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## Conquering the Achievement Gap and Shaping Our Children's Future

by Carlos S. Ortega-Guerrero

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### Abstract

This paper explores the book, *Toward Excellence with Equity*, by Ronald F. Ferguson. It discusses the achievement gap, a disparity in the educational levels of minority, Hispanic, and black students. By analyzing the history of the gap starting with the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in 1990 and its use of the Armed Forces Qualifications Test, researchers were able to prove a direct relationship between the black and white participants' test scores and their wages. The reasons for which the gap persists are explored thoroughly including the influence of peers and the effect that parent and teacher perceptions have on the educational success of the student. Finally, possible solutions that resolve the persistence of the gap are discussed. The paper highlights the urgency in achieving educational equality.

*Keywords:* achievement gap, inequality, educational disparity

The United States of America is a country that has gone through so many radical societal changes throughout its short history; it is a country that went from slavery to making it illegal to discriminate against any ethnic group all in a little longer than 200 years. Unfortunately, we have not gone far enough; it is time to shape history again so that we can create a better future for all of our children. Our current educational system is hurting the children that make up the majority of the minority ethnic groups, Hispanics and blacks. The disparity in education levels between this group and white Americans has stayed at a very high, dangerous level. Being that this sector of the population is growing at the fastest rate, if we cannot heal the system in the near future, the future of the entire country is at stake. This disparity has taken on the name "achievement gap" describing just that, a gap between what Caucasian children learn and these minorities. Fortunately, it is not too late to resolve the problem, by exploring its history, examining the persistence of the problem, and by finding remedies that will lead to social equity, we will begin to mend the gap and begin the path to recovery.

Understanding where the achievement gap originated is the first step in understanding how to resolve the dilemma. The first credible proof of the gap was discovered through the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) in 1990. The survey studied large discrepancies in earnings between blacks and whites from the mid 1970s to the late 1980s. The main hypothesis for this incidence was because the advancements in the field of technology required having the ability to use reading and math; this gave some employees more value than others. This was confirmed by the NLSY because this survey kept a record of the math and reading scores of the entire participant pool. They received these scores after taking the Armed Forces Qualifications Test (AFQT). The test nearly proved the hypothesis because the discrepancy between blacks and whites on their test scores "predicted at least fifty percent of the black-white hourly earning gap among young adults (p. 2)." This NLSY study became the first time in history anyone had found a reason to study the large inconsistencies between blacks and whites in terms of wages earned. Once this idea was linked to the AFQT scores, it that sparked a movement to understand why this achievement gap existed. This is not to say that educational disparities were not acknowledged before this point, but it gave those that were voicing their opinions a better set of statistics that proved what they were trying to argue (Ferguson, 2007).

There were two distinct instances prior to the NLSY survey that tried to face the achievement problem before it had been studied thoroughly were the Tennessee Star Experiment and the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. The Tennessee Star Experiment, which was conducted in the 1980s, tested the impact that small class sizes had on black and white nine year olds. It was estimated that small classes (13-17 students) compared to large classes (22-25 students) benefited the black students more than the white students. This was seen as a possible explanation of the reductions in test-score discrepancies from 1970 through the late 1980s. Evidence on the effectiveness of small class sizes was deemed inconclusive after the study. This displays the importance of analyzing previous studies like the Tennessee Star Experiment, we can avoid running into the same troubles that researchers from that time fell into. This can then lead to real solutions which are desperately needed today. The other instance that demonstrates the test-score disparity being addressed pre-NLSY is the publication, *A Nation at Risk*. During the time that this article was published, in the 1980s, there was a push for teacher accountability. It was a summary of why a lack of educated citizens would threaten the future of the entire nation. This article gave importance in advancing the education in of all of the demographics. Although the publication was very controversial when it was first released, it was a huge a reason why there is discussion about the achievement gap at all. We need more publications like this so that we can influence the people of this generation to resolve a gap that has not been narrowed in over three decades (Ferguson, 2007).

