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The Achievement Gap Between African-Americans and Whites

Dorri Mills

EDCI INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH

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Signature of Project Advisor

Jo Tyler
Associate Professor of Linguistics and Education
Introduction

For over 30 years the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has been compiling data on the academic achievement levels of American students. The statistics are based on ethnicity, gender and grade levels of these students. The trend has remained constant for these 30 years where African-American students score significantly lower in all subjects and all grade levels as compared to Whites, Asians, Hispanics and Native Americans (Hoff, 2000, para. 1). This is commonly known as the “achievement gap”. As early as kindergarten, African-American students are trailing their white peers and by the twelfth grade, on average, African-American students are reading at the eighth grade level of whites. This gap is widespread throughout the United States and is out of control in many urban and rural educational systems.

While there is no one specific cause of the achievement gap, there is a widespread belief that the achievement gap is caused by the socio-economic status of African-American students. This perception of the achievement gap does have an element of truth. Students who come from an impoverished family are less likely to have the basic necessities at home, much less a computer. But this does not explain the under-achievement of African-American students in middle class suburban neighborhoods (Johnston & Viadero, 2000, para. 17). During the 2000-2001 school year, the Minority Students Achievement Network (MSAN), an organization consisting of fifteen suburban school districts, surveyed 40,000 middle and high school students on their perceptions of the achievement gap. According to the students, the reasons for the gap reside in the school system filled with unqualified and uncaring teachers who underestimate their abilities (MSAN, 2002, para. 15).

Another reason for lower achievement levels is lack of teacher preparedness to teach in urban and rural schools. Urban and rural areas do not attract the best and the brightest of
educators and many school systems hire teachers who are not qualified to teach the subjects they teach. For example, 40 percent of math teachers who teach in schools where at least 49 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch are not qualified to teach math (Haycock, 2001, para. 31). In the state of Virginia, only 80 percent of K-12 classes are taught by teachers who are considered highly qualified by the standards from the No Child Left Behind Act created by the Bush Administration. In high poverty schools in Virginia, only 73 percent of K-12 classes are taught by teachers who are highly qualified (The Education Trust, 2003, p. 11).

With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, standardized testing is becoming more common in the classroom. Many critics of standardized tests believe that the tests are culturally biased and will only exacerbate the achievement gap. For example, Christopher Jencks of the Brookings Institute suggests that some items that appear on standardized tests at times will favor one cultural group over another (Jencks, 1998, p. 67). Not only are the tests considered biased by many educators, high stakes testing is pushing educators to “teach to the test” which decreases student-centered learning. The classroom is becoming a rote learning center where higher order thinking skills are not given a chance to flourish (Townsend, 2002, p. 224). Standardized testing is not necessarily the best measure of a student’s success or failure, especially if the tests are biased toward students of color and those whose native language is not English.

There are many reasons for the academic achievement gap between blacks and whites and there are ways to lessen it. Kati Haycock of the Education Trust believes the implementation of higher standards for students and teachers will promote positive achievement for African-Americans (Haycock, 2001, para. 19). John Chubb, the chief education officer for Edison Schools, a private company which provides reform models to public schools, suggests smaller
class sizes and more professional development for educators could bridge the gap (Chubb & Loveless, 2002, p. 2). Studies have proven that smaller class sizes at the elementary level levels the playing field for African-American children (Krueger & Whitmore, 2002, p. 40). Lessening the achievement gap will take money, higher standards for students and teachers, and, according to Gloria Ladsen-Billings, a professor of Education at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, culturally relevant teaching. In her book *The Dreamkeepers Successful Teachers of African-American Children* (1994), Ladsen-Billings demonstrates students can be successful if their teachers teach in a manner that is culturally relevant and the teachers hold the belief that every child can succeed.

Success begins in the classroom, as does the achievement gap. If educators are unaware of the disparities that exist between the achievement of African-American students and their white peers, they will not be able to lessen the gap. When researching the achievement gap, I searched the archives of *The Richmond Times Dispatch* and found only a handful of articles. Most of the articles were press releases from the VDOE claiming the gap has shrunk. Increasing awareness of the achievement gap could possibly lay some groundwork for improving student performance. If teachers are aware of the achievement gap, what are they doing to lessen it? What causes the gap? Are they making an attempt to improve academic achievement of their African-American students? These are some questions asked in my survey of area educators.

