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A Cultural Approach to Establishing Equity and Closing the Educational Achievement Gap

[Pedro R. Portes](#)

Introduction

Addressing the underdevelopment awaiting most children belonging to historically disparaged groups in the uneven playing field of public education remains - the top problem in advancing equity and excellence in education. Clearly, excellence in our educational system requires equity in opportunities to learn regardless of children's background or status. The achievement gap remains as wide today as when it was first documented by norm-referenced, learning and teaching outcomes (e.g., National Assessment of Educational Progress - NAEP scores by ethnicity) among mounting evidence that in effect reveal an average differential of four grade levels. While differences at the individual level are understandable, gross disparities in both educational and economic outcomes among ethnic populations represent a problem with both scientific and ethical dimensions (Portes, 2005). The social science community is still at a loss after decades of reforms that fail to reduce this enduring achievement gap in education. Well funded comprehensive school reform models have created the illusion that the gap is closing when this is not true. For example current NCLB policies and related programs, such as Success for All (Slavin, 2002) do not, in spite of claims to the contrary (see Pogrow, 1999; 2002), close the gap nor offer a viable alternative direction. Such an example raises ethical questions not only about how scarce resources are being misallocated but also of how pretense and self-serving entrepreneurship becomes part of the political economy of education. This problem may be defined in terms of how social injustice prevails alongside group-based poverty that in effect cause and sustain the educational system's under-education by design. The latter in part defines the "achievement gap". The gap is dialogical, a semiotic category that remains largely misunderstood by those who associated it with a cultural deficit that thrives in the thinking of influential policy writers (see Rothstein, 2004; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). These scholars frame the problem of the achievement gap in terms of faulty parenting practices that should be modified to parallel of those of middle class dominant group families and successful Asian groups. Zero tolerance practices championed by charter schools are considered a solution to the longstanding pattern of group based poverty and social disadvantages that include tracking and severe inequalities (Kozol, 1992; 2000).

Much like the mandates to end bilingual education, Limited English proficiency (LEP) has become a new mechanism through which many students are tracked into programs that offer little hope of helping them catch up, even after six or more years of second language learning. In spite of evidence that bilingual education works, laws are passed to create an underclass of students who generally cannot achieve at grade level standards. Low income Asian, white and black students also confront barriers to mastering academic English, in addition to the more visible Latino groups who are increasingly faltering in the system. Meanwhile, social justice becomes trivialized while new generations of students are placed at risk while going to schools as currently organized. We have yet to find an approach that is effective and sustainable. At the same time, the persistence of a growing group-based inequality (Portes, 1996) in access to a grade level education presents not only an ethical dilemma but threatens our democratic principles. The latter are believed to guide the organization of our educational system when in reality, a caste-like system persists unhampered. It seems then that a seriously limited understanding prevails regarding how to address a growing educational achievement gap and that in itself, becomes part of the complexity of this problem. There is a need for a broader kind of research inquiry that can serve to organize a knowledge base for policy relevant to closing the achievement gap. Rather than rely on single barrel solutions such as charter schools or modifying other people's childrearing patterns and "one-shot" programs, educational programs that span across home and

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schools can provide greater cultural continuity that integrate intense meaningful learning experiences for students placed at risk by overcompensating for the current 'teaching to the test' basic drills. The relationship between individual and cultural development, especially in relation to structural constraints, mediated action, and agency, is yet to be fully understood. Only then can the current system be restructured in organizing teaching and learning in ways that can embrace students' cultures of origin while at the same time ensuring that learning and teaching are designed to meet current grade-level standards. These two conditions are pivotal in improving the status quo and require early enrichment and a pipeline of supplementary educational support to break from the massive compounding of disadvantages awaiting children from groups subjected to group-based inequality.

Current approaches and educational programs for children placed at risk remain ineffective in closing the achievement gap in spite of some modest gains reported in the early literature (Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983). The modest gains reported by Head Start mainly concern lowering retention and drop-out rates for some minority groups rather than improvements in educational outcomes. A limited understanding is also reflected in the inconsistency of federal and state policies. Existing programs classified as comprehensive school reform do not significantly reduce the learning gap in terms of children's academic development as measured by performance standards such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress or similar tests. In addition, the question of how current efforts do and do not empower future families in bringing about changes in the reproduction of inequality and advancement of equity needs to be studied. Consequently, a shift in policy makers' perspectives, particularly in the area of intellectual and cultural development, is needed for developing reasoned and effective educational and social policies. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to occur unless the knowledge gap amongst educators and policy makers is bridged.

