

# Closing the achievement gap education essay



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The American education experienced long and sustained period of school reforms filled with significant challenges. The policymakers as well as the governors made the school reform movement their top project priority since the 1980s (Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey & Liebert, 2006). The school reform movement undergone profound achievements in the past and continues to tackle significant challenges although it has achieved its goal in creating changes to school conditions, student performance, and institutional policy. The National Governors Association for Best Practices is looking into the achievement gap challenge facing the schools today (Grant, 2009). This requires creating new policies and developing old policies to close in the achievement gap problems happening in several states. The policy primer discloses the nature of the achievement gap problem, its history, and the different state's efforts to solve the existing problem. The primer also discusses alternative solutions and strategies at state level including important issues and factors to avoid in implementing solutions.

### **Understanding the achievement gap context**

The achievement gap context is all about the differences one sees between people coming from different race and class (Chubb & Loveless, 2002). There is an increasing difference concerning the performance of students coming from the disadvantaged minority as compared to the performance demonstrated by white students of the same grade level (Chubb & Loveless, 2002).

This achievement gap is a clear issue of racism and the effects of the power of the privilege. Educational institutions, educators, and policymakers face genuine lack of understanding creating and developing schools that can

cope up with the context of a diversified society. The challenge goes on with the creation of correct policy that could help close the achievement gap.

### **Federal response to the urgent persisting achievement gap problem**

The No Child Left Behind Act or NCLB is an attempt by the Federal government to close the achievement gap (Chamberlain, 2004). The policy set forth a new accountability practice for American schools to set the same standards with detailed plan for testing performance to ensure students meet preset standards of the schools. The framework of the NCLB allows a student to transfer to other schools located at the same district if he fails to pass the test performance set by the school. It is the responsibility of the school district to provide persistently failing students supplemental services as well as choices to study at other schools operating within the same district (Chamberlain, 2004). The school needs to demonstrate adequate progress about the problems of persistently failing students. Failure to show progress makes them open for state law corrective action (Chamberlain, 2004). The schools focus their performance targets based on the conditions of the students with disabilities and coming from disadvantaged family background. This includes students coming from ethnic or minority group that possess limited English language skills and proficiency. However, well performing schools are still required to alter school practices, policies, and governance to accelerate and enhance the educational experience of the disadvantaged group of students.

The state considers a school as well performing only when they become successful in bridging the achievement gap. The intervention of the new

Federal law on the educational scene has created quite a stir among schools struggling to meet the new set of policies and criteria.

### **How do you measure the achievement gap?**

NCLB Act is clearly a Federal strategy to challenge the achievement gap brought by the effects and challenges of inequality among students in the US. Schools measure achievement gap by comparing African-American test scores and academic performance with the Hispanic group and white Americans using standard assessment tests (Chamberlain, 2004). Survey statistics gathered by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reflected a narrow gap between Hispanic and African-American 17 year old students reading scores for the period 1975 to 1988 (US Commission on Civil Rights, 2004). The gap becomes wider or somehow constant in the areas of mathematics and reading during 1990 to 1999. The NAEP charts on achievement gap raised concern over the intelligence and skills of the disadvantaged minority students. The Education Trust analysis on the NAEP data bothered policymakers. It concluded that the grade 12 level disadvantaged minority students performed similar to the level of the students studying four years behind them (Ferguson & Mehta, 2004). The skills of the Latino and African-American 17 year old students are comparable to the skills possessed by the 13-year-old White students in the subjects of English, science, and mathematics (Ferguson & Mehta, 2004).

The educational attainment is another way to measure the achievement gap between races. The different ethnicities showed wider gap as to the highest educational level of attainment they had achieved in the past. The groups showed gaps in all discipline. Dropouts among African-American and

Hispanic groups in high school are heavier even though the tuition fee rates are lower than those rates given to the Whites (Ferguson & Mehta, 2004).

The Whites show more effort in trying to get a college degree than the Blacks and Hispanic young adults.

Policymakers and schools do not overstate the importance of achievement gaps but actually noted the big difference between Whites and other ethnic group's educational achievement specifically Hispanic and African-American groups (Chubb & Loveless, 2002). The achievement gap is the outcome of local and national standard test measures between diversified groups of students mostly categorized by ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Chubb & Loveless, 2002). The other forms of category applicable to the groups are their gender and ability.