Most educators surveyed are aware of the achievement gap, but very few are aware of the actual statistics. For example, only five percent of those surveyed know that only 15 percent of African-American eighth graders in the state of Virginia are proficient in reading according to scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2003. The purpose of my survey was to determine how many educators know about the low achievement of African-American students.
American students, their perceptions on the causes of the gap and if they are working to make improvements. My research report begins with data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) to show the disparities in achievement between African-Americans and their white peers. I include a literature review of the achievement gap with a focus on socio-economic status, standardized testing, cultural relevance and language bias. Finally, I end my research with a survey of area educators attending the Master’s of Education program at the James Monroe Center of Mary Washington College. With my research, I plan to educate area teachers on the reasoning behind the achievement gap and prove to them there are ways to lessen the gap.

The Achievement Gap: What the Numbers Say

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has been compiling data on African-American achievement for over 30 years. Today, African-American students are scoring an average of 28 points lower on national assessments for reading in fourth and eighth grades than white students (NCES, 2003). In the state of Virginia, African-American students are passing the Standards of Learning (SOL) at an average of 27 percent lower than whites in reading in the eighth grade (VDOE, 2003). (See Figure 1). Across all grade levels, 65 percent of African-American students passed the Language Arts SOL, compared to 85 percent of whites. On the 2003 Nation’s Report Card, an assessment of reading by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 15 percent of African-American eighth graders in Virginia are proficient in reading, compared to 39 percent of whites (NCES, 2003).
Since the inception of the SOL’s in 1998, African-American achievement has been significantly lower than that of white students in every grade level and every subject. In 2001, the pass rate on the eighth grade reading SOL for African-Americans was 53 percent. In 2003, 49 percent of African-American students passed the eighth grade reading SOL, compared to 76 percent of whites (VDOE, 2003). However, the gap has not significantly increased because white students, also, achieved lower scores on the same test. Still, the achievement levels of African-Americans are losing ground. The same holds true for the NAEP, commonly known as the Nation’s Report Card. In 2002, African-Americans in the eighth grade scored 245 out of 500 where whites scored 272. But in 2003, African-American scores dipped to 244 out of 500 (NCES, 2003). Although this is not a significant change statistically, it still signifies a decline in achievement for African-Americans. (See Figure 2).
Figure 2. National Assessment of Educational Progress 8th Grade Reading Scores

In a press release from October of 2002, the VDOE, claimed the achievement gap between African-American students and whites was decreasing (VDOE, 2002). Although, African-Americans increased their scores in many areas, the VDOE failed to mention that whites had also made fairly significant gains as well. For example, the VDOE claimed African-Americans had narrowed the gap in the end of grade test for geometry. There was an increase of scores from 51 percent to 53 percent, but whites gained as well. White students increased their scores from 80 percent to 83 percent, which increased the gap from 29 points to 30 points (VDOE, 2002). Although African-Americans are scoring higher on many SOL tests, the gains made by whites are keeping the gap in tact.
**Socio-economic Status as Cause**

The socio-economic status of students is a statistical predictor of achievement levels according to a 1998 analysis from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth conducted by Phillips, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov and Crane (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002, p. 497). The study allowed Phillips et al. to compare parents’ income and its effects on their children over a period of time. The study found that parent income does not correlate strongly with scores on early vocabulary tests of students ages five and six. However, parental wealth has a direct correlation to a child’s academic success in later years because wealth usually determines where they live and which schools they will attend (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002, p. 497). Low-income families tend to live in low-income neighborhoods that usually, not in all cases, have below average school systems and a high percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunches.

Students who receive free or reduced lunch are more likely to be low achievers. In 2003, 63 percent of students who are considered to be economically disadvantaged passed the Virginia SOL tests (VDOE, 2003). On the Nation’s Report Card, students who received free or reduced lunch scored 252 out of 500 compared to the score of 274 of students who were found ineligible (NCES, 2003).