Another Look at Current Educational Policy

It is clear that current policy disregards establishing greater social justice. The latter is regarded as incompatible with higher standards and accountability. Over one in five of America's children grow up in a culture of poverty under changing family forms; many families are headed by women in impoverished minority populations at two and three times that rate. Most of these children are inadvertently being prepared for limited socio-economic opportunities and failure upon entering school. Schools not only fail to educate some children equitably but also perpetuate poor economic futures for them and the nation. As a result, children are bound in a context of economic deprivation that is progressively limiting with respect to intellectual development, achievement motivation and the possibility of benefiting from schooling. Over forty percent of native, Latin and African-American children live in poverty compared to fourteen percent of majority children. This massive inequality is reflected in NAEP scores (reading and comprehension) gaps that show that "majority-group 13 year old students" perform at about the same level as 17-year-old black students (*Condition of Education*, 2006). A literacy gap ranging from 3-to-4 grade levels is thus constructed, resulting in the majority of students subject to group-based inequality seriously being handicapped in competing in today's economy, in higher education and accessing equity-inspired opportunity structures. That is, a system that leaves the poorest students several grade levels behind has been institutionalized further with higher standards alongside a host of equal opportunity structures that are moot given that few of these students can qualify for them. The educational system seems more concerned with giving the impression of being equity minded than it is concerned about producing greater equity in actual learning outcomes.

Pseudo-debates still prevail in policy circles that deliberate on whether some types of daycare and preschool services are effective (Zigler & Styco, 1993); what types of staffing and physical environments work best; and the role of whole language and ESL programs in helping students placed at risk. On the right end of the political spectrum, students from low income ethnic backgrounds are blamed by privileged, deficiently informed groups following the views of Herrnstein and Murray, (1994), Huntington (2004a, 2004b) and other pseudo scientists who promote a cultural deficit explanation for the gap, thus reviving the ideology of racism. It is often presumed in these debates that adequate methodologies and programs have in fact been proven effective in enabling minority children to compete successfully with mainstream children (Schorr, 1989) when they have not, the victims are blamed for not catching up. Some preschool packages have been developed for children at risk based on early intervention research (e.g., Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, Miller-Johnson, 2002; Zigler, 1986) yet most children in need have limited access and follow-up support. Often the success of early age interventions and after-school programs is defined on the basis of non-academic elective domains such as self-report, consumer satisfaction, reduction in discipline referrals, or drop-out rates (e.g. Ramey and Ramey, 2005). While these areas of study may be justified as necessary and instrumental, they are clearly not sufficient for closing the massive educational achievement gap constructed later in elementary and secondary grades. Moreover, the models that still under gird much policy—focusing on early age intervention, family literacy, drug, violence and teen pregnancy prevention, family resource centers, after school programs, class size reduction and other school reform interventions—appear disjointed and ill-defined.

Many policy makers and researchers defend current models as adequate (Consortium for Longitudinal

Studies, 1983, pull-out programs for ESL, Leadership oriented transformations of counselor and principal preparation programs, Success for All) and regrettably give the impression that all that can be done is being done. Even when some early education programs prove effective, an obvious problem concerns the fact that most children soon are placed at risk, and remain excluded from challenging curricula or underserved in public school. Rather than describe and evaluate current explanations of the current achievement—for instance, deficiencies in the educational system itself (Noddings, 1996) and the pedagogical preparation of educators (Clinchy, 2001; Tharp, Estrada, Dalton, & Yamauchi, 2000; Wong-Fillmore, 2002), unfair school and social practices (McLaren, 1994; Varenne & McDermott, 1999), limited inherited ability (Herrenstein & Murray, 1994)—the current paper's goal is to outline a unified cultural-historical perspective (Portes, 2005) of the development of the achievement gap. A socio-cultural model of development and its potential for guiding compensatory educational interventions is outlined.