There are many ways that a school can measure the achievement gap between the groups such as test scores resulting from standardized test and average grades obtained by each group. The dropout rates, highest level of educational attainment, and population of college enrollees are other ways to measure the achievement gap between ethnicities (Strictland & Alvermann, 2004).

Although the results of this statistic survey came from different American states, the same thing is also happening with other countries. These achievement gaps noted across countries showed the possible effects brought by discrimination and social injustice. The government made a good move eradicating social discrimination.

The move to bridge the achievement gap between ethnicities also responds to their effort to solve existing social discrimination at the same time. Eradicating the gap as a public policy would help eliminate the other problem of social discrimination. However, some people disagree that the core causes of the achievement gap come from a person's class, culture, or even biology. These people believe that policymakers can directly influence economics and education using progressive education based on multiculturalism. This idea is more effective in helping them achieve equality among ethnic groups.

### **Identified factors causing the widening achievement gap**

Researchers do not have any clear idea about the real reason for the increasing achievement gap between ethnic groups. Structural as well as cultural factors played a major role to the widening discrepancy. Students lacking the cultural capital portrayed by the middle class are likely to show low academic scores and achievements especially if they experience little parental involvement concerning their education and home coursework (Strictland & Alvermann, 2004). Annete Lareau stated that better resource students demonstrate more accomplishments in academics and life (Lareau, 2000).

Other researchers believed that a person's ability to achieve more in life and academics largely depends on its socioeconomic condition and the classification of race from which he belongs. It is evident that students belonging to the disadvantaged minority suffer the adverse result of the achievement gap because they find themselves at a disadvantage position than the White students.

### **Understanding the effects of the environment and culture to students' performance**

The culture, traditions, beliefs, social roles, and environment of the student influence the student's performance and are factors that need extra consideration and study when dealing with the core causes of achievement gap (Lareau, 2000). It would be for the researcher's advantage that he should look into the lives, environment, economic condition, and practices of the disadvantaged minority to ascertain and identify specific cultural differences that can help explain the differences of the child-parent relationships between ethnic group families (Lareau, 2000). Cultural differences shaped the child's behavior and motivation to become achievers. The authors Jencks and Phillips argue that a child belonging to the Black family do not have much motivation and encouragement from their parents because of the lack of understanding about the benefits of education and obtaining academic skills (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). The lack of awareness resulted to Black children going to school with little vocabularies than their White counterparts.

Studies claimed that students with parental involvement such as homework assistance show more progress in school (De Carvalho, 2001). In comparison, the disadvantaged minority consists of single parents have to spend more of their time looking for money to cope up with their household economics and other needs rather than staying and getting involve with their child's homework (De Carvalho, 2001). The minority group also consists of parents that do not understand nor speak English well. The study points two major causes of the child's difficulty namely unavailable English speaker at home and lack of parental involvement for homework.

Researchers highly believed that children from the minority group do not attend school because they are not willing to find themselves in comparison with the Whites and accused as behaving like the White children by their peers (De Carvalho, 2001).

The children of the minority group simply lack the motivation and the understanding to pursue higher education because they do not see and believe the benefits and role of education in their future. They possess little understanding about the benefits that knowledge and higher education bring to their lives and how it could improve years of hard work (De Carvalho, 2001). The common minority behavior from lack of motivation to do better in school is plain rejection of the idea to achieve something more in their future. It is like giving up their potential and the ability to do more by not studying and working hard to make any progress in their social status as well as to receive higher wages.

Furthermore, researchers found that schools often set up their performance measures based from the students' knowledge as well as familiarity about the White group that belongs to the middle class cultural capital. It is obvious that the disadvantaged minority is not familiar about the middle class cultural capital background of the White group. Schools need to change their test for students' performance and base it on their understanding of the subject matter. The test should be solely base on how they understand and perceive the subject they are taking.



**How structures of the institutions influence the students?**

Students coming from the disadvantaged minority group definitely go to schools categorized by the district as poorly funded schools (Danielson, 2002). Children belonging to low-income household attend poorly funded schools because it is the only affordable form of education. Schools belonging to the poorly funded school category have limited resources and employ teachers with less qualification (Danielson, 2002). Schools tried to solve the achievement gap between ethnicities by placing students in tracking education groups.

The framework of the tracking education group assigns students within the same school into several groups base on their skills and academic abilities (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004). The schools then tailored the teachers' lesson plans to meet the varying requirements of the different sets of learners' abilities (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004). The strategy made dramatic progress to some learners.