Students growing up in poverty have fewer opportunities for achievement in school. These students have less access to enriching summer programs such as camp, travel opportunities and library visits. Only 32 percent of black students have a computer in their homes as opposed to 73 percent of white students (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002, p. 499). With the advancements in technology in the past 15 years, not owning a computer limits student’s access to information. As a teacher, when I assign a writing assignment in class, typing is not a
requirement, but is extra credit. Many educators are requiring students to type all assignments. If
the students do not have a computer at home, they are at a grave disadvantage.

The lack of literature in the home is also a major factor in student achievement (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002, p. 499). Fewer opportunities and encouragement to read can have a negative affect on student performance. Students who live in low-income homes are less likely to have access to literature, and reading is usually not emphasized in the home (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002, p. 499). In the 2000-2001 school year, the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) conducted a survey of over 40,000 students from 15 suburban districts located across the country. The study found that 57 percent of whites reported having accessibility to computers and literature at home compared to only 27 percent of African-Americans. The study also found that African-American students were more likely to live with one or no parent and their parents were less likely to have a college education than their white peers. Studies have shown that the education level of parents has a direct influence on the academic achievement of the student. The more competent the parent, the better able they are to help their children with their schooling (Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002, p. 498).

Another major contributing factor to black student underachievement is poverty in the school systems. Nationally, urban and rural schools spend an average of $7,000 on each pupil while suburban schools spend at least $12,000 per pupil. The average student in New York City will see an average of $26,000 less spent on their education in their public school career than students in the rest of the state of New York (Johnston & Viadero, 2000, p. 4). Of these urban schools, many are crumbling due to age, and many classrooms house up to 40 students (Clinchy, 2001, p. 493). Economic disparities in the home and school place students at a greater risk of failing compared to more affluent suburban settings.
Research through the Education Trust has shown that students in high poverty and rural areas are much more likely to be taught by teachers who do not even have minors in their subjects (Haycock, 2001, para.31). In the state of California, only 35 percent of classes in high poverty schools are taught by teachers who are considered highly qualified by the new terms set forth in NCLB. In Virginia, 73 percent of classes in high poverty areas are taught by highly qualified teachers. There is no national average because seven states did not participate in the study (Education Trust, 2003, p. 11).

While poverty in the home and school are contributing factors to the underachievement of many African-American students, they are not necessarily causes of the achievement gap. African-American students in affluent suburbs such as Evanston, Illinois and Montclair, New Jersey are still scoring lower on standardized tests than their white peers (Johnston & Viadero, 2000, para. 17).

**Standards and Testing**

The No Child Left Behind Act has created a standards initiative across the country. Kati Haycock of the Education Trust believes that standards hold the key to the success of all American students and will benefit those students who are considered at-risk for failure (Haycock, 2001, para. 15). Standards are a guide for teachers, administrators and students to the skills and knowledge needed for mastery. According to Haycock, standards will not make a difference if there is not a rigorous curriculum to enforce them (Haycock, 2001, para. 18). Students who are taught at a higher level curriculum do better on standardized tests. For example, students who finish the college preparatory courses in mathematics score higher on the NAEP than those students who only take the minimal courses (Haycock, 2001, para. 19). Standards are in place in most states across the country due to NCLB.
With the implementation of standards comes high stakes testing which, in many cases, encourages test-driven curricula that often promotes a "teaching to the test" strategy in the classroom and diminishes the possibilities of higher-order thinking skills (Townsend, 2002, p. 224). High-stakes testing, in most cases, causes school systems to reward those schools that are successful and punish those that are not. For example, in Florida the state government rewarded successful schools with a check for $100 for each pupil if the school improved over the previous year or the school passed the state standards. If the schools failed to meet expectations, the schools were punished by such actions as removing personnel and taking away funds for students to allow them to attend other schools (Townsend, 2002, p. 3).