Class Differences in Socialization

Cultural differences in home environment factors account for inequality in scholastic and economic outcomes far more than a host of school variables (Coleman 1990; Jencks and Phillips, 1999). However, if the socialization patterns associated and observed in certain cultures are *not the causes* but rather *the products* of the long-term consequences of adapting to insensitive socio-historical conditions, this research and accompanying explanations reveal much less than is generally claimed. It may be precisely because of restrictions imposed on families and children's development that socialization practices produce dispositions that are incompatible with those required in schools. Recently the work of Hart and Risley (1995) on early socialization and its impact on literacy development has been injudiciously interpreted with a cultural deficit explanation that ignores the history of poverty and social injustice in shaping the achievement gap (see Rothstein, 2004). Rothstein's analysis suggests that faulty family and community socialization patterns cause unsuccessful adaptation to school literacy demands and should be modified to fit patterns of mainstream families not living in poverty. From a cultural-historical framework, extended unfair treatment by the dominant society creates and amplifies social class and ethnic differences that resist short-term interventions. After almost half a century of gradual, painstaking progress in creating strategic opportunity structures and educational reforms, the agency of dominant groups persists in sustaining a social and educational apartheid. A major premise from the social justice vantage point is that organizing a more equitable, socially just history will significantly reduce, in time, not only conflict and war, but gross group- based disparities in educational and economic outcomes. The evidence to support this premise lies in great measure in the history of oppression and social injustice of any group.

Understanding the SES Divide.

In 1979, the wealthiest class had ten times more wealth than the middle class. Today, such inequality has more than doubled for upper classes and the working class has been basically excluded from economic growth during these decades. Yet, in spite of much discussion of the economic and social inequality problem, many remain convinced that equal opportunity already has been established and individual entrepreneurship is the solution. Presumably, this can be "proven" by anecdotes that deny the reality and prevalence of group-based inequality (Portes, 1996). Every time students from poor backgrounds beat the odds, such anomalies are used as proof positive that the current system is on the right course and that what is needed is for the slackers (both students and educators) to shape up. Given these myths and current economic trends, it seems unlikely that inequalities will be reduced unless there is a radical increase in the knowledge base of educators and the dominant class. Group or status inequality is socially and historically constructed in the synergy of inter-group relations, demographic shifts, and legislation and court decisions. A congruent educational and social policy is needed to break the multigenerational cycles that reproduce poverty and lower academic achievement for some groups.

Group differences in income and academic achievement essentially reflect the extent to which inequity is being produced by a system of public education founded outside democratic principles. In this society, education remains a commodity to be privatized through the inter-correlated wealth, inside information and privilege factors. The parents of children affected by group based inequality, on the other hand, generally believe public schools will treat theirs right as much as that a grade level education is obligatory and a child's right. They tend to socialize children in ways that do not provide the edge of academically relevant discourse and hands-on experience. The reality is that of subtractive schooling for some (Valenzuela, 1999; 2002) and value-added college preparatory courses for predominantly advantaged others. School performance scores, much like intelligence test scores serve as an index of cultural achievement (Cole, 1996) and each must be viewed historically in terms of students' access to certain cultural experiences and tools that strongly influence academic development and cultural adaptation. Any group comparison of school performance requires attention to the inter-cultural history of each student group in a broader context.

Conceptual and Practical Problems with Current Policy

The forces that control language policy, teacher, principal counselor preparation and certification,

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education tax dollars, special education, Even and Head Start and similar norms are based on human agency and power. Early education, for example, is considered a critical period for promoting language and cognitive growth because of the dramatic changes that can be made. Since Bloom's (1964) finding that a child's intellectual level at age seventeen is largely accounted for by age four, early age education programs have been launched to serve most children. Depending on social class, children (monolingual) learn about 13 word meanings per day. Early childhood education programs have been regarded as the logical way to bring about a change for children trapped in "cultures of poverty", where standard English is not fully cultivated outside school. The theoretical underpinnings of early age interventions have been based on the notion of a *critical period* that was loosely borrowed from ethology (Lorenz, 1952). It was and still is considered an important explanatory principle for the achievement gap, serving still as the theoretical rationale for the many millions of dollars spent on early interventions since the late 1960's. Children of the poor are often targeted for interventions that promote school readiness, and presume a level ground for schooling can be provided. Multi-million dollar programs have been launched to catch problems early, to prevent the achievement gap from emerging, and to show that equal educational opportunity is being established. While these efforts are necessary, two inter-related questions remain:

a) How to bring about and sustain comparable distributions in educational outcomes for ethnic and majority children, at least in terms of a grade-level education, and b) When will the elimination of group-based inequality become an actual national goal in its own right?

Some Head Start and other early intervention models have produced modest gains for some participants in some programs (Lazar & Darlington, 1982; Dunham, Kidwell, & Portes, 1995; Schorr, 1989). Head Start has been institutionalized but not all eligible children are served, particularly Latinos who are learning English. In spite of these well-intentioned efforts, an educational handicap continues to be forged for this underserved population. Labels—"disadvantaged" has been traded for that of "at-risk" minority, students of color and "placed at risk"—but the general model of insufficient- and discontinuous support for *individuals* remains essentially the same. Low levels of academic achievement remain directly related to poverty. The present system of locally funded schools (except for Department of Defense schools) fails to educate these children at grade level, thus sustaining intergenerational poverty. The literacy gap has remained intact since 1971 in spite of the billions of dollars spent of reforms.

Gaps in Language Mediated Activity

A cultural-historical view of human development can account for the prevailing gap in school achievement learning outcomes for economically impoverished ethnic group students. This model can also account for the predictive validity of tests scores from age 4 to 17. By age four, the effects of certain environmental conditions (constraints or affordances) become manifest and predictive of subsequent development and school achievement. The social context or environment surrounding the mind of a young child who scores well below the norm is indicative of marked differences in both the quality and quantity of learning opportunities found across social class as well as differences in the rate at which educational experiences are delivered interactively through peer and adult mediated experiences. These patterns are established and detectable early, and most importantly are likely to remain consistent over time.

From this perspective, Bloom's (1964) finding that most of the differences in school achievement at age seventeen can be detected as early as age four can be easily explained. It is not just having a "critical period" for language stimulation for the brain to process that accounts for the correlation but the continuity and stability of interaction patterns that are associated with poverty and those engulfed by it and who in turn are educated and treated differently because of their cultural background. Such patterns persist in their socio-economic and political context. This is not how Hart and Risley's (1995) findings concerning differences in everyday socialization practices are being considered by decision-makers today. Instead, we lose track of the obvious opportunities that lie before us to organize a more equitable system for educating all children in ways that promote all children's success while being respectful to cultural differences.

This reinterpretation of the critical period notion for human development is relevant for understanding the socially mediated nature of the achievement gap. Language mediation occurs in all cultures. The achievement gap that is robustly maintained long after preschool depends, however, on systemic differentials in mediated experiences that persist in poverty and are amplified by the structure of the educational system itself.

Part of the problem for children from groups over-represented in poverty is not only obvious differences in learning experiences associated with poverty but twice or more the demands placed upon them by two worlds that require adaptation in their own subtle ways. Differences in resources, access and timing interact today with the increased demands of higher standards that like the Iraq war's lack in adequate preparation and support. Thus, the social inequity that is produced and reproduced through cultural practices in asset distribution, mediated learning opportunities and tools such as those reflected by

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socio-economically differentiated language, technology and in/after school activity reinforces group-based learning outcomes as the signature of public institution.

A system that does not overlook the relationship between mind and culture in the formation of skills, aptitudes and dispositions required in school is needed. A meaningful understanding of higher thinking or abstract functions (Vygotsky, 1978; 1987) lies outside the knowledge base of educators and policy-makers who seem concerned about social justice. Higher thinking skills are needed not only for low-income students but also for those who educate them and structure current policies. These skills develop first inter-psychologically and can be easily cultivated among peers and adults in meaningful learning experiences, particularly during and after adolescence. These skills and concepts transfer and become part of each person in terms of capacity to adapt to any environment and profit from further social interactions. Before such higher concepts and skills become self-regulated, a rich socio-linguistic context must be available and organized regularly so relevant experiences can be connected to school success. Both formal and informal learning environments need to be organized so gains made earlier in the lifespan do not wash-out. The fact that this only tends to be the case in educated families outside of school explains much of the intractability of the gap. Hence, accountability and higher stakes testing gain new meaning along with understanding students' cultural history (Portes, 2005). The measurement of individual school aptitude, without regard to context, tells us less about individual ability than about the contexts of social learning insofar as differentials in cumulative interactions and inter-group relations are concerned.

