The Achievement Gap

Amy C. Ciaccia
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Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
MS in Special Education

Department
Education

First Supervisor
Susan Schultz

Subject Categories
Education

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GSED 595: Capstone Project
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The Achievement Gap

The gap in academic achievement between students in this country can be historically traced back to early cases of inequality and discrimination. Slavery, Jim Crow laws, and personal prejudice all had a hand in putting this epidemic in motion. Our country started out with many different types of "achievement gaps"—economic, social, and academic—so it is no surprise that they still exist today, regardless of the "change" that has been lawfully noted. The literature works that I chose to review all acknowledge that the source of the gap stem from the roots of America's development. However, they all also focus on different causes or contributions to it.

Inequality is the issue at hand when discussing the achievement gap. My first literature work, Closing the Achievement Gap; A vision for changing beliefs and practices, gives us insight into how deep it impedes the progression of our society. It suggests that the most commonly accepted explanations for the achievement gap include assumptions about issues that include poverty, academic structure, peer pressure, student attendance and mobility rates, disparities in resources, parenting, preschool, quality of teachers, stereotypes, test bias, and genetics. The book further discloses that the persistence of the achievement gap between black and white students in grades k-12 is a major concern among researchers and social policy analysts, but that this gap and it contributions to the continued social and economic inequality in the United States and is nothing new. The civil rights movement has identified the gap as a major issue for over several decades and although it was significantly less between 1970 and 1990 (NCES, 2001), it has been widening each year since. Pervasive inequality is the most pressing problem facing

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1 Williams, pg. 15
2 Williams, pg. 25
U.S. education. Inequality is evident not only between districts but also within districts and within schools, where students of different social backgrounds attain widely varying outcomes. The problem is particularly pronounced for students who face economic disadvantages. Achievement differences between students living in poverty and their more privileged peers, often called the “poverty gap,” have shown little sign of diminishing.

The roots of standards-based educational reform can be traced back to the beginnings of American history—to the push for equality proclaimed by the Constitution in 1776, restated by Lincoln in the Emancipation Proclamation in 1864, and demanded by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963. In education, the Supreme Court affirmed the importance of equal access in its landmark ruling in Brown v. Board of Education. This 1954 decision, which stated that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal,” provided the spark for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, or national origin. Also in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson created an education commission chaired by John Gardner to formulate new approaches to federal aid for education. The Gardner Commission recommended linking federal education aid to the War on Poverty by focusing on improving learning opportunities for children from low-income families.

President Johnson adopted this approach and signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) into law in April of 1965. The largest financial component of ESEA was Title 1, which was intended to help local education agencies serve the educational needs of children from low-income families. Services provided under Title 1 included supplementary

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3 Gamoran, pg. 3
4 Gamoran, pg. 18
reading instruction and summer school for low-performing students and professional development for teachers\textsuperscript{5}.

However, there now was concern about the expanded role of the federal government in education. Because of this, the legislation included a provision that the federal government could not “exercise any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel, or over the selection of any instructional materials in any educational institution or school system\textsuperscript{6}. There was also debate about whether Title 1 services should be provided to all poor children or only to those at risk for academic failure regardless of socioeconomic level. That debate continues today, but Title 1 is a school-wide designation based on the percentage of students participating in the federal lunch program.

A report assembled by Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell warned that the U.S. schools suffered from “a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people.\textsuperscript{7}” It also claimed that because of inferior teaching, Americans had engaged in “unilateral disarmament” in the economic war for markets with other industrial nations whose students outperformed ours on international mathematics and literacy tests\textsuperscript{8}. To remedy the situation, the commission called for more rigorous and measurable standards and higher expectations for academic performance on standardized tests, along with more time devoted to “the New Basics” and improved teacher preparation and educational leadership. These recommendations led many states to strengthen requirements for high school graduation, develop curriculum standards, and establish teacher license tests. Despite the report, concern about the state of U.S. education continued to build.

\textsuperscript{5} Gamoran, pg. 19
\textsuperscript{6} Gamoran, pg. 19
\textsuperscript{7} Gamoran, pg. 20
\textsuperscript{8} Gamoran pg. 20
United States. These measures prevent schools from "hiding" their low achievers and inflating their results. Failure to meet the achievement targets or Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) results in sanctions that range from requiring districts to offer students tutoring and transfer options to closure and reconstitution of schools\textsuperscript{11}.

There are many reasons to expect that NCLB's approach to increasing standards and holding schools accountable for student performance will boost the chances for poor children to succeed in school. The first is that by requiring schools to report test results separately for students in different demographic subgroups, NCLB focuses attention to social inequalities in school performance that sometimes have been obscured in the past, perhaps increasing the political will to address this serious problem. Secondly, in principle, the transfers and supplemental services offered to students in schools that are not making AYP should help disadvantaged students to obtain better opportunities. Thirdly, NCLB required districts to place a "highly qualified teacher" in every classroom. Teaching out of field or with provisional certification is more common in schools with large proportions of low-income students than elsewhere, so that requirement may improve opportunities for the disadvantaged\textsuperscript{12}.

No Child Left Behind also works to better learning opportunities for students with special needs. The goal of NCLB is to "ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and State academic assessments\textsuperscript{13}." As many analysts have observed, this legislation reflects two powerful currents that have driven U.S. education policy over the past fifty years; the pursuit of educational excellence and the effort to ensure that all students, regardless of ethnicity or income, have equal access to education. Less

\textsuperscript{11} Gamoran, pg. 4
\textsuperscript{12} Gamoran, pg. 4
\textsuperscript{13} Gamoran, pg. 17
widely recognized is a third policy stream that converged with the pursuit of excellence and equity in NCLB; the right-to-education movement for individuals with disabilities. This movement is particularly important in any discussion of the poverty gap because poor students are disproportionately represented within the special education population\textsuperscript{14}. More importantly, the lessons researchers have learned about what works in special education can help promote learning for all disadvantaged students.

However, it cannot be overlooked that there are also many challenges to reducing inequality under NCLB. More diverse schools may be more likely to be labeled as not making adequate yearly progress simply because their larger number of population subgroups means that they have more targets to hit. The substantial level of improvement required by 2014 also suggests that schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged students may be not be as successful. Also, NCLB sanctions such as transfers and supplemental services draw resources away from struggling schools, so students who are not fortunate enough to transfer may find their opportunities getting worse, not better. Furthermore, even if districts provide extra resources to schools with low-income students, those resources may not be enough to compensate for a disadvantaged home and community environment. For example, across the country, fewer students are receiving SES than might be expected on the basis of the large number of schools that have failed to achieve their AYP goals. The best recent estimate is that only 20% of eligible students are receiving supplemental services\textsuperscript{15}. A number of socioeconomic elements could be to blame for that statistic. Another concern is that many districts are passing accountability for meeting standards to students themselves, and some research suggests that

\textsuperscript{14} Gamoran, pg. 17
\textsuperscript{15} Gamoran, pg. 12
students living in poverty are disproportionately burdened with sanctions when accountability systems are put in place.

