

# 1

---

## The Achievement Gap

*It's not just going to school but learning something while there that matters.*

—Hanushek, Levy, and Kohtaru (2008)

**W**hile reading the title of this book—*Teach! Change! Empower!*—some of you may have declared, “I don’t need another publication telling me about student achievement and diversity.” You may say this because you have had it with discussions in the media, at conferences, in faculty meetings, and in the teachers’ lounge about legislation, official decrees demanding high-stakes testing, the need for higher student achievement, and increased attention to diversity. In addition, you are angry—OK, maybe not angry, but definitely annoyed—because the discussions, for the most part, are neither kind nor understanding of teachers. Teachers and principals are presented as the primary culprits for what is wrong in schools (and much of U.S. society).

It is true that these discussions are everywhere; they are not kind to teachers and many are unfair. However, you also know that they will continue until schools undergo reforms to eliminate the achievement gap. Even if everyone who is raising questions were silent, the achievement gap and the difficult challenges schools face affirming diversity would not go away.

## WHAT IS THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP AND WHY MUST IT BE ELIMINATED?

The achievement gap is the difference between the academic performance of poor students and wealthy students, between minority and nonminority students, between students who are in special education and those who are not, and between second-language learners and first-language learners (McCall, Hauser, Kingsbury, Cronin & Houser, 2006). It illustrates restricted life chances and choices, chances and choices that will be cut short for increasing numbers of poor and minority children by virtue of their educational “failures.” In the 21st century, education, knowledge, and technological training are among the most valuable assets a citizen can have to find employment and to act as a thoughtful, social, responsive, and reflective individual. Thus, addressing achievement gap is critical for enabling students to reach their fullest potential and to having a flourishing life, both inside and outside the bounds of the economy.

The National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices (2007) states that the achievement gap is one of the most pressing education policy challenges that states currently face. Olson (2007); Jencks and Phillips (1998); Jacobsen, Olsen, Rice, Sweetland, and Ralph (2001); Farkas (2004); McCall et al. (2006); Rothstein (2004); and Noguera and Wang (2006) all contend that differences in educational performance and attainment between Whites, Blacks, and other students of color continue to be central to inequality in the United States. Numerous research studies (e.g., Olson, 2007; Phillips, Crouse, & Ralph, 1998; Jacobsen et al., 2001; McCall et al., 2006) also report that during every year of schooling, Blacks and Latinos learn less than White students.

Olson (2007) uses results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as “the nation’s report card,” to measure the progress that states have made in raising student achievement in elementary and secondary schools over past decades. Olson states that, as measured by the NAEP, or the nation’s report card, “When looked at over that longer time period student achievement has gotten better” (p. 42) with mathematics scores in particular improving for low-income Black and Latino students. But reading achievement “has barely budged since 1992” and high school achievement remains “flat” (p. 42). Moreover, the report emphasized that “achievement gaps based on race and class remain daunting,” noting that, near the end of high school, Black and Latino students “have reading and math skills that are virtually the same as those of eighth graders” (p. 42). Ironically, although Black students start elementary school only one year behind White students in vocabulary knowledge, they finish high school approximately four years behind

White students in math and reading achievement (Jacobsen et al., 2004, Phillips et al., 1998).

The achievement gap is the product of multiple social and economic factors in society that place minority students at a disadvantage. There are factors within the social, political, and economic environment (e.g., lack of access to health care, adequate nutrition, and decent housing) and cultural clashes in society that frequently cause some students to disassociate with academics (Noguera, 2003). However, some students persevere despite these factors. While educators cannot influence all aspects of students' lives, this book is designed to help teachers develop pedagogies to close these achievement gaps and affirm diversity.

## **THE MULTIPLICITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY OF GAPS**

In order to give full meaning to our discussion about eliminating the academic achievement gap, the conversation needs to be situated within a broader context—that of multiple gaps. Teachers and educational researchers argue that while the academic achievement gap helps to explain differences in students' performance in schools, it is only one of several gaps that challenge the academic success of students and the affirmation of diversity in U.S. society. Therefore, other gaps, such as the economic gap and health care gap, should also be considered during discussions about closing the academic achievement gap. These various gaps and their effects are interrelated and often serve to sustain one another.

