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Pushing Past the Achievement Gap: An Essay on the Language of Deficit

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Despite the intense focus on the achievement gap that exists between African American, Latino, and other students of color and their White counterparts, the achievement gap discourse keeps us locked in the deficit paradigm. This article challenges us to look at the inherent fallacies of the achievement gap discourse and place students' academic struggles in the larger context of social failure including health, wealth, and funding gaps that impede their school success.

In my American Educational Research Association (AERA) Presidential address in San Francisco in April of 2006 (Ladson-Billings, 2006), I challenged my colleagues in education research to reconceptualize this notion of the achievement gap and to begin to think about the incredible education debt we, as a nation, have accumulated. Thus, rather than focusing on telling people to “catch up” we have to think about how we will begin to pay down this mountain of debt we have amassed at the expense of entire groups of people and their subsequent generations. Looking at our current educational problems as an “achievement gap” forces us to look to the year-to-year progress on various standardized test measures and allows us to conclude that the problem lies solely in the realm of scholastic disparity.

Specifically, the problem I have with constructing our current concern as an achievement gap is both substantive and semantic. Let me start with the semantic issue. When we speak of an achievement gap (and believe me, everyone is speaking of it—regardless of their political or ideological position), we are suggesting that some groups of students are doing just fine and we have to find a way to get the groups that are not doing fine to catch up with them. This presents two problems. First, student academic performance is not static. Those students who are achieving at acceptable levels are not waiting for those who are lagging to catch up with them. Thus, the primary premise of closing the gap rests on a notion of slowed performance at the top while there is simultaneous increased performance at the lower levels.

Given the increased pressure to achieve (via standardized testing), it is unlikely that high-performing students will stand still. Long term trends from the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that all students' scores are improving. For example, in 1971, White 9-year-olds average scaled score in reading was 214, while Black 9 year-olds average scaled score in reading was 170 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). In 2004, the average scaled score for White 9 year-olds was 226 while for Blacks it was 200 (Education Commission of the States, 2005). In the case of Hispanic/Latino students, the difference between them and White students was 217 and 183 in 1975. Hispanic/Latino students were not tested as a separate group before 1975. (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). These gaps are relatively stable and remarkably similar at ages 13 and 17 with the largest gaps showing up among 17-year olds, both Black and Hispanic/Latino (Education Commission of the States, 2005).

The one curious narrowing of the gap appears in 1988 and this narrowing appears across all groups at each age level (Lee, 2002). This was the final year of the Reagan presidency and no significant education legislation was passed. Instead we had a rhetorical legacy coming out of the Commission on Excellence in Education's “A Nation at Risk” report (1983) that catapulted education to the forefront of the nation's consciousness and created enough attention to the sad

state of U.S. education that the attention and subsequent activity may have been enough to improve teaching and learning in some of our poorest performing schools.

The second semantic problem is that the achievement gap makes us think that the problem is merely one of student achievement. It comes to us as if the students are not doing their part. We hear nothing of the other “gaps” that plague the lives of poor children of color. For example, let us look at the school funding gaps:

- Chicago Public Schools spends about \$8,482 per pupil while nearby Highland Park spends \$17,291 per pupil. Chicago Public Schools have an 87% Black and Latino population while Highland Park has a 90% White population.
- Per pupil expenditures in Philadelphia are \$9,299 for its 79% Black and Latino population while across City Line Avenue in Lower Merion the per pupil expenditure is \$17,261 for a 91% White population.
- New York City Public Schools spends \$11,627 per pupil for a student population that is 72% Black and Latino, while suburban Manhasset spends \$22,311 for a student population that is 91% White (Kozol, 2005).

The fundamental question these funding differences raise is why are children in suburban schools worth, on average, \$10,000 more than children in urban schools?

One of the earliest things one learns in statistics is that correlation does not prove causation, but we must ask ourselves why the funding inequities map so neatly and regularly onto the racial and ethnic realities of our schools. Even if we cannot prove that schools are poorly funded because Black and Latino students attend them, we can demonstrate that the amount of funding increases with the rise in the White student population. This pattern of inequitable funding has occurred over centuries. The persistent under-funding of schools serving Black and Brown children has had a pernicious effect on the earning ratios of Black and Brown people related to years of schooling.