Because NCLB is a fairly new program, measuring its success is difficult, but it has been evaluated. The Institute for Research on Poverty and the Wisconsin Center for Education Research sponsored a conference at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in February 2006. Participants came from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds to analyze and assess the relation between NCLB and the poverty gap. What they discovered were findings pointed toward modest improvements for poor children, but at nowhere near the rate of improvement demanded by NCLB—or by anyone who views low educational outcomes among disadvantaged youth as a major impediment to the advancement of American society. They believe that NCLB is undoubtedly flawed by its assumption that schools alone can eliminate achievement gaps in the face of powerful social inequalities. But questions still remain of what schools can do...how much gap-closing can be expected from standards-based reform? What lessons can be learned from past reform efforts in order to make better progress?

On one hand, NCLB creates incentives for improving student performance and reducing gaps in achievement, and on that level, the policy appears to be succeeding. What NCLB has done for certain is alerted educators, politicians, and the general public about problems of inequality, including inequality between students in poverty and their more advantaged counterparts.

Another federal reform policy that was developed to ensure equality for student learning, more specifically for students with special needs, is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA. The Brown v Board of Education decision was a giant step toward ensuring equal

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16 Gamoran, pg. 5
17 Gamoran, pg. 6
protection under the law for African American and other minority students. However, children with disabilities did not have their right to public education protected by law until 1975, when Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). This act did not only guarantee the right to education for all students with disabilities, but it also established the mechanisms through which parents and children could exercise that right. By approving EAHCA, Congress assured students with disabilities between the ages of five and twenty-one the right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) based upon an individualized education plan (IEP), and the right to due process. Other requirements of EAHCA were the use of nondiscriminatory evaluation procedures, parent participation in making all children who were in need of early intervention or special education services were identified and referred.

The EAHCA was reauthorized in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). However, this act was amended in 1997 and then again in 2004. In 2004, it was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act and its intent is “to help children with disabilities achieve to high standards-by promoting accountability for results, enhancing parental involvement, and using proven practices and materials; and also, by providing more flexibility and reducing paperwork burdens for teachers.” It emphasizes high-quality, data-driven instruction, as well as early identification of and intervention for learning problems before they significantly impact student learning. The act also provides the opportunity for a student’s response to intervention (RTI) to become part of the criteria for identification of a specific learning disability.

18 Gamoran, pg. 21
19 Gamoran, pg. 22
20 Gamoran, pg. 22
Before 2004, students were identified with a learning disability when their low achievement was discrepant with their normal intelligence. Under the RTI approach, students who struggle to learn academic content may receive supplemental instruction within general education. It has promise not only for providing earlier identification and intervention, but also for increasing misidentification.\(^\text{21}\)

Furthermore, IDEA 2004 encourages a collaborative relationship between general education and special education to ensure early intervention for students with learning difficulties. This approach may help reduce the poverty gap, given the disproportionate representation of poor and minority students within the special education population. Poor children are over-represented in the high-incidence categories of mild mental retardation (MMR), emotional disturbance (ED), and, to a lesser extent, learning disabilities (LD).\(^\text{22}\) However, they are not over-represented in low-incidence categories (deaf, blind, orthopedic impairment, etc.) that are observed outside school and typically diagnosed by a medical professional. These patterns of disproportionate representation in special education have led Congress to ask the National Research Council (NRC) twice-once in 1982 and again in 2002-to examine underlying causes and make recommended changes.\(^\text{23}\)

In 2002 NRC report found the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education most apparent for American Indians (13 percent) and African Americans (14 percent). The percentages for the other groups were 12 percent for Whites, 11 percent for Hispanics, and 5 percent for Asians or Pacific Islanders. In response to the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education, the NRC (2002) addressed 3 areas:

\(^{21}\) Gamoran, pg. 22
\(^{22}\) Gamoran, pg. 22
\(^{23}\) Gamoran pg. 22
biological, social, and contextual factors: schooling, and the referral and assembly process.\textsuperscript{24} Conditions associated with poverty were identified as major reason for lower performance at school entry (lead exposure/poor nutrition/etc.).

The NRC report pointed out that high-poverty schools tend to have fewer qualified teachers, fewer resources, and less support for high academic achievement, and so they perpetuate or even widen the learning gaps poor children bring to school. The report concluded that the referral process is seen as subjective, assessments are seen as having conceptual and procedural shortcomings, and placements into special education are made too late to be effective or efficient. The National Research Council’s recommendation: to resolve disproportionate representation of minority students in special education is to integrate regular and special education services in an early identification and early intervention model: “one in which no child is judged by the school to have a learning or emotional disability or to lack exceptional talent until efforts to provide high-quality instructional and behavioral support in the general education context have been tried without success.\textsuperscript{25}”

No Child Left Behind was to merge with the reauthorization of IDEA to ensure that all children, regardless of race and ethnicity, income, language, or disability status, had the opportunity to be successful in school. Both programs, NCLB and IDEA, work together to ensure high-quality instruction that help to close the achievement gap. Both place an emphasis on prevention and early intervention and rely on whole-school approaches and multi-tiered instruction that incorporate scientifically based academic programs and positive behavioral interventions and supports. No Child Left Behind and IDEA also both require highly qualified teachers, as defined by federal law and require alignment of performance goals and indicators

\textsuperscript{24} Gamoran, pg. 23
\textsuperscript{25} Gamoran, pg. 24
with states’ definitions of adequate yearly progress. These programs require progress monitoring and mandate high expectations for students with disabilities by including them in district and state accountability systems and assessments\textsuperscript{26}.

Now, a look into the \textit{real} topics researchers debate over in terms of contribution to the achievement gap. Does culture or social class explain the black-white achievement gap? As previously mentioned, the topic of race in American political history has long been and remains a highly sensitive issue. Because of that, excessive attention is paid in public debate to the extent to which lower test scores for black students are attributable to race-neutral socioeconomic characteristics, or instead, to the culture of underachievement in the black community.

Conservatives argue that economic reforms are relatively unimportant and moral and cultural self-help is the best antidote to low achievement. Liberals deny that cultural factors play a role, partly because they confuse cultural explanations with genetic ones. Liberals also argue that if only economic reforms were implemented, blacks would quickly do as well as whites in school. They fear that acknowledging the role of cultural factors, no matter what their origin, implies that problems of black students in the U.S. schools are the “fault” of blacks, not whites. However, it should be clear that the existence of historically rooted cultural differences between black and white Americans does not in any way suggest that blacks and whites have different genetic capacities\textsuperscript{27}.

Regardless of political views, research has pointed out that race and class both have a hand in contributing to the Achievement Gap. In the book, \textit{Class and Schools: Using social, economic, and educational reform to close the black-white achievement gap}, the author, Richard Rothstein, points out that “Children differ in how ready they are to learn when they enter school,

\textsuperscript{26} Gamoran, pg. 30
\textsuperscript{27} Rothstein, pg. 51
and these differences are strongly influenced by their social class backgrounds. He suggests that parents of different social classes tend to raise children somewhat differently. More educated parents read to their young children more consistently and encourage their children to read more to themselves when they are older. He also believes that most parents with college degrees read to their children daily before the children begin kindergarten and points out that few children whose parents have only a high school diploma or less benefit from daily reading. White children are more likely than blacks to be read to or told stories in pre-kindergarten years. Young children of college-educated parents are surrounded by more books at home while children of less educated parents see fewer books. He further assumes that a 5 year old who enters school recognizing some words and who has turned pages of many stories will be easier to teach than one who has rarely held a book. The second child can be taught, but, with equally high expectations and effective teaching, the first will more likely pass a reading test than the second. So the achievement gap begins.

