

Diversity: The Windows of Opportunity in Overcoming the Academic Achievement Gap Between African-American and White Students and in Overcoming Racially Discriminatory Myths of African American Students in Public Education

Vera Ann McLaughlin, Associate Professor of African American History, Tidewater Community College

Abstract

The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 legally authorized equitable academic conditions and access for African-American students in the United States' public school systems. However, in actuality, *Brown* did not lead to substantial *de facto* changes in equity and access. The American public education system continues to confront wide disparity in the achievement of African-American students and their White counterparts due to racial discrimination. The disparity, commonly referred to as the academic achievement gap, has also given way to the emergence of racist education myths, such as: a) African-American students innately cannot learn; b) African-American students are incapable of competing academically with their White counterparts; and c) the academic achievement gap between the African-American and White student population is irreducible. In order to dispel these racially discriminatory myths, a new paradigm shift in public education in America must take place. This paradigm shift includes the immersion of diversity within both curricula and school policy. Such a shift would transform the predominantly one-culture curricula that is so detrimental to the academic achievement of African-American and other non-White students in an otherwise ethnically and racially diverse student population in the United States.

Introduction

The educational opportunities afforded all African-American students since the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 should have assisted in placing African-American students academically on par with their White counterparts. This decision legally authorized academic conditions that would bring about equity and access for African-American students in public schools. Therefore, when the *Brown* decision began the process of school desegregation, social scientists confidently predicted that the racial gap in academic performance would soon be eliminated (R. Slavin and N. Madden 2001, 4).

The desirable academic outcome or goal in 1954 remains the same in 2007, that is, the elimination of the academic achievement gap between African-American and White students. Also, according to Judith Winston, "We cannot postpone the opportunity to educate children to high standards while . . . seeking additional resources to coordinate the multilayered efforts that

will transform schools into the culturally and racially diverse schools envisioned and promised by *Brown*” (1995, 763).

Even though schools are now desegregated, public education has failed to deliver the promise of a quality education for Blacks (“Brown Anniversary Speakers” n.d., 1 ; Meldrum and Eaton 1994 [Abstract] ; Slavin and Madden 2001, 4 ; U.S. Department of Education n.d., para. 1). This is because the *Brown* decision did not lead to substantial *de facto* changes in equity and access in the public school system. For example, in discussing the academic achievement gap, the Minority Student Achievement Network study noted that the achievement gaps are not limited to the gap in grade point average; they are found in course level enrollment, performance in specific courses, rates of participation in gifted programs, and in special education placement (Ogbu 2003, 3). Consequently, nowhere is the challenge of a first-rate education for African-American students more evident than in the disparity known as the academic achievement gap between African-American students and their White counterparts. An academic achievement gap exists in most public educational systems throughout the United States due to racial discrimination.

The academic achievement gap has given way to the emergence of racist discriminatory education myths, such as: a) African-American students innately cannot learn; b) African-American students are incapable of competing academically with their White counterparts; and c) The academic achievement gap between African-American and White student population is irreducible.

African-American Students and the Academic Achievement Gap

The purpose of this article is to first, challenge racist discriminatory education myths concerning the academic low achievement of African-American students in the public schools in

the United States. Second, it is to inculcate diversity in antithesis to such myths in the elimination of the academic achievement gap. In this article, two terms are operationally defined, academic achievement gap and diversity, used synonymously in education as multiculturalism. A formal discussion of the academic achievement gap cannot be discussed in a vacuum; its relevance lies in its educational genre. Haycock, President of the Education Trust, described the achievement gap as differences between one group's average score and the average of another group's score on a particular test (2001, 4). Thompson and O'Quinn defined the achievement gap as measuring the performance of White and minority students on tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress, end-of-grade, or end-of-course examinations (2001, 5). Rather than using the term achievement gap, some writers discussing the achievement gap have used racial disparities to define the achievement gap (Ferguson, Clark, and Stewart 2002, 3; Johnston and Viadero 2000, p. 5).

Multicultural education as defined by Nieto is antiracist education, basic education, important for all students, pervasive, education for social justice, is a process and is a critical pedagogy (2000, 305). James Banks, the architect of multiculturalism, proposed that the goals of multicultural education are to provide all students with the skills, attitudes, and knowledge to function within their ethnic culture, the mainstream culture, and within and across other ethnic cultures . . . to reduce the pain and discrimination that members of some ethnic and racial groups experience because of their unique racial, physical, and cultural characteristics (1999, 3-4).

While the academic achievement gap does exist, the myths surrounding African-American academic low achievement must be looked at through the prism of African-American culture. In doing so, one could ask the question, "Does the achievement gap support myths of academic low achievement by African-American students in public education or are there other

variables that account for the achievement gap between African-American and White students?” If so, is diversity the linchpin that will transform schools into institutions of inclusiveness, thereby dispelling racist education myths associated with the academic low achievement of African-American students, and assist in bridging the academic achievement gap?