However, some schools based their grouping from the students' cultural capital and socioeconomic status that results to the disadvantaged minority overly representing the lower educational group (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004). This made schools placed the African-Americans and the Hispanic students into the lower educational group. Their perception about the minority group wrongly placed the African-Americans and the Hispanic students, which reflects practice of institutional racism (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004). This confirms some researchers' beliefs that the initiation of the tracking education groups implies the existence of racial segregation within the school system itself.

Several studies performed on tracking education groups provided negative results. The implementation of the tracking education groups harmed the potential of the minority students to learn more skills because the teachers assigned to their groups are less qualified (Molnar, 2003). The curriculum design for the minority group is also less challenging and provides less opportunity for advancement in their academic fields. The peers as well as the teachers of the students belonging to the lower tracking educational group labeled them as slow learners. This greatly affected their self-confidence and motivation to continue their studies, which resulted to increasing minority school dropouts. Concerned psychologist claimed that the school's tracking group's outcomes might not be beneficial to all groups (Molnar, 2003). They cannot identify any lasting benefit to the grouping.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Rational**

The schools explanation over the creation of the tracking education widely varies. The goal to find applicable institutional and policy solutions to narrow the achievement gap gave birth to drafting education reforms. The categorization leads schools to provide remedial classes as well as tutoring sessions for identified less performing students.

### **Strategies applied to narrow the ethnicities achievement gap**

The school provided tutoring sessions to the less advantaged and low performing students after school. They also offer remedial classes to help underperformers. The main problem noted with the categorization program is the pressure it gave to minority students. The program pushes minority students or underperformers to learn at a fast pace in an attempt to catch up

with the performing groups usually comprise of their White counterparts. The catch up required more efforts from the teachers and gave much pressure to the students. The schools changed their categorization by race to grouping the students according to their ability. This new grouping criteria enabled schools to provide fair quality education for the students without considering ethnicity. The detracking scheme made schools and teachers perceive students equally (Burriss & Welner, 2005). This also made schools provide more teachers that are qualified to the different groups, design their curriculum appropriately, and provide more resources to the learners.

### **Understanding the condition of the minority**

The Blacks and the Latinos usually describe the low-income minority of the United States (Aragon, 2000). These students usually come from poor families and comprise the less performing group in school. The schools can easily identify minority students based on their SAT scores. Minority students often obtain lower scores than their White peers (Aragon, 2000). The schools broke down their SAT scores according to their socioeconomic status. The results showed that the Blacks and the Latino students usually achieve lower SAT scores than the Whites. However, Asians still achieve higher SAT scores than their White peers who belong to the same family income level. The analysis of the authors Steven G. Rivkin and Eric A. Hanushek fully explained the core causes of the increasing achievement gap. In their book published last 2006, the authors discussed the effects of the schools effort to group the students according to their socioeconomics and ethnicity (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006). The racial concentration in certain groups created the unequal distribution of experienced teachers and the inexperienced teachers

(Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006). The study noted the increasing achievement gap in the grades 3 and grades 8 levels.

### **Looking into the structure of the high performers that belongs to the minority group**

There are minority students who managed to excel in their grade levels. One great example of minority high performers is the students attending at Davidson Magnet School of Augusta, Georgia. The other school with minority high performers is the Amistad Academy located in New Haven, Connecticut.

The schools strategically employ traditional and rigorous training instructions that include providing direct instruction to students. Researchers found direct instruction effective and efficient in developing the skill levels of the learners coming from the inner city of the research title Project Follow Through (Harris & Graham, 2007). Black schools sometimes perform higher than their White counterparts do. The results of the annual test during the later part of the 19th century at Washington, DC can prove this claim. The Blacks performing higher than the Whites do continued until the middle of the 20th century. The M Street School gave quite a performance during this period by exceeding on the national standardized test.

The author Carl L. Bankston III and his partner researcher Stephen J. Caldas claimed that the achievement gap causes the segregation of the schools in US (Caldas & Bankston, 2005). The book titled “ A troubled dream: The promise and failure of school desegregation in Louisiana” published in 2002 and the other book titled “ Forced to fail:

The paradox of school desegregation” published in 2005, clearly pointed that students benefit more when placed in the same school with high achieving students (Caldas & Bankston, 2005). Their research also showed that students experienced academic disadvantage when they interact more with low achieving schoolmates. This proves their perception about the achievement gap as the core cause of school segregation. This means that parents played a major role and are greatly involve in the creation of school segregation for the fact that many parents even avoid sending their children to schools with larger minority student population (Caldas & Bankston, 2005).