However he makes it clear that this is not a determinist description: some low-income children are naturally quick learners, take to school well, and respond so well to the high expectations that after a few years of school they read better than typical middle-class children. He continues to say that some middle-class children get no support for learning from troubled families, and some low-income parents organize life around a dream of college. But on average, "a typical middle-class child who began to read at home will have higher lifetime achievement than a typical low-income child who was taught only in school, even if each benefits from a good curriculum, effective teaching, and high expectations." Rothstein suggests that if society wants all students to have the same chance to achieve academic goals, then it should find ways to

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28 Rothstein, pg. 19
29 Rothstein, pg. 19
30 Rothstein, pg. 19
help lower-class children enter school having the same familiarity with books that middle-class children have.\textsuperscript{31}

Rothstein continues to make a critical point in regards to the effectiveness of a literate household. He says, "Giving away computers won’t overcome the gap, and so urging less-educated parents to read to children can’t fully compensate for differences in school readiness.\textsuperscript{32}"

He believes in parent modeling and that if children see parents reading to solve problems or for entertainment, then children will more likely to want to read for themselves, that parents who bring reading material home from work demonstrate by example that reading bridges work and leisure, and those parents who read to children but don’t read for themselves send a different message. He also explains how a parent reads to a child is as important as whether they do; more educated parents read aloud differently\textsuperscript{33}.

For example, when working-class parents read aloud, they are more likely to tell children to pay attention without interruptions or to sound out words or name letters. When they ask children about a story, questions are more likely to be factual, asking for names of objects or memories of events. Parents who are more literate are more likely to ask questions that are creative, interpretive, or connective, like, “What do you think will happen next?” Middle-class parents are more likely to read aloud to have fun, to start conversations. And lastly, children learn that reading is enjoyable and are more motivated to read in school\textsuperscript{34}.

The author then explains that even the way families converse is another social class difference that arises. He says that through (dinner talk) conversations, children develop vocabularies and become familiar with contexts for reading in school. That educated parents are

\textsuperscript{31} Rothstein, pg. 19
\textsuperscript{32} Rothstein, pg. 21
\textsuperscript{33} Rothstein, pg. 21
\textsuperscript{34} Rothstein, pg. 23
more likely to engage in this type of talk and to begin it with infants and toddlers by conducting pretend conversations (or baby talk) long before infants can understand the language\textsuperscript{35}. He says that when educated parents speak to each other in children's presence, even if the children are not being addressed directly, these parents use larger vocabularies and more complex sentences than less-educated parents do. He points out that on the contrary, working class parents typically maintain firmer boundaries between adult and child worlds and are less likely to conduct conversations with pre-verbal children. He suggests that only when it is necessary to give a warning or issue other instructions, these parents less often address language directly to infants or toddlers. Also, working class parents are less likely to simplify their language (using baby talk) to show pre-verbal children how to converse, before the children are naturally ready to do so\textsuperscript{36}. His point is that different "childbearing" patterns that are specific to social class, do exist and they do-to some degree-have an influence on how children learn, the rate they learn at, and determine what instructional approaches will be most effective in schools\textsuperscript{37}.

Social classes also differ in the responsibility children take for learning. Parents whose professional occupations entail authority and responsibility believe more strongly that they can affect their environments and solve problems. But parents whose jobs entail following orders or doing routine tasks exude a lesser sense of efficacy. Lower-class parents are more likely to instruct children by giving directions without extended discussion because following orders is how they themselves behave at work. Differences in childrearing practices extend not only to how behavior is rewarded or punished, but to differences in conceptions of appropriate behavior. For example, middle-class parents' behavioral expectations are typically aligned with those of

\textsuperscript{35} Rothstein, pg. 22
\textsuperscript{36} Rothstein, pg. 24
\textsuperscript{37} Rothstein, pg. 24
schools, while lower class parents expectations are sometimes in conflict. Lower class children, for example, are often expected by their parents to fight back and defend themselves physically when they are provoked, are and ridiculed or punished if they fail to do so\textsuperscript{38}.

However, the author says, "There is no suggestion here that the childrearing practices of middle class parents are morally superior to those of lower class parents, nor that middle class childrearing practices develop children who are more psychologically well adjusted or who function better in all adult roles....The only suggestion here is that children who are raised with self-confidence and a sense of entitlement, whether spoiled or not, can have an advantage when called upon to master difficult academic material in class.\textsuperscript{39}"

This book also suggests how grandparents' social class backgrounds can have a direct effect on student achievement. This may widen the black-white achievement gap because black children typically have more contact with their grandparents than white children. This difference is partly because of a higher rate of single and teenage motherhood in the black than in the white community, and a tradition in the black community of close ties between nuclear and extended families, "dating in part from the difficulty maintaining the integrity of nuclear families during slavery.\textsuperscript{40}" The responsibility of taking care of the children often falls to grandmothers when mothers are at work. And although black grandparents are more mature than teen mothers, and children being raised by grandmothers benefit from that, it is also the case that black grandparents have significantly less education than white grandparents or black parents.\textsuperscript{41}

As a result, because black children are raised by grandparents to a greater extent than are white children, black children's verbal fluency, vocabulary, and later academic achievement will

\textsuperscript{38} Rothstein, pg. 26
\textsuperscript{39} Rothstein, pg. 27
\textsuperscript{40} Rothstein, pg. 28
\textsuperscript{41} Rothstein, pg. 29
partly reflect the lower education level of their grandparents.\textsuperscript{42} "These types of deficits cannot be made up by schools alone, no matter how high the teacher's expectations. For all children to achieve the same goals, those from the lower class would have to enter school with verbal fluency similar to that of middle class children."\textsuperscript{43} Again, Rothstein reminds his readers to, "Beware of deterministic simplification: some lower-class children, despite few educated role models, succeed in school, perhaps as the first children in their families to attend college. But on average, these children must struggle harder to motivate themselves to achieve than children who assume that, like their parents' social circle, the only roles are doctor, lawyer, teacher, social worker, manager, administrator, or businessperson."\textsuperscript{44}

Another important aspect to examine is how cultural influences on achievement, black underachievement, and racial discrimination affect success in school. The expectation of black students that their academic efforts will not be rewarded to the same extent as the efforts of their white peers is rational for the majority of black students who do not expect to complete college. Some will reduce their academic effort as a result. We, as teachers, can say that they should not do so and, instead should redouble their efforts in response to the greater obstacles they face. But as long as racial discrimination persists in the labor market, the average academic achievement of black students will be lower than the average achievement of white students, simply because many black students (especially males), who see that academic effort has less of a payoff for them than it has for whites, can be expected to respond by reducing their effort.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{42} Rothstein, pg. 28
\textsuperscript{43} Rothstein, pg. 48
\textsuperscript{44} Rothstein, pg 29
\textsuperscript{45} Rothstein, pg. 35
Anticipation of mistreatment remains prevalent in the culture of many black families. It should be expected that black students will absorb this anticipation from their homes and communities, and that it will not be erased simply by insisting that teachers hold high expectations for black students. It would be naïve to expect black students, raised in nearly homogenous de-facto segregated communities, suddenly to enter school without pride in their mistrust of majority institutions, including educational ones.