“Diversity: The Windows of Opportunity in Overcoming the Academic Achievement Gap Between African-American and White Students and in Overcoming Racially Discriminatory Myths of African-American Students in Public Education” is framed with these understandings. The “one culture curriculum fits all” in public education is deficient in meeting the needs of a racially and culturally diverse student population within this country; such a curriculum is anachronistic. Many African-American and minority students are affected by strategies that appear to them to be racist and insulting when overlooking their rich cultural heritage and cultural language. These students react in ways which may negatively impact their learning processes and contribute to the academic achievement gap.

Achievement Gap and the Prism of African-American Culture

As test-based accountability has come to dominate the public education agenda, the racial and ethnic achievement gap has risen to the top of policymakers’ concerns (College Board 1999, 12 ; Edley, 2002; 5., 12; Hendrie 2004, 1; Jackson 2001, 2, 3; Kober 2001, 10-11). Uhlenber and Brown believe that the achievement gap has become one of the central issues in public education in general and urban education in particular (2002, 493). According to a special published report, “Despite decades of attention, gaps in the achievement of minority students remain one of the most pressing problems in education” (Viadero and Johnston 2000, 3). Kurt Landgraf, President and Chief Executive Officer of Educational Testing Service, testifying before the Education

Forum on Public Policy

Reform Subcommittee of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce on Measuring Success stated, “It is unconscionable that in the United States of America—which people from around the globe consider the ‘land of opportunity’— we have a test score achievement gap” (Landgraf, 2003 5).

Many educational researchers and educational public policymakers agree that an achievement gap exists; however, they differ significantly in their approach to addressing the issue of the achievement gap. The closing of the academic achievement gap in academia between African-American students and their White counterparts has become something of a conundrum. There are a number of theories as to why the achievement gap persists. Often, these theories focus on the disparate backgrounds with which students enter school, the continued family and cultural obstacles that poor and minority students encounter throughout their school tenure, and factors in schools that perpetuate inequity of opportunity (Reynolds as cited in North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2002, 8).

According to Perry and others, the failure of African-American students and other minorities to achieve academically are attributable to the conflict between the culture of the home and the culture of the school, the culture of White stream America (2003, 52-80). Lisa Delpit believes that educational and school policymakers who blame non-White parents for their inability to assist their children in the educational process,

[F]ail to understand that if the parents were members of the culture of power and lived by its rules and codes, then they would transmit those codes to their children. In fact, they transmit another culture that children must learn at home in order to survive in their communities (1995, 30).

There is research which suggests that schools are insensitive to the role of parents in assisting their children in the educational process. For instance, Daniel-White (2002) posits, “Schools assume that it is the parents’ responsibility to meet the school’s demands without

giving parents adequate tools to do so and without adapting efforts to meet parental needs. . . .The assumption teachers make that all parents have the same educational level also contributes to parents failing to help their children with their homework” (6). Delpit and Daniel-White seem to suggest that while both home and school cultures are important, the dominant home culture must be considered by teachers as a function of the educational process of students of color and other non-White students.

Another dynamic of culture is language, which is based on language differences versus language deficiencies and the ineptitude of teachers to fully comprehend and accommodate the needs of students who use languages other than American Standard English (Perry et al., 2003). Students who face communication problems with his or her teacher will be penalized academically as his or her academic evaluation is not based on his or her home culture but the culture of the school.

African-American students find themselves in a dilemma; they must learn to speak and write in American Standard English or run the risk of academic failure. These students must reconcile between their home culture and that of the culture of their school. With this educational demand weighing so heavily on a child, how can the child perform his best? He may feel that his verbal response may cause consternation in the classroom with his peers and simply not respond or interact academically with the teacher in the classroom. Therefore, one would argue that students of color are academically at a disadvantage because many teachers fail to consider their rich cultural heritage, which includes language, as a factor in their classroom learning process. According to Delpit and Dowdy, “The central concern is about the freedom to go back and forth from the home language to the public language without feeling a sense of inferiority” (2002, 13). When the values of the home and community are incongruent with the values of the school,

minority children may experience confusion, stress, and adjustment problems that ultimately result in low self-esteem and poor academic performance (Borman et al., 1998 17).

Jones (1990), a highly successful teacher of mathematics, believes that the failure of children of color to achieve who uses Black language or what the majority would call non-standard English is not as much the fault of the child as it is an indictment of pedagogical practices. He posits,

Poor language usage certainly limits the ability of students to communicate what they know about science and mathematics, and it is a handicap to social advancement. On the other hand, poor teaching is a greater handicap. Its effects on the individual can be long-lasting, and its consequences for the nation can be disastrous (as cited in Perry et al. 2003, 133)

Jones' argument is that students of color, poor language skills and all, can learn, if the teacher is equipped to move students from a level of mediocrity to a level of excellence. Dreeben (1987) found that the quality of instruction of African-American students was, on average, much lower than that received by their White counterparts. Correspondingly, African-American student achievement outcomes were much poorer than those for their White peers. Dreeben also found that when Black students received similar instruction, they attained comparable reading achievements (as cited in Borman et al. 1998). The level of a student's achievement has to do with the quality of instruction provided by the teacher, and for students of color, this is most important. It is imperative that teachers who teach large numbers of African-American students understand the significant role they play in the learning process of this particular group.