After discovering the origins of the achievement gap, we can begin to analyze why it persists. A couple of the most influential factors in the continuance of the gap include peer pressure to remain authentic and the standards that parents and teachers set for the child. Students that come from Hispanic and black communities have a very real fear that they will lose their authenticity if they come off as intelligent. This fear stems from being ridiculed, for “acting white,” by their friends for using high vocabulary words that are not used with frequency in their respective communities. The fear of acting white seems almost comical as a cause that allows achievement gap to thrive, but the social isolation that these children would have to otherwise face is very real. There are many examples of students that struggle with this issue from day to day. In one of the examples that Ferguson (2007) used, a child refused to raise his hand to answer one of the questions being asked by the teacher, yet he whispered the correct answer under his breath. Upon noticing this, the middle school’s principal asked the child why he had not raised his hand to give the answer. The child’s response was that he feared losing his friends by “acting white (p. 67).” This shows a reluctance to participate because of peer pressure at a very young age. If this student continued with same mentality throughout high school, which is often the case, it becomes easier to understand why children coming from Hispanic and black households have a difficult time retaining information. Through avoidance, not only do they miss short term opportunities to participate in class, but they begin to withdraw entirely at a steady rate which has a very negative long term consequence that may include dropping out. The other powerful example given by the author was that of a black student leader. When he attempts to explain the difference between college preparatory (CP) courses, where most of the students are black, and honors courses, where most of the white students are, he tries to make both courses look like viable forms of education, yet he basically explains how the honors courses create a better “atmosphere” for learning (p. 68). In this example, by admitting that the honors courses create a better learning experience, the student leader is faced with what he perceives as rejecting his black peers. His only option out was to try and balance both viewpoints by trying to validate both environments; this was he can give his true opinion while remaining authentic to his ethnic group. The social problems that Hispanic and black students face, by trying to excel in their studies, give a strong indication for why the achievement gap is relentless amongst these minority groups. A way to reform this way of thinking is necessary (Ferguson, 2007).

A large factor that dictates how students achieve in school is the standards that parents and teachers set for the students. Parental expectations of their children’s grades vary by race and by

levels of education, relative to the parents, as illustrated by the author (p. 71). On average, Hispanic and black parents allow their children to get much lower grades than what Asian and white parents allow of their children. These numbers are very significant because these expectations are another illustration of the achievement gap. Those that have parents that have higher expectations end up achieving more than those with parents who have lower expectations. These parental expectations also influence other areas of the students' academics. For example, blacks are less likely to participate in class, but when the family background and the parental education variables are controlled, black males reportedly have more interest in their studies than whites. On top of this, blacks students report spending as much if not more time on homework than whites when taking the same classes (p. 189). The causes of this is not because black students are less intelligent than white students, but because black students usually have less foundational knowledge and receive less help at home; this all relates back to the levels of education of the parents. Parents that have less education do not give their children as many skills and cannot help their children with homework as often. This is not an excuse for the parents, but a fact. We will explore later how these parents can continue to help their children through school even when not formally educated. These previous examples demonstrate the importance of parental standards for children. The involvement of parents is crucial in closing the achievement gap (Ferguson, 2007).

The perceptions that teachers have of students are imperative as well. Study after study has proven that educators, on average, have higher expectations of their white students than their black students; in most cases it is not due to the fact that they are discriminating students due to ethnicity, but because they look for previous indicators of achievement, for example grades. This means that for some students, teachers are satisfied with an average grade, while other students are reprimanded for that same grade because more is expected from them (p. 69). The power that teachers have through their expectations is larger than what is normally perceived. In the way that the school system is currently structured, a student has no purpose for achieving more than is expected of them. Without having the necessary support system to encourage the students to reach college, it is impossible for them to envision this for their future. As explained by Ferguson (2007), this problem is exacerbated by the tracking programs that are in currently in effect (p. 96). Students that are in low track courses receive a lower quality of instruction which is fueled by the teachers' perceptions of what the students can achieve in these courses. In other words, by trying to remediate the problems of the students who are already disadvantaged, placing them in low track courses, students are put in environments that are less conducive of a positive learning experience. Inhibiting the progress of already disadvantaged students should not be tolerated. All of these examples of low teacher expectations are best combined through the concept of "self-fulfilling prophecies (p. 146)." If an educator makes the mistake of creating an inaccurate perception of what a student can achieve, it can actually begin to influence the students' performance. Although these perceptions are not racially biased, teachers still have higher expectations of white students, again, because of previous grades. The earlier that the teacher stigmatizes student, the more difficult that it makes it for the student to accomplish their full potential this can really harm their future. This theory of a self-fulfilling prophecy should be taken advantage of in a positive way and not in a way that condemns the future of the children (Ferguson, 2007).

After discussing the reason why this achievement gap continues to plague our American education system, we can now begin to discuss the possible solutions. As mentioned previously, one of the reasons for the persistence of this problem was constant peer pressure on minority Hispanic and black students not to lose their ethnic identities by "acting white." A resolution for this was addressed by Ferguson (2007); when students who are more fluent in black English than in formal English, they are more likely to have constructive participation if allowed to use their regular speech patterns (p. 287). Educator must begin to remove the negative stigma associated with students that speak different forms of the English language. The highest priority for teachers is to teach their

students high vocabulary words that are more common in the formal English context; before this can be done, students need to be engaged in the class discussions. This is critical to increasing and maintaining their attention levels for longer periods of time. If students decide to continue to use the informal English forms with peers it should be their choice completely. As long as their heightened vocabulary allows them to communicate properly with teachers, employers, and everyone else outside of their societal network, the work of the educator succeeded. Being able to implement this step will require teachers to embrace the way that different students' use English. Once this step is enacted across all of the classrooms that minority Hispanic and black students attend, they will not feel as if they are inauthentic, or "white." This could eventually lead to a shift in the way that these populations use the English language. If all of the students learn a similar level of formal English, there will be no reason to ridicule one another.