Standardized tests assess student's skill and knowledge of the curriculum they are being taught. The method in which these tests are administered leaves many test takers frustrated, confused and anxious (Jencks, 1998, p. 69). More often than not, these tests are timed; the student may not eat, drink or leave the room. The instructions for completing the test may be so formal that students answer questions incorrectly because they are unsure of the directions (Jencks, 1998, p. 69). The pressure can be overwhelming for all students. The pressure will only escalate if passing the test determines advancement to the next grade or perhaps graduation. In a 1993 study of test anxiety performed by Turner, Beidel, Hughes and Turner, the researchers found that 41 percent of the 229 African-American students who were tested experienced test anxiety. The children who showed signs of anxiety achieved at a much lower level than those students who felt no pressure (cited in Townsend, 2002, p. 229). High-stakes testing is on the rise across the country due to NCLB, but even before NCLB, students were squirming in their chairs and sharpening their pencils.
Standardized tests are not new to American school children, but are now more frequent and have more of an impact on a student’s and school’s future. In Boston, students who do not pass the eighth grade state standard are forced to go to summer school even if they passed the school year. If they still fail the test after summer school, those students will be placed in “transition” classes in the ninth grade, where the students get no electives or any creative program. They take double English and math classes, and if they fail again, the students will continue the program in the tenth grade (Clinchy, 2001, p. 494). Needless to say, the dropout rate in Boston has increased 28 percent for African-Americans, which in turn has increased the test scores for the area (Clinchy, 2001, p. 495).

**Cultural Relevancy**

Due to poor school funding, high-stakes testing and unqualified teachers, the achievement gap has become a plague on American education. Some of the proven ways to lessen the gap, many of these paths to success revolve around increasing funding for public schools, but there are ways to assist African-American students that require little or no funding. According to Gloria Ladsen-Billings of the University of Wisconsin, the education of the African-American child revolves around good teaching, teaching that involves cultural relevance to all students.

In a culturally relevant classroom, the teacher uses prior experiences of the students to help them relate to concepts. For example, a teacher talks about the governing structure of a church and tells the students the pastor is the president, the deacons are senators and the trustees are representatives. The lesson, of course, is about the United States government. The teacher is relating personal relevance to concepts being learned in the classroom (Ladsen-Billings, 1994, p.
Another example of cultural relevance would be a poetry lesson where students would have the opportunity to create poems similar to rap artists. If the student relates to the lesson in a manner that they feel is relevant to their life, understanding the lesson becomes much more relevant. Culturally relevant practices according to Lipman (1995), “build upon students’ cultural and experiential strengths to help them acquire new knowledge” (Quoted in Benson, 2003, p. 16).

Ladsen-Billings contrasts a culturally relevant teacher to an assimilationist teacher whose job is to pass information on to the students so they will pass the end test. In a culturally relevant classroom, knowledge is continuous and viewed critically. In an assimilationist’s classroom, the curriculum is prepackaged with predetermined textbooks and lessons (Ladsen-Billings, 1994, p. 80). Culturally relevant teaching steers students away from the rote memorization that is required to pass a multiple-choice test. Instead, culturally relevant teaching helps students understand the content and actively participate in lessons.

In an assimilationist’s classroom, the teacher assumes that all students come into the classroom with certain skills. What happens when some students do not possess these skills? The assimilationist believes these students are impossible to teach. The approach to teaching the students becomes remedial and skill oriented with teacher centered instruction (Townsend, 2002, p. 227). The culturally relevant teacher scaffolds instruction for these students and differentiates the instruction so all students participate in the construction of their own knowledge (Ladsen-Billings, 1994, p. 96).

The manner in which students are taught plays a key role in their success. Teaching in a way that is deemed relevant by the students may encourage them to actively engage themselves in their work and strive for success. If students perceive that the culture of the classroom is not
compatible with their home culture, they may underachieve (Benson, 2003, p. 16). All students are not the same. They do not come into the classroom with the same life experiences as their peers and they all learn in different ways. African-American students and students whose native language is not English need to be taught in ways that are relevant to them as individuals. Unfortunately, there are no statistics to prove that culturally relevant teaching promotes higher achievement.

**Language Bias**

All standardized tests are written in Standard English (SE). Many American school children, especially African-American children do not speak SE. Many African-Americans speak in a dialect called African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). AAVE is especially common in urban and rural areas and is utilized by many middle class suburban African-Americans. Some students may be classified as poor readers on standardized tests because the tests do not accurately assess the students’ abilities (Wolfman, Adger & Christian, 1999, p. 160). To make an accurate assessment of reading skills for certain students, language needs to be taken into consideration. For example, some reading tests like the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test require a student to know the word when it is pronounced in SE. African-American preschoolers may not recognize the word unless it is pronounced in AAVE. The student’s vocabulary is automatically underestimated (Jencks, 1998, p.69). Understanding linguistic diversity among students may give the classroom teacher the means to promote success on the part of the linguistically diverse student.