Teachers who use best practices strategies to reach minority students or students who use home-language in the classroom are truly teachers dedicated to their students and their craft. The student-teacher relationship for children of color, especially African-American students, impacts

student learning. This is borne out by studies showing that these students need that extra encouragement by the teacher more so than do White students (Ferguson 2002, 6, 27-28).

In responding to the low achievement of African-American students, one would argue that the teacher variable is most significant in the achievement of African-American students. Having a good teacher instead of an average teacher for four or five years in a row could essentially close the gap in math performance between students from low-income and high-income households (Olsen 2003, 7). Teachers must stop using traditional pedagogical practices within the classroom that overlook cultural differences and instead create environments in the classroom that are at best hostile to the learning of culturally and racially diverse student populations. Diversity must be seen as a means of bridging the gap between a culturally and racially diverse school population and the teachers who teach the students within these schools' walls.

Myths of Academic Low Achievement of African-American Students

This section examines myths surrounding the achievement of African-American students. According to Goodlad, "Deep seated myths and prejudices regarding the distribution of ability to learn contribute strongly to the differentiation of students' access to the array of knowledge schools provide" (1988, p. 17). These myths and prejudices create *de facto* inequalities among minority students and the majority population of the school. Hilliard, III (1998) posits, "The race of the child does not tell us anything about the child's mental capacity to succeed in school" (p. 74). A metacognition discourse of racial discriminatory education myths follows.

Myth One. African-American students innately can not learn

Forum on Public Policy

The achievement gap between African-American students and White students must be eliminated in this country if it expects to lead the world in this global society. In their book, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom wrote, “The racial gap in academic achievement is an educational crisis, but it is also the main source of ongoing racial inequality. And racial inequality is America’s great unfinished business, the wound that remains unhealed” (2003, 1). According to Yzaguirre, a Hispanic advocate, “Closing the gap has to be a societal goal, to do otherwise is to admit to failure, tolerate racial differences, and give up on the very fundamental ideals of America” (as cited in Johnston and Viadero 2000, p. 5). President Bush stated that the education of all children is a moral challenge (The U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Student achievement, regardless of ethnicity, must be a priority of all Americans.

One of the priorities must be to solve the issue of large African-American populations of students being placed in special education. Welch and White (2006) found that 17% of all public school students are African-American, yet 41% special education placements are African-American and 85% of those are males. Is this due to cognitive problems among African-Americans, especially African-American males or is it bad local educational policy?

Do African-Americans score low on cognitive tests because of genetics or because of the environment? Much acrimonious debate has taken place on this topic as it relates to race and intelligence (Fairchild, H. 1995, 297-299; Fish, J., 2002; Haynes, N. 1995, 275-291; Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Link, F. 1985, 1-20; Richman, et al. 1997, 378-386). Herrnstein and Murray support the genetics theory of low intelligence for African-Americans, intelligence stagnation. Crane posited that White students do not have better genes than African-American students, but

White students are treated differently than African-American students within society. Society nurtures White students who have certain proclivities for learning. He stated:

It is possible that children who develop more cognitive skills than average because of their genes also tend to receive greater than average encouragement to pursue intellectual activities and more help from parents and teachers. If this is true, then the environment widens genetic differences in cognitive skills. Racial discrimination in general is another example of causal relationships of this type. People with genes for Black skin systematically encounter different environments than do others in our society. This example illustrates the fact the environment explanation of the race gap in cognitive skills actually assumes that the cause of the gap is both 100% genetic and 100% environmental in the sense that genes for Black skin cause the environment to react to the individual in such a way as to discourage the development of such skills. (Craine 1994, p. 192)

In support of this theory, Ogbu (1995) wrote, “African-American students’ low achievement is due to how they are treated educationally, socially, politically, and economically” (as cited in Borman et al. 1998, p. 19). These sentiments are also echoed in the social mobility theory, which promotes the idea that it is not necessarily the race of the student that is important as is the position or status the student holds within society and how the student is treated within society (Perry, et al. 2003, 58-60).

Crane, Ogbu, Perry and others theories are consistent with the learning theorists who hypothesize that the environment is so strong on human behavior that individuals are shaped by their environment. According to the socio-cultural psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, “A study of a child’s cultural environment is essential in addressing his educational needs. Failure to do so could lead to a child being cognitively misdiagnosed as to his educational abilities” (as cited in Miller 2002, 406). The cultural environment is the catalyst, which has a direct impact on a student’s cognitive and academic potential. Following the beliefs of the learning theorists, one would surmise that this is dependent on how society ranks and treats cultural diversity based on norms within our society. Consequently, society makes less effort to encourage African-American children versus White children in their cognitive abilities.