The empirical data suggest that more schooling is associated with higher earnings, that is, high school graduates earn more money than high school drop-outs and college graduates earn more than high school graduates. Margo (1990) pointed out that in 1940 the average annual earnings of Black men were about 48% of those of White men, but by 1980 the earning ratio had risen to 61%. By 1993, the median Black male earned 74% as much as the median White male (Clinton White House Staff, 1995, Empirical Literature Review section).

While earnings ratios show us how people are (or were) doing at particular points in time, they do not address the cumulative effect of such income disparities. According to economists Joseph Altonji and Ulrech Doraszelski (2005):

The wealth gap between [Whites] and [Blacks] in the United States is much larger than the gap in earnings. The gap in wealth has implications for the social position of African Americans that go far beyond its obvious implications for consumption levels that households can sustain. This is because wealth is a source of political and social power, influences access to capital for new businesses, and provides insurance against fluctuations in labor market income. It affects the quality of housing, neighborhoods, and schools a family has access to as well as the ability to finance higher education. The fact that friendships and family ties tend to be within racial groups amplifies the effect of the wealth gap on the financial, social, and political resources available to [Blacks] relative to [Whites]. (p. 1)

This economic analysis maps well on to the notions of achievement gap versus education debt I am trying to advance. So while the income gap more closely resembles the achievement gap, the wealth disparity better reflects the education debt.

We also fail to discuss the health gap. Students in low-performing schools rarely have the health benefits that students in high-performing schools do. The age-adjusted death rate for the African American population was 29.6% higher than for the non-Hispanic/Latino White population. The death rate for the Hispanic/Latino population was greater than the non-Hispanic Whites for four of the leading causes of death—chronic liver disease, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, and homicide (Keppel, Pearcy, & Wagener, 2002).

The wealth gap is also not discussed. Over the last 7 years, the number of children living in poverty in the U.S. has grown by 11.3% to approach 13 million. More than a million children have fallen into extreme poverty (22% increase) over the past 5 years, now gripping over 5.6 million children (Witte & Henderson, 2004). Extreme poverty means living with an annual income below \$7,870 for a family of three. To isolate the “achievement gap” in the midst of all of these other disparities seems wrong-headed and disingenuous.

But, the problem I have with all of this “achievement gap” talk is not merely semantic. It is also substantive. First, this gap is not a new phenomenon. Scholars have offered a variety of explanations for it over time. In the 1950s and 1960s, we had cultural deficit theories that suggested that children of color were victims of pathological lifestyles that hindered their ability to benefit from schooling (see Bereiter & Engleman, 1966; Hess & Shipman, 1965). Unfortunately, although the specific language of cultural deficit is no longer used, the thinking behind such language continues to linger. In 2007, we can still walk into schools and hear the following explanations for poor students’ of color school failure:

- The parents just don’t care
- These children don’t have enough exposure/experiences
- These children aren’t ready for school
- Their families don’t value education
- They are coming from a “culture of poverty”

In the remainder of this article, I attempt to unpack the thinking behind each of these oft-repeated explanations.

THE PARENTS JUST DON’T CARE

When I began teaching in the late 1960s my colleagues told me as we prepared for back-to-school night, not to get my hopes up because “these parents just don’t care” and I should not expect them to attend. They were talking specifically about my students since the bulk of the students who were bussed to the school from the African American community were in my classes. No one acknowledged that my students’ parents were less likely to have transportation to travel across the city or that it was not particularly safe for Black people to be found in the school’s neighborhood after dark. My school parents came from a community I knew well. I grew up in that neighborhood. I called a group of my friends and asked them to car pool my parents to the school. I contacted my parents and told them where in the community the cars would pick them up. On back-to-school night almost all of my Black parents showed up. My colleagues were shocked but they never acknowledged that they had not really tried to facilitate the parents’ getting there.