It is a widespread belief that students who speak in AAVE have a verbal disadvantage. This theory is called the “deficit theory” where the student is considered to be linguistically underdeveloped (Powell, 1998, p. 21). In reality, the student is usually highly competent, yet the
teacher perceives the student as being linguistically inferior. Linguistic diversity is not a cause or symptom of a learning deficit. The deficit perceived by the teacher is, in reality, a difference in language. The reaction of teachers to the difference in language could be detrimental to the academic achievement of these students. In many cases, students with a language difference, such as those students who speak AAVE, are likely to be tracked into lower level classrooms with less able students (Wofram, Adger & Christian, 1999, p. 24). An understanding of the differences in dialects in school communities is needed to promote the highest academic achievement of all students. Presuming the student is academically inferior is promoting an injustice to all students who vary from the mainstream dialect.

Classroom teachers, when teaching grammar and sentence structure, use the traditional method of correcting a student called the correctionist model. The traditional approach to language is that there is only one way to construct a sentence and only one way the sentence should sound. SE in a correctionist’s classroom is the only way to write and speak. But this method does not take into account the student’s background and home language. The teacher is constantly correcting the student and presuming ignorance. The teacher needs to take into account that classrooms are “neither culturally nor linguistically monolithic” (Wheeler & Swords, 2001, p. 4).

There is a method that is being used across the country to help students decipher the differences between home speech and classroom speech. This method is called the contrastivist model which recognizes a child’s home language as different from school language. This model teaches children to code-switch between home language and school language. Through the efforts of the teacher, the student is not told they are wrong, but is asked to gauge the differences between home speech and classroom language. By contrasting home language and school
language, students see the differences in form and use and are able to limit AAVE in their classroom work. In a study in a classroom in Chicago, there was a 59.3 percent decrease in AAVE in the classroom (Wheeler & Swords, 2001, p. 8). If used in all classrooms, the contrastivist model could be a means to increase the achievement of African-Americans.

**Smaller Class Size**

The reduction of class sizes, although an expensive process, could drastically improve the achievement of African-American students. In the nation's inner city classrooms there are as many as 40 students to a classroom with one teacher. The largest gaps in African-American achievement are found in these schools. A prime example would be the nation’s capital, Washington D.C., where students scored 183 out of 500 on the NAEP tests for 2003. The national average was 216 out of 500 (NCES, 2003).

Research suggests that lessening the student to teacher ratio in the long run would improve the achievement of African-American students. The state of Tennessee launched an experiment in the reduction of classroom size called Project STAR in the early 1990’s (Chubb & Loveless, 2002, p. 3). The project assigned students from kindergarten to third grade to average size classrooms and to smaller classrooms of 13 to 17 students with a teacher’s aide. The student’s progress was then followed throughout their public school careers. The researchers found that all students who were placed in smaller classrooms achieved higher scores on national tests than those who were placed in average size classrooms.

After the students moved on to the fourth grade, the achievement of African-American students stayed on course, or close to it, with their white peers. The achievement gap was cut by 15 percent. These same students, after reaching high school, participated in college entrance
tests, the SAT and ACT, at an eight percent higher rate than those students in the average size classrooms (Chubb & Loveless, 2002, p. 3). The findings of Project STAR suggest that a decrease in class size would greatly benefit the achievement levels of African-American students. Unfortunately, the reduction of class size is costly and a route many school systems do not consider.

**Summary**

The achievement gap between African-Americans and whites is an issue in American Education that does not seem to going away. It dates back to the 1800's when the Supreme Court decided “separate but equal” was constitutional. After the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, many believed the playing field was leveled for African-American students. Statistics show otherwise. There is a constant trend of underachievement compared to white students, a trend that does not seem be lessening. On national assessments for reading, African-American students are scoring an average of 28 points lower than whites. The same holds true for state assessments in Virginia. On the 2003 SOL for Reading/Language Arts, 65 percent of African-American students passed compare to 85 percent of whites. The causes of the gap include socio-economic factors, language bias, teacher quality, and testing. Research has shown there are ways to lessen the gap by creating smaller class sizes and promoting cultural relevance. The gap will not change if educators do not know of its existence, the reasons for it and ways to lessen it.

