

The Influence of Racial Attitudes on Student Achievement in the United States

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Abstract

White high school students frequently outperform their African-American peers in public high schools throughout the United States. The U. S. has professed its intention to mitigate this wide disparity but, despite numerous assessments and subsequent proposed solutions, the gap has only closed a sliver since public schools were racially desegregated and integrated in the 1960s. Studies focused on this gap often discuss the impact of socioeconomic status (SES), which holds that unequal resources lead to better academic performance for students from higher SES families and poorer performance for students from lower SES families. However, some studies argue that the gap cannot be fully explained by SES alone, and that research and policy related to student achievement must consider the impact of racial discrimination in America. This paper therefore considers the intersection between race and African-American students' perceived academic achievement.

Educational opportunities for African-American students in the United States depend on a society permeated by Eurocentric values. The educational system has changed from endorsing an environment of hostility towards African-American students to one of inclusion, albeit often forced or sympathetic. Attitudes towards African-American individuals have changed over the past few decades, but a significant gap between the achievement levels of White students and those of African-American students has persisted. The term “achievement gap” commonly refers to the unequal rates of achievement between poorer-performing minority students and their better-performing peers. In many

cases, the concept of socioeconomic status (SES) is inextricably intertwined with discussions of the achievement gap; the higher the SES, the better the academic achievement. Yet statistics also tell us that lower SES White students are still more likely to be at the higher end of the achievement gap than are minority students of equal, or even greater, affluence. These findings tell us that SES alone cannot explain achievement gaps in American public education.

Inequities in education can be detrimental to a person's success within society throughout the course of their entire life. When some social groups are granted better access to education than others, not only are social disparities apparent, but conflict may also ensue (Anderson et al., 2011). Equal education can lead to equal access of other resources within society, such as equal income and housing, while exclusion or unequal quality of education can lead to differing life chances and socioeconomic discrepancies (Howard, 2010). A vicious cycle then manifests itself; African-American students may have lower achievement levels in school due partly to lower SES, but conversely those lower SES levels are due to their limited opportunities and ongoing unequal status within U.S. society.

The extent of the achievement gap's influence is a result of a history of long-held discrimination and prejudice towards African-Americans. Negative attitudes towards African-American individuals became more covert after a landmark judicial case desegregated schools, and these attitudes continue to limit public discussions on race. Internalized negative stereotypes have also affected student achievement. A direct impact of these negative stereotypes is under-representation of African-American culture and visibility in the education system, which is manifested by fewer African-American educators, language and culture barriers, and stereotype threats. Further impacts of race on the achievement gap include teacher bias, color-blind policies, and over-surveillance. A major obstacle that must be overcome in order to create equal, positive outcomes for all ethnicities of students is the negative association of race in relation to academic achievement. As an alternative, focus should be directed towards creating more positive and open discussions of race. Currently, the focus has instead been directed towards

socioeconomic status as a major factor in the creation and maintenance of the achievement gap.

Pointing to this one factor alone has decreased the responsibility that educators feel for fighting against the achievement gap. In part, this is because:

Public education has successfully shifted the blame for the failure of schools to meet the needs of minority students on to the shoulders of the clients they purport to serve. They have pulled off the perfect crime, for they can never be held accountable, since the reason for failure in school is said to be the fault of poor homes, cultural handicaps, linguistic deficiencies, and deprived neighborhood. The fact that schools are geared primarily to serve monolingual, White, middle-class and Anglo clients is never questioned (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 5).

Recommendations for lessening the achievement gap should therefore focus on the impacts of racial discrimination, including how to fight against that bias within the American public education system. Based on the idea that an individual's race impacts most aspects of their life in the U.S., this paper discusses how race affects African-American students' positions in relation to the achievement gap. I argue that racial attitudes and biases should be addressed in order to change African-American students' position at the lower-end of this gap and to propel them forward, toward higher educational achievement. In order to address these challenges, I believe that any future action in the American public academic system should include African-American students' points of view.

Literature Review

Measures of success in public education for African-American students are significantly lower than for White students. In other words, the American public education system generally has a more positive impact on White students than it does for African-American students. This achievement gap is seen by educators and human rights activists as one of the most puzzling problems that exists in American society today (Howard, 2010). According to Tyrone C. Howard, founder of the Black Male Institute at the University of California Los Angeles, "the achievement gap is the discrepancy in educational outcomes between various student groups, namely, African American, Native American,

certain Asian American, and Latino students on the low end of the performance scale, and primarily White and various Asian American students at the higher end of the academic performance scale” (2010, p. 10).