Forum on Public Policy

The classroom environment is just as strong on student achievement. The literature on the achievement gap suggests that teachers' low expectations of minority students have a direct correlation to the achievement of the child, especially those in urban schools (Bamburg 1994, 5-14; Carter, 2000, 29; Diamond Randolph, and Spillane 2004, 1-13). According to Haycock (2001), many researchers suggest that part of the reason some students do not excel academically is that schools do not ask them to and do not expect them to (Kober 2001, 27). Obiakor warns, "Teachers cannot expect high standards from minority students when they have low expectations of their academic success" (1998, 14). However, positive messages on self-efficacy by teachers to children at the elementary level will encourage students throughout their educational school years.

Rushern Baker II, Director of Community Teachers Institute, voiced a strong opinion concerning the importance of urban education. His voice brings with it a prophetic educational message. He has not equivocated and his message cannot be silenced: "Urban public education is the best hope for many minority children, but they are often getting too few teachers of color, too few qualified teachers and too many teachers who leave too soon" (*The Associated Press* 2004, p. 2).

Schools must create conditions that will permit both African-American and White students to exert their will in reaching a positive end on their end-of-course state standards, whereby both will be on par and the academic achievement gap is no longer at the top of the political and educational agendas. Therefore, the racist myth that Black students innately can not learn, is challenged by how society treats its African-American student population and how educators view the African-American students they teach.

Myth Two. African-American Students are Incapable of Competing Academically with Their White Counterparts

“Nationally, the percentage of Blacks who lived below the poverty level in 2000 was a historic low; however, Black individuals, families, and children continue to be overrepresented in poverty” (Hoffman et al. 2003, 25). Borman and Overman in examining studies on academic resilience in mathematics among poor and minority students of Black, Latino, and White students from relatively homogeneous low-socioeconomic backgrounds, said, “Minority students have lower academic self-efficacy and are exposed to school environments that are less conducive to academic resilience. These factors are associated with the differences affecting achievement gaps among minority and non-minority students” (2004, p. 8). Borman and Overman believe that minority students who struggle with poverty may also struggle to achieve academically.

Students from low-income homes, or who have parents with little formal education, are more likely to be low achievers and much less likely to be high achievers than students from high-income families, or who have parents with bachelor’s or advanced degrees (Commonwealth of Virginia 2004, 42-43; Drummond and Stipek 2004, 2; Hoffman et al. 2003, 13; Johnston and Viadero 2000, 18; The Heritage Foundation n.d., 34-35; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, 124-130; Thomas and Bainbridge 2001, 1). The College Board, in assessing the impact of socioeconomic status on student achievement concluded that it is generally one of the most powerful predictors of students’ academic achievement (1999, 17-18).

Conversely, a Washington-based research and advocacy group, the Education Trust in a national study of 4,500 schools that educate poor students in this country, found that these schools are among the top performers in their states (as cited in Archer, 2004). S. Carter, in a

well-documented study on high performing poverty schools, supported the Educational Trust assertion that students of poverty can achieve academically. He stated that these children are able to perform well academically in spite of their socioeconomic conditions. He cited 21 high performing schools throughout this country, which dispels the myth that students of poverty are predisposed to failure. There are those who question the validity of these types of positive educational outcomes by students of poverty (2000, 2; Archer 2).

In a study of the achievement gap of Black and White students in an urban American public school district, it was found that in a number of these schools, Black students outperformed White students in fifth grade mathematics. There were very small variable differences between student achievement and ethnicity (McLauchlin 2006, 71).

Perry and others asserted that educational researchers prefer to ignore single instances of a typical high performance with poor children as “outliers” or errors (2003, 143). Carter asserted, “The reaction of the education establishment and its apologists has been to dismiss such achievement as a fluke—the work of extraordinary heroes whose performance cannot possibly be held as a national standard” (2000, 2). Edmonds, the guru of the effective schools movement counters these critics by asking and responding to the following question:

How many effective schools would you have to see to be persuaded of the educability of poor children? If your answer is more than one, then I submit that you have reasons of your own for preferring to believe that basic pupil performance derives from family background instead of school response to family background (1979, 23).

With data so rich in these types of success stories, ordinary students accomplishing extraordinary feats in academia, the question becomes, “What are students doing in these schools that other schools of similar characteristics are not?”