Some 20 years later when I was researching effective teachers of African American children (Ladson-Billings, 1994), I heard the same thing—the parents just don’t care—from many of the less-effective teachers. However, from the highly effective teachers I saw a variety of creative strategies for involving parents. One teacher said to me, “I’ve never met a parent who didn’t want the best for her children. They don’t always know how to express their caring in a way that middle class people do, but believe me, they care!”

THESE CHILDREN DON’T HAVE ENOUGH EXPOSURE/EXPERIENCES

I spend a fair amount of my time in schools and I get to hear many things about what is “wrong” with the students. One of the things I hear is that the children lack exposure or experiences, especially at the early childhood level. As a consequence, many of these classrooms are filled with day after day of “experiences” but little, if any, teaching. Now, I do believe that school can, and should, offer students some interesting and new experiences, but those experiences must be tied to student learning. To take students to the zoo or the amusement park without some learning linked

to it (particularly when none of the high-stakes tests that students will be held accountable for are going to ask students if they have been to an amusement park) is not only unfair, it is unethical.

Too many of the teachers teaching poor children of color fall into what a colleague in mathematics education calls the “You-Poor-Dear” syndrome. You don’t have much money in your family—“you poor dear.” You only have one parent at home—“you poor dear.” You’ve never been to the beach—“you poor dear.” The problem with this syndrome is not only do teachers focus their energy on sympathizing, but this sympathy also turns into a set of excuses for why they cannot expect much academically from underserved students.

In a research project on early literacy that my colleague, Mary Louise Gomez and I conducted, I came across a classroom where an African American first grader refused to do her work each day and the teacher consistently told the child that “maybe you will feel like writing tomorrow.” I term this attitude on the part of the teacher, “permission to fail” (Ladson-Billings, 2002). It is contrasted with what teachers seem to do with White, middle-class students, namely “demand success.”

THESE CHILDREN ARE NOT READY

This next point is a particularly sensitive one to the early childhood education community; however it is one that we cannot avoid. Increasingly, we are hearing people talk about children not being ready for kindergarten. What does it mean to be ready *to begin* school? What ever happened to being five-years-old and being able to make it to the bathroom 3 out of 5 times as the only prerequisites for entering kindergarten? Now we learn that children who do not know their colors, their shapes, how to count from 1 to 20, and how to recite the alphabet are not “ready” to attend school. What are the children supposed to do?

If their parents “don’t care” and they lack “experiences or exposure” how is staying home in that environment supposed to get them ready for school? If you cannot count or identify colors then school would be an excellent place to teach those skills. There is now have a curious phenomenon that implies, “If you come to school not reading you get treated as if you have no right to be in school.”

While the age for starting school varies throughout the world (e.g., most Scandinavian countries start their children at age 7), we may be setting unrealistic developmental timelines for what children can or should do at age 5. Interestingly, the most affluent parents have the luxury of doing what Graue and DiPerna (2000) referred to as “academic redshirting.” This means they have the resources—both human and fiscal—to hold their children out of school for a year. By doing so, their children enter school physically, mentally, and emotionally ahead of their peers because keeping them out of school does not mean they do nothing for a year. Instead, these children enjoy additional advantages such as travel, enrichment activities, and time to mature. When they do enter school their parents seek a kindergarten curriculum that is academically more rigorous. And, schools work so hard to court middle class students that their parents exercise an inordinate amount influence over the school. So once again, the children with the least resources receive the least academic support. This achievement gap that we bemoan is something that we have helped to create.

THESE FAMILIES DON’T VALUE EDUCATION

This is a powerful myth that continues to live in schools. Yet, by every indicator we can see that poor families and families of color actually place a higher value on education than more education savvy parents (Collins & Yeskel, 2005). The poor pay more of their tax dollar toward education. The poor are the primary targets for products like “Hooked on Phonics” or other expensive academic supports. The poor are deeply committed to and invested in education as the primary vehicle for lifting them out of poverty. The rich often see education as a credentialing mechanism. They know it is important to go to the “right” school and get the “right” teachers and ultimately

get into the “right” colleges. The poor naively believe that school is school and as long as their children get decent grades they have a chance to escape the grip of poverty.