Education is a human right guaranteed by multiple international legal instruments. This right is included in Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) under Article 26, in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) under Articles 28, 29, and 30, and in the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) under Article 13. Each affirms that education should be free and compulsory for all, with no distinctions made based on race, sex, language, political affiliation, national origin, or any other classes. Access to education is considered of great importance in regards to human rights. It enables humans to reach their full potential and claim their rights. It also promotes tolerance among distinctive groups and allows humans to make informed decisions that will enable everyone to be active and fulfilled participants in society. This right has several manifestations: “Children have a right to education (access to quality education), they have rights *in* education (a non-discriminatory environment based on respect and the best interest of the child); and they gain rights *through* education (the ability to make informed choices concerning their lives and to participate as citizens in the world” (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 86). Education therefore provides a means for humans to develop their capacities of mind, a means to be given a platform in which they can be respected, and a means through which to maintain and promote peace worldwide. The achievement gap limits each of these goals, however, especially for students on the lower end of the performance spectrum.

While many minority groups in the United States can be found on the lower end of the performance scale, African-American students are often impacted by this gap in ways that other minority groups are not. For example, African-American males find themselves in situations where they fail academically, are held back in school, are ascribed punishment, and are labeled as needing special education more frequently than any other group in the country (Noguera, 2008). On the other hand,

minority groups such as Hispanics may find themselves as representatives of the lower-performing end due to English language proficiency and literacy deficits, among other reasons (Roy-Campbell, 2012). Therefore, the achievement gap for Hispanics poses a different set of challenges for educators than remedying the over-representation of African-American males in the special education system. In other words, the public education experience is different for African-American students than it is for students of other minority groups.

African-American students score lower on verbal, mathematical, and technical standardized tests, and these gaps in test scores increase as a student progresses through higher-grade levels. For example, there is less standardized test score improvement between White males and African-American males with an additional year of education; White males continue to improve their standardized test scores at greater speed than African-American males do. In Missouri, the average ACT score for an African-American is 16.4, while the average score for Whites is 22.4. The average ACT score for African-American high school students who hope to eventually attend graduate school is 18.9, compared to 24.8 for White counterparts. Gaps between the scores of African-Americans and Whites lessen as post-high school aspirations decrease. For African-Americans who would like to go to a vocational-technical college, the average ACT score is 14.7, while White counterparts earn an average score of 17.8. This is a difference of 3.1 points, opposed to a difference of 5.9 points between students' scores overall. The implication of these lower test scores is that students are first disadvantaged within the educational system, and ultimately go on to lower-paying and less prestigious jobs. Therefore, educational disadvantages translate to economic disadvantages that transcend academic careers (Finch et al., 2002).

The achievement gap is pronounced by the time students reach their senior year of high school. J. Cooper and R. Schleser (2006) find that African-American and White students have differing mathematical abilities by the twelfth grade, with African-American students in their senior year performing at around the level of eighth grade White students. A study by S. Steptoe (2004) noted that

students in the class of 2004 scored 104-points lower than whites on the math SAT and 98 points lower on the verbal section. More recent data from The College Board's 2013 SAT Report on College & Career Readiness shows that significantly few (15.6%) African American students reached or exceeded the SAT Benchmark that year. This was a 0.8% increase from the 2012 school year. African Americans also only made up 13% of the total number of participants, while exactly half of the total number of participants were White. Thus, few African American students participated in the SAT, while fewer still did well on it. The College Board (2013) argues that "nowhere is the need to expand access to rigorous course work more important than among underrepresented minority students" (p. 6). This statement may have been prompted by the fact that the percentage of African-American SAT participants has only risen 1% since 2009 (The College Board, 2009), even though an economic-stimulus bill signed by the U.S. Congress in 2009 included a \$115 billion allotment for education – some of which was designed to be used for the benefit of disadvantaged students (Klein, 2009).

Not only are fewer African-American students participating in the SAT and reaching the SAT benchmark, but they also perform worse than other groups in relation to completing the core curriculum of their high school, enrolling in honors courses, and maintaining GPA's in the A range. African-American SAT participants did not score higher than any group in any of these three areas. For example, 66% of African-Americans completed core curriculum at their high school, compared to the following: 70% of Hispanics, 71% of American Indians, 74% of Asians, and 80% of Whites. Students with GPA's in the A range included 27% of African-Americans, in contrast to 53% of White participants. The College Board's 2013 SAT Report on College & Career Readiness argues that the challenges minorities face must be addressed in order for students to be better prepared for college and to complete a degree.

Socioeconomic differences between social groups are frequently cited as the main cause of the achievement gap. Within this model, educational differences are attributed to unequal resources, such

as the quality of educators and curriculum. The root of the gap is seen as differing socioeconomic levels of schools and families (Howard, 2010). Finch et al. (2002) note that “indeed, what seems to be placing White men ahead of African-American men with respect to high school graduation rates, college admission rates, and scores on standardized tests is the fact that urban households typically have higher rates of family poverty and lower levels of educational preparedness of children” (p. 92). Low socioeconomic status may also impact later mortality, in addition to affecting a student's achievement levels in school (Juon et al., 2014). Distinct differences between the socioeconomic levels of African-Americans and Whites may exist even within the same community. Ronald Ferguson, a Harvard Kennedy School of Government professor, found that 73% of Whites were in the upper middle class or higher of their communities, while only 21% of African Americans were (Stepptoe, 2004). This shows that even when children attend the same school and live in the same school district, socioeconomic differences that account for the achievement gap may still exist.