Differences in the actual social and economic conditions of the classes most likely affect the rate of student success the most. Conditions such as medical care, lead exposure, oral hygiene, low birth weight, etc. all play a very significant role in how a child performs in school. These conditions are things that cannot be ignored. Overall, lower-income children are in poorer health. Their greater incidence of vision problems has the most obvious impact on their relative lack of school success. Children with vision problems have difficulty reading and seeing what teachers write on the board. Trying to read, their eyes may wander or have difficulty tracking print or focusing. "Vision tests show that these problems are inversely proportional to family income; in the United States, poor children have severe vision impairment at twice the normal rate. Fifty percent or more of minority and low-income children have vision problems that interfere with their academic work. A few require glasses, but more need eye-exercise therapy to correct focusing, converging, and tracking problems. Children who are believed to have learning disabilities are also more likely to have vision impairment."

Evidence shows that lower-class children are more likely to suffer from vision problems because of their less adequate prenatal development than are middle-class children whose

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46 Rothstein, pg. 36
47 Rothstein, pg 37
48 Rothstein, pg. 37
pregnant mothers had better medical care and nutrition.\textsuperscript{49} It also does not help that vision screening in schools usually only asks children to read charts for nearsightedness. Most school children are never tested for farsightedness or for difficulty with tracking, which are the problems that are most likely to affect academic performance. But even in cases when testing lead to a referral to the eye doctor, low-income children are less likely to follow up or when they get prescriptions for lenses, they less frequently obtain them or wear them to school.\textsuperscript{50}

Lower-class children also have more hearing problems and oral malnutrition. Their hearing problems may be due to previous ear infections. If poor children simply had as much medical treatment for ear infections as middle-class children, this could be remedied and they would be able to pay better attention. Children without dental care are more likely to have toothaches, cavities and other oral hygiene issues that will contribute to their poor academic performance. Children with toothaches will pay less attention in class and are distracted during tests, on average, than children with healthy teeth.\textsuperscript{51}

Lead exposure is another condition that low-income children face. Children who live in older buildings have more lead dust exposure that harms cognitive functioning and behavior. High lead levels also contribute to hearing loss. Studies show that low-income children have dangerously high blood lead levels at five times the rate of middle-class children.\textsuperscript{52} Lead exposure plays a bigger role now in the achievement gap than it used to. A generation ago, all children suffered declines in Intelligent Quotient from breathing leaded fumes from auto exhaust. With gasoline now unleaded, middle-class children have less lead exposure, but other sources remain for low-income children who continue to suffer cognitive impairment from exposure to

\textsuperscript{49} Rothstein, pg. 38
\textsuperscript{50} Rothstein, pg. 38
\textsuperscript{51} Rothstein, pg. 38
\textsuperscript{52} Rothstein, pg. 39
lead in wall and house paint. In 1978, lead-based paint was banned from residential
construction, but low-income children are more likely to be living in buildings constructed prior
to that date and in buildings that are not repainted often enough to prevent old layers from
peeling off. Urban children are also more likely to attend older schools, built when water pipes
contained lead.53

Lower-class children, particularly those who live in densely populated city
neighborhoods, are also more likely to contract asthma. The asthma rate is substantially higher
for urban than for rural children, for children whose families are on welfare than for non-welfare
families, for children from single-parent than from two-parent families, and for poor than for
non-poor families.54 This disease is contracted for many reasons, but is provoked in part from
breathing fumes from low-grade home heating oil and from diesel trucks and buses well as from
excessive dust and allergic reactions to mold, cockroaches, and secondhand smoke. Asthma is
known to keep children up at night, which then makes it more likely for them to be drowsy and
less attentive in school the next day. Middle-class children typically receive treatment for
asthma symptoms, while low-income children get it less often. Rothstein notes that “asthma has
become the biggest cause of chronic school absence.”55 Children who suffer from asthma tend to
refrain from excercise, which makes them less physically fit, drowsy, and more irritable. This then
snowballs into behavior problems that ultimately depress achievement. What is worse is that
there is an increase in the amount of children who contract asthma, most likely because of
environmental factors; but the rate for all children has increased by 50 percent from 1980-1996,
and doubled for African Americans.56

53 Rothstein, pg. 39
54 Rothstein, pg. 40
55 Rothstein, pg. 40
56 Rothstein, pg. 40
As mentioned earlier, student attendance affects achievement. Children without regular medical care are also more likely to contract other illnesses that keep them out of school. Despite federal programs to make medical care available to low-income children, there remain gaps in both access and utilization. Many eligible families are not enrolled because of ignorance, fear, or lack of belief in the importance of medical care. "Under the 1996 federal welfare reform law, recipients who went to work at low-wage jobs that provided no health insurance continued to be eligible for Medicaid. But the bureaucratic difficulties of enrolling in Medicaid, including the fact that welfare officials in many states discouraged working welfare recipients from enrolling, has meant that many low-income children are still not enrolled. The federal Child Health Insurance Program, adopted in 1997 and intended to extend health care to all low-income children has helped, but many low-income children are still uninsured." Low-wage work interferes with the utilization of medical care and parents who are paid hourly lose money when they have to take their child to the doctor. Others are at risk of being fired for excessive absences and so they are likely to skip routine pediatric care and go to the doctors only in emergencies.

To make matters worse, lower-class families with health insurance who attempt to use it confront huge disparities in medical facilities. An analysis of California communities found that urban neighborhoods with high poverty and high concentrations of black and Hispanic residents had one primary care physician for every 4,000 residents. In Los Angeles, there was one primary care physician for every 13,000 people versus a nearby high-income residential area that had one for every 200 residents. The gaps are as common all over the country. Because of this, low-income families - with or without insurance - are more likely to use emergency rooms and less likely to use primary care doctors, even for routine care. This may explain why black

57 Rothstein, pg. 41
preschoolers are one-third less likely than whites to get standard vaccinations for diphtheria, measles, and influenza and it may ultimately validate why poor children lose 30 percent more days from school than the non-poor, on average. "Good teaching can't do much for children who are not in school." 58.

The use of alcohol and smoking, especially during pregnancy, can create health problems in children that affect their academic achievement. Children whose mothers drank during pregnancy have more difficulty with academic subjects, are less able to focus attention, have poorer memory skills, less ability to reason, lower IQ's, less social competence, and more aggression in the classroom. Fetal alcohol syndrome, a collection of the most severe cognitive, physical, and behavioral difficulties experienced by children of prenatal drinkers, is 10 times more frequent for low-income black than for middle-class white children. 59 Children of mothers who smoked prenatally do more poorly on cognitive tests, their language develops more poorly, and they have more serious behavioral problems, more hyperactivity, and more juvenile crime. Because secondhand smoke also causes asthma, children whose mothers smoke after pregnancy are also more likely to have low achievement. 60

Birth weight and overall nutrition are also taken into consideration when examining achievement levels. Evidence shows that 13% of black children are born with low birth weight, double the rate for whites. 61 Low birth weight can be attributed to poor prenatal care, such as smoking during pregnancy. Poor nutrition directly contributes to an achievement gap between lower and middle-class children. Low-income kindergartners whose height and weight are below normal for children their age tend to have lower test scores. Iron deficiency anemia also

58 Rothstein, pg. 42
59 Rothstein, pg. 42
60 Rothstein, pg. 43
61 Rothstein, pg. 43
affects cognitive ability: 8% of all children suffer from anemia, but 20% of black children do so.\textsuperscript{62}

The government subsidizes free breakfast and lunch programs for low-income children, most enroll for lunch, but few for breakfast. Even with the best of intentions, breakfast programs are hard for schools to organize because of two main problems. Arranging to supervise breakfast before classes begin is one problem. Another is scheduling buses to bring eligible children, but not others, to school early. Because of that, only a minority of eligible students get subsidized breakfast in school. It is a huge loss because breakfast programs are proven to positively affect achievement. Poor children who get school breakfasts have better test scores and attendance and are better behaved and less hyperactive than similar children who are not fed.\textsuperscript{63}

Together, all these elements add up to a cumulative disadvantage for lower-class children that cannot help but discourage average performance. In addition to these is also a housing and student mobility factor that has been proven to affect students' academic success.