One of the reasons we know the poor value education is found in the historical record (Anderson, 2002). During the Civil Rights era, education was the primary battleground. It was seen as more important than jobs, housing, and other social inequalities. People have literally died for education, yet we keep hearing that certain families do not value it.

A large part of my work is to observe schools and their teachers in naturalistic settings. What I find fascinating is not what people do, but the meaning attached to what they do. Let me share an example. When my daughter was an elementary student she was extremely difficult to wake up each morning. Everyday was an adventure in determining how quickly I could get her to school without being stopped for speeding. She ran into her classroom with papers flying out of her unzipped backpack and a half-eaten muffin or bagel in her hand. Even though she was often arriving at school just before the bell (and many times after it) no one would dare describe our family as not caring about education.

However, on the other side of town where I was conducting research was a neighborhood of more modest homes and low-income apartment complexes, I often saw a mother drive her older vehicle up to the school and drop off children, just as I had done with my daughter. The children’s backpacks had papers flying out and they too had some portion of the day’s breakfast in their hands. The difference was that when those children got inside of the school I heard whispers of how “those people don’t care about education.” The working class mother and I were engaged in the very same behavior. We struggled to get our children to school on time and yet the meaning placed on our actions was quite different.

THEY ARE COMING FROM A “CULTURE OF POVERTY”

I think this last myth is the most troubling. It is disturbing on the intellectual level because of my training in anthropology, which makes me proprietary about the concept of culture. The term ‘culture’ is reserved for some pretty specific and tacit understandings. Culture is what people make. It represents their worldviews, symbol systems, art, language, and their very being.

The myth is aggravating on a more visceral level because poverty is not a culture. It is a condition produced by the economic, social, and political arrangements of a society. Poverty is linked to the values of a society. When we think it is acceptable for people to work and not earn a living wage, we contribute to the creation of poverty. When we demand low prices for goods and services—cheap and plentiful food, clothing, clerical, and domestic services—we participate in the creation of poverty. In 1962 when Michael Harrington (1962/1997) first began describing “the other America,” he was speaking to the way America had created a separate and subordinated society for the poor and then completely ignored them. Later Oscar Lewis (1966/1996), in his description of poor Mexican families, introduced the notion of a “sub-culture of poverty” that became shortened to the “culture of poverty.”

Today the term is problematic because consultants and so-called experts are making money from desperate schools and districts by perpetuating this culture of poverty myth. Teachers and administrators assume that poor children are so inherently different that they cannot be treated with dignity and humanity. They are trained to not place high academic expectations on these children because the primary purpose of school is to bring order to their lives.

There is something to be learned in the midst of poverty. But poverty is a part of a dialectic relationship created by social values that permit huge disparities in health and well-being. Thus, the poverty that exists in one part of the world is related to the affluence in another part. Similarly, the poverty that exists on one side of town is related to the affluence and avarice on the other side. When one segment of a society regularly and consistently has access to the best schools, the best health care, the best communities, and social resources, it means that other segments lack or have limited access.

Rather than the culture of poverty, what we see in schools is what Martin Haberman (1991) calls “the pedagogy of poverty.” Haberman identifies 14 specific acts that traditionally constitute

the core functions of urban teaching: (a) giving information, (b) asking questions, (c) giving directions, (d) making assignments, (e) monitoring seatwork, (f) reviewing assignments, (g) giving tests, (h) reviewing tests, (i) assigning homework, (j) reviewing homework, (k) settling disputes, (l) punishing noncompliance, (m) marking papers, and (n) giving grades. There are times when any one of these activities might have a beneficial effect, but Haberman (1991) writes, "Taken together and performed to the systematic exclusion of other acts, they do not work" (p. 290). This pedagogy of poverty is:

. . . sufficiently powerful to undermine the implementation of any reform effort because it defines the way pupils spend their time, the nature of the behaviors they practice, and the bases of their self concepts as learners. Essentially, it is a pedagogy in which learners can 'succeed' without becoming either involved or thoughtful. (p. 291)

Furthermore, Haberman asserted that the pedagogy of poverty appeals to those who did not do well in school themselves. It appeals to those who rely on common sense rather than thoughtful analysis. It appeals to those who fear poor children and children of color and as a result they often are obsessed with control. It appeals to those who are unaware of the full range of pedagogical options.

