

Race, Class, and the Achievement Gap: The Promise of Student Potential

Chapter One

- I. The Undeniable Correlations Among Race, Class, and the Achievement Gap
- II. Why There Is a Strong Correlation Among Race, Class, and Achievement
- III. Conclusion: The Promise of Student Potential

The fact that you have joined us in our quest to close the achievement gap in this country indicates that you are not only aware of the inequities in our education system, but you are also bothered enough to do something about them. You know and are frustrated that by the time students from low-income communities reach eighth grade, they are on average three years behind their more affluent (and more often White) peers in math and reading. You recognize but resent that that gap widens to four years by grade 12. Former U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige has starkly stated this tragedy: “Nearly 70 percent of inner-city and rural fourth graders cannot read, even at a basic level. It is our greatest failure as a nation. It is our failure as a people.”

This chapter and its attached readings pose the question “Why?” Why does this gap exist? And why is this gap drawn along racial and socioeconomic lines?

In an attempt to begin to answer these difficult questions, we will survey a variety of factors that are often blamed for the achievement gap. Among the factors we will consider are racism, inequitable school funding, poverty-related burdens, inequitable distribution of political clout, structures and practices inherent in the school system, family structures and support, and cultural norms.

Our purposes for beginning this text with such an expansive discussion of the achievement gap are two-fold. First, we believe that by establishing the landscape of potential causes for the achievement gap we not only focus your attention on all the work we have to do to end it, but we are also better able to identify and isolate those issues that are actually within your realm of influence as a classroom teacher. As we will discuss throughout Part I of this text, we believe the cause of the achievement gap that is most within your power to overcome is the lowered expectations that so drastically undermine minority and low-income students’ academic success. Second, we are inclined to begin with this survey of the achievement gap causes in part because of what is *not* on the list. Low-income, African-American, Latino, and Native American students’ lack of potential is not a reason for the achievement gap. As we have seen over and over in our classrooms, our students—the vast majority of whom are minority and low-income—can in fact meet the highest standards of academic achievement.

Thus, the key point of this chapter is that while there is a correlation between low achievement and students’ race and class, it is not a difference in students’ *potential* that causes that correlation. It may be, however, a teacher’s high expectations of his or her students that can help erase that correlation. So, there is one particular cause of the achievement gap that we, as instructional leaders in our classrooms and schools, can and must fight every single day—the barrage of low expectations that weighs on our students.

Additional Readings

Along with this chapter, please read the following excerpt found on the Institute Info Center within TFANet:

- “Explaining the Academic Gap; Conventional and Alternative Explanations” from Professor John Ogbu’s book *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*

Race, Class, and the Achievement Gap

I. The Undeniable Correlations Among Race, Class, and the Achievement Gap

There is no shortage of evidence of the “failure” described by the Secretary of Education. After some progress toward closing the achievement gap during the 1980s, it has begun to grow again since the early 1990s. And, at every point, the gap between white and minority students, and between affluent students and students from low-income communities, has been shockingly large.

Socioeconomic Correlations

If we group students in this country along socioeconomic lines, the correlations with achievement are stark. One study of fourth and eighth graders’ scores on the 1992 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Trial State Assessment found that, within the same school, wealthier students scored more than 30 points higher, on average, than students of low socioeconomic status. In eighth grade, that gap rises to almost 50 points.¹⁴ The gaps are even larger when comparing scores of wealthy and poor students attending different schools.

The Children’s Defense Fund’s *Poverty Matters: The Cost of Child Poverty in America*, also indicates that depressed academic achievement and socioeconomic status often go hand in hand. Lower-income children are far more likely to suffer from poor nutrition, housing problems, stress and depression, and are also more likely to have fewer resources for learning, all of which can have a negative impact on academic achievement. The Children’s Defense Fund cites a study by Duncan and Brooks-Gunn which argues that these deficiencies alone can contribute to one-quarter to one-third of the lower reading, math, and vocabulary test scores among lower income elementary students. Additional research consistently links shortfalls in other resources – like the availability of computers, the opportunity to attend camps or music classes, or the possibility of going on family trips – to lower academic achievement as well.¹⁵

Race Correlations

Similarly strong correlations with academic achievement are apparent if we group America’s students by race. If we use the end of high school as the benchmark moment, the racially-drawn disparities are most glaring:

- While one out of 12 White students can competently read from a specialized text (such as the science section of the newspaper), only one out of 50 Latino students and one out of 100 African-American students are able to gain information from a specialized text.
- One in 30 Latino students and one in 100 African-American students can complete multi-step, elementary-algebra problems that one out of 10 White students can complete comfortably.
- Three out of 10 African-American students and four of 10 Latino students have mastered usage and computation of fractions, percents, and averages. Meanwhile, seven of 10 White students have mastered these same skills.