The Virginia General Assembly showed an interest in the achievement gap between its best and its poorest performing schools by looking at the Standards of Learning assessment

Forum on Public Policy

scores of these schools. These schools included both poor and non-poor students. The Assembly assigned the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission to conduct this study. The study used both quantitative and qualitative components. A quantitative analysis of the measurable factors associated with Standards of Learning assessment results in schools and divisions and a qualitative review of schools and divisions. They found that (a) strong and stable principal leadership; (b) environment conducive to learning; (c) effective teaching staff; (d) data-driven assessment of student weaknesses and teacher effectiveness; (e) curriculum alignment, pacing, and resources; (f) differentiation in teaching; (g) academic remediation; and (h) structure and intensity of school day made an academic difference (Christie 2004, 2-3; Commonwealth of Virginia 2004, vii). The results of the Virginia General Assembly study were consistent with the philosophy that students from low-income homes can perform well academically in spite of their socioeconomic level or condition.

The findings of the Commonwealth of Virginia's report refuted the contention that poor children cannot learn and are predisposed to a life of academic failure. These findings also embrace the philosophy of those scholars who believe that poor children and non-poor children not only have the ability to learn, but are learning (Carter 2000; Haycock as cited in Carter; 104; Kozol 1991 and 2000).

When the educational background of a child's parent is the best predictor of a child's success, with many Black parents lacking higher education, the future of the Black child is at risk. Based on this variable of school success, Black students do not stand a chance of succeeding. To embrace the concept that a child's socioeconomic status determines his future is to write these children off and give educators an excuse in justifying the academic failure of children of poverty rather than using strategies that will compensate for the socioeconomic level

of these students. One could ask, if the educational background of the child is a predictor of the success of the Black child, how is it possible for students in many schools of poverty throughout this country to meet the academic challenge and succeed? The studies by the Education Trust and the state of Virginia debunk suppositions by those who would believe otherwise. Therefore, the racist myth that Black students are incapable of competing academically with their White counterparts is just that, a myth.

Myth Three. The academic achievement gap between African-American and White students is irreducible.

Some educators seem to think that the academic achievement gap is irreducible due to conditions prior to formal education. “The average Black child arrives at kindergarten with fewer academic skills than the average White child. Schools may then simply push children along in ways that sustain or add to racial disparities, validating the expectation that Black-White differences in achievement are normal” (Ferguson 2003, 460). The gap begins at the elementary school and widens as students pass through higher grades. By the time they are in the 12th grade, Black students are about two or more years behind their White peers in reading and mathematics (Coleman 1966, 273; Kober 2001, 24; Ogbu 2003, 3). Borman, Stringfield, and Rachuba believe that poor and Black students who begin early school years at or above the 50% percentile do not keep pace with the achievements of more advantaged or White students (1998,19). Ferguson asserted, “Some of the advantages that White children have over Black [*sic*] children include home learning resources, such as, books and computers in the home” (2002, 6). He seems to suggest that Black students start to school academically behind their White counterparts because of their home culture.

Forum on Public Policy

Armor of George Washington University, along with a number of other scholars who met to discuss the achievement gap in American education, reinforced the point set forth by previous scholars in maintaining that the gap must be closed prior to a child starting his formal education. Once formal education starts, the gap becomes irreducible (as cited in Roach 2004, 2). They theorize that learning is static and the child's cognitive abilities have peaked and will not function beyond the child's developmental stage prior to formal schooling.

The advancement of this theory is problematic because of what develops. That is, education is a process rather than an event; it is a work in progress. Also, in the nature versus nurture of the child, it is hypothesized that a child's educational level is heavily determined by his environmental culture more so than the formal education he or she receives at school (Crane 1994, 192; Delpit 1995, 30; Miller 2002, 406; The College Board 1999, 17-18). If one accepts the supposition that the educational experience of African-American students stops prior to formal education, then one would find the cognitive abilities of African-American students to be linear and static with no chance of improving. This was not the case in the Virginia or Education Trust studies.

Thompson and O'Quinn reported that the progress that was made in the early eighties in closing the achievement gap shows that the gap is not an immutable fact of nature or of intractable socioeconomic patterns (2001, 21). The changes included Head Start programs, funding to poor students, integration, and affirmative action for higher education (Jencks and Philips 1998, 183). These findings do not embrace the belief that heredity or a child's socioeconomic condition means that the child will be an underachiever or an academic failure. The past and present polemic discussions on the achievement gap between African-American and White students as irreducible have relied on poverty as predictors of academic success of

African-American students in the educational system. This practice is anathema to the National Council for Social Studies (hereafter referred to as NCSS) Curriculum Guidelines for Multicultural Education and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (hereafter referred to as NBPTS) teaching practices to reach *all* racially and culturally diverse school-age children. The NBPTS specifically spells out these practices, such as:

Teachers are dedicated to making knowledge accessible to all students. They treat students equitably, recognizing individual differences. They adjust their practice based on observation and knowledge of their students' interests, abilities, skills, knowledge, family circumstances, and peer relationships. They understand how students develop and learn. They are aware of the influence of context and culture on behavior. They develop students' cognitive capacity and respect for learning. Equally important, they foster students' self-esteem, motivation, character, civic responsibility and their respect for individual, cultural, religious, and racial differences. (Darling-Hammond 1999, pp. 6-7)

The NCSS's Task Force on Ethnic Studies revised its Curriculum Guidelines for Multicultural Education, which offers 22 guidelines on how to incorporate diversity within the educational curriculum from elementary to college level (1991). The ideas by the National Board and the NCSS offer ways to reverse some of the negative stereotypes of the irreducible academic achievement gap.