So What to Do?

For a significant and lasting effect on children's intellectual development to be sustained at the group level, *both* individual and contextual supports need to be activated in restructuring educational program design and practices. To achieve a significant and lasting educational effect with children placed at risk requires that certain provisions be organized for children, regardless of class membership, very early and for an extended period of time. This implies going beyond simple accommodations offered by adults in the school to more direct changes in the ways current school programs and socialization experiences are designed for those being placed at risk. One basic premise, then, is that only when the essential mechanisms that produce group-based inequality are identified can a strategy re-organize those mechanisms and advance to produce positive outcomes. It is known that the gap is not only produced early but amplified over time by the current structure and practices of a public system designed to provide a middle school education for some and a college preparation for others.

In summarizing, the belief in a critical period and compensatory early education has not fared well in empirical literature and reflects an incomplete analysis of the problem. While some of the current efforts appear necessary, they are not sufficient for allowing children from groups subjected to inequality to succeed in school. The content and timing of educational interventions is of obvious importance, but they cannot compensate for the subsequent discontinuity of support for learning experiences that determine, to a great extent, the child's readiness to learn and adapt to school. A plan for providing cultural continuity is needed to support any type of educational intervention. The concepts of "enrichment" and "intellectual stimulation" need, then, to be re-examined insofar as they concern the development of intelligence or school aptitude. This reexamination is needed for the following reasons:

- If parent involvement is the most important factor predicting school success, why not include "inside" parent information through formal and informal life skills based on human development and learning theory to be shared with adolescent students before they become parents. This strategy for intentionally promoting higher level thinking with those least likely to have access is described elsewhere (Portes, 2005).
- If bilingualism has been shown to produce certain advantages in intellectual ability, why not promote bilingual education in school, particularly from elementary on when children are most ready. This would not only help prepare more competent student generations for a global economy but also help a growing Latino population avoid falling behind.
- If learning a second language promotes less bias, more cultural sensitivity, and better academic outcomes, why not require a foreign language for educators?
- For students needing to learn standard English language skills, why not provide expert tutors and sheltered instruction in content areas rather than segregation from those who have those skills?
- For advantaged and all college students who will someday lead the nation, why not encourage at least one semester of tutoring and mentoring of a student placed at risk in the local school district?

Summary

The input from the environment needs to be designed for continuity, while challenging and reinforcing the child's development in various valued areas with respect to measures of school success. These areas need to be aligned with school skills and foster proximal zones for development that are culturally prized and consonant with those from which intellectual assessments are made in relation to adult career roles

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and activities.

The activities found in the environment that mediate development require particular attention to symbolic tools centered on language-mediated literacy and intellectual skills, as well as beliefs and expectations. The learning opportunities around those placed at risk require continuous enrichment in the very ways everyday activities are supported and mediated. Finally, in order to achieve comparable distributions of grade level performance in the future by ethnicity, a strategy of overcompensation for the first few generations needs to be established until comparable parental education levels and practices are established intergenerationally. That is, a socio-cognitive support system needs to be in place long enough to influence future generations of families and produce a bi-cultural "kit" that promotes school success. This strategy is needed because its implementation runs contrary to that imposed by generations of poverty and oppression and its need to support children's school success. Today, important financial and social information basics are not shared with those who are working yet living in poverty every day. Information is power and like education, prevention and promotion activities need to be structured in a transformed system.

For children placed at risk, overcompensation can be defined as an early start that involves a high intensity and continuity of experience in terms of culturally mediated activity. Given socio-economic differences, and differences in parents' language and education, effective preschool and afterschool experiences become essential in forging a ZPD that is compatible with what schools require for readiness. Overcompensation is required today because the effects of socioeconomic disadvantages have been cumulative and increase with age and the current economy.

