

Achievement gaps among low-income groups



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An academic achievement gap is “ the disparity in academic performance between groups of students” (Education Week 2011). These gaps affect everyone. The role our society plays in overcoming the challenges that create achievement gaps is vital. This paper will identify possible reasons for this educational inequality in regard to literacy, racial, financial inequality and cultural effects on education.

The income divide has long played a prominent role in the quality of education that low-income students have grown to accept. It has been established that many children who experience poverty are more likely to experience lower levels of educational attainment (Smith et al., 1997; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000a; Bradshaw, 2002; Strelitz & Lister, 2008). Part of this divide is due to public schools that are funded by state and local governments. A large portion of school funding is reliant on income and property taxes, which creates an imbalance especially for more impoverished areas with higher unemployment rates. Since funding comes from income and property taxes, neighborhoods that are more affluent have school districts that can secure a more significant amount of money for students. With the implementation of Title 1, which is the most extensive federal aid program for public schools in the US, schools with at least 40% of its students receiving free or reduced lunches (NCES. ed. gov) can garner supplemental funds to assist in meeting low-income students’ educational goals. Unfortunately, the point of this money is to supplement funding not equalize it. Current policy fails to provide the educational support needed for success and tends to ignore the lack of opportunities many children face outside of school. It also fails to consider students that are facing food

insecurity, parent's unemployment, or lack of housing are usually under immense stress, and this will undermine their ability to learn. These issues can impact a student's performance in school.

Jerome Bruner wrote a paper called 'Poverty and childhood' where he stated 'With respect to virtually any criterion of equal opportunity and equal access to opportunity, the children of the poor are plainly not getting as much schooling, or getting as much from their schooling as their middle-class age-mates' (p. 43). Bruner explains how the culture of poverty can influence a child's upbringing, and how different kinds of upbringing can mold the development of said children, especially concerning the expectation of success. Bruner felt that the low achievement of poor children was a direct result of discrimination, but also of deep-rooted cultural habits and traditions or upbringing (Bruner Citation). Parents of many cultures have a profound effect in molding a child's thinking patterns. According to the cultural deficit theory, because the social, linguistic, and cultural nature of the home environment does not prepare them, some students do poorly in school and are underprepared for the work they will

be required to do. The cultural deficit theory suggests that shortcomings in the home environment result in knowledge, skills, and behaviors that contribute to unsatisfactory school performance.

Neighborhoods not only play a crucial role in a child's social development, but they also provide access to resources, opportunities, and interactions that influence said development (Sampson, 2000). Poverty stricken neighborhoods may also have less than optimal effects on childhood

development by depriving them of access to community services, healthcare, and may expose them to violence (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). A consistent and pragmatic finding that supports this view is the association between neighborhood socioeconomic status and a child's development (Leventhal, Dupe ´re ´, & Shuey, in press). Neighborhood opulence, often seen as the presence of affluent, well-educated, and professional residents, is associated with achievement-related outcomes in children, such as higher test scores and educational attainment (e. g., Boyle, Georgiades, Racine, & Mustard, 2007; Sastry & Pebley, 2010). Segregation of neighborhoods and schools that stem from growing inequality in family income has had an immense effect on the educational attainment of students in the US. This segregation is a result of high-income families buying homes in areas where less-affluent families are unable to afford (Reardon & Bischoff, 2011).

In a study in the USA Hart and Risley (1995), it was discovered how immense the difference in exposure to the complex adult language of poor children versus their more affluent peers is. Since a broad and expansive vocabulary is critical to academic attainment, many low-income children will face the demands of education with a clear disadvantage. Hart and Risley (1995) also discovered that the higher the social class of the parents, the more likely they were to speak to their children in a way that initiates and maintains conversations. US National Household Education Survey (Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo, & Coll, 2001; Corwyn & Bradley, 2000) and the UK Millennium Cohort Study (Dearden, Sibieta, & Sylva, 2011) showed that children from more impoverished families have less access to cognitively stimulating

materials such as books and newspapers. Additionally, Sylva, Melhuish et al. (2010) found that children of parents with low academic attainment were statistically less likely to go to a library which,

coincidentally, can be a significant predictor of lower educational achievement in children ages five to eleven years of age.