**Survey Data**

In addition to my research of the achievement gap, I conducted a survey of current teachers and students of education at the James Monroe Center of Mary Washington College. The survey was designed to assess the awareness of the achievement gap among area teachers
and future teachers and their perceptions to what causes the gap. I received 100 responses, 66 from current teachers and 34 from pre-service candidates. Of the current teachers, the survey was further broken down into length of time in the profession. Nine respondents have taught for ten or more years, 17 for four to ten years, 23 for one to three years, and 17 for the first year. Then, the teachers were asked about the number of students in their classroom. Only one reported having over 30 students. 79 percent of teachers responded their classroom size was less than 26 students, considered to be average according to the Tennessee study. In the nation’s inner city classrooms there are as many as 40 students with one teacher. With this data, it would be safe to assume that classroom size is not an issue in this area.

The survey then proceeds with a question regarding cultural acknowledgement. The question asks, “Do you know effective ways to take cultural differences into consideration when designing lessons and assessment”? While only 50 percent of pre-service candidates answered this question in a positive manner, 72 percent of teachers answered yes. However, only five of nine teachers with more than 10 years experience said they knew of ways to take cultural differences into account, or 55 percent. Out of all respondents, 63 percent are aware of effective ways to take cultural differences into account when designing lessons and assessment. When asked of the reasons behind the achievement gap, 45 percent of respondents cited attitude and cultural awareness of teachers as one of the top three causes, indicating teachers recognize their own need for professional development in this area.

In addition to cultural awareness, 44 percent of respondents cited the use standard English as one of the top three causes of the achievement gap between African-Americans and white students. This suggests that teachers need a better understanding of dialect differences in order for them to teach the students properly. If the teachers associate dialect with academic
potential, the student will get tracked into lower ability classrooms with a watered down curriculum which further perpetuates the achievement gap.

In this area, 55 percent of current teachers responded that socio-economic status is the number one cause of the achievement gap. 56 of the pre-service candidates cited socio-economic status as the number one cause, as well. Totally, 86 percent of respondents cited socio-economic status in the top three causes of the achievement gap. What this statistic tells me is that most teachers and those studying to be teachers perceive African-American students as economically disadvantaged. Poverty is a correlation to the achievement gap, not a direct cause. Not all poor African-American students are low achievers and not all wealthy African-American students are high achievers. Lack of literature in the home, as well as computers, can promote low achievement in any student including white students. If teachers believe this, then they may consider they cannot do anything about the achievement gap.

Four percent of all respondents correctly estimated the reading proficiency of African-American students as less than 20 percent. 56 percent of respondents believed the pass rate for proficiency was between 20 and 40 percent. When asked about the percentage of African-Americans who passed the SOL’s in Reading/Language Arts, only 41 percent correctly answered between 50 and 75 percent. This statistic tells me that teachers are aware of the achievement gap, but unaware of actual statistics, which in some cases are shocking. Not only are teachers unaware of the statistics, they believe the achievement gap is decreasing. When asked this question, 53 percent of all respondents believe that the achievement gap is decreasing slightly. Although, this may be true for some SOL tests in Virginia, as a whole the gap is either increasing in some areas or staying about the same because, while African-Americans are making some gains on the SOL’s, whites are improving their scores as well, keeping the gap in tact.
Teachers and future educators in this area are aware of the gap in achievement between African-American students and their white peers. A large majority believe that socio-economic status is a leading cause for academic failure among African-Americans. The ability to speak standard English, also, plays a key role in African-American achievement. A sizable minority also see vernacular dialect and cultural awareness on behalf of the teachers as being causes of the gap. A large number also recognize that they need to learn more about how to differentiate instruction for minority students.