CONCLUSION

I have focused on several persistent myths about why poor children and children of color (particularly, African American and Latino) experience school failure and continue to lag behind their White counterparts because it is important for us to begin to change the discourse. If we can control the discourse, we can control the thinking. Let us call it "strategic reinvestment" when we simply mean firing people from their jobs. Let us call it "a personal savings account" when we are actually referencing the dismantling of social security, the one safety net that most of the poor can count on. Let us call it "No Child Left Behind" when we mean disinvesting from public education and cradle-to-grave testing. I argue that we need to change the discourse from achievement gap to what I have termed an "education debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The gap in which language places the onus of underachievement on the students, their families, and in some cases individual teachers. It constructs students as defective and lacking. It admonishes them that they need to catch up.

When we speak of an education debt we move to a discourse that holds us all accountable. It reminds us that we have accumulated this problem as a result of centuries of neglect and denial of education to entire groups of students. It reminds us that we have consistently under-funded schools in poor communities where education is needed most. It reminds us that we have, for large periods of our history, excluded groups of people from the political process where they might have a say in democratically determining what education should look like in their communities. And, it reminds us that what we are engaged as we reflect on our unethical and immoral treatment of our underserved populations.

Of course, there are those who think "I haven't done any of those things." I contend that we are all responsible and late in the summer of 2005 we saw a vivid example of what our social neglect and lack of genuine concern can produce. My experience with the horror known as Hurricane Katrina happened from more of a distance than that of most Americans I know. I was attending a conference in London when the broken levees, flooded streets, cries for help, and chaos of the hurricane's aftermath showed up on television screens. There was something surreal about seeing this kind of tragedy mediated through another's cultural lenses. For days I sat mesmerized and unbelieving as the drama unfolded. How can the richest, most powerful nation in the world be so totally inept in its response to its own citizens? Of course, in the years since the disaster we have learned of the system breakdowns at every level. But, the larger lesson points to the lack of an infrastructure and ongoing support for entire populations.

In April 2007, the Red River flooded the town of Grand Forks, North Dakota. The river crested at 54 feet and caused the displacement of 50,000 people, the largest natural disaster displacement until Hurricane Katrina (Hansen, 2007). Today, Grand Forks has come back bigger

and better. Remarkably there was no loss of life in this disaster and the responses of the local, state, federal, and charitable organizations were efficient and effective. The big difference in Grand Forks and the Gulf Coast Region, particularly New Orleans, rests in the difference in what was in place long before the disasters.

Grand Forks is ranked among the best places in the country to raise a family, operate a business, or be a child (City of Grand Forks, n.d., Quality of Life section). This is a community with low taxes, low unemployment, low crime, and low insurance rates. New Orleans, Louisiana, stands in sharp contrast to Grand Forks. New Orleans, despite its ideal location as a major port and a major tourist attraction is a tale of two cities. It is a city of haves and have-nots and the large numbers of have-nots are African American. Before the disaster New Orleans had a high incidence of poverty, an escalating crime rate, and an ineffective public school system. The disaster merely exposed the deprivation.

Unfortunately, words failed to convey the depth of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. In my AERA Presidential address (Ladson-Billings, 2006), I used photographic illustrations to jolt our memories. Looking into the faces of the people—standing on roof tops, wading through flooded streets, marching into the Superdome, sitting and staring blank-faced into nothingness—brought some to tears. More importantly, it reminded my colleagues of the silliness of isolating contemporary academic achievement without a more in-depth and robust understanding of the nature of social, cultural, economic, and political histories and relations between Black and White and Brown and White peoples in this country. As we attempt to unravel these problems I will continue to insist that what we struggle with is not an achievement gap, but rather an education debt.

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