Now, to address the negative perceptions that parents and teachers have of Hispanic and black students, we must reassess the current way in which these groups interact. The first most important viewpoint to change is the perception that parents have of their children because it will have the largest impact and can yield immediate results. Currently, Hispanic and black parents allow their children to receive lower grades than any of the other demographic groups. This means that the expectations that these parents are much lower than the rest of the population. Before any significant progress on the achievement gap, parents must consistently enforce: "daily leisure reading, discussions in which children explain their homework answers to parents, and appropriate bed times (p. 279)." Reading is one of the most important activities that children engage in, and getting them into the habit of reading on their free time can really enhance their critical thinking skills and develop their vocabulary. Having these skills will prepare them for college and for the professional world; although these goals seem to be distant, the earlier that the process is started, the more opportunities that they will have to develop and refine their abilities. It is also central for the parents to ask their children to explain their homework to them. Even if Hispanic and black parents do not fully understand the assignment due to a lack of education, this demographic of parents have lower levels of education on average, it assigns importance to the child's studies. It makes the children understand that the parents will be involved in the educational process. In turn, this influences the children to set higher expectations for them since they understand that they will be under constant supervision. Not only does this keep tabs on the child, but in order to explain their assignments to their parents, the children must have a very good understanding of what is required of their work. This also means that parents must be in constant communication with their children's teachers to ensure that the students are doing what is required and that they are up to speed with the rest of the class. Setting appropriate bedtimes and enforcing the time repeatedly also helps create a good habit for the future. When children learn to abide by the time that parents set, they are more likely to respect their future restrictions, for example curfew or maintaining appropriate behaviors. Not only this, but they will also learn to respect deadlines set by future teachers and employers. By ensuring that all of the measures previously mentioned are implemented, the parents would succeed in raising their perceptions for their children which would create successful students. All of these skills have an immediate effect on the performance of children.

Now, addressing the perceptions that the teachers have of the students requires a different set of strategies. A way to help teachers attain better perceptions of the students is by creating a good environment which facilitates the learning process for students. As Ferguson (2007) explains, "student performance can be depressed when fear of confirming a negative stereotype interferes with concentration and distracts students from doing their best (p. 286)." When students are placed in an environment in which they feel comfortable and safe, they are more likely to participate and become more receptive to the information that they are being given in the classroom from day to day. This is not a process that can be enacted from one day to the next, but ensuring that all of our educators are trained intensively to be sensitive of the cultural differences from one student to the next. This

positive environment is very difficult to create at later ages because of the amount of the social experiences that the children have through by that time; this is why it is critical to also address this while children are still in the early stages of elementary school. If we can create a more positive view of children who come from minority groups, it will not only help the teachers to believe in their abilities, but it will help the students to believe in themselves. This takes advantage of the theory behind a self-fulfilling prophecy. When the students begin to believe in themselves because their teachers prove to them that they can accomplish their goals, they are more likely to create higher expectations for themselves. They will have a more positive outlook on life that will lead them to more prosperous futures through which they could become role models for the students to continue to struggle.

In conclusion, not only is the future of minority communities highly at risk because of the achievement gap, a substantial difference between the performance of minority Hispanic and black students versus Caucasian students, but the future of the entire nation is at risk. We must pull together and overcome these educational inequalities. The achievement gap can be conquered by understanding the history of the gap, the reason for which the problem persists, and the methods through which we can solve the problem. Although the problem was first proven in the 1990s, it existed before this time. Solutions were attempted before the 1990s, but none of the studies yielded good results. The problem persists because of the pressure that minority students face when trying to remain "authentic" to their ethnic groups and exert a lot of effort to avoid "acting white." This problem coupled with the low expectations that parents and teachers have of them only fuels the fire by creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Through this prophecy, the children learn to believe in their failure. Parents must learn to give their children a good example at home and have them follow a healthy regimen that exposes them to the importance of their education. Teachers must create an environment in the classroom where the children thrive intellectually and where they will not be ashamed of the way that they communicate whether formally or informally. This way, they can open their minds to new vocabulary that will help change the rest of their lives. It is time that we mobilize to shape our children's future. It is time to equalize the educational opportunities no matter ethnicity so that we can succeed as entire nation. It is time to ensure that this country remains a beacon of hope and prosperity for all demographic groups.

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