The myth that the academic achievement gap is irreducible is refuted by the study of Thompson and Quinn who reported that the gap started to close in the 1980s without regards to students' socioeconomic or any natural phenomena (2001, 21). If it was possible in the 1980s, then it is possible in 2007. Therefore, the idea that the gap is irreducible is debunked by the fact that actions in the past by educational policymakers created *de jure* equity and access conditions for African-Americans in closing the academic achievement gap in educational systems throughout the country. The systems must now make it a reality enforcing educational policy in this area.

Diversity and Curriculum

In education, although an elusive term, curriculum embodies all of the resources and pedagogies whereby learning occurs. However, the most significant thing that curricula should do is to provide equal access of knowledge and information to all students, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic background.

The K-12 educational system is the best chance to help children become culturally responsive. According to Richards and others, “The educational system has historically fostered the achievement of one segment of the school population by establishing culturally biased standards and values. The mono-cultural values of schools have promoted biases in curriculum development and instructional practices that have been detrimental to the achievement of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds” (2007, 64). This monocultural view is visible in many public school systems. However, this practice is in strict opposition to the principles embodied by the NBPTS and the NCSS.

The guidelines by the NBPTS and the NCSS, when incorporated within curricula, provide equal access and equity to students who have been marginalized in our society. Above all else, the guidelines provide social justice by creating conditions within the educational system whereby students are allowed to participate equally in the educational process and appreciate cultures from all groups. Changes in education must begin and end with differentiated curricula.

Conclusion

The incorporation of diversity into the public school curricula in challenging the racist academic myths of African-American students deals specifically with equity and public access to education. One can not blame victims for being victimized, just as it is untenable to blame African-American students for the academic achievement gap when there appears to be inherent

Forum on Public Policy

within the public educational system a practice of non-access for many African-American students and non-White students to programs that would help them progress from one level of education to the next. Because these students can not pass culturally biased standardized criterion data tests, public educational policy dictates that they be denied access into academies and gifted programs. Many teachers transfer the belief onto their African-American students that they are incapable of performing in Advanced Placement classes as well. Where is the hope for these students to achieve? They are fighting a losing battle.

If a large number of students are low achieving, schools must look at the practices taking place within their schools and modify them accordingly. If the curriculum does not promote *all* students in high achievement, no matter what race or culture, then it must be discontinued and a new curriculum implemented that reaches out to *all* students. If not, the same results will occur—systematic failure for African-American and non-White students. Educational public policy must change. Overlooking diversity as a means of assisting in closing the achievement gap and in challenging myths associated with the low achievement of African-American students in the public school system is antithetical to a progressive educational system.

Recommendations

Diversity creates opportunities to change the perception of the low achievement of Blacks and an opportunity to address educational public policy in this area with the following recommendations:

1. Recruitment of a diverse teacher population through partnerships with local universities, as the number of teachers of color appears to be limited in public education.
2. Restructure the curriculum to reflect demographic changes, which will include

Forum on Public Policy

differentiation reflective of minority achievements taught as an integral part of the curricula rather than add-ons.

3. Actively encourage and seek opportunities for minority students to participate in higher level educational pursuits, such as: enrichment programs, academies, gifted education, International Baccalaureate Programs and Advanced Placement classes.
4. Use benchmarks to note academic levels of achievement between the various ethnic groups within the school system by disaggregating data, instead of using normative data as a measuring tool.
5. Provide and require effective diversity training for all staff members, because teachers are capable of influencing students in a positive manner in bringing about social justice for all inside and outside of the classroom.
6. Consider the student, parents and school community as a package when solving issues of diversity and closing the achievement gap. Each entity is dependent on the other for success.
7. Institute a Parent Academy whereby parents are readily available to learn what is needed to assist their children in academic achievement. Also, allow parents to participate in the school day with their children, use parents also as valuable resources within the school. Make facilities available at night and during the weekend for parents.

References

Achinstein, B. *Community, Diversity and Conflict Among Schoolteacher: The Ties That blind. Advances in Contemporary Educational Thought Series.* New York: Teachers College Press, 2002.

