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Closing the Achievement Gap: Two Views from Current Research. ERIC Digest.

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Historically, we have tried to raise the achievement level of low-achieving minority and immigrant students living in urban low-income areas, but we now recognize that there is an even greater gap in student achievement in schools in suburban middle-income

communities than in the inner cities, particularly at the higher achievement levels. (College Board, 1999). More minority students attend suburban schools than popularly believed; in 2000, 33 percent of African-American children, 45 percent of Hispanic children, 54 percent of Asian children, and 55 percent of white children lived in suburban areas, and they attended both poor, segregated schools and excellent racially integrated schools with many resources (Ferguson, 2002, p. 2).

We now have two major studies that can help us understand the achievement gap in suburban schools. Ronald Ferguson of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University analyzed the data collected by the Minority Student Achievement Network, formed by fifteen middle- and upper-middle-income districts throughout the nation. To better understand the experiences of different racial and economic group students that affect their academic achievement and academic engagement, the Network surveyed middle- and high-school students in ninety-five schools in fifteen districts using the "Ed-Excel Assessment of Secondary School Student Culture," developed by John Bishop of Cornell University. The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine how the schools can be educationally productive in closing the achievement gap in their heterogeneous student bodies.

The late John Ogbu, Professor of Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley, conducted an ethnographic study of students at all grade levels in schools in Shaker Heights, Ohio. The ethnographers conducting the study observed 110 classrooms from the start to the finish of the lesson, in classes of (1) different racial makeup, (2) the same subject taught at different levels, (3) different subjects, (4) the same teachers teaching the same courses at different levels, (5) the same teachers teaching different courses, and (6) teachers of different races and genders. In the elementary school, the researchers also acted as participant-observers by assisting the teachers with small tasks when they asked for help (Ogbu, 2003). The purpose of this study was to determine how the identity of African-American students as an oppressed group outside the opportunity structure affects their academic achievement specifically and their school experience more generally. This digest distills and compares the findings and recommendations of these two important studies.

THE FERGUSON STUDY OF THE MINORITY STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT NETWORK

(FERGUSON, 2003)
Self-Reported Achievement and Skill Disparities: Black, Hispanic, and mixed-race students reported lower grade-point averages than white and Asian students. Black and Hispanic students also reported less understanding of the lessons being taught and less comprehension of the reading material assigned.

Socioeconomic Status and Home Learning Resources: White and Asian students came

to school with more of the educational resources identified with higher academic status (e.g., books and computers) than their African-American and Hispanic peers. However, these resources boost achievement less among African-American and Hispanic students than among students of other ethnicities.

Effort: African-American and Hispanic students identified teacher encouragement as a motive for their effort and substantially indicated that this encouragement was more motivating than teacher demands, unlike white students, who cited demands more than their minority peers. But white students also indicated that teacher encouragement was an incentive for them to make an effort to achieve.

Academic Behavior and Homework Completion Rates: By these measures whites and Asians appear more academically engaged and leave a greater impression of working harder and being more interested in their studies than their African-American and Hispanic peers. However, the students in all the population groups differed very little in time spent studying and doing homework, except Asians, and no group of students - including Asians - expressed a great deal of interest in schoolwork.

Ferguson (2003) draws a number of conclusions from his research for changes in the behavior of teachers in the classroom and in schools generally that can help close the achievement gap:

* Although teachers observe differences in academic performance and behavior between African-American, Hispanic, and mixed-race students on the one hand and white and Asian-American students on the other, in practice they should assume that there are no systematic group-level (as distinct from individual) differences in effort or motivation to succeed among the two groups (p. 18).

* Because there are observable racial and ethnic group gaps in standardized achievement test scores and self-reported differences in comprehension of the content and lessons, schools should identify and respond to specific skill and knowledge deficit problems of particular groups.

* Because students value and respond to encouragement, teachers need to provide it routinely.

* Schools need to provide more educational resources and learning experiences because of student differences in advantages due to their family background.