Socioeconomic differences may account for the achievement gap for multiple reasons. For instance, a lower income may be an indication of a lower level of education of the parents. According to Carl Bankston III and Stephen J. Caldas (1996), “the resources of families consist not only of income and position but also of intangible qualities, such as reading habits of parents, family stability, and expectations for future achievement by children” (p. 536). A higher income increases the amount of tangible and intangible things that families may possess. For example, a family with parents who work at a lower income job may work hours that do not coincide with their children's spare time, and may thus not be available to help with homework. A family may not own a car, and might thus spend more spare time taking public transportation and have less mobility to participate in educational activities such as seeing museums or going to the library. Adequate health care may be harder to come by, which can translate to more school absences. There are a multitude of other negative effects that arise strictly from belonging to a lower socioeconomic class, which may impede the level of success students can

achieve in school. In addition, some researchers have found evidence that the achievement gap within the African-American male community may be linked to increased violence among the group, which is often attributed to lower socioeconomic levels. Notably, African-American male adolescents lead the United States in homicide, both as victims and perpetrators, as well as have the greatest rates of suicide, incarceration, conviction, and arrest (Martin et al., 2007).

Deficit-Based Thinking is one theory used to explain the achievement gap – and with deeply negative consequences. This theory posits that the root causes of differing levels of achievement between racial groups are deficits in a student's cognitive and motivational abilities. For example, an unsuccessful student would be lazy, not able to speak good English, not value education, and have intellectual deficits. The underlying assumption is that an education system that is based primarily on the dominant culture, such as White culture in the United States, is both normal and more beneficial than an education system that values anything else. This leads to educators having lower expectations for students, and thus has a negative impact on these students' educations (Howard, 2010). Perhaps as a result of this “deficit-based thinking,” African-American children may be falsely labeled with behavioral and mental health problems. African-American children are labeled more frequently as “hyperactive” or “mentally retarded” than other races, for instance (McNeil et al., 2001). Also, African-American children may be taught survival skills in order to coexist with others in a society that actively discriminates against them, while White children may be taught to stay quiet and to take criticism. In the Minneapolis school system, for instance, enrollment of Black and White students is nearly equal, but 43% of all suspended students were Black males versus 14% of White males (Martin et al, 2007).

The Cultural Mismatch Theory attempts to challenge the Deficit-Based Thinking Theory by describing differences in achievement levels as being due to cultural differences that may be at odds with mainstream values, behaviors, ways of socially interacting, differing ways of speech and communication, and how students present themselves. According to Tyrone Howard (2010): “Cultural

difference proponents argue that people socialized in different environments will vary in numerous areas, including cognitive processes and communication methods” (p. 30). In order to breach the differences in culture, educators should be more “culturally responsive” in their teaching methods (Howard, 2010, p. 30). Indeed, there are distinct differences between classrooms when one considers culture and its impact on learning. In what is called an “individualistic” classroom, students are encouraged to work independently and are also rewarded for individual achievement. Knowledge is viewed as power, and the most important aspect of communication is to discuss the content of academic subjects, as opposed to using communication as a means to discuss relationships to other people and things. This style of classroom is indicative of the values of White Americans with Western and Northern European heritage (Tileston & Darling, 2009).

On the other hand, a “collectivist” classroom places value on interdependence rather than independence. The role of family and the community are considered to be more important than the student's role as an individual, for instance. Rather than intelligence being measured on the amount of information a student knows about the world and how the student is able to critically analyze this information, a student in a collectivist classroom is seen as intelligent if they know how to successively be a part of the community in which they belong. Nonverbal communication is used more frequently in a collectivist classroom. Furthermore, a student may first think of their relationship to the material of a subject that is being taught, and then think about the content and meaning of the material. “Teachers, who often expect the direct answer to their question based on an individualistic value system, might get impatient with the long story response” (Tileston & Darling, 2009, p. 14). The student, then, does not feel valued. It may be possible to reconcile both the collectivist classroom and the individualistic classroom in order to provide all value systems with an opportunity to succeed (Tileston & Darling, 2009).

Finally, Stereotype Threat is another theory that helps to explain why the achievement gap between White and African-American students exists. In a study conducted by Claude Steele, African-American and White students were given a test and told that it was going to be scored and used to measure their intelligence. African-American students did worse than White students on the test. Afterwards, the students were given a test and told it was only going to be used to study how the students solved problems, and that it was not going to be used as a measure of intelligence. The African-American students and White students scored roughly the same. African-Americans seemingly performed lower because they were anxious about reinforcing stereotypes (Howard, 2010).

In conclusion, there are stark differences between African-American students' rates of success in U.S. public education systems and White students' rates of success. Whites are typically found at the higher end of the academic performance level in the United States, while African-Americans are typically found at the lower end. Some theories that have been used to explain the achievement gap between White students and African-American students include consideration of socioeconomic differences, Deficit-Based Thinking, Cultural Mismatch Theory, and Stereotype Threat.