Forum on Public Policy

- Appelbaum, Peter. *Contemporary Education Issues. Multicultural and Diversity Education: A Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara, California: ABC CLIO, 2002.
- Archer, J. (2002, January 9). "Group Cites Needy But High-Performing Schools," *Education Week*, 21 (2003): 3.
- Bamburg, D. (1994). *Raising expectations to improve student learning*. Illinois: ERIC Identifier ED378290, 1994.
- Banks, James. *An Introduction to Multicultural Education*. 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999.
- Borman, G. and L. Overman. Academic Resilience in Mathematics Among Poor and Minority Students. *The Elementary School Journal*, 104, no. 3 (2004): 177-196.
- Borman, G., S. Stringfield, and L. Rachuba. (1998, June). *Advancing Minority High Achievement: National Trends and Promising Programs and Practices: A Report Prepared for the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement the College Board*. John Baltimore, MD: Hopkins University: Center for social organization of schools. ERIC Identifier ED438380, June 1998.
- Brown Anniversary Speakers Say Anger Needed in Debate Over Education. *Black Issues in Higher Education* 21, no. 9 (n.d.): 1-2.
- Carter, S. *No Excuses Lessons From 21 High-Performing, High Poverty Schools*. Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2000.
- Christie, K. (2004, April). Virginia's Excellent Adventure. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85, no. 8 (2004): 565-567.
- Coleman, J., E. Campbell, C. Hobson, J. McPartland, A. Mood, F. Weinfeld, and R. York. *Equality of educational opportunity*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966.
- College Board. *Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement*. NY: College Board Publications, 1999.
- Commonwealth of Virginia. *Report of the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2004. Review of Factors and Practices Associated with School Performance in Virginia. To the Governor and the General Assembly of Virginia*. Senate Document No.8. Commonwealth of Virginia: Richmond, Virginia, 2004.
- Crane, J. Exploding the myth of scientific support for the theory of Black intellectual inferiority. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 20, no. 2 (1994): 189-209.
- Daniel-White, K. *Reassessing Parental Involvement: Involving Language Minority Parents in School Work at Home*. FL: Working Papers in Educational Linguistics, 2002.
- Darling-Hammond, L. *Reshaping Teaching Policy, Preparation, and Practice: Influences of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards*. NY: AACTE Publications, 1999.
- Delpit, L. *Other people's Children: Cultural Conflicts in the Classroom*. NY: The New Press, 1995.
- Delpit, L. and J. Dowdy. *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*. NY: The New Press, 2002.
- Diamond, J., Randolph, A. and J. Spillane. Teachers' Expectations and Sense of Responsibility for Student Learning: The Importance of Race, Class, and Organizational Habitus. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 35, no. 1 (2004): 75-99.
- Drummond, D. and D. Stipek. Low-Income Parents' Beliefs About Their Role in Children's Academic Learning. *The Elementary School Journal*, 104, no. 3 (2004): 197- 214.
- Edley, C., Jr. *Keeping the Promise of "No Child Left Behind": Success or Failure Depends Largely on Implementation by the U.S. Department of Education. Testimony Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce Oversight Hearing on the Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act*. MA: Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2002.
- Edmonds, R. Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership*, 37 (1979): 15-27.
- Education Trust. *State summary of Virginia*. Ed Watch Online. Washington, DC: Education Trust, 2001.
- Fairfield, H. Unmasking Pseudoscience: Comments on "How Skewed is the Bell Curve?" *Journal of Black Psychology* 21, no. 3 (1995): 297-299.
- Ferguson, R. *What doesn't meet the eye: Understanding and Addressing Racial Disparities in High -Achieving Suburban Schools*. NY: ERIC Identifier ED474390 North Central Regional Educational Lab, 2002.
- Ferguson, R. Teachers' perceptions and expectations and the Black-White Test Score Gap. *Urban Education* 38, no. 4 (2003): 460-507.
- Ferguson, R., R. Clark, and J. Stewart. *Closing the Achievement Gap in Suburban and Urban School Communities*. Policy Issue. Illinois: ERIC