¹⁴ Lee, J. “State policy correlates of the achievement gap among racial and social groups.” *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, Vol. 24, 1998, pp. 137-152.

¹⁵ Sherman, Arloc. *Poverty Matters: The Cost of Child Poverty in America*. Washington, DC: Children’s Defense Fund, 1997, p. 23.

Overall, according to recent data, “[n]ear the end of high school, in fact, African-American and Latino students have skills in both reading and mathematics that are virtually the same as those of White students in the 8th grade.”¹⁶

Another disturbing means of looking at this data is to contrast the academic achievement of top-performing and bottom-performing students in each racial group. The National Center for Education Statistics, in its report on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, divides student performance into groups called Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced, based on their knowledge and skill levels in each subject area. The results are consistent with our worst fears (both in the overall deficiency of all students’ performance and in the racially-drawn disparities in student performance):¹⁷

- 3.4% of White students score at the Advanced level on the science exam, compared to 0.1% of African-American students.
- Nearly half of all White students are placed in either the Proficient or Advanced categories in reading, compared to less than 20% of Black students and about 25% of Latino students.
- In five of the seven subjects tested, a majority (over 50%) of Black students are rated Below Basic, compared to about 20% of White students.

All together, the data reveals the disturbing conclusion that “the average Black or Hispanic high school student achieves at about the same level as the average White student in the lowest quartile of White achievement.”¹⁸

Another government study, “Educational Achievement and Black-White Inequality,” by the National Center for Education Statistics,¹⁹ confirmed that (in 2001) African-American students scored significantly lower than White students on both math and reading tests in both elementary and secondary schools. Comparisons were made first between overall average outcomes for Blacks and Whites (in the first in each pair of columns that follow) and then between average outcomes for Blacks and Whites with similar levels of prior educational achievement (the second in each pair of columns that follow).

In math, the 1990-1993 data shows that the gap actually closes slightly in upper elementary school, but then widens through junior high and high school:

Why Focus Only on Race and Class?

There are, of course, more forms of diversity than race and class, and in fact many of us find those other aspects of our and our students’ identities—such as gender, age, sexual orientation, religious background, disability—to be critically influential factors in the dynamics of difference and sameness that impact the teaching and learning in our classrooms. In discussing the achievement gap and our theory of change, we are focusing on race and class because those are the “lines” by which the achievement gap is most starkly defined, to the point that it is no exaggeration to say that our students are virtually segregated by race and class. So, while we believe that in order to be truly effective teachers we must be aware of the dynamics involved in our interactions and expectations of students of all different identity characteristics, here we are highlighting race and class as the factors most highly correlated with wide-spread patterns of unacceptably low academic achievement in our schools.

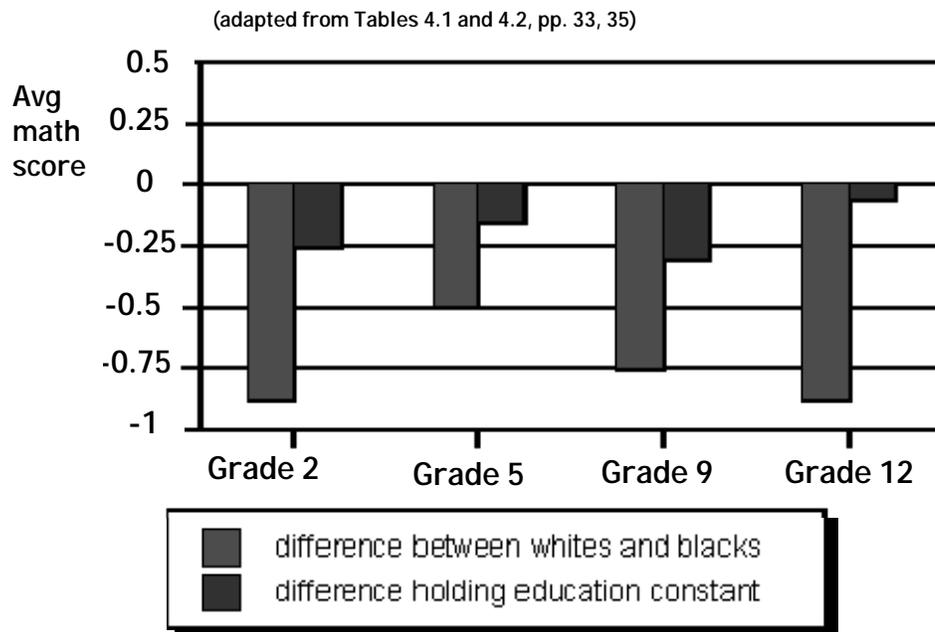
¹⁶ Haycock, Kati. “Helping All Students Achieve.” *Educational Leadership*. Vol. 58, No. 6, March 2001.