The Achievement Gap in the United States, Past and Present

In order to better understand the connection between race and education, it is important to note how discrimination, prejudice, and racism have changed in the United States throughout the years. "Notions of a post-race society, situated in contexts constructed and fortified by issues of race and racial privilege, are untenable" (Chapman, 2013, p. 615). Before African-Americans gained equal status as U.S. citizens before the law, racism was obvious, encouraged, and also believed (by Whites) to be justified. Racism of this nature – commonly called Jim Crow racism because of laws that permitted racial segregation – held that Whites were superior to Blacks, that Blacks should be segregated and kept away from Whites, and that the government should enforce these inequalities (Whitley & Kite, 2010). Schools

were kept racially separate because of these views, creating a separation of realities and life opportunities between African-Americans and Whites. African-American students' life opportunities were limited when compared to those of White students, and attempts were made to maintain this inequality even after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled school segregation unconstitutional. Essentially, “schools in the United States were largely designed, to begin with, for the purpose of schooling those to be subjugated, not of educating them” (Mazama & Lundy, 2013, p. 128).

Active subjugation was not the only problem that historically kept African-American students' perspectives out of American classrooms. Schools commonly taught the New England Classical Liberal Curriculum, which included subjects such as Latin, Greek, and Western philosophy. In other words, a White European perspective dominated schools and was regarded as a culture that held more substance and weight than non-Western cultures. The notion that Whites had superior intellect was continually instilled in all students' minds, with and without intent, and the consequences of this bias can still be seen today. Because of the dominant White perspective that was present in public school curriculum, pride in being African-American was discouraged. This “largely contributed to the intellectual and mental marginalization of Africans by making them largely invisible, and therefore irrelevant even to themselves” (Mazama & Lundy, 2013, p. 125).

Jim Crow laws were eventually ruled unconstitutional, yet less overt racism and the privileging of White perspectives in areas such as politics and education continued in the United States. The U.S. Supreme Court desegregated public schools with its *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, but could not prevent teachers, students, and parents from holding racist views. “Instances of overt racism have become less frequent,” write Saucier et al. (2005), “but racism may still be expressed when doing so does not arouse guilt in the individual and when the individual's behavior is not interpreted as being racist” (p. 3). Even though proclaiming one's dislike of a particular race has largely become unacceptable, negative stereotypes have not disappeared. Negative attitudes towards African-

Americans persist, in part because it is difficult to change long-held attitudes that are products of “sociocultural influences, including lifelong exposure to persistent racial hierarchies” (Rudman, 2010, p. 545). There is frequently a strong desire in the U.S. for people not to appear racist, while young people simultaneously learn racist attitudes that have been handed down throughout the years.

In many cases, African-Americans were essentially granted freedom without voice. Even though Jim Crow laws were ruled as unconstitutional, Eurocentric values continue to permeate life in America – including students' educational experiences. For example, the majority of public school teachers are White, curriculums were created by White educators for White students, and African-American English (AAE) is discouraged and not considered proper. Even though identifying strongly with one's race and ethnicity is one of the most important factors for a student's success (Ani, 2013), today's education systems frequently deny students the opportunity to identify in this manner (Mazama & Lundy, 2013). To conceptualize this issue, imagine that a White student has suddenly found themselves in an inner-city public school. They are surrounded by peers and teachers who have different expectations from what they are accustomed to; their culture is mismatched. “They would realize that education is not mainly an academic exercise about abstract mastery of information but a way of relating to a community and maintaining communal ties” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 441). Figuring out how to relate to this new community would make it difficult to do well in school, especially when the peers and teachers strictly enforce integration of their values into the school community. For African-American students who represent a school's racial minority, this imagined scenario is an everyday reality.

Critical Race Theory accounts for the importance of race and racism in all aspects of a person's life. Regarding the achievement gap, Critical Race theorists speculate that race plays an important role in every step of a student's education. When viewed through this theoretical lens, “education is, in essence, a racial project and race consists of an educational project” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 428). Race has an impact on a student's education in a variety of ways. For White students, the impact is both more

positive and conducive towards motivated success, while the opposite is more generally true for African-American students. Education is, as Leonardo (2013) calls it, “a racial project” because of the dichotomy between positive and negative influences and the desire to make education a positive influence for all students. Further, race is an educational project because individuals fall somewhere on a continuum of race knowledge and awareness. Making education a positive experience for all students requires greater awareness of race and existing racism.

The negative effect of race on an African-American student’s level of achievement can be attributed, in part, to prejudice. Types of modern day prejudice, which are more hidden than the racism exhibited during the Jim Crow era, include Modern-Symbolic Prejudice and Aversive Prejudice. Modern-symbolic prejudice is a position defined by the endorsement of egalitarian principles but the rejection of policies aimed at promoting these egalitarian principles. For example, those who fall into the category of modern-symbolic prejudice believe that minority groups are unsuccessful because they do not work hard enough, and that nothing is stopping minority groups from becoming successful. A modern-symbolic racist would believe that an African-American student who is not as successful as a White student is simply not working as hard. Aversive prejudice, on the other hand, can be referred to as “the discomfort, disgust, fear, or uneasiness that may be experienced by Whites in the presence of Blacks despite the beliefs that Whites espouse egalitarianism” (Saucier et al., 2005, p. 3). While aversive racists try to appear as unprejudiced as possible, their anxiety and discomfort with African-Americans causes tension. An aversive racist would be uncomfortable with desegregated school districts that have diverse student populations. An underlying problem with each of these forms of prejudice is the unwillingness to discuss race.