### **Understanding the standards based form of education reform**

The standard based education reform based its classification by the education characteristics and income level of the student regardless of performance (US Commission on Civil Rights, 2004). Most schools in US decide to adopt the education reform. The policymakers believed that students regardless of race and gender have the potential to become achievers and receive higher pay levels. There is a need to study the content and context as well as the effects of the state’s education policy and compare them with the education policies of other nations. Improved performance is attainable using the standard based assessments with clear set of incentives such as examination for high school graduation (US Commission on Civil Rights, 2004). The student reforms of whole language, multiculturalism, affirmative action, block scheduling, desegregation, inquiry-based science, and reform mathematics were not successful in improving the achievements of the students.

The recent NCLB legislation requires students to take annual testing and demonstrate progress at an acceptable rate every school year. The federal government imposed sanctions to schools with larger population of under performing students. Obviously, the schools having the greatest attendance of minority and poor students face the problems of coping up with the legislation and working on the skills of the students. Those who favored the traditional education claimed that the schools are not designing the education reforms in a constructive way because the reforms are not curriculum and student based.

The IQ tests and the SAT are widely accepted as norm-referenced tests. Some people claimed the ACT as limiting chances for the minorities. Many people favored the standards based assessment because they have a clear definition and design of the criteria for the reference test (US Commission on Civil Rights, 2004). The criteria are acceptable and regarded as free from any cultural bias. The students can easily pass the reference test criteria. In 2006, states like the Washington questioned the effectiveness of the approach.

The assessment became a mandatory requirement for graduation. Terry Bergeson, a Superintendent, believes that students coming from the disadvantaged minority can compete and are capable of achieving higher scores (Thomas, 2005). However, these minority students need additional help to perform more. MCAS in Massachusetts showed higher percentage of graduating students for all races. In the Fairtest point, there are still many minority students dropping out and performing less than the Whites and Asians.

Although the Washington state has narrowed the achievement gap, researchers cannot find any conclusive evidence that the standard based reforms are effective in closing the achievement gap. The author of the book titled “ The Bell Curve”, Charles Murray, looked into the point gaps and its relative improvement (Locke, 1995). His analysis implied that the test is theoretically easy to pass but actually difficult to answer. The test consists of open-response questions that are mostly problem solving, reading, writing, and mathematics. Minorities who fail the test are about twice or even four times than the population of the students that achieve high scores of the testing history. In 2006, only one sophomore student belonging to the minority group passed the standard test. One needs to pass WASL to obtain a diploma.

The tasks of keeping American public schools from educational failure depends on how fast policymakers and educators provide efficient policies and effective structure of framework for teaching that can respond to the students individual differences and capabilities. There is a rising need for educational institutions to meet projected challenges posed by changing demographic trends and requirements. The most crucial part is the transmission of societal values from diversified students of differing religion, philosophy, history, and political context.

The lack of understanding of each ethnic group values and culture endangers the opportunity of any education reform to work for the learners.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Significance of the problem**

The American Indian group always ranked below the Latino and the African American students in terms of graduation rates and standardized test scores. The three groups always showed significant numbers concerning dropout rates. The achievement gap persists in the US history. The study published in the Education week revealed that American Indian or Alaska Native students' graduation rate is about 47.4 percent. The foundation of the couple Bill and Melinda Gates funded the study. The statistics showed that American Indians were 30 points below their White peers, which means that about half of the graduating students belonging to the minority failed. The Council of Chief State School Officers report in 2006 declared that the low attendance of American Indian students across the country is a significant problem among the states specifically West Mississippi (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2006).

The persisting problem about the achievement gap of the African Americans, Hispanic, Asian Americans, and Caucasian students present a challenge to the present structure of public education (Zajda, 2005). The gap narrowed a little during the 1970s and the 1980s and then started to widen again in 1990. The gap persists to widen until today (Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson & Rahman, 2009). There were about 22% grades 4 White students who scored below the basic NAEP test for reading in 2007.

The report also showed about 50% Hispanic and 54% Black students who obtained scores below the basic NAEP. There were about 16% White students at grades 8 who scored below the basic mark required to pass the



reading test. There were about 42% Hispanic and 45% Black students performing below the basic mark required to pass the reading test. The wide achievement gap reflected in their math scores also. Some people argued that district resegregation across the states reinforced the rising disparity problems. This is especially true in the northern and southern districts (Kozol, 2005). The White parents enroll their children in high quality suburban schools while the African-American as well as the Hispanic families enroll their children in racially isolated schools. These racially isolated institutions normally provide school instruction of very low quality and normally face other types of problems (Zajda, 2005).