¹⁷ National Center for Education Statistics. “Educational achievement and Black-White inequality.” U.S. Department of Education, 2001, pp. 31-43. Online at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2001061>, accessed 7/1/2010.

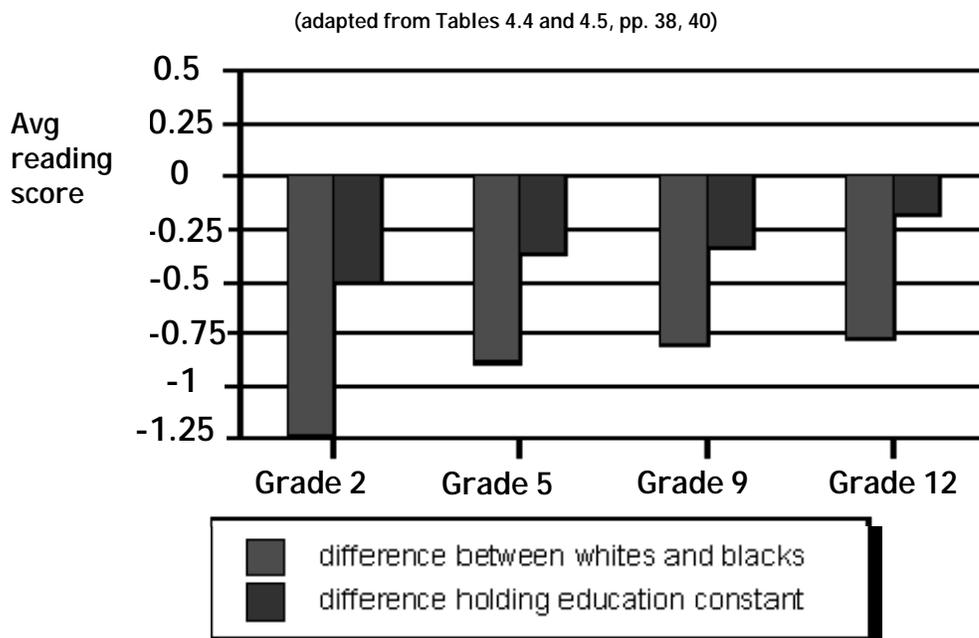
¹⁸ Education Commission of the States. “The Progress of Education Reform 2003: Closing the Achievement Gap.” Vol. 4, No. 1, March 2003.

¹⁹ National Center for Education Statistics. “Educational achievement and Black-White inequality.” U.S. Department of Education, 2001, pp. 31-43. Online at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2001061>, accessed 7/1/2010.

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The 1990-1993 reading test results show a similar gap, with a reduction of the reading gap in elementary school and then little change thereafter:



The National Center for Education Statistics report concludes that “[w]hatever the causes of Black-White gaps in educational achievement, the perpetuation of a large portion of these gaps throughout elementary and secondary school leaves Blacks at a relative disadvantage as they prepare for college and/or the labor market.”²⁰

²⁰ Ibid. p. 42.