An African-American perspective is often absent from course work and curriculum, but also from the instruction level; there are extremely few African-American teachers working within the U.S. public education system. Since only 5% of U.S. public school educators are African-American and it is

likely that a student will go through 13 years of education, starting from kindergarten, and never have a Black teacher. Few African-American educators means that there are fewer role models that students of color will identify with. Research shows that identification with positive role models is more likely to lead to higher student achievement, so there are clear negative implications related to this lack of African-American educators. Notably, contact with educators has been linked to student success. This could be any type of contact, including academic discussions, help with course selections, and/or career plans. For African-American students, more frequent interactions take place with teachers than for White students. For African-American students, discussion of course selections had the strongest positive correlation with self-development, while for White students there was a stronger correlation between discussion of career plans and academic work to self-development. Either way, the impact of out-of-class contact between students and teachers was equally beneficial in regards to intellectual gains for each of the two races (Einarson & Clarkberg, 2010).

Stereotype threat can also influence a student's success. African-American students voiced that “stereotypes and the threat of fulfilling them is a major obstacle in their academic lives” (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013, p. 387). Stereotype threat is particularly harmful to African-American students because of the nature of the stereotypes directed towards them. A commonly held stereotype of African-Americans is that they are intellectually inferior (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013). A student's perception of their own possible failure can be detrimental towards their self-esteem. In order to protect their self-esteem, fewer African-Americans make serious efforts to succeed in school. “They tell us we are in a world where hope must be constructed therapeutically because so much of it has been destroyed by the conditions of internment in which we have placed these children. It is harder to convince young people that they ‘can learn’ when they are cordoned off by a society that isn’t sure they really can” (Kozol, 2005, p. 37). Giving students a sense of their impending failure is “one of the most destructive and long-lasting messages a nation possibly could give its children” (Kozol, 2005, p. 37).

Teachers can treat African-American students with intentional or unintentional bias. For example, sometimes worries of appearing racist or supporting stereotypes mean that White educators don't provide the same level of instruction or advice to African-American students. White counselors in a research study were more willing to tell a White student that their tentative course load was too difficult and less willing to give an African-American student the same advice. In another study, feedback on a badly written essay showed that participants were more likely to give more positive feedback when they thought the writer was African-American, and more likely to be truthfully critical when they were told the writer was White (Whitley & Kite, 2010). Bias can be more subtle, too. Colorblind policies, aimed at promoting "a facade of colorblind equity," contribute to unequal treatment because "the discourse of color blindness allows school adults to disregard the racial identities of students by solely viewing them as individuals who are divorced from the social, economic, and cultural factors that shape their past and present experiences" (Chapman, 2013, p. 614). When race issues do arise in class, such as in discussions of slavery, African-American students may be turned into the center of attention, which can make some students feel uncomfortable (Chapman, 2013). Over-surveillance as a form of bias can affect African-American students, as well. Some university students stated that they were watched more closely by their professors, who asked other classmates questions about them. For example, they asked if they were able to handle the coursework (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013).

Language and cultural barriers are often found in classes between teachers and minority students, which can limit contact with educators. For example, it was found that 71% of pre-service teachers believe that the espousal of African-American English (AAE) negatively affects student's achievement in communication studies, such as writing and reading. However, linguists consider AAE to be another dialect of the English language, which is made of legitimate lexical, phonological, syntactic, and morphological rules. In public education systems, this legitimate form of communication (which many, but certainly not all African-Americans speak) is viewed by educators as a hindrance to a

student's learning abilities. AAE also shapes the listener's view of the speaker. Dialects that are not considered to be mainstream English are received less warmly by the listener, and the listener is more likely to assign negative personal attributes onto the speaker, such as lower intelligence, education, friendliness, and trustworthiness. A self-fulfilling prophesy can then transpire; a teacher may hold a negative attitude towards the student because of their dialect and have lower expectations, and thus the student performs more poorly (Newkirk-Turner et al., 2013). Furthermore, the idea of AAE as an encumbrance on a student's ability to learn is problematic because of the underlying assumption that American English dialects spoken more predominantly by White people are more proper, suggesting that White culture in general is more socially acceptable and proper than African-American culture.