A major contributor to this issue is that urban rents have risen faster than working-class incomes. This, in turn, makes families more likely to move, even if there steady employment because they fall behind in rent payments. Instances of unemployment and family breakups also contribute to student mobility. In 1994, a government report found that 30% of the poorest children (family income was less than $10,000) had attended at least three different schools by third grade, while only 10% of middle-class children (those from family income over $25,000) did so.\textsuperscript{64} Black children were more than twice as likely as white children to change schools this much. This disrupts school environments as they try to adjust classrooms to avoid placing newcomers together, or because classes get too large or too small from new arrivals and

\textsuperscript{62} Rothstein, pg. 43
\textsuperscript{63} Rothstein, pg. 45
\textsuperscript{64} Rothstein, pg. 46
departures. High mobility not only depresses achievement for the children who move, but also for the students who are stable. The classes are reconstituted and the teachers are unable to integrate instruction over time. They have to spend time reviewing old material instead of introducing new material. A statistical analysis was done and concluded that if black students’ average mobility were reduced to the level of white students’ average mobility, this improvement in housing stability alone would eliminate 14% of the black-white test score gap. 65

Yet, after all this speculation of levels of achievement between low-income students and middle-income students, there is further consideration to the concept that culture plays a bigger part. Evidence shows us that there are differences between blacks and white with similar incomes. On average, poor whites perform better than poor blacks, and middle-class whites better than middle-class blacks. You start to wonder, “even if differences in social and economic conditions affect learning, why should there be a gap when income is similar?” or “even if school efforts are frustrated by children’s poverty, why should schools be less effective with poor children from one racial group from another?” 66 The author believes that culture explains part of it, and the rest depends on the length of time a child experiences living in poverty. “Income is an inexact proxy for the many social class characteristics that differentiate blacks from whites whose current-year income is the same. For example, blacks whose incomes are near the poverty line are more likely to have been poor for several years than whites whose poverty is more often episodic. In part, the length of time spent in poverty affects student achievement because income affects learning differently at different ages.” 67 For adolescents, family income has little effect once their prior achievement is taken into account. What matters most is family income in early childhood. Family income of children below 5 years of age has a

65 Rothstein, pg. 46
66 Rothstein, pg. 48
67 Rothstein, pg. 48
bigger impact on whether these children complete high school than their family income later when they are actually in high school.

Families who are poor for longer periods are more likely to have had low income in their children's early years. So the white children scored better than the black children most likely because the black children were likely to be from a family that had experienced longer bouts of poverty. When parents suffer unemployment, children’s achievement tends to suffer as well. Parents under stress from not having a job are also more likely to discipline children arbitrarily, leading to an increase in misbehavior. When their parents lose work, adolescents are more likely to be delinquent, use drugs, lose faith in the future, and suffer from depression.\(^{68}\)

The next literature work, No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning, gives some consideration to how academic funding impacts academic achievement. The authors, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom ask, “Does more money equal a better school?” I assume that many would think so, but they say, “We do not think there should be large funding disparities between schools districts within states. But we do not believe that money per se-additional money poured into the existing structure of public education-has either improved education overall or closed the racial gap in academic achievement."\(^{69}\) They want us to consider this: per pupil spending on America’s elementary and secondary schools nearly doubled between 1970 and 2000, but the educational system is not performing twice as well as a result. Actually, according to evidence from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), today’s schools are doing no better than they were three decades ago. It has been noted that a lot of funding has gone to schools to expand the opportunities for students with disabilities, but it is estimated that special

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\(^{68}\) Rothstein, pg. 48

\(^{69}\) Tbernstrom & Tbernstrom, pg. 153
education has accounted for less than a fifth of the growth in total school spending per pupil in recent years.\textsuperscript{70}

Next, the authors examine a shared concern: have minority students such as blacks and Hispanics been deprived of their share of educational resources? They tell us that studies indicate that overall educational spending per pupil is up 91 percent over the past thirty years, but it is possible that the increases have not benefited all students equally. The 1989-1990 school year data has been compiled and analyzed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) at the U.S. Department of Education. The investigators divided the nation’s school districts into four student-population categories: less than 5% minority, 5-19%, 20-49%, and 50% or more.\textsuperscript{71} They then calculated average levels of per pupil spending for each category, sighting interesting results.

In terms of actual dollars spent, it turned out that majority white districts did not spend a lot more than those with minority enrollments of 50 percent or more. The white district expenditures were actually a bit less. In 1989-1990, districts in which minorities were the majority spent an average of $431 a year more per pupil than those with hardly any minority students, and advantage of 8.5 percent. So, they did spend more, but what needed to be considered is that minority students are more likely to live in big cities, where everything is expensive: transportation, janitorial and food services, housing and other living costs for teachers, etc. Big-city students also cost more to educate because a higher proportion are classified as Limited English Proficient or as in need of "special education.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{70} Themstrom & Themstrom, pg. 153
\textsuperscript{71} Themstrom & Themstrom, pg. 154
\textsuperscript{72} Themstrom & Themstrom, pg. 154-155
When adjustments were made for these differences, it turned out that districts with more minority students did have a little less money. But the differences were surprisingly small. Even after allowing for all the estimated extra costs, the high-minority districts spent an average of just $286 a year less than those that were nearly all-white—a difference of only 6.5 percent. It is not likely to perceive that such a modest deficit in funding can explain the very large racial gap in skills and knowledge.\textsuperscript{73}

Even though this information is quite dated, the national trend has clearly been toward a more egalitarian distribution of school dollars. States have assumed a larger share of responsibility for funding education, and have been particularly concerned with resources in the poorer districts. Also, the federal government supports about 7 percent of the average school’s budget, targeting funds for students in various disadvantaged categories.\textsuperscript{74} The combination of state and federal aid has considerably reduced funding disparities between districts within states in recent years. It is a process that has been expedited in part by litigation and threatened litigation; in more than two dozen states plaintiffs, with varying success, have brought lawsuits that assert a state constitutional right to equal educational spending.\textsuperscript{75}

In conclusion, it is obvious that this debate about whether low achievement of black students is rooted in culture or economics is unwinnable because socioeconomic status and culture cannot be separated. On one hand, if black families value education less because their historical experience has been that education has not paid off in economic mobility, then the undervaluing of education won’t likely be eliminated simply with cultural appeals, and social and economic reforms. On the other hand, even if society could develop a complex measure of

\textsuperscript{73} Ternstrom & Ternstrom, pg. 155
\textsuperscript{74} Ternstrom & Ternstrom, pg. 155
\textsuperscript{75} Ternstrom & Ternstrom, pg. 156
socioeconomic status that included, along with family income, measures such as family assets, persistence of poverty, savings for college, grandparent's assets, etc., and even if this measure fully explained all differences in educational outcomes between blacks and whites, it would not eliminate the possibility that cultural factors play a role.\textsuperscript{76}

What cannot be ignored is that our educational system and the way it is designed to teach all students, regardless of race, culture, economical status, or even ability is severely flawed. The achievement gap represents how our nation is failing, as a whole, to take care of each other; to learn from what has happened in the past in order guide our youth to create a successful future. "An alarmingly high proportion of all American students are leaving high school today with academic skills that are below basic."\textsuperscript{77} It is a sad statistic, but the blame is shared.