Similar numbers are readily available for Latino and Native American students. Almost 60 percent of Latino students in fourth grade have not been taught to even a basic level of reading skill. The numbers are similar for math.²¹ The dropout rates for Latino students hover around 45 percent.²² Similarly, according to government statistics, Native Americans are less than half as likely as White students to score at or above proficient on standard reading and math tests.²³

II. Why There Is a Strong Correlation Among Race, Class, and Achievement

The fact that race and class are such consistent predictors of diminished academic achievement in this country poses an obvious and difficult question: Why? Why is it that students of color and poorer students, on average, lag so far behind Whiter, wealthier students? If we can answer this question, we may gain insight into how to close the achievement gap for those students.

Of course, answering this question is not easy. The search for the source of the achievement gap raises complex questions with complex answers, and many researchers espouse competing, contradictory, and/or controversial theories about why it is that poor, African-American, Latino, and Native American children lag behind White, affluent students in their academic attainment.

An Incomplete Survey of Purported Reasons for the Achievement Gap

Consider the following brief synopses of some of the common—and sometimes hotly contested—explanations for the achievement gap:

Racism. Many observers and analysts link the underachievement of African-American and Latino students to racism, in all its incarnations in America. First, and most obviously, persons of color may be subjected to straightforward, overt discrimination and prejudice, and that discrimination may occur in the school system. For example, students might be put in less engaging classes because of their race. Teachers may find their impact suppressed because of their race. School funding decisions may be made for race-based reasons. Second, some would argue that the legacy of relatively recent institutionalized racism in this country creates certain dynamics, such as the relatively lower educational attainment of Black parents, that contribute to the achievement gap. Many would also point to the growing re-segregation of minority students and wonder what impact that trend—whether it is purposeful or not—will have on the achievement gap in the next decades. [An astounding 70% of African-American students and over a third of Latino students attend “intensely segregated” schools.]²⁴ Third, many would argue that students in America are subjected to a vast and powerful stream of covert, if not subconscious, racism in the form of lowered expectations of students of color. As we will discuss at more length below and in the next chapter, the notion that racism itself is a primary cause of the achievement gap is a wide-ranging, multi-faceted idea, encompassing not only blatant, individualized prejudices but also the grand social scheme of low expectations that impact our and our students’ visions of academic success.

Inequitable School Funding. Differences in the amounts spent per pupil in different schools can be dramatic. In New Jersey, in 1995-1996, the lowest amount spent per pupil per year by a district was

²¹ “Latino Achievement in America.” A report by the Education Trust. Online at <http://www.edtrust.org>.

²² Valverde, Leonard and Scribner, Kent. “Latino Students: Organizing Schools for Greater Achievement.” *Principals.org Bulletin*. Vol. 85, No. 624, April 2001.

²³ “Reaching Out: Raising American Indian Achievement.” U.S. Department of Education. Online at http://www.ed.gov/nclb/accountability/achieve/achievement_native.html, accessed 1/31/07.

²⁴ After decades of desegregation, schools became significantly more segregated in the 1990s. Orfield, G. “Schools more separate: Consequences of a decade of Resegregation.” Harvard University, The Civil Rights Project, 2001.

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\$5,900. Meanwhile, another district spent \$11,950.²⁵ In Illinois, the gap was even more drastic, with some schools spending about \$3,000 per year and others spending around \$15,000. Before litigation challenging the system began in the late 1980s, expenditures per pupil in Texas ranged from \$2,000 per year per student in some schools to \$20,000 per year per student at other schools. Like most school systems in the country, Texas schools were funded primarily through local property taxes, leading to massive disparities in the available funds for different districts. In fact, the wealthiest district had *700 times* the taxable property value of the poorest district.²⁶ (As it does in many states, the education funding litigation in Texas continues to this day.) Given that these funding disparities are often drawn along racial and socioeconomic lines, many blame these funding systems for perpetuating the achievement gap. Others would point to the success of poorly funded schools across the country, or to the continued failure of some well-funded schools, as evidence that money is, at best, only part of the answer.

The Weight of Poverty. Challenges that disproportionately face children in low-income communities might also be a cause of the achievement gap. Some of us know these challenges first hand, either from our own upbringing or from working, living, or growing up in low-income communities. The Children's Defense Fund report cited earlier explains that poor children often must work to help support their families or spend "study time" caring for their younger siblings; they suffer from poor nutrition and related health problems; the financial stress upon their families can lead to depression and/or behavior problems; they either have no home or live in homes without utilities, with water leakage, or with infestations; and they may have greater financial barriers to education and fewer books, family trips, and extra curricular activities. For some analysts, these poverty-related factors add up to an explanation for the achievement gap. (Not everyone agrees that poverty should be listed as a "cause" of the achievement gap, however. Other analysts point to the fact that poor children in some schools or poor schools in some states perform very well as evidence that poverty does not cause the achievement gap.)