Current Challenges and Efforts to Eliminate the Achievement Gap

Race and socioeconomic status are often inadvertently grouped together in terms of the achievement gap, but socioeconomic status is not the only factor that impacts a student's fate in regards to their level of achievement within public school systems. "While it is clear that government policies designed to exclude, segregate, and subjugate Blacks in all aspects of American life would negatively affect their life choices and chances, even after such laws were changed, the long-term implications of such practices remain given the racialized gaps and disparities in nearly every aspect of U.S. public education" (Horsford, 2014, p. 35). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, introduced in 2001 by former president George W. Bush, sought to encourage increased academic success of minority students by using standardized tests to increase visibility of lower-achieving students within school districts. It was hypothesized that this increased visibility would push school districts into pushing for accountability for every child's success. While Bush possibly had the best of intentions, some argue that the only good thing to come out of this legislation has been the increased conspicuousness of an achievement gap between minority groups (Webley, 2012).

Direct results of NCLB legislation included making the achievement gap more visible while simultaneously not providing a solution, thereby forcing some states to create new laws in order to deal with the downfalls of this federal policy (Webley, 2012). Some schools lost their accreditation due to low test scores. Because of the level of segregation between districts that still exists, and because of the enormous differences in test scores between districts, desegregation was considered to be instrumental for solving the achievement gap. Policies designed to carry this out include programs that bus students from mostly African-American schools to mostly White schools. The Missouri Supreme Court recently upheld a ruling giving students from failing school districts the opportunity to transfer districts (Lee, 2013).

In Saint Louis, schools in urban areas tend to be represented by a predominantly African-American student population while county schools tend to have largely White student populations. Normandy (a school district in an urban area of Saint Louis) is 97% African-American, while Francis Howell (a school district in a suburban area of Saint Louis) is 90% White. Other schools in Saint Louis are racially segregated, too; more than half of all public schools in Saint Louis city and surrounding areas are more than 75% White or African-American. Scores on federally mandated tests in urban Saint Louis schools are usually lower than scores in suburban schools. Every White-majority school district in or around Saint Louis, except for one, made a perfect score on Missouri's performance assessment. In contrast, the six predominantly African-American districts made an average score of seven (Eligon, 2013). One of these lower-scoring school districts, Normandy, had about one quarter of their student body transfer to Francis Howell. Beyond Normandy, 11 other districts in Missouri have been provisionally accredited. "Provisionally accredited" refers to the almost failed status of districts; if their achievement scores drop any more, they risk having their accreditation taken away. One of these districts includes Saint Louis Public Schools, which contains approximately 25,000 students. Normandy, which has about 1,800 students, buses approximately 450 students to Francis Howell (Lee, 2013).

Busing programs in Saint Louis are not a recent development. After forced desegregation in Saint Louis failed because there were not enough White students to integrate into the public school system, a case almost went to trial in the Missouri Supreme Court that would have forced the state and suburbs to help the city integrate its district and share the burden. Saint Louis County was afraid that if the case went to trial they would be forced to merge their county school districts with the city school district, so they settled out of court. The settlement stipulated that 16 districts in the county would take African-American students from the city. In February 1999 the program was upheld, and 13,000 students from inner-city schools continued to be bused into county school districts, in addition to the state of Missouri paying \$40 per year to the city.

There are a few problems that arise from this busing policy. Desegregating school districts by integrating African-American students into mostly Caucasian, accredited schools does not necessarily deal with the root problems of racism and discrimination. Even after federally mandated desegregation, school districts have remained socially segregated by race. While the recent court ruling that allowed students to transfer districts provided students the opportunity to receive an education from an accredited school, the underlying issue remains that the predominantly African-American schools are under-resourced. The achievement gap between African-American and White students exists as a result of this discrimination; it's likely that, had Normandy's student population been White, it would not have faced the situation of low test scores and loss of accreditation in the first place.

This racism also means that busing programs have faced a backlash from some White families, who expressed concerns about African-American students being bused into their children's school districts. When Normandy named Francis Howell as the receiver for their transfer students, there was a storm of protest. Some parents did not want students from Normandy to be welcomed into the school district because they believed this would not only create a more negative environment for their children, but also lead to lowered expectations and less time for teachers to interact with individual

students (Mcdaniel, 2013). Fears of increased drug use, violence, lower grades, and bigger class sizes were cited as reasons for their anxieties. Some of the parents had no shame in discussing their stereotype-driven fears. “Demanding the board put metal detectors in the schools to prepare for the Normandy students, parent Beth Cirami said she moved to St. Charles County for good schools — now she was worried about her children getting stabbed, robbed or given drugs” (Bock, 2013). On the other hand, some pointed out that the students who chose to transfer from Normandy would be the top of their classes and driven to succeed; waking up early in order to attend an unwelcoming school with more rigorous curriculum does not sound indicative of violent, drug-using students (Eligon, 2013). While negative feelings towards Normandy students were not shared by every Francis Howell parent, the fact that these fears were admitted in an open forum shows that some harbored powerful race-based stereotypes. Accusations such as the ones that Francis Howell parents made can be linked to aversive prejudice; there was an evident conflict between their desire to be unbiased and their anxieties that arose from the negative stereotypes that they had of Normandy students (e.g. “all Normandy students are violent, use drugs, and steal”).

