

Achievement Gap or Development Gap?

“Outliers” and Outsiders Reconsider an Old Problem

Special Report

by

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Introduction

Debate about the achievement gap between Black and Latino public school students and their white, typically more well-to-do peers, has been going on in one form or another for over a generation. Lately it has gotten louder, for several reasons. One is that the federal No Child Left Behind Act, the goal of which was to close the achievement gap, is up for renewal and rewrite. Another is that the massive amount of stimulus money coming down the pike has accelerated competition for funding among those offering solutions to the gap.

Yet another important factor fueling public interest is the upcoming New York City mayoral race, which has brought the achievement gap center stage. Mayor Michael Bloomberg gained control of the New York City public school system in his first term by an act of the state legislature in 2002. (Mayoral control must be reauthorized this June.) The campaign promises to reignite battles over mayoral control vs. so-called community control and between independent coalitions oriented toward innovation and traditional Democratic Party coalitions. Within that overall environment, discussions of the achievement gap are becoming increasingly politicized.

One case in point. McKinsey and Co. recently issued a report, *The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools*, which argues that the systematic underachievement of poor and minority young people produces a “permanent recession” – one they calibrate at 2% to 3% of GDP. As soon as the report was published, an assortment of interested parties piggybacked on to it, some promoting the virtues of mayoral control as a means of closing the gap, others extolling community control as the key.

Like many discussions of the achievement gap, the McKinsey report did not add any particular insight other than to describe its economic impact. (That permanent educational failure produces a permanent economic recession is something every kid with below-average math and reading scores gets.)

Describing and redescribing a problem does not, in and of itself, get us closer to a solution. Moreover, if we're seeking remedies for the gap, we must examine whether the gap in question is best described as an achievement gap at all.



There is a Gap. But What Kind of Gap is It?

It is indisputable that white middle-class kids perform better in school than poor kids of color. On average, according to the McKinsey report, “black and Latino students are roughly two to three years of learning behind white students of the same age.” In math and reading as measured in the fourth and eighth grades, 48% of African Americans and 43% of Latino students are “below basic”; the same is true for only 17% of whites. The gap exists in every state and, according to McKinsey, it is even more acute in large urban school districts.

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So there is a gap. But does it make sense to frame it as an achievement gap? No, from both a scientific and logical point of view. The two groups – poor kids of color and white middle-class kids – are so different from one another in their life experience, their relationship to learning and their expectations for themselves, that it makes no sense to compare them.

Comparative analysis can only be done when the things being compared are sufficiently similar. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb “compare” as “To speak of or represent as similar; to liken.” But the learning and development experiences of poor kids and middle-class kids couldn’t be more different. Thus, comparisons based on test scores that yield the construct of an achievement gap are the educational equivalent of a “false positive” in medicine – where an illness has been incorrectly diagnosed and is therefore being incorrectly treated.

Historically, education has been seen as – and has been – the singular pathway out of poverty and into the middle class. And while it continues to be the case that individuals can and sometimes do succeed through education, for the mass of poor kids of color, public education – as it is currently construed and constructed – is failing. These kids are not simply failing to learn. They are failing to become learners.

This is a problem of catastrophic proportions, one which requires a different description. We are not facing an achievement gap. If that’s all that was going on, we would simply have to close it. No, we are facing something more serious. It is a development gap. A generation of young Americans (at the very least) is passing through the public school system unable to become learners. Unless and until we accept and understand that, educators and policymakers will focus on the achievement gap to no avail.

School-based Learning is an Acquired Taste

Far from being an automatic or natural skill, school-based learning is what we would call an acquired taste. The lack of that acquired taste is a developmental issue. A study done in the 1970s at the Rockefeller University showed that kids who don’t do well in school have no trouble handling problem-solving, remembering and reasoning outside of school. On the street, they learn the skills, drills and rules of play, games and other kinds of interactions because these activities are done socially and on their terms. The kids were “street smart” but “school dumb” – performing as skilled learners outside of school but failing to learn in school.



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As one noted expert in the field recently observed to *The New York Times* about the achievement gap, “Where we see the gap narrowing, that’s because there’s been an emphasis on supplemental education, on after-school programs that encourage students to read more and do more math problems.”¹ Having outside-of-school settings available to encourage learning is only one piece of the puzzle. After-school programs that focus only on remediating, or adding to classroom curriculum, will miss the mark with most inner-city underachievers, for whom the acquired taste for school learning has yet to be cultivated. That’s why after-school programs that focus on development are so key.

What is Development and How Do You Help Kids Grow?

In the simplest terms, development is expressed in the capacity of human beings, young and old, to make life choices, large and small, that allow them to grow. It is deeply connected to creativity and to the capacity of human beings to shape, rather than simply react to, their circumstances.

If you examine the cultural and life history of white, middle-class young people in our society – the same kids overall who are performing well in school – you find that they are exposed to a range of developmental experiences that take place outside of the classroom. Growing up in their social milieu includes visits to museums, theatres, parks, and other settings where they encounter a larger, more cosmopolitan world. They receive special training in the arts or athletics. They travel and have a multitude of outside-of-school experiences where they develop an interest in learning.

Poor kids have few life experiences of this kind. Poverty is the great immobilizer and the social and cultural insularity in poor communities, including those of color, is well known. In New York City, many – if not most – kids living in housing projects in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx had never seen the World Trade Center until they saw news coverage of the attack on 9/11. Most never travel into Manhattan, but instead live life within a ten-block radius where their sense of themselves in the world is narrow and confined.

The “Outliers” View

In his latest book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell devotes a chapter to the results of a Johns Hopkins University study of the achievement gap in the Baltimore public school system. Gladwell critiques the recent policy obsession with smaller class size, increased funding, and other popular “solutions” to the education crisis, looking for new insights that might be counter-intuitive but nevertheless useful. The Johns Hopkins study tried to examine the achievement gap through a different lens.