The California state is the most affected state in the US. Jack O'Connell, State Superintendent, considers the task of helping the minority as moral, economic, and ethical imperative (Gerston & Christensen, 2009). The California Department of Education (2009) revealed the state needs to prepare and train the students especially the African-American and the Latino to compete in the global economy. This would make California gain a competitive edge over world economic leaders. The success of the task largely depends on how well the students respond to the NCLB standardized test. Taylor (2006) is the main advocate of the Critical Race Theory. He tried to bring awareness about the racial minority and institutionalized oppression hidden under the Federal as well as state policies.

Although the Federal government created the NCLB in an attempt to bridge the achievement gap, Taylor claimed that the Federal regulation puts too much pressure over the educators and students in trying to improve academic performance. Taylor claimed that the movement did not correctly

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address the issues stated in *The Colors of Poverty* by Lin and Harris. Taylor claimed that putting pressure to perform better does not respond to the racial segregation practices and policies. People and policymakers do not even understand the occurrence and the consequence of the practices nor do they have the ability to reverse its occurrence (Taylor, 2006).

### **Understanding the context of differentiated instruction**

Differentiated instruction makes students the center of learning and teaching based from the theory that students come to school bearing different skills implying unique differences on their learning needs (Tomlinson, 1999). The varying degrees of differences may refer to their personal and educational context, community or environment background, and academic skills. The educators under the differentiated instruction design and employ several methods of instruction that can facilitate the learning experiences of the diversified students in the classroom effectively. The goal is to match students' skills to the resource materials in a qualitative manner. The program includes blending the needs of the whole class with the design of their individual instruction using effective approaches and methods to expedite the processing of knowledge, input and output, of the learners.

This requires constant assessment of the students' progress by their respective classroom teachers. Policymakers considered the differentiated instruction movement as a proactive approach to educational issues facing practitioners today (Tomlinson, 1999). The proactive approach makes the students become more comfortable in pursuing their education. Educators refine and tailor their instructions according to the needs of the students. This also entails adjusting the curriculum to fit the students' academic

needs. Teachers committed to this approach understand that the students they teach shape their teaching style and practically believe that students create awareness on teachers how to shape them.

The students' personality and learning style necessarily influence the instructor's teaching philosophy and methods (Tomlinson, 1999). This is the only way to get through them and seems the only possible way that they get to learn things. Creating a model for differentiated instruction requires student centered approach that supports the key elements of interest, readiness, and learning profile (Allan & Tomlinson, 2000).

The Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, declared that people receive and learn more things when they are ready to learn these things (Daniels, 2001), which is the theory behind the differentiated instruction movement. The differentiated instruction approach matches the individuals' interest and methods of learning. This approach supports the student interest, which is one of the key elements of differentiated instruction. Jerome Bruner claimed that the moment a teacher gains the interest of the student is the specific moment that a student starts to learn and the learning experience becomes more rewarding (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000).

The American psychologist who wrote about the multiple intelligence theory, Howard Gardner, claimed that a human being is a unique individual that possesses different levels of intelligence and perceives learning in different ways. This led him to suggest that schools need to look into the possibility of providing individual-centered approach. The framework tailors the curriculum to the intelligence and preferences of the child (Tomlinson &

Allan, 2000). This suggestion fits to the different student learning profile key element of differentiated instruction.

The context of differentiated instruction supports and integrates the learning styles of the students to the conditions of their brain development.

This constructivist learning theory details and analyzes the various factors that influence the readiness, intelligence preferences, and the interest of the students that motivate and engage them to learn at school (Anderson, 2007). Kathie Nunley, an educational psychologist, stated that the movement for differentiated instruction is crucial to the classroom makeover from the 1970s homogeneous groupings to the present heterogeneous learners (Nunley, 2006). Educators using the differentiated instruction approach are able to ascertain and meet the differing needs of the students, help each student in their learning process, and exceed expectations from established standards (Levy, 2008). Tomlinson believed that the need to implement differentiated instruction came from the fact that learners are unique individuals that vary in different ways. The student population is also fast becoming academically diverse, which presents higher probability that diversity will continue for a long time.

### **Pre-assessment criteria for differentiated instruction**

The most crucial part of the differentiated instruction program is the assessment, identification, and determin