The impact of busing programs can be negative for schools and for students. As part of the law that enabled children from an unaccredited school to transfer, the home districts must pay for the transfer expenses, rather than the receiving district. Normandy has estimated that it will cost around \$15 million for the 450 students that have transferred districts in the year 2014 alone. With more students transferring due to the desire to receive better education elsewhere, and consequentially fewer funds available for the students who remain, it will be even more difficult for Normandy to get its accreditation back (Lee, 2013) . Students from Normandy have to get up earlier than most suburban students in order to catch the bus. Waking up early, especially when after-school activities must be attended, is a drain on a student's energy, which means less energy output for homework. Thus, in many cases two racial groups attending school in the same district will still have different experiences. The

White student will never have to wake up before dawn to make the trek to an unfamiliar district, and they will not have to leave the environment in which they are familiar and comfortable. Being bused into an unfamiliar district may be socially isolating for a student, lowering performance in school. Students interested in taking advantage of the transfer program are usually the students who were higher achieving at their home district in the first place, meaning that the brightest students have the option of leaving and potentially creating a brain drain in the city public schools. Students thinking about leaving are then forced with a difficult decision between receiving a better education for themselves at a different school, or helping their community by remaining at schools such as Normandy (Lee, 2013).

Some critics also argue that desegregation may not be an effective solution if the goal is to equalize educational opportunities and create positive education experiences for every student.

According to Sonya Douglass Horsford (2014):

Research emphasizing the benefits of school desegregation has dominated the social science and education research as a promising strategy for equalizing educational resources, opportunities, and outcomes in schools, but its inability to dismantle the legacy of separate and unequal education in the United States reveals the complex and seemingly intractable reproduction of systemic racial inequality in schools and society (p. 36).

Some parents have turned to homeschooling in order to combat the negative effects of White-centered curricula on their children. In the United States, 10% of more than two million homeschoolers are African-American, while 75% are White (Mazama & Lundy, 2013). Some (but certainly not all) of these families homeschool with the express intention of dispelling negative stereotypes and providing more diverse, open learning opportunities. Some African-Americans hold negative stereotypes about other African-Americans because of an admiration for White culture that has been instilled by many public schools (Mazama & Lundy, 2013). "The full scope of the African American embrace of homeschooling as a result of discontent with Eurocentric curricula can thereby be grasped only within the context of the African American ongoing quest for a quality education" (Mazama & Lundy, 2013, p.

136). Other initiatives include a program launched by President Barack Obama called “My Brother’s Keeper,” designed to lessen the achievement gap between boys of color (both African-American and Hispanic) and White boys. This new initiative will first create a partnership of interested foundations and businesses to brainstorm proposals that will improve minority boy’s experiences in academic settings, and second, will place more emphasis on evaluating programs for effectiveness (Goldfarb, 2014).

To date, many solutions focus on the helplessness of African-American students rather than their abilities and desires. For example, students at Normandy were given the option to either stay or go. Staying meant receiving an education at an unaccredited school, but leaving meant abandoning their home district and studying in a more hostile, mostly White environment. There was no option proposed for those students who wanted to receive a socially valuable education within Normandy, leaving students out of the decision-making process. Further, many solutions assume that African-American students wish to be successful in the same fashion that White students are successful. The question of why students are successful, rather than the question of why students are not successful, is asked more frequently by parents, educators, politicians, and others. Changing future recommendations so that they include students’ needs and desires is key. African-American students’ autonomy should be of paramount importance when deciding on and enforcing policies designed for their benefit.

Future Recommendations

An individual’s identity shapes their experiences in school, which means that the intersectionality of race and socioeconomic status should be a priority for schools, educators, and communities. Success not only depends on intellect, but also on the degree of identification with ethnic identity. “Black adolescents and young adults who have a sense that their race and ethnicity are central to their lives have been found to have fewer psychological stress and behavioral difficulties, even when confronted with obvious stressors such as racial discrimination” (Ani, 2013, p. 409). White students do

not have to think about their race and ethnicity because most aspects of their lives cater to their ethnicity. For example, teachers are predominantly White and the accepted dialect of English in the United States is spoken and written in academic settings. For students from minority groups – including African-American students – minority group identification that fosters a sense of pride often leads to students becoming more motivated to achieve (Ani, 2013, p. 415).

Policies should emphasize the need for integration of all cultures and identity groups, rather than just simple desegregation. Currently, the assimilation of ethnic groups in the form of desegregation and integration plans has been legally implemented in public education systems with the assumption that it promotes equality by allowing equal access to teachers and resources. Even though desegregation and integration are sometimes used interchangeably, there is a distinct difference that leads to distinctly different outcomes. Desegregation merely forces students of different backgrounds into one space, while integration allows students to interact with the intent of creating meaningful relationships and mutual respect (Horsford, 2014). Desegregation creates a separate-but-equal relationship among schools and the students, but integration creates a sense of belonging and connectedness among students. In order to integrate rather than desegregate, smaller class sizes may be beneficial. With smaller classes there is also less of a chance for isolation because a sense of community is promoted, rather than being comprised of a group of students who never have the chance to interact with everyone else. This also creates an ability to form closer relationships with adults, giving students a role model. Research shows that the more connected a student feels to their school environment, the more likely that student is to attend school and succeed (Caroleo, 2014).