Briefly, the study asserts that an important unit of analysis in measuring the achievement gap is not the gap as it appears at the end of the school year, but rather the gap as it appears at the beginning of the school year, in September, after a three-month hiatus from the classroom.



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In the study, as Gladwell reports, “The wealthiest kids come back [from summer vacation] in September and their reading scores have jumped more than 15 points. The poorest kids come back from the holidays and their reading scores have dropped almost 4 points.”² While poor kids overall progressed less well than middle-class kids during the school year, the “summer slide” (as it is sometimes called) dramatically widens the gap between poor and middle-class (of color and white) kids. From this data, Gladwell infers that “Schools work. The only problem with school, for the kids who aren’t achieving, is that there isn’t enough of it.”³ And he adds “For its poorest students, America doesn’t have a school problem. It has a summer vacation problem...”⁴

But there is another, opposite inference to be drawn from the Baltimore study. Indeed, Gladwell even points to it when he writes: “Virtually all of the advantage that wealthy students have over poor students is the result of differences in the way privileged kids learn while they are not in school.”^{5,6}

The Outsiders View

Which raises different questions: What kinds of developmental and enriching outside-of-school experiences can be created for poor children? How can we help inner-city youth acquire a taste for school-based learning?

We can’t lift them and their families out of poverty overnight, adding all the cultural and cosmopolitanizing influences that help young people become learners, unless we’re willing to undertake a radical redistribution of wealth. But we can, indeed we have, created outside-of school programs that provide inner-city youth with the kinds of experiences and environments that help ignite such development. That is the approach on which the multiple youth programs of the All Stars Project are based. Once they begin developing, young people are motivated to become learners.

Performance and Development

It should be noted that in spite of the failure of the school system to come to grips with these issues, inner-city youth have found ways to develop. Their passion for popular culture, for performance, and for Barack Obama has been insatiable. In fact, while social scientific research has focused on what inner-city youth cannot achieve, the All Stars has focused on what they can. No small part of the success of the All Stars is that it learns from the young people what they like doing, and then works with them to expand their capacities in those areas. In doing so, the kids develop and, most importantly, they learn that development is possible. That lesson can be applied everywhere in life, including in school.

Using performance – something young people love to do – as a way of creating new forms of self-expression and self-realization, the All Stars has successfully intervened into the development gap, providing a new model for engaging and reorganizing the underdevelopment of inner-city youth.



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Going Outside-the-Box For Our Kids

Not surprisingly, in light of the politicization of the “achievement gap” issue mentioned earlier, the approach created by the All Stars, like the All Stars itself, has been largely marginalized by public policy institutions. It does not “fit” within the matrix of the current power struggle, in which institutional players battle each other for control of the school system, its budgets and its extraordinary influence within – and over – poor communities. The All Stars’ controversiality is heightened because it does not subscribe to the liberal proposition that says, in effect, there is no development problem for minority youth and that all we need to do is spend more money in the classrooms of poor communities.

Nevertheless, the All Stars and its approach have been embraced by a vibrant independent community of wealthy business executives and philanthropists, educators, community leaders, law enforcement professionals (including New York City Police Commissioner Ray Kelly), theatre artists and the young people themselves. Mayor Bloomberg, who accepts standardized notions of the achievement gap, has nonetheless been an advocate for the program, twice helping it to secure an IDA triple tax-free bond to purchase and then renovate its 30,000 square foot development center on West 42nd Street. Bloomberg has received ample criticism for that support from political forces invested in maintaining the educational status quo. This political conglomerate of critics believes that the achievement gap can only be addressed from within the school system and through its political allies, including the teachers union, the City Council and the Democratic Party.

With the anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* approaching, the spotlight is on education inequality as the final frontier of the civil rights movement. But as any pioneer will tell you, crossing the frontier requires vehicles suited for off-road travel. That’s where out-of-the-box approaches come in. In a 1995 presentation to the American Psychological Association, “Diagnosis: The Human Cost of the Rage to Order,”⁷ philosopher Fred Newman (an All Stars founder) and psychologist Kenneth Gergen discussed the social and psychological dangers of a quantitative diagnostic model for categorizing mental illness. If we want to respond to the current crisis known as the achievement gap, we have to free ourselves from what might be called the “rage to measure,” the fixation on quantitative measurement of and cures for educational underperformance. Instead, we must understand the crisis as a development gap if we want to reach those on the other side.

1. Freeman A. Hrabowski III, as quoted by Sam Dillon in “No Child’ Law Is Not Closing a Racial Gap,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 2009, p. A1.
2. Gladwell, Malcolm, (2008). *Outliers: The Story of Success*. New York, Boston, London: Little, Brown and Company. p. 258. *Emphasis in original*.
3. Ibid. p. 259
4. Ibid. p. 260
5. Ibid. p. 258
6. Teachers, of course, have had first-hand experience with “summer slide” for decades. Research and documentation similar to those of the Johns Hopkins study began to appear in the late 1970s.
7. The report was published in *Performing Psychology: A Postmodern Culture of the Mind*, Lois Holzman, Editor. (1999). New York, London: Routledge.



Authors

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All Stars Project, Inc.

Founded in 1981, the non-profit All Stars Project, Inc. produces outside-of-school development programs for urban youth. Headquartered in a performing arts and development center on West 42nd Street in New York City, All Stars operates in Newark, Chicago, and the San Francisco Bay Area and is 100% privately funded. Programs inspired by the All Stars model are active in Los Angeles, Boston, Atlanta, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, South Africa and Namibia.

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