Students who live on the downside of the gaps usually contend with multiple challenges. Being on the downside of a gap (e.g., health or economics) diminishes students' opportunities in other areas (e.g., school achievement) and magnifies the detrimental effects of outcome gaps (e.g., social mobility or career opportunity). Let us take the case of Leslie to illustrate how multiple gaps intersect. Leslie lives with her family in poverty and without health insurance. When she suffers from illness or injury, her poor health may go untreated because of a lack of health insurance and financial resources. The illness or injury may begin to interfere with, for example, her ability to eat, hear, concentrate, and sleep. As a consequence, her school performance may begin to slip. If the slip is not corrected—and here she will need the teacher's help—Leslie, a beautiful child with great potential, may fall into a pattern of low expectations and resign herself to this position. What is becoming increasingly clear is that students who excel in school must stay focused and on task.

## EFFECTS OF THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The academic achievement gap stands out more than the other gaps because academic achievements greatly influence the life chances of students. In addition, education in the United States has always been considered the great equalizer; for some, it is the cure-all for all social ills. That said, education does frequently (and increasingly) shape students' professional/career development, social mobility, self-esteem, and self-identity (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Bandura, Barbaranelli, Vittorio, & Pastorelli, 2001). The academic achievement gap in reading, math, and science are especially noticeable between the rich and the poor, native speakers and nonnative speakers of English, and between White students and students of color. These gaps often reflect differences in social capital (e.g., access or connections between social networks) and power, because some groups have more benefits, as well as the clout to distribute them as they wish. To understand the causes and effects of the academic achievement gap, teachers need to examine how some groups exercise power over others in oppressive ways. For example, are some students in your classes behind in reading or math, not because they lack cognitive skills but because they, unlike their more socio-economically privileged peers, have limited access to home computers with math games, personal tutors, or college-educated parents who know how to help them? In other words, they lack economic and social goods and resources—they lack social capital. See the following box for more information on poverty rates in America. Use the Reflection box as a way to apply the points made in the chapter to your own school situation.



### 1.1 Do You Know?

#### Poverty Rates

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2007), the poverty rate in the U.S. for Blacks was 24.5 percent; Hispanics, 21.5 percent; Asians, 10.2 percent; and non-Hispanic Whites, 8.2 percent in 2004. Although the Midwest did not have the highest poverty rate among U.S. regions, it was the only region where the poverty rate increased from 2003 to 2007, from 10.7 to 11.1 percent.



### 1.1 Reflection

Can you find examples in your school of the intersection between different gaps (e.g., economic, health, legal treatment, and academic achievement gaps)?

Examples are

---



---



---

How are these gaps related to racial issues?

---



---



---

Describe one child for whom these gaps intersect.

---



---



---

How are these gaps connected to that student's work in school?

---



---



---

While such differences in opportunity may seem normal (simply “the way that it is”) and out of the school’s reach, such imbalances will only continue to grow in our competitive society unless we give students who are on the margins—through no fault of their own—solutions for tomorrow, the support and encouragement to catch up to their more socioeconomically privileged peers (e.g., opening honors and AP classes to students who are on the margins and strategically reaching out to them, counseling parents, holding accelerated summer institutes between middle and high school, and providing extra support such as afterschool computer clubs and mentors). That said, I know this is difficult because I hear from teachers, “Some of my students don’t want to learn, so what am I suppose to do?” I take issue with this because I believe all students want to learn, even if they are very resistant to learning or to our teaching. It is our responsibility as teachers to reach our students and engage them in a way that makes learning meaningful to them.

Your first Action Plan follows and includes eight activities.



**Action Plan 1:** Revisiting the Struggle for Closing the Achievement Gap With Fresh Eyes

I. This week is the time to think back over your past experiences teaching children. If you are new to the teaching profession, consider your observations during student teaching situations. Often, standardized tests combined with the notion that “all children can succeed” give us the idea that children achieve in the same ways with the same results. Remember, students are not the same in the ways they learn or in the results they achieve. List several children who have not “achieved” according to your expectations. Describe their achievement behaviors and attitudes in your classroom as “case studies.”

<i>Students</i>	<i>Achievement Behavior</i>	<i>Attitude Toward Achieving</i>
1.		
2.		
3.		

II. Analyze your beliefs about students labeled as “underachievers.” For each of the numbered statements below, think of one or two ways of describing underachievers.