A particular problem with the approach to integration in the United States often emphasizes assimilation into the mainstream culture of White privilege. In effect, the dominant culture is able to maintain their comfort levels, while the minority is forced into an environment in which they must conform and possibly face acts of misunderstanding and/or discrimination on a daily basis. Therefore, it

is important to pay attention to cultural biases and how the dominant culture impacts minority cultures. It is important to carefully and completely scrutinize the ways in which communities do, or do not, cater to students from different backgrounds. If African-American students are forced to work harder than their White peers in order to attain the same level of success, then their community is not aiding them in the same way that they are aiding their White classmates. For example, if an African-American student is forced to commute for longer distances to another school district because the education in their district is inferior, or perceived as such, then society is hindering that student's academic success.

In order to create an unbiased system, schools should build on each group's capital, rather than forcing assimilation of one culture into another. African-American students and White students each have opinions and experiences that should be encouraged and voiced. The discussion of race has become discouraged within classrooms because it creates a responsibility to take action. Leonardo (2013) lists African-American capital as including the following: linguistic, aspirational, navigational, social, familial, and resistant forms. These forms of capital should be encouraged because they promote African-American autonomy in the academic environment, which can lead to higher success rates. The idea of "success" is relative; different groups have varying ideas of what it means to achieve success. Different cultures have differing perspectives and experiences, and those groups can exist within the same area. It is important to keep this in mind, and to respect each group's level of connectedness they feel to the culture they identify with.

The impact of race should be discussed more often in education. Focusing solely on socioeconomic status deflects the acknowledgement that race impacts a student's education experiences, while simultaneously discarding responsibility to look at racial biases. While the importance of socioeconomic status should not be overlooked in regards to a student's success within America, it is important to consider racial inequalities that can be alleviated in order to lead to more equitable student outcomes in the future. "We believe that the racial achievement gap exists and persists because

fundamentally, schools are not designed to educate students of color, and educators continue to lack the will, skill, knowledge, and capacity to affirm racial diversity”(Singleton & Linton, 2006, p.5). In fact, focusing on socioeconomic status may have reverse consequences from what is intended, because it gives students the message that failure is inevitable because of factors that are uncontrollable in their lives.

To encourage discussions of race, safe spaces should be created. For instance, serial testimony is “a facilitation method that asks participants to respond briefly to a question or prompt by drawing on their life experiences” (Van Der Valk, 2014, p. 26). In this method, students are regarded as the main authority of their own education, and are given opportunities to share their personal stories while being respected and uninterrupted. The person in charge of facilitating serial testimony often provides a prompt, such as asking students to describe experiences in which they have received an unearned advantage or disadvantage. The underlying concept is that each student's experiences are as equally valid as the experiences of their peers. Students are able to safely discuss these experiences, bringing the importance of race into light. White individuals, including educators and parents, should look at the privilege that they have been granted by society and how this unequal balance affects others. This privilege should be taught and discussed. One method of doing this is to be a “gentle catalyst” and asking others to examine the privilege that they hold. For example, teachers can discuss social constructs and the economic privilege that comes from being White. It is important to not make students feel guilty, but to discuss who has privilege and how they keep it (Samsa, 2014). Students are individuals who are responsible for the amount of thought and energy that they put forth in their quest (or lack thereof) for learning.

A further recommendation is to stimulate students into achievement rather than passively accepting the fact that students from disadvantaged groups will fail. The bar needs to be set high so that students will push themselves to reach higher levels of intellect and self-fulfilling achievement. African-

American students should not be held at lower standards than their White peers. In order to stimulate students toward achievement, it is important to break commonly held stereotypes, as these stereotypes can be internalized by students and consequently impact their education. More organizations should focus on helping high school students reach graduation. Currently, organizations working towards African-American students' success often focus on higher education, which may be because university students are more valued by society and viewed as more likely to contribute to society. The Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) was founded in 1990 in order to increase the number of Black and Latino male graduates from college by creating a positive environment focused on community. This organization has a high success rate; According to their webpage, 86% of their members graduate, compared to the national average of 42%.

To date, many approaches towards eliminating the achievement gap have revolved around changing the students who are negatively affected by it rather than changing the viewpoints of those assessing the standards of achievement. Eurocentric standardized testing and curricula have become accepted methods for assessing student's academic capabilities, with White student's achievement levels set as the ideal standard. Efforts to match African-American students' achievement levels to those of White students perpetuate the idea that African-American capital and culture are not as valid. Breaking stereotypes and working together to provide equal opportunities for universal equally beneficial education is key towards granting every student the opportunity to be as successful as they desire. Some students are prevented from reaching their fullest potential within the public education systems in the United States, and it is a violation of those student's rights to let these inequalities continue to exist. Students, regardless of their background, should matter to their communities. African-American underachievement in public education systems has become internalized by U.S. society as a norm, and by African-American students as a sign of their expendability within their communities.

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