of the process of developing early vocabulary, letter-sound recognition, and comfort in communication.

The scholars at the Harvard University’s Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI) put together the *Seeding Success Zero-to-Three Initiative: Evidence for the Fundamental Five Early Childhood Parenting Behaviors* project, which explored parenting strategies to improve academic performance, including ways to reduce

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the racial achievement gap in early skill development. They explore five recommendations, some of which are directly applicable to the addressing the shape, letter, and number recognition gap.

One of the AGI suggestions is to talk, read, and sing to children immediately after birth, focusing on real talk rather than baby talk.41 They also suggest playing number and rhythm games to develop early recognition of numeracy.42 Research supports the notion that lack of early parental talking or play may affect early achievement gaps. Brooks-Gunn and Markman looked at the effects of parenting on early school readiness and found that black mothers talked to their children significantly less than white mothers, even within the same socioeconomic class. Intervention programs, including literacy programs, which encouraged mothers to talk with their children more dramatically changed black mothers’ behaviors, and improved black children’s outcomes on school readiness tests.43

Meredith Phillips, in her study of data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, found that, even when comparing black and white families of the same socioeconomic class, “black children [between birth and age 2] spend 140


fewer hours in literacy activities than white children.\textsuperscript{44} With less time spent looking at letters and listening to read text, young black children gain neither the familiarity nor comfort necessary to transfer to the learning of reading in educational settings. Early deficiencies in language development are extremely important because these snowball into poorer reading and writing skill development, ultimately leading to lower academic achievement.\textsuperscript{45,46} These deficiencies are also “important because reading and parent-child conversations are things that families and communities can do something about,”\textsuperscript{47} meaning that it is not necessary for parents or communities to wait on legislation or policy to begin addressing the black-white achievement gaps themselves.

It is worth noting that government policy, funding, and programming does have a significant role to play in addressing the racial achievement gap when it comes to pre-educational programming. Early Head Start programming, which targets infants and toddlers, has been found to have small but positive effects on


narrowing black-white achievement gaps in early skill test scores\textsuperscript{48} and behavior.\textsuperscript{49} Head Start programming, starting at age 3, has also had short-term positive effects, but these successes diminish over time as educational experiences begin to level the playing field for black students. Head Start programming is also not sufficiently focusing on cognitive development, and is instead too heavily focused on reading skills. As Jencks and Phillips note, “getting Head Start to emphasize cognitive development should therefore be a higher priority than merely expanding its enrollment.”\textsuperscript{50} Waiting on public policy to shape educational outcomes is frustratingly ineffective.\textsuperscript{51} Thus, as has been argued earlier, governmental policy alone, without efforts by schools, families, and communities, are not remotely sufficient in addressing the black-white achievement gap.

Brooks-Gunn and Markman argue that the type of parenting-oriented early start programming matters, depending on the end-goals of the project.\textsuperscript{52} They found that parental programming that takes place in the home (with a worker


\textsuperscript{52} Brooks-Gunn and Markman. “The contribution of parenting…”
visiting) improve parental nurturance and success with discipline, these programs did not appear to increase the child’s language or literacy skills. Home visiting programs were often better at helping parents develop routines.\textsuperscript{53} Center-based programming, on the other hand, was far more successful at improving children’s school readiness.\textsuperscript{54,55} The most important factor, however, is how well-trained and supervised staff is, and how clearly, they have set goals for both the parents and the children in the program.\textsuperscript{56}

**The Community Beyond**

One strategy for changing the way the community contributes to or narrows racial achievement gaps is to saturate the environment with parenting ideas that will narrow the black-white achievement gap. The “Boston Basics Campaign” has brought together a wide variety of social, political, and economic organizations across the city of Boston to cooperate in disseminating information about young child care.\textsuperscript{57} The approach is to view child-rearing as a community effort, and therefore, not only parents themselves influence children. Thus, by bringing together “health centers, churches, schools, personal care establishments, recreation centers, and large employers, the Boston Basics

Campaign seeks to change extended-family social norms around early childhood caregiving.”  

Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips also suggest a similar idea, but with caution. They note that, “as a practical political matter, whites cannot tell black parents to change their parenting practices without provoking charges of ethnocentrism, racism, and much else. But blacks are hardly the only parents who need help. We should be promoting better parenting practices for all parents in every way we can, including television, which reaches both blacks and whites.” But the notion of full community involvement in order to address achievement gaps is one with real traction at multiple age levels.

With stereotype threat theory in mind, this strategy could be directly applied, for example, to literacy and speaking skills for young children. When members of a community learn that speaking to young children can help them develop necessary early skills that set them on a higher path for reading and writing abilities, that community can mobilize programming in religious or civic centers to get more young children engaged with spoken word. This would create positive associations between reading and social activities shared with other


black community members, potentially combatting stereotypes that may potentially pose a threat to young black children's academic development.

This strategy can also be used to change public norms about the way education, learning, and academic achievement are discussed publicly. If communities understood the impact of negative stereotyping on black youth's academic performance, it may be possible to change discourse within those communities. Just as the Boston Basics program has expanded the idea of who contributes to academic development, programming could be strategically used to expand the group of people who are working to narrow the black-white achievement gap. This community can support parents, who can then be targeted with programming that specifically targets key aspects of the racial achievement gap.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The black-white achievement gap has been apparent in academic literature and governmental reports since the 1960s. While there have been some periods in which these achievement gaps have narrowed, especially in the 1970s and early 1980s, it is clear that inconsistent governmental policy and poor pedagogical approaches have stalled the rise of black test scores. Communities have also not taken enough interest in combatting the black-white achievement gap, though in many cases, the state and other external groups like NGOs or charities could do more to help communities change social understandings of education. The achievement gap persists at every stage of academic
development, from toddler shape recognition scores to chances of passing the State Bar Exam in law, and continues to limit the possibilities of black youth in the US today.

Significant research has been conducted which has explored why the gap exists and persists. Theories which focus solely on black ‘racial inferiority’ have been dismissed, though they still persevere among the biased. Instead, researchers and educators have explored everything from the socioeconomic basis to the cultural ecology of black communities, to understand how the educational experience is understood, internalized, and processed by black and white students.

Unfortunately, there is not one clear cause of the black-white achievement gap; as such, there is no single clear solution. A variety of legislative and governmental solutions have come and gone; more success seems to be found at the district and individual school level. This chapter, and more broadly, this thesis, have explored some of the potential strategies at the local level that could address the black-white achievement gap. Narrowing the gap will require changing standards and expectations at schools, as well as shifting peer-group and community understandings of academic achievement and black identity. Changing the paradigm about academic success will require new ideas in communities, shared responsibility in child rearing, and a collective genuine effort to support all children.
With a problem as pervasive and serious as the black-white achievement gap, it is logical to want a federal panacea that will move statistics in a direction everyone wants to see. But there is no single cause of the black-white achievement gap because it manifests in so many ways and on so many levels. There will not be one single solution either, though by continuing to address economic disparities, research cultural factors, and promote positive cultural change, educators can use the ever-growing body of theoretical research to propose reasonable efforts to address the achievement gap. Federal efforts to design legislation that fits all districts, even legislation with flexibility, will never successfully address the black-white achievement gap, but funding and programming, based on the kind of research described in earlier chapters of this thesis could do more help than current legislation is providing. This thesis has only begun to scratch the surface of the various possibilities but has also shed some light on areas where new pedagogies could be imagined and attempted.
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