Over the last 45 years, educators in the US have seen significant gains in academic achievement. There remains a racial achievement gap that persists because not all ethnic groups of students are progressing at similar rates, however. There is evidence of this gap in the form of standardized test scores, dropout rates of high school students, high school completion rates and retention rates. Nationwide, the go-to source for statistical analysis in educational proficiency is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Reports from 2015 show that 45% of white students met or exceeded in reading proficiency, and only 18% African American students did the same. Asian students outperformed all racial categories with 57% meeting or exceeding in reading proficiency. In 2015, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported the level of poverty affecting students nationally. It showed 25% of white students experiencing high amounts of poverty and African American students experiencing 45% as well.

Furthermore, the study showed 15% of Asian students experiencing high levels of poverty, but also had the highest percentage of low poverty reported for all racial groups. Latino, African-American and Native American students have consistently fallen short of their white and Asian peers educationally. The large gaps in educational achievement contribute to inequality in life chances ranging from future employment to higher

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education. Because of these gaps, underrepresented minorities are much more likely to hold low-paying jobs that provide little to no advancement.

Frequently, children are entering school with little or limited use of the English language (Green, 2003), this is another reason for achievement gaps. The increasing number of non-native English speakers in the United States also known as ELL (English language learners) has increased from 8.1% in 2000 to 9.5% of all students in 2015 (NCES. ed. gov). Although there are language assistance programs to help ELL students attain English proficiency, the challenge of learning a second language while also learning other subjects can be a challenge. In 2005, the NAEP reported 73% of fourth grade ELL students fell below basic in reading, while their native English-speaking peers fell just below 25%. The literacy gap continues to grow as ELL students move up in grade level with fourth graders falling 35 points behind, and eighth graders falling 50 points behind. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Latino students from low socio-economic families typically score two years behind other students in the fourth grade (White-Clark, 2005). This gap widens by 12th grade, where these students are close to four years behind English speaking students. The dropout rate is higher for ELL students versus their English speaking peers, and reports of significant achievement gaps on state and national assessments (Snow & Biancarosa cited in Short & Echevarria, 2004).

Some would argue that having an economic disadvantage is not the best attempt to explain the achievement gap. If you take into consideration the 2015 Stanford study on Urban Charter Schools, many inner-city charter schools are outperforming schools in suburban areas. If a person's ability to

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perform well on a test is solely dependent on economic and racial advantages, then how would inner city schools stand a chance? Could it be that a societal value of education is the main difference? I would argue that it even though societal values play a role, the statistical data available speaks to the overall picture. It is apparent that children who grow up in an impoverished neighborhood or with an economically disadvantaged family struggle more than their more affluent counterparts. Granted, there are stories of the young child who grew up in a poor neighborhood only to outperform his peers, but these stories are few and far between.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the achievement gap is the manifestation of a multitude of trends that have had a significant impact on educational inequality in the United States. It is a symptom with very real and devastating consequences. Mike Rose wrote in his book about the educationally underprepared that “ American meritocracy is validated and sustained by the deep-rooted belief in equal opportunity” (Rose Citation p128). As wonderful as that sounds, it is clear that equal opportunity in the educational system does not always exist and unequal access to quality education will affect not only current students, but subsequent generations of students. Our existing educational system and its ability to equally support all schools is set up in such a way as to steer low-income children towards schools that lack the monetary means to set children up for success. There is a stark class delimitation that, ultimately, forces an entire group of children to become underachievers.

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- “ The NCES Fast Facts Tool Provides Quick Answers to Many Education Questions (National Center for Education Statistics).” National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a Part of the U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=158. In this website, the NCES answers questions in a FAQ style format. This is a reliable source because it is from a . gov website and it is backed up by statistical data. I am using this website to reference how schools, qualify for Title 1 assistance.
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- and uses over 50 sources from various studies. It could be proven inaccurate due to the location being in the UK versus my research being US based. I plan to use this article to cite the likelihood of children in poverty having lower levels of educational attainment.
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