\textsuperscript{76} Gamoran, pg. 52
\textsuperscript{77} Thernstrom & Thernstrom, pg. 14
Methodology

For my capstone research, my study was based upon the following; surveys, budget information, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports, and district report cards. In regards to using budget reports, I understand that student success cannot be measured simply on the element of funding, but money is a key player, along with the services that are available to the school community because of it. By using budget reports from both an urban and suburban district, I was able to compare their demographic statistics, which directly affect student success rate; as well as the actual services listed to be available or implemented.

The purpose of the surveys was to gain insight of how faculty members in the opposing districts felt about the knowledge, availability, and usage of special educational services in their schools and district. It is important to acknowledge their opinions because they are the ones in the classrooms each day, not the reform policy makers or trustees from the board, not the superintendent or other district committee members. These are the people who can truly assess the success of services intended to better academic achievement for all students, including those with special needs.

The information provided in the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports and district report cards was found online and gave me the opportunity to examine both districts carefully. This resource allowed me to compare and contrast the districts regarding their status and the status of schools within the district under the State and federal accountability systems, on student performance, and on other measures of school and district performance.
Findings

In terms of demographics, the two districts are very different. The suburban district that I chose to analyze is noted as the largest suburban school district in its county and is the eighth-largest district in its state. It was created in July of 1928, but schools existed in the area before the town was established in 1822. The district is made up of nearly 13,500 students in grades pre-k through 12th grade. The district’s academic facilities include three high schools, one 6-12 grade school, three middle schools, and twelve elementary schools. Running the district is a faculty of 1,117 members, 102 administration members, a support staff of 1,726; 373 substitute teachers; and 347 community education teachers. Approximately 75% of the faculty members have Master’s Degrees and on average, the teachers have been working in the district for eight years. In terms of student make-up, 82.6% of the student population is white/non-Hispanic. The minority population includes approximately 0.4% Native American, Alaskan; 9.4% African American; 2.1% Asian/Pacific Islander and 5.5% Hispanic. The average class size in this district is 21 students per classroom. The students of this district are recognized locally, nationally, and internationally for contributions as part of bands, orchestras, and other performing groups. Student artwork has won prestigious national awards, and each year middle and high school drama groups raise thousands of dollars for local charities. Student athletes achieve high athletic honors, and are strong competitors across the county, state, and region.

Financially, this district’s budget for the 2006-07 school year was $180,297,893, with an estimated per pupil expenditure of approximately $13,489. It is full of “highlights”, or unique services that are provided to the student body. One of these
highlights is the development of Smaller Learning Communities (SLC). Through a $1.4 million U.S. Department of Education grant, this district is restructuring its three large high schools into smaller learning communities. These communities are assisting all students; especially those with disabilities, minority students, and students from low-income backgrounds, to achieve New York State Learning Standards and graduation requirements. The three schools are restructuring into a Lower House for ninth and tenth-graders and an Upper House for eleventh and twelfth-graders. The strategies that are to be used in these two houses include advisement periods, humanities teams, looping of humanities and mathematical teams in the Lower House, and Career Clusters in the Upper House. Through a $5 million U.S. Department of Education grant, the SLC restructuring is being expanded to include an advanced reading program in 9th grade to help students increase their reading and comprehension skills in all content areas.

Another academic support service that is unique to this district is the School CARE Teams. School CARE (Chemical Awareness and Resistance Through Education) teams coordinate education, prevention, and intervention activities designed to fight the problem of alcohol and drug use among students. The district also offers counseling and psychological services and support to students at risk of dropping out. The “High School Transition Program” is offered by Community Education and allows qualified 16-17 year old high school students at risk of dropping out a chance to earn a high school equivalency diploma. They also have the opportunity to take career and technical courses. Another similar program that the district offers is the “Bridges” program, which offers alternatives to students, ages 16-20, who are either at risk of leaving high school or who have already left school, or are in need of one or two courses to earn a diploma.
Other common district programs offered are instructional support services, speech and language services, English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and special educational services.

The urban school district is much different in terms of size and demographical construction. This district has approximately 34,000 students; 2,000 pre-k; 17,000 elementary (K-6), and 15,000 secondary (7-12). It also has 10,000 adult students. To educate all these students, the district has 55 pre-k sites, 39 elementary schools, and 19 secondary schools. Out of the approximate 34,000 students, 65% of them are African American; 21% of the students are Hispanic, 12% of the students are White and 2% of them are Asian, Native American, East Indian, or Other.

This district’s profile sites severe economic issues as 88% of the student body is eligible for free or reduced-price lunches and 50% of the schools in the district are at 90% poverty level or higher. This district has the highest poverty rate out of its state’s “Big 5” districts.

The “highlights” in this school district that were listed in its budget report include a grant for preschool special education. This grant, which is listed as section 4410, provides resources for preschool special education programs and services that include community pre-school related services and special education or itinerant teachers. For seven consecutive years, pre-K in Rochester has been recognized by the Children’s Institute, an independent evaluating organization, as among the best programs in the United States and Western Europe. According to this district’s 2005-2006 annual report, Eighty-eight percent of pre-K classrooms were meeting or exceeded international standards. More specific recognition was to the fact that 94% of students developed at or
above expected levels; that children with the greatest needs improved the most; and that children from all ethnic backgrounds improved equally. The annual report also stated that in terms of school readiness, the urban district that I researched may be America’s most improved district. It revealed that in 1990, 61% of entering kindergarteners had one or more problems in language, motor skills, cognition, vision, and hearing. By 2005-2006, only 38% had such problems, a drop that independent evaluators attribute to pre-K.