Test Bias. According to some, one contributor to the achievement gap is the method of measurement used. (Of course, very few people, if any, think that the achievement gap is merely a result of test bias. Rather, the argument goes, the achievement gap could be somewhat exaggerated by test bias.) The tests used to determine academic achievement, according to this line of reasoning, are geared toward White, affluent students and experiences, thereby disadvantaging poor students and students of color.²⁷ Tests might be biased in their content (and therefore be asking questions about subjects that one group of students is more likely to have experienced than another group) or they might be biased in "method" (and therefore be designed or administered in a way that is more accessible and welcoming to one group than another). Or, a given test might actually be missing students' strengths; a child might be strong on math and computation but weak on comprehension, for example. Tests might also be biased in that they purport to test something that they do not. For example, according to many psychologists, the IQ tests purport to measure innate ability but actually measure developed ability.²⁸

Lack of Political Clout. Perhaps it is an amalgam of several of the previously mentioned causes, but some analysts would argue that the lack of political empowerment in low-income (and largely minority) communities contributes to the achievement gap as well. This lack of voice in policy- and decision-making may allow injustices such as inequitable funding, institutional racism, and the challenges of poverty to go unchecked by government.

²⁵ Hadderman, Margaret. "Equity and Adequacy in Educational Finance." ERIC Digest, No. 129, August 1999. (ED 454 466). Online at <http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-1/equity.html>, accessed 7/1/2010.

²⁶ Farr, J. Steven and Trachtenberg, Mark. "The Edgewood Drama: An Epic Quest for Education Equity." *Yale Law & Policy Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1999, p. 615.

²⁷ Viadero, D. "Lags in minority achievement: Defy traditional explanations." *Education Week*, March 22, 2000.

²⁸ Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. "The Black-White test score gap: An introduction." From *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998, pp. 1-51.

Media-Perpetuated Stereotypes. Another force that some say fuels the achievement gap is the negative influence of media-perpetuated stereotypes about students of color and students from low-income communities. You are undoubtedly familiar with the pattern of racial, gender, religious, and orientation stereotypes and omissions in television, movies and other media. A 1997 study found, for example, that despite the fact that ethnic minority groups made up more than a quarter of the population, only around 15% of the members of prime-time drama casts were members of those groups.²⁹ Moreover—and perhaps even more damaging to the expectations we have for our students—when persons of color are in fact included in entertainment and media, they are often portrayed in stereotypical and inaccurate ways. As the American Psychological Association found in its own study, minorities are “segregated in specific types of content, and rarely engage in cross-ethnic interaction.” Those stereotypes and omissions undermine teachers’ messages to students of color and students from low-income communities that students can in fact succeed academically.

School System Structures and Practices.

Another arena of suspicion for persons trying to track down the cause of the achievement gap is structural practices in the school system itself. One does not need to look too closely to see a number of disparities in the systems and structures of public schools that might be contributing factors. Consider, for example, the disparate dispersal of high performing teachers. Whether one defines teacher quality by teachers’ experience, by teachers’ credentials, or—as Teach For America would suggest—by the academic achievement of their students, high performing teachers generally move from poorer schools to better ones. Another structural contributor could be the allocation of resources within school districts—as poorer, minority students are more often relegated to older, less-resourced buildings. (In one California survey approximately one-third of teachers state-wide and approximately one-half of teachers in low-income schools reported that they did not have enough text books for students to take them home.³⁰)

Other Inequitably Implemented School Structures. Sometimes, lowered expectations of minority and low-income students are essentially institutionalized into our school structures. For example, when “homogenous grouping” is not implemented with opportunities to move from one “track” to another, it can become a virtual institutionalization of low expectations for certain students. Similarly, students may get “tracked” into the “low” or “remedial” classes and then, because those classes—if poorly implemented—move at a slower pace, there is no chance that the students can ever get out of that “track” and into more demanding courses. Remediation systems such as these, while motivated by a

Permanent “Tracks”: Marcus’s Testimony

These structural policies and practices affect real students and impact their entire lives. Consider the testimony of eleventh-grader Marcus McKinney, a California high school senior, appearing before the California Senate Education Committee, April 10, 2002:

In my 11th grade year, I went to my counselor to try to get a Spanish class. I had a floor covering class, where you learn to put down tiles and lay down carpet. I told my counselor that I wanted Spanish 1, so I could try to meet the requirements to apply to [University of California]. She tried to tell me that I hadn’t met my year of technical art, because at my high school you have to have a year of technical art [or] one year of a vocational class [to graduate]. I told her I already did because I had auto mechanics in the 9th grade. I had to bring my parents up there to get out of floor covering and into Spanish 1. Then this year I tried to get into Spanish 2, so again, I could meet the requirements. My counselor told me Spanish 2 was only for students who were going to college, automatically assuming that I wasn’t going to college. It made me mad. I got kind of discouraged, but I told her I am going to college and I want this class. Then I did not get the class anyway, because the class was overcrowded.

Barth, Patte. “A Common Core Curriculum for the New Century.”
Thinking K-16: A Publication of The Education Trust. Winter 2003, Vol. 7, Issue 1, p. 13.

²⁹ Gerbner, G. and Ozyegin, N. *Proportional Representation of Diversity Index.* Cultural Indicators Project, Spring 1997.

³⁰ “First Things First: Why we must stop punishing students and fix California’s schools.” Californians for Justice Education Fund, May 17, 2003. Online at http://tcla.gseis.ucla.edu/reportcard/features/5-6/pdf/first_things_first.pdf, accessed 7/1/2010.

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desire to help students catch up, can become systematized forms of lowered expectations if implemented poorly. The fact remains that lowered expectations, whatever their original motivation, are only hurting our students by perpetuating the massive achievement gap in this country.

Mayo Elementary School in Compton was well known for its students' success on state and district standardized tests. Year after year teachers and students received recognition for their achievement. I felt lucky to have been placed there. My first year teaching I worked hard to maintain the progress for which my colleagues had set a precedent and when our test scores came back I was excited to hear that they were going to be celebrated. Mayo's students scored at a level 3 on a state-wide scale of 1-10. I was confused – a three? The elementary school that I myself attended fewer than 10 miles away scored at a 10, yet we were celebrating success. I was offered an explanation – in districts like Compton, where students face language barriers and qualify for free or reduced lunch, a 3 was considered equal to a 10. Our students met the highest expectations that were set for them. Unable to mask my disappointment from the other teachers at my grade level I was consoled – and reminded that my own expectations needed to be checked. I left that experience determined to spend more time talking to and observing teachers at schools that ranked 10 out of 10 so that I too, could implement teaching strategies and hold expectations that would ensure my students were truly at a 10 despite the excuses made for Compton kids.

Kate Sobel, Los Angeles '98
Principal, Camino Nuevo Charter Academy

Lack of Compensating Capacity in the School System. One way to explain the achievement gap is simply to acknowledge that the students with the greatest needs (academic, social, nutritional, etc.) are attending the schools with the least capacity to serve those increased needs (higher student-teacher ratios, dilapidated infrastructures, fewer resources). This is not to say schools in low-income areas are doing worse than other schools; rather, given the external pressures of increased student needs, those schools need more—not the same, and certainly not less—resources and capacity to serve those students.

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These several proposed “causes” of the achievement gap—racism, inequitable funding, poverty, lack of political power, and school structures—probably each have some impact on the achievement gap in America. And much of the debate surrounding these causes relates to their *relative* impact on students' academic performance. Still other explanations—including the influence of certain racial groups' family structures and/or racial groups' “culture”—are also often discussed but are more controversial.

Family Structures and Changes. Among the many “family structure” factors that different commentators blame for the achievement gap are parents' level of education, single-parent families, and grandparent involvement in raising children. This line of thinking holds that the growing number of students raised in “non-traditional” home settings is contributing to those students' lesser achievement. However, other researchers claim that these family-structure factors do not seem to have very much influence on student performance. For example, some research indicates that the effects of being raised in a single-parent family are “never large enough to be of any substantive importance.”³¹ (The same researchers did find a high correlation between differences in “parenting practices” and children's test scores. And, we do know, for example, that different students arrive at school with dramatically different experiences in terms of exposure to books, pre-school learning opportunities, etc.) On the other hand, yet another group of researchers, warning that family situations and influences are exceedingly complex, assert that by defining “family characteristics” broadly these factors could contribute to as much as two-thirds of the achievement gap.³² (These researchers include in that broad definition parent education,

³¹ Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. “The Black-White test score gap: An introduction.” From *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998, p. 42.