It may be then that school-based activities need to be reorganized so that "basic skills" are not all that the child encounters: he or she also needs to learn higher order skills. Too often we find that schooling with its still tracked practices and low expectations, and with much occurring in the classroom that fails to work within children's zones of proximal development, often impedes the development of higher-level intellectual skills. In this sense, schools frequently fail to provide optimal conditions for intellectual development, literally placing them at risk early by locking them there through tracking (Oakes, 1990) and with a host of interacting factors (Portes, 2005). Any effective program designed for children who have been placed at risk must, therefore, neutralize or reverse two main detrimental influences: a) the effects of limited socioeconomic resources and the norms that evolve there and b) the effects of schools that organize less than optimal conditions for the development of students placed at risk. This is a tall order. Unless current urban structures are reorganized according to the above principles, greater social justice in terms of more proportional achievement outcomes will remain distal.

Conclusion

Current reforms and programs fail to organize and sustain the necessary conditions to empower most children placed at risk with access to equitable educational opportunity. As a result students placed at risk obtain generally a middle school education at seventeen, while their peers obtain a 12 year education and often more. Current policy ensures that most poor and English learning children become and remain at risk in the lower range of scholastic achievement during the K-12 period. Equal educational opportunity requires a restructuring strategy for the activation of specific conditions that favor intellectual and subsequent economic development, both in and out of school. These social and pedagogical conditions that are yet to be structured are the means to achieve the ultimate goal of closing the educational gap. They are the *sine qua non* for establishing comparable educational opportunities. Ironically, these same social conditions may be considered, in and of themselves, the ultimate *goal* to be achieved for educational excellence since not only would the gap narrow, but the national achievement level would rise.

Today's policy response to the achievement gap maintains a large bureaucracy. Success in second order effects such as reducing drop outs for some groups and very few others, in turn, serves a twofold purpose. First, it creates the false impression of actively pursuing and gradually achieving the goal of establishing equal educational opportunity for all. Second, it appears as if truly effective strategies for the eradication of structural obstacles in children's development are known, accessible and being utilized. If all *that can be done is being done*, the current push for accountability, vouchers, and productivity for educational excellence can proceed unhampered. The problem, however, is that excellence for some without equity for all is an oxymoron. Thus, second-order benefits, from this perspective, serve to undermine and impede genuine progress toward a full and rich equal opportunity and equitable education for all students.

For educational interventions to reverse discriminating structures and to achieve parity for historically neglected populations, a convincing strategy must attend to socio-genetic conditions that simultaneously address individual and group development (Portes, 1996). Demographic changes in the U. S. population create an imperative to find effective ways to educate children from groups over-represented in poverty. It may no longer be just an ethical dilemma for those interested in moving toward democratic ideals. It is also a must for the nation's economic survival, safety and, indeed, its relative power superiority. From

a national perspective, the U. S. is not only the richest economy in the world, but models the future of the global economy and community by how it deals with its own third world-type conditions. It may be precisely because economic interests transcend national borders that this search for ethical and practical solutions remains pressing. Closing the gap is a canonical means for achieving greater social justice. Each of these interests calls for a no-nonsense national policy strategy and determination that is as concerted and more successful than the wars on drugs and on terrorism. A socio-cultural solution [2](#) is needed to restructure society through education so that group-based inequality is not the signature byproduct of the current educational system. Equity in education thus requires the first step of guaranteeing all children's right to learn at grade level as a basic first step in striving toward excellence in education. Once the latter is achieved, the severe under-representation of students from some groups in college can finally become addressed in a sincere and lasting fashion.

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¹Current policy here is defined as the current blend of federal, state and district laws, policies and preparation programs that produce practices consistent with leaving students behind their grade level in

[object]

a variety of content areas.

2Details of how we can take this step with primary intervention strategies based on a cultural and developmental model are beyond the present scope and available elsewhere (Portes, 2005). It includes a plan for restructuring the present educational system and a family/human development curriculum for adolescents as future parents.

[CONTACT](#)