When it came to testing, the 2005 school year annual report revealed the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Percentage of White students who passed</th>
<th>Percentage of African American students who passed</th>
<th>Percentage of Hispanic students who passed</th>
<th>Percentage of students with disabilities who passed</th>
<th>Percentage of students with limited English proficiency who passed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Math 4</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science 4</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 8</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math 8</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What these results demonstrate is solid evidence that would support a claim which was previously discussed in the literature review; that, indeed, there are gaps among races of students at the same socioeconomic level. It allows those who insist that the gap is a result of culture differences gain a lead against those who do not. These test results more clearly reveal how much students with special needs are falling behind their peers. The No Child Left Behind Act is designed to eliminate such huge deficits in achievement between all students, but sadly, the results only show how wide that gap is.
The next group of percentages that I examined were part of the “Accountability and Overview Report Cards, 2005-2006” for both the urban and suburban district. I was able to do this by using the “New York State Testing and Accountability Reporting Tool” at the following website: (https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb/Home.do).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Suburban District</th>
<th>Urban District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annual Attendance (04-05)</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% eligible for free lunch</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% eligible for reduced lunch</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% limited English Proficient</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information that the above chart reveals is that because the percentage of free or reduced lunches provided in the urban district, the assumption can be made that the majority of students in the urban district come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. I was actually very surprised to see such a low percentage of students with limited English proficiency, especially in the urban district. The percentages posted for attendance shows little discrepancy between the districts, which is a very positive result.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Profile</th>
<th>Suburban District</th>
<th>Urban District</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaskan</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American or Black</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Examining the demographic profiles of each district allows for further correlation between what the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports show us and the element of race. As
mentioned in the literature review, many researchers of the Achievement Gap name have renamed it as the "racial gap." There is an overwhelmingly different student body profile when comparing both districts, but most noticeably when looking at the black to white ratio in each district, as well as the percentage of Hispanic or Latino students in each district. The percentages of the other ethnic groups listed remain consistent between the two districts. This information will be kept in mind when looking at the accountability reports for each district.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Qualifications</th>
<th>Suburban</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core classes not taught by highly qualified teachers</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers with no valid teaching certificate</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals teaching out of certification</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of teachers with a Master's Degree plus 30 hours or a Doctorate</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chart is quite important in regards to the requirements mandated under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). There is much speculation that students who attend school in impoverished districts do not receive an adequate education because they are not taught by "highly qualified" teachers. NCLB defines a "highly qualified" teacher as one with a degree and who is teaching in the content area they are certified in. After examining this information, it is clear that the urban district I chose does have a higher number of teachers who are not "highly qualified." The differences are not too wide, but they exist enough to the point where the speculation made by so many is validated. There is no reason why either district should permit educators into their
schools that are not certified to teach. I could never walk into a law firm or practice medicine if I did not have my degree, the same should hold true for education. The statistic that is surprising to me is that the urban district has a higher percentage of teachers who have higher degrees than necessary to be considered "highly qualified." Who are they? Where are they? Furthermore, I think the assumption could be made that the urban district has inconsistent hiring policies and that "blinders" are worn when it comes to dismissing teachers who are not qualified.

**AYP overall accountability (by all students):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measured Category</th>
<th>Suburban- elementary</th>
<th>Urban- elementary</th>
<th>Suburban- secondary</th>
<th>Urban- secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>Good standing</td>
<td></td>
<td>Good standing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Good standing</td>
<td>Good standing</td>
<td>Good standing</td>
<td>Good standing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Good standing</td>
<td>Good standing</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rate</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Good standing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chart represents how all students performed in each district overall. There is no breakdown of ethnic group or ability level. The reports are given from three accountability levels; state, federal, and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The overview of accountability
represented above is from the perspective of the federal level. The way that each level reports its
data is through a series of color coordinated symbols. In each box I wrote out what those symbols
(if they were there) represent. The “Good standing” or green indicates achievement of
proficiency at the federal level. Those under “Improvement” regardless of the year they have
next to them, represent a cautionary level. These are areas in which students did not meet
proficiency on the accountability measure for which it was identified and are considered to be a
“District in need of improvement” for the following year. The year next to them in parenthesis
indicates how long they have been categorized under “Improvement.” According to federal
levels of accountability it is clear that the suburban district is consistent with achieving
proficiency at the elementary and secondary levels. On the other hand, the urban school district is
consistently under improvement in ELA for both elementary and secondary students. The
graduation rate for urban students is also at a cautionary level as it continues to be categorized as
under “Improvement” for the second year.

A discussed previously in the literature review, more students in urban settings are
coming to school with less experience regarding literature, vocabulary, and other phonemic skills.
The accountability report reflects exactly that and goes further to show that students do no better
as they continue through school into the higher grades. What this indicates to me is that even
though students may not be receiving experience in the home, the district’s efforts have paid off
just as poorly.
The chart below represents accountability from the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report level. The AYP indicates satisfactory progress by a district or a school toward the goal of proficiency for all students. However, the chart below more specifically represents achievement levels by ethnic group.

**BROKEN DOWN BY ETHNICITY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American or Black</td>
<td>1. Insufficient number of students tested to determine AYP for Math</td>
<td>1. Insufficient number of students tested to determine AYP</td>
<td>Insufficient number of students tested to determine AYP</td>
<td>Did not meet AYP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>1. Made AYP</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>Did not meet AYP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Good Standing in Math</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaskan</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>Insufficient number of students tested to determine AYP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>Insufficient number of students tested to determine AYP</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Here, again, the levels of achievement are color coded. The green represents areas where
the level of proficiency identified by the AYP was met. The yellow says that students who tested
"Made AYP using Safe Harbor Target," but it still reflects caution. The Safe Harbor Target
provides an alternate means to demonstrate AYP for accountability groups that do not achieve
their Effective Annual Measurable Objectives (Effective AMO's). The Effective AMO is the
Performance Index (PI) value that each accountability group within a school or district is
expected to achieve to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The Effective AMO is the
lowest PI that an accountability group of a given size can achieve in a subject. To my
understanding, I believe that this is a way of "curving" results in order for students to
meet proficiency requirements.

In regards to what the chart demonstrates, I am unclear as to how there were an
"insufficient" number of African American students in the suburban school district- at the
elementary level- to determine AYP for math, but there were enough to determine
achievement of proficiency for ELA and science. What I am clear about was how any
discrepancy regarding achievement was only seen in the urban school district with
African American or black and Hispanic or Latino ethnic groups at both academic levels.
Again, this evidence could be used to support the claim that this is a gap pertaining to
race and culture, regardless of socioeconomic status. All other ethnic groups in the urban
school district, at both academic levels, outperformed African American/Black and
Hispanic/Latino students.
"OTHER" ACCOUNTABILITY RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other Groups</th>
<th>Suburban-elementary</th>
<th>Urban-elementary</th>
<th>Suburban-secondary</th>
<th>Urban-secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficiency</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>Did not meet AYP</td>
<td>Insufficient Number</td>
<td>1. Did not meet AYP for ELA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td>Did not meet AYP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The accountability reports did not break down these two "other" groups by ethnicity. However, the pattern that is revealed again is that students who attend the suburban school district are achieving proficiency and that the majority of students who attend the urban school district are not.

ACCOUNTABILITY RESULTS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suburban-elementary</th>
<th>Urban-elementary</th>
<th>Suburban-secondary</th>
<th>Urban-secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Made AYP</td>
<td></td>
<td>Did not meet AYP</td>
<td>Did not meet AYP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unfortunately, the accountability reports did not break this information down by ethnicity either. That would have been more interesting to my research because then, not only could I make correlations between special education and achievement, but also between achievement, special education and race. As mentioned in the literature review, there is a noticeable, disproportionate amount of African American students (especially
males) classified with disabilities. I would have liked to have seen more statistics regarding that. However, the most interesting change of events that takes place in this chart is that the suburban school district did not meet AYP at the secondary level. What is happening to the care, attention, and follow through of learning for those students once they leave the elementary level?

Both districts make mention of an array of special education services that are economically made available to schools, students, and their families. There are two federal, reform-based programs that are actively mandating an equally proficient education for students with special needs; Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act and No Child Left Behind. If the services are available and the federal reform policies are being carried through, then why is there such a lack of academic achievement for students with disabilities? Any number of people can “say” that all these opportunities for successful learning are in place, but are they really? I wanted to know the answer to these questions, so I designed a short survey for faculty in each of the districts to complete.