Forum on Public Policy

- Identifier ED473122 North Central Regional Educational Lab, 2002.
- Fish, J. *Race and intelligence: Separating Science from Myth*. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2002.
- Haycock, K. Closing the Achievement Gap. *Educational Leadership* 58, no. 6 (2001): 6-11.
- Haynes, N. How Skewed Is the Bell Curve? *Journal of Black Psychology*, 1995, in *American School Board Journal*. <http://www.trust.org> (Accessed may 18, 2005).
- Hendrie, C. In U.S. Schools, Race Still Counts. 2004. <http://edweek.org> Accessed (January 21, 2004).
- Herrnstein, R. and C. Murray. *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. NY: The Free Press, 1994.
- Hilliard, A., III. (1998). *SBA: The Reawakening of the African Mind*. CA: Makare Publishing, 1998.
- Hoffman, K., C. Llagas, and T. Snyder. *Status and Trends in the Education of Blacks*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2003.
- Jackson, J. *NAACP Call For Action in Education*. MD: ERIC Identifier ED474666 NAACP Education Department, 2001.
- Johnston, R., and D. Viadero. *Unmet Promise: Raising Minority Achievement. The Achievement Gap*. Washington, DC: ERIC Identifier ED458334 Editorial Projects in Education, Inc, 2000.
- Kober, N. *It Takes More Than Testing: Closing the Achievement gap*. A Report of the Center on Education Policy. Washington, DC: ERIC Identifier ED454358 Center on Education Policy, 2001.
- Kozol, J. *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. NY: Harper Perennial, 1991.
- Kozol, J. *Ordinary Resurrections: Children In the Years of Hope*. NY: Crown Publishers, 2000.
- Landgraf, K. *Using Assessments and Accountability to Raise Student Achievement*. NJ: ERIC Identifier ED482280 Educational Testing Service, 2003.
- Link, F. *Essays On the Intellect*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1995.
- McLauchlin, V. 2006. "A study of the 2003-04 academic achievement gap in Virginia Standards of Learning mathematics scores between fifth-grade Black and White students in an urban American public school district." Ed. D. diss., Virginia: Regent University.
- Meldrum, C. and S. Eaton. 1994. *Resegregation in Norfolk, Virginia: Does Restoring Neighborhood Schools Work?* Abstract. ERIC Identifier ED371095.
- Miller, P. *Theories of Developmental Psychology* 4th ed. NY: Worth Publishers, 2002.
- National Council for the Social Studies. *Curriculum guidelines for multicultural education*. NCSS Task Force on Ethnic Studies Curriculum Guidelines. Silver Spring, MD: National Council of Social Studies, n.d. <http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/multicultural> (Accessed January 15, 2007).
- Nieto, S. *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* 3rd ed. NY: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc, 2000.
- North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. *Bridging the great divide: Broadening perspectives on closing the achievement gaps*. Naperville, IL: ERIC Identifier ED475906 North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2002.
- Obiakor, F. Teacher Expectations of Minority Exceptional Learners: Impact on "Accuracy" of Self-Concepts. *Exceptional Children* 66, no.1 (1999): 39-54.
- Obiakor, F. *Teacher Expectations of Multicultural Exceptional Learners: Impact On "Accuracy" of "Self-Concepts."* MN: ERIC Identifier ED419311 Council for Exceptional Children, 1998.
- Ogbu, J. *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement*. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003.
- Olson, L. The Great Divide. *Education Week*, 22, no. 17(2003): 9-15.

Forum on Public Policy

- Perry, T., C. Steele, and A. Hilliard III. (2003). *Young, Gifted, and Black Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.
- Richards, H., A. Brown and T. Forde. Addressing Diversity in Schools: Cultural Responsive Pedagogy. *Teaching Exceptional Children* 39, no. 3 (2007): 64-68.
- Richman, C.; S. Bovelsky, N. Kroovand, J. Vacca, and T. West. Racism 102: The Classroom. *Journal of Black Psychology* 3, no. 4(1997): 378-387.
- Roach, R. Conservative Scholars Ponder K-12 Education Conference Highlights Include Discussions of Public School Reform, Closing Racial Achievement Gap. *Black Issues in Higher Education* 21, no. 9 (2004): 1-3.
- Slavin, R. and N. Madden. *Reducing the Gap: Success For All and the Achievement of African-American and Latino students*. Washington, DC: ERIC Identifier ED455079 Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), 2001.
- The Associated Press*. Education Groups Push for Greater Diversity in Teaching Force. *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 2004. <http://findarticles.com> (Accessed October 11, 2005).
- The Heritage Foundation. (n.d.). "Black/White Achievement Gap." Chap. 2 from <http://www.eted02.Inx390.Isu.edu/docs/available/etd-0605103-> (Accessed March 17, 2005).
- Thernstrom, A. and S. Thernstrom. *No Excuses Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. NY: Simon and Schuster, 2003.
- Thompson, C., and D. O'Quinn, III. *The North Carolina Education Research Council. Eliminating the Black-White Achievement Gap. A Summary of Research*. ERIC Identifier ED457250 Clearinghouse on Urban Education. Chapel Hill, N.C.: North Carolina Education Research Council, 2001.
- Uhlenberg, J., and Brown, K. (2002). Racial gap in teachers' perceptions of the achievement gap. *Education and Urban Society* 34, no. 4 (2002): 493-530.
- U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Reaching out . . . Raising African- American Achievement. *Edweek*, 23, no. 19 (n.d.): 1 16-19.
- Viadero, D. and R. Johnston *Lags in Minority Achievement Defy Traditional Explanation. Second in a Four-Part Series*. Washington, DC: ERIC Identifier ED458335 Editorial Projects In Education Incorporated, 2000.
- Wagner, T. *Making the Grade: Reinventing America's Schools*. NY: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002.
- Welch, C. and E. White. (13 October 2006). Reducing Referrals to Special Education: Improved Identification Within an RtI Process. Virginia Beach: Virginia. *NAASBMC Closing the Achievement Gap Summit*, 2006.
- Winston, Judith. (Summer 1995). Fulfilling the Promise of Brown. *Teachers College Record*, 96, no. 4 (1995): 757-766.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2006.