1. How would you describe underachievers?

---



---

2. Describe teaching challenges posed by this characteristic of underachievers.

---



---

3. Explain a teaching strategy to overcome this challenge.

---

---

4. Describe what underachievers are.

---

---

5. Describe teaching challenges posed by this characteristic of underachievers.

---

---

6. Explain a teaching strategy to overcome this challenge.

---

---

7. How would you describe underachievers?

---

---

8. Describe teaching challenges posed by this characteristic of underachievers.

---

---

9. Explain a teaching strategy to overcome this challenge.

---

---

III. What struggles are you having in your teaching because your beliefs about how and why students learn or don't learn are being challenged by information you are acquiring about the students, school policies, and the school climate?

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

Struggles with teaching

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

IV. In what ways do you currently think about and reflect upon your students and your teaching?

Reflections on students

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

Reflections on teaching

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

V. How would you like to expand your reflections?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

What barriers exist that hinder your reflections about students and teaching?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

VI. List three examples from your teaching experience that show you are open to change, and three examples that show your resistance to change.

Open to change

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Resistance to change

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

With a group or a partner, discuss what you see in one another's practice when you look at these lists?

---

---

What is your orientation to change?

---

---

---

---

VII. If you are open to challenging your prior way of thinking about students and your teaching, consider a child in your classroom who has been labeled as an "underachiever." Research the child in order to learn about that child's struggles and strengths. Explain reasons why this child may be struggling in school.

1.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

Next, list strategies that will enhance the child's vision of value and achievement in school. If you need some ideas or resources to get you started, you might want to look at Theresa Perry's *Young, Gifted, and Black*, which describes ways to boost students' vision of themselves as high achievers.

1. My student's special interests and strengths include the following traits:

---

---

2. My student struggles with the following situations or subject areas:

---

---

3. Here are ways that I can increase my student's achievement and joy in school by drawing on the child's strengths and minimizing his or her struggles:

a.

---

---

b.

---

---

c.

---

---

d.

---

---

VIII. Commitment Statement (in your own handwriting)

Now, write a "commitment statement" to your future students. In it, describe a classroom in which all students will understand and appreciate their value as human beings and be able to achieve at a pace that is consistent

with their ability. Commit yourself to exploring your students' experiences and backgrounds as well as their strengths in order to boost their identity formation and academic achievement. Don't worry if you don't have all of the answers as to how this will happen. That is what the rest of the weeks in this process are for. Think broadly, think big. Describe the ideal classroom for every child. Using your own handwriting to make this commitment to your future students is powerful. Even if you don't feel your ideas are very original or fully formed, use this as your starting point. You may even wish to share this with your current students and include them on this journey.

---



---



---



---



---

### **Careful: Belief System Development in Progress**

I firmly believe that all students can improve and grow in the traditional academic skills of reading (decoding and comprehension), writing with clarity and creativity, and math reasoning skills. However, knowing that not all students learn in the same way or have the same interests can lead us as teachers to valuable discoveries about our students' strengths in areas of more nontraditionally acknowledged talents. Consider the multiple intelligences of Howard Gardner (1993) as a way to begin:

- Linguistic intelligence ("word smart")
  - Logical-mathematical intelligence ("number/reasoning smart")
  - Spatial intelligence ("picture smart")
  - Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence ("body smart")
  - Musical intelligence ("music smart")
  - Interpersonal intelligence ("people smart")
  - Intrapersonal intelligence ("self smart")
  - Naturalist intelligence ("nature smart")
1. List names of your students next to each of the intelligences. Where do their strengths shine through?
  2. Plan at least one way to bring each form of intelligence into some learning experience in your classroom this week. For example, you

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

could have students with an “interpersonal intelligence” lead study sessions with small groups of their classmates, where they design a “review session” for a subject area. You will discover many natural “teachers” in this way!

**This, I Believe**

---

---

---

Post these statements, along with your additions to them, in a prominent place in your plan book or on your desk.

1. My students do not misbehave or “underachieve” in order to torture me. They are here to find their way in the world and they need me to believe in them.
2. My students are ALL valuable and excellent. They all have gifts and strengths. Some gifts and strengths may be hidden or affected by past experiences in school. The students need me to illuminate their gifts and strengths during instructional time.
3. All of my students can achieve academically. It is my job as their teacher to make sure this happens.
4. My students are resilient. They can overcome challenging circumstances with encouragement and opportunity. I must find a way to see that they have the opportunity to do so. What I will do includes the following ideas:

---

---