³² Phillips, M., Brooks-Gunn, J. Duncan, G.J., Klebanov, P., & Crane, J. “Family background, parenting practices, and the Black-White test score gap.” From *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1998, pp. 111-140.

mother's family background, mother's quality of schooling, educational outcomes, family income, parent attitudes and values, grandparents' influence, and parenting practices.)

Our Focus on African-American and Latino Students

Throughout this text, most of the conversations about racial groups focus on African-Americans and Latinos. We focus on these two groups because approximately 95% of the students the Teach For America corps members teach are African-American or Latino. Asian-American students are not discussed very often in this text because we have so few Asian-American students. (Moreover, statistically speaking, Asian-American students are not performing at the same low levels, on average, that African American and Latino students are in this country—though in some of the pockets where we teach, we have seen that behind the overarching statistics lie real disparities.) Of course, while they do not comprise a large percentage of the students we teach overall, Native American students are the primary focus of our New Mexico and South Dakota corps members. When possible, we have attempted to include data and research related to Native American students. New Mexico and South Dakota corps members can expect their training to be supplemented with some region-specific diversity-related conversations.

Group Culture. A closely related and also controversial idea is that there are some elements of certain ethnic groups' "culture" that contribute to those students' underperformance in school. Some contend, for example, that there are unique aspects of African-American culture—and other aspects of Latino culture—that are misaligned with the mainstream approach to education in our schools, leading to the achievement gap. For example, one Berkeley professor contends that "what one sees in Black students is less a refusal to contribute any effort than a sad tendency for their efforts to stop before the finish line. This tendency stems not from laziness or inferior mental power, but from a brake exerted on them by a cultural inheritance that school work is more a pit stop than a place to live."³³ And in their book *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, authors Abigail and Stephen Thernstrom argue that as a result of a long history of institutionalized discrimination that precluded African-Americans from the education system, there is a Black "culture" that is disconnected from academic achievement. Different researchers have different, but perhaps analogous, explanations for the Latino achievement gap. Latino's struggles are often framed in terms of immigration-related and assimilation-related challenges, including language acquisition.³⁴ These "culture"-based explanations for the achievement gap evoke both passionate support and heated rebuttal. To some, these theories are often unacceptable "deficit" views of cultures that happen to be different from that of the majority, and such deficit models are not only often inaccurate but may do harm to the

students they purport to describe. Others find that an examination of "Black culture" and "Latino culture" offers insights into how we can best solve the achievement gap problem. Later in this text, we will explore some of the questions posed by these theories, including whether or not differences in African-American, Latino, and Native American students' culture actually should inform a teacher's classroom design and instruction. [See chapter seven of this text, entitled "Cultural Learning Styles."]

"Explaining the Academic Gap; Conventional and Alternative Explanations"

In order to offer a somewhat different lens on these causes of the achievement gap, along with this chapter you will read a brief excerpt from "Explaining the Academic Gap; Conventional and Alternative Explanations"³⁵ from a study by Professor John Ogbu, Chancellor's Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. An educational anthropologist, Professor Ogbu focuses his studies on minority status in education. In fact, some of this work has sparked some controversy because of his

³³ McWhorter, John. *Losing the Race: Self Sabotage in Black America*. New York: Free Press, 2000, p. 126.

³⁴ Conchas, G.Q. "Structuring failure and success: Understanding the variability in Latino school engagement." *Harvard Educational Review*. Vol. 71, 2001, pp. 475-504.

³⁵ Ogbu, John. *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*. Chapter 3, Manwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Association, 2003, pp. 33-55.

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endorsement of the type of “cultural” explanation for that achievement gap that was discussed previously.

The excerpt you will read is part of a study of the academic disengagement of African-American students in Shaker Heights, Ohio. While this study focuses on the particular factors at play in a particular school district, Professor Ogbu’s survey of traditional explanations for the achievement gap—and those explanations’ limitations—will serve as helpful background for your own thinking about why your students are so far behind and how you can help them. As you read this article, think critically about the degree to which you believe he is correct about the influence and limitations of such explanations as racial groups’ IQ, social class status, racial segregation, teacher expectations, and cultural differences and conflicts.