THE OGBU ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY (OGBU, 2003)

Opportunity Structure and Education: Many African American students did not perceive schooling to be a preparation for future success in the job market. They did not understand how their academic performance at one level of schooling affects the courses they will be able to take at a higher level of schooling, which could lead to

greater opportunity. Further, they did not know enough about the educational requirements for future jobs. Their role models were entertainers and athletes because they are wealthier and more visible to them than lawyers, engineers, and university professors whose success depended on their educational credentials.

Race Relations and Schooling: African-Americans felt disparaged and misrepresented in the community, despite the appearance of racial harmony, and fearful and socially distant from whites. As an example, whites in the community felt that the achievement gap was due to social class differences while African-Americans maintained that it was the result of racism. African-American students also strongly believed that their teachers did not "care" for them because they were not supportive, nurturing, and encouraging. They also held teachers accountable for their academic performance.

Identity and Culture: African-American students were unengaged in the attitudes and behaviors that lead to school success because to them accepting the school curriculum, language, and pedagogy would mean rejecting their collective identity. However, they were not opposed to earning good grades although it meant being accused of acting "white" by their peers. Many of these same students also questioned their intelligence, having internalized the beliefs of others', and often acted as if they were less intelligent than their white peers.

Educational Strategies: African-American students recognized the need for effort to meet high academic standards, but chose not to apply it for reasons noted above. They reported that they realized that they did not work hard enough to get good grades. They also felt that the lack of discipline and other disruptive behavior in the classes where they were in the majority were not conducive to learning, unlike the climate in advanced placement classes, where most of the students were white and performed academically at a higher level. Parents of African-American students believed that their children should work hard to make good grades; however, they did not involve themselves in their children's schooling by supervising the completion of homework and the use of time or by protecting their children from negative peer pressure. Culturally, African Americans believed that it was the role of the school and teachers to make their children learn and perform successfully. Finally, African-American students often were not educated in honors or advanced placement classes because counselors in the upper elementary grades assigned them to less academically rigorous tracks with less academic and career rewards; further, parents did not fully understand the consequences of the placements, did not adequately prepare their children for academic work, and did not intervene to try countermand the placements.

Based on his research, Ogbu (2003) also makes several recommendations for communities and schools like those in Shaker Heights, Ohio, for closing the achievement gap:

* To increase African-American students' academic orientation and performance,

communities need to provide supplementary education programs using the resources of for-profit and non-profit community-based organizations to create a parallel educational system.

* The community needs to provide academically successful role models, publicly recognize achievement, and encourage schools to infuse multicultural perspectives into the academic curriculum to counter students' idea that to achieve is to act white and to help students develop a sound self-concept and identity. The schools, in turn, need to develop strategies to help parents take a greater role in the academic life of their children, and to help them learn to be academically self-motivated and persistent.

* Students need help to learn how to distinguish between short-term and long-term educational goals in course-taking, and between courses in academic subjects and courses that develop a cultural identity. They should also help students to develop study habits and study skills and to resist anti-academic peer pressure.

* Teachers need to recognize that their expectations have an effect on their students' concept of themselves as learners and achievers and the internalization of negative or positive beliefs about their intelligence.

* Schools need to provide parents information on tracking practices, and about differences between honors and Advanced Placement classes, regular classroom placement, and remedial classes. Parents also need to be helped in working with teachers to monitor and effectively enhance their children's academic progress.

A FINAL NOTE ON CLOSING THE GAP

In their conclusions about their research findings, Ferguson and Ogbu do not differ in their views on how schools can help minority students to be more academically engaged and better achievers, only in emphasis. For Ferguson, the role of the teacher and the school is to encourage the individual student to meet the demands of academic work by changing classroom practices. For Ogbu, students will perform better and be more engaged in school if they are helped to modify parts of their collective identity that reject school success, through caring individual and institutional practices. This difference of perspective is noteworthy, however. Ogbu maintains that minority students do not participate in the opportunity structure of the United States because they have identified with their oppressed and marginal position in American society. For him, schools must actively alter these students' identity as outsiders, through caring. Ferguson, on the other hand, argues that schools need to develop interventions that improve minority students' capacity to master the learning tasks of the classroom through academic encouragement, implying that their success will change their self-concept and identity.

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