Survey Results

In the suburban district, I had a total of eight teachers participate in completing the survey. Out of the eight surveys, seven were completed by women and one was completed by a male. 25% of the survey participants were between the ages of twenty and thirty years old. 12.5% of the participants were between 31-45 and 60+ years of age. The majority of the participants -50% - were between 46-60 years old. All of the participants educated students at the secondary level (grades 6-12). The number of students with special needs that each of the participants educate ranges from as low as eight students to as high as 60 students.
I wanted to know how effective these teachers felt in meeting the special needs of their students with the resources that were currently available to them. The results were split right down the middle. 50% of the participants said they could effectively meet the needs of their students and the other half said they could not effectively meet their needs based on the current resources available. I asked for commentary on this question and received five responses; four of them were comments that voiced frustrations, such as:

“Speed of delivery in Regents classes is not always conducive to students’ learning style. Some need a smaller setting w/more repetition.” “2:1:3 students have a wide variety of needs, not the least of which is toileting. Having a handicapped accessible bathroom complete with proper lifts, toilets and changing tables within close proximity of their classroom would foster greater independence and provide a more realistic environment to practice/maintain personal hygiene.” “A lot of students with counseling on their IEP need more consistent therapy. There are many students who receive special education services that would benefit from individual or group counseling but do not get it because this service has to be limited because of our other responsibilities: scheduling, academic jeopardy, college and career planning, classroom visits, mediations, etc. etc.” and “Many classified students are already starting off behind. Many of them are coming down from the middle school not having passed the previous course and are still placed in the next level. Then they fall behind right away, even though their mods are given! We need to offer classes that fit the students, not fit the students to the class!!!” The only positive response stated that the teacher felt they had “excellent support from special ed. dept. and program managers.” Apparently, this was not the majority consensus.

I believe that more of frustrations like these need to be voiced and taken into serious consideration. Here four teachers who have valid concerns about the “quality” of
education that students with special needs are being subjected to. I am sure that these are just a fraction of the reasons that could explain why students with disabilities in this suburban district—at the secondary level—are not meeting AYP.

The next question on the survey asked participants to comment about which special education services get utilized the most and which ones the least. Seven of the eight participants gave feedback. This is what they had to say: “Co-teaching in regular ed setting. Presenting material to capable kids in a 15:1 diploma-bound setting.” “My students are multiply handicapped and use a variety of services including 1:1 monitor, OT, PT, Speech/Language, door-to-door transportation, Adaptive Phys. Ed. and Community Based Instruction. Due to their disabilities, they do not use test-mods or resource room.” “Extended time, quiet location, test read, organizers to help with concepts utilized most”; “most: self-contained and co-taught/integrated classrooms least: social workers, counselors, AIS services, behavioral specialists.” “Co-taught classes (MOST) 15:1 classes (not sure we have any) (LKAST),” and “co-taught / push-in and pull/out services / test mods are utilized the most.”

I was not so surprised with the resources listed as being used most frequently, but what was more surprising was what one teacher said of the resources that get used the least. “Social workers, counselors, AIS services, and behavioral specialists” were all named. These are some of the most significant elements to educating students not only with special needs, but all students. Care and concern for students inside and outside of the school should be a priority for all teachers, and it goes to show that the lack of the services used to encourage that priority should signal as a red flag. My experiences in the classroom have taught me that students are very aware of how much a teacher or any adult genuinely cares for them. They need to feel that they have people in their corner,
encouraging them to succeed. The type of relationship that a teacher has with a student directly affects how well that student will perform in their class; both academically and personally. If the teacher is not supporting the student enough, for whatever reason, that student may feel left out, discouraged, and left behind.

The final question on the survey asked participants to agree or disagree to whether or not they feel the district has done its job in terms of communicating the latest resources available to teachers, students, and their families. Seven of the participants agreed and one did not. However, some of the commentary that was given sounded a bit more uncertain. This is what a few of the participants had to say: “The CSE/Annual Review process in my district is thorough and complete. Parents and general education staff are well informed of all services provided for each special education student”; “I don’t think the District is always forthcoming with parents and the range of services available. Often in meetings there is a push to declassify, whether that is a sound decision or not. This may be connected to staffing and budget restraints”; and “They communicate the latest resources, but we sometimes don’t get to use those resources, or have to wait for them, because there is not enough of them or not enough time for them to be available”. I was very pleased to receive this feedback; especially the comment from one teacher of how often he/she notices a “push to declassify” and how they tied to budget concerns. Once again, I find myself discouraged by lack of concern that is given to the student.
Conclusion

Overall, I do not believe I could ever pick a side on the debate over the causes of the Achievement Gap. There is not one scapegoat for this epidemic. All of the elements discussed in the literature review and the statistics examined from the accountability reports have very strong connections to each other and, because of that, validate a number of theories. However, this gap is a continuous and infectious circle that has existed for so long that I cannot comprehend why so much effort is spent on deciding who is to blame instead of finding a real, proactive solution. I do agree with those who criticize No Child Left Behind. I believe that the goal of that reform policy, to have 100% proficiency by 2014, is a set up for disappointment. Basing the accountability reports on standardized testing is the element that is most disconcerting. I understand that standardized testing is most likely the easiest way to measure proficiency for such a large number of students, but it definitely is not the most effective or the most accurate. I can use my own experience to validate this. I took the SAT’s three times and never once broke 1000, but my grade point average was a 3.5. That test score did not make me look as capable as I actually was as a learner to a number of colleges. It was both discriminating and invalid. These standardized tests scores most certainly represent the same inconclusiveness for some students.

There needs to be another way to accurately measure academic proficiency. As educators, we are constantly being advised to use differentiated instruction in order to effectively teach all learners. Students all learn differently, they express themselves differently, and they all test differently. So how can the number one indicator of an entire district’s overall academic achievement be primarily based on standardized tests? It does not make a whole lot of sense.
Students with disabilities are also accountable for taking the same test as general education students. How is this fair? I believe their level of proficiency needs to be measured and included in the district’s progress report. It should be. Their progress is just as important and we need to be on top of how well they are achieving a successful education. I think whether or not a student labeled with a disability takes such a test should be based on their disability. That may sound very discriminatory to some, but how is it any less discriminatory to give a student a test to take knowing they are not going to pass it. Bottom line: it is absurd to base proficiency on standardized testing.

We live in a different world, a world that is still tainted by inequality; a world that blurs right from wrong; one where rules do not apply to everyone; there is a lack of caring for others and for the environment; for some it is a world without love; without safety; without family. This all sounds very morbid, I realize that, but this is what my students grow up in every day and I am not only talking about the environment outside of school, I am talking about this being the way it is inside of school. How can we expect students to take their learning seriously when a stable learning environment is not supported for them? When rules are not enforced or applied to everyone? When a sense of belonging is found in a gang, not from a teacher, sports team, friend, or family? When they enter a classroom that was not cleaned the night before and there are not even enough desks for them or books; how do they feel welcome? Who would want to learn in that? There needs to be a change. It needs to happen now, it needs to make sense, it needs to work. Schools, families, and communities need to come together and support the youth that surrounds them.
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