This section began by posing the question, “Why is the achievement gap correlated with race and socioeconomic status in this country?” The incomplete list that we have explored above should give you some theories about the answer to that question. All of those factors, from blatant racism to theories of group culture, are likely to have a higher impact on minority or low-income students, thereby helping to explain the correlations among race, class, and the achievement gap in this country.

III. Conclusion: The Promise of Student Potential

You’ll notice that “lack of student potential” is not one of the factors listed as a contributor to the achievement gap. Among the most important lessons we have learned as educators of under-achieving students is that the *correlation* between race and income on the one hand and achievement on the other does not denote *cause and effect*. That is, the fact that African-American, Latino, Native American and poor students are behind most White, more affluent students in their academic performance does not mean that they are behind *because* they are Black, Latino, Native American, or poor. Put more positively, our students have the potential to succeed at the highest levels of academic accomplishment.

This may be an obvious point. It certainly is intuitive to those of us who have watched our students exceed the expectations that had been placed on them. Unfortunately, not everyone is convinced that our students have the innate ability to succeed alongside their White and affluent neighbors. Not only do many people consciously and subconsciously endorse a theory of lowered potential by adopting negative assumptions and stereotypes about poor and minority students, but some individuals also explicitly develop and foster this theory as a means of explaining the achievement gap.³⁶ Perhaps the best known (and most controversial) of these studies is *The Bell Curve*, published in 1994, written by Harvard professor Richard Herrnstein and economist Charles Murray. This book compared IQ scores of students of different races and attempted to define a causal relationship between race, IQ levels, and academic achievement as shown on standardized test scores.³⁷

³⁶ While these more blatantly racist and classist theories have been roundly criticized and refuted, it is worth noting that some analysts do argue that race itself is the root cause of the achievement gap. The rationale of this view is that the strong *correlation* between race and the achievement gap means that race is *causing* the achievement gap—that students of color are simply less able (because of their genetic predisposition) to succeed in school. .

³⁷ The publication of this book sparked a virtual explosion in the scientific, education, and political communities as scholars and the entire nation debated its findings and the argument of nature vs. nurture. Despite the volumes of analysis and studies debunking *The Bell Curve*’s methods and results, there are still active and vocal supporters of its theories today. (See, for example, Thomas Bouchard’s *The Genetic Architecture of Human Intelligence* and Steven Pinker’s *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*).

It was easy to list the reasons I should keep my expectations low and not bring my students to the DC Citywide Science Fair. Thoughts of years of institutionalized racism, educational inequality, and poverty, all raced through my head as I worried I should keep them home to protect them from a possible disappointment. But ultimately, if I had not brought them to Howard University that day, to stand side by side with students from around the city that had grown up with more resources of every kind, they would never have won Citywide First Place honors in Medicine and Health and Behavioral Science, and Second Place honors in Chemistry. You can imagine the empowerment this gave my students and our school community, where good news is not brought home often enough. They had high expectations for themselves, which along with their dedicated preparation allowed them to speak to the judges about their projects with their hard-earned confidence, charisma, and aptitude. They taught me an unequivocal lesson in expectations that day and watching them from the audience was one of the most powerful moments of my life.

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Study of Academic Disengagement. You can access this excerpt by visiting the Pre-Institute Work page on the Institute Info Center within TFANet. 

Having witnessed irrefutable evidence that students of color can achieve at high levels, we reject outright the notion that poorer students of color are somehow less able to succeed than their more affluent and White counterparts in other school districts. But we must acknowledge the challenge we face as teachers of maintaining high expectations for our students despite the insidious, low-level murmurs of genetic inferiority that—despite overwhelming evidence of their fallacy—are periodically recycled in this country. We also must acknowledge that we are all exposed to such theories and we must actively challenge them with the evidence from our classrooms so that they do not further take hold in the American psyche.

Our students' potential to succeed is not a mere hypothesis; it has been proven time and time again in classrooms across the country. A critical key to unlocking that potential is, as set forth in the next chapter, establishing and maintaining high expectations.

Please take a break at this point to read "Explaining the Academic Gap: Conventional and Alternative Explanations" from Professor John Ogbu's book *Black American Students In An Affluent Suburb: A*