Conclusions

The achievement gap between African-American and white students has been documented by the NCES for over 30 years. Today, African-American eighth graders are scoring an average of 28 points lower than whites on achievement tests in reading. In Virginia, 65 percent of African-American students are passing the SOL’s compared to 85 percent of whites. My research suggests that although teachers are aware of the achievement gap between African-Americans and whites, they are not aware of its severity. There is no one single cause of the achievement gap between African-Americans and whites, but there are many perceptions of what causes it. The most common perception of the achievement gap is the socio-economic status of African-American students. In my survey, socio-economic status was the number one reason cited by area teachers for the achievement gap. This leads me to believe that teachers assume if a student comes from a low income background, then the student cannot be a high achiever. What about the middle class African-American students across the country that are not achieving? It seems to me that it is easier to place blame on something that we have no control over, than to examine how our own teaching practices could improve the situation. There are many factors
involved in the achievement gap such as classroom size, language bias, teacher quality, and standardized tests. The results of this study make a strong case for more professional development related to culturally relevant pedagogy and language bias. My survey also shows that many teachers are not aware of how they can reduce the achievement gap, even though they recognize that teachers' attitudes and practices are contributing factors. The achievement gap begins in the classroom and it will not change until educators are made aware of its severity and make a concerted effort for change.
References


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Appendix A: Survey of Local Teachers and Pre-service Candidates
Dear Student,

My name is Dorri Mills and I am a student at the James Monroe Center of Mary Washington College seeking my Master's in Middle School Education. I am currently completing EDCI 590, the final step to my graduation in May. I am writing this letter to ask you to participate in a short survey I have designed for my research. I am researching teachers' perceptions of the academic achievement of African-American students compared to the achievement of white students. After completing the survey, please place it in the specified box located in the library at the James Monroe Center by April 6th. All survey answers are completely anonymous.

Thank you in advance for your cooperation,

Dorri Mills

1. Do you currently teach?
   Yes   No

   If yes, continue from question 2. If no, skip to question 5.

2. If yes, how many years?
   a. 0-1
   b. 1-3
   c. 4-10
   d. more than 10

3. What grade level do you teach?
   a. K-3
   b. 4-5
   c. 6-8
   d. 9-12

4. How many students are in your classroom?
   a. fewer than 20
   b. 22-26
   c. 27-30
   d. more than 30

5. Do you know effective ways to take cultural differences into consideration when designing lessons and assessment?
   Yes   No

Continued on back
The following questions relate to your perceptions of the achievement gap. Please answer them to the best of your ability.

6. The average score of African-American students compared to white students on the Standards of Learning averages ...
   a. less than 10 percent lower
   b. 10 to 20 percent lower
   c. 20 to 30 percent lower
   d. more than 30 percent lower

7. The percentage of African-American students who passed the Reading/Language Arts Standard of Learning in 2003 was ...
   a. less than 25 percent
   b. between 25 and 50 percent
   c. between 50 and 75 percent
   d. more than 75 percent

8. In Virginia, the percentage of African-American eighth graders who passed the national reading proficiency test in 2003 was ...
   a. less than 20 percent
   b. between 20 and 40 percent
   c. between 40 and 60 percent
   d. more than 60 percent

9. In recent years, the achievement gap between African-American students and white students has ...
   a. increased gradually
   b. increased greatly
   c. decreased slightly
   d. decreased dramatically

10. What do you think are the causes of the achievement gap between African-American students and white students? Rank the following with the most prominent cause ranked 1 and the least prominent 6.
    ____ family income or socio-economic status
    ____ ability to use standard English
    ____ access to books in the home
    ____ quality of school and educational facilities
    ____ training of teachers
    ____ attitude and cultural awareness of teachers
Appendix B: Powerpoint Presentation
The Achievement Gap between African-American and White Students
By Dorri Mills
April 19, 2004

Introduction
• For over 30 years the National Center for Education Statistics has been compiling data on the achievement of all American students. The data is based on ethnicity, gender and grade level. The data shows a constant trend of lower tests scores for African-Americans students compared to whites. This is commonly known as the "achievement gap."

What the Numbers Say
• African-American students score an average of 28 points lower on National tests in Reading
• Only 65 percent of African-American students passed the Language Arts SOL in 2003, compared to 85 percent for whites
• Only 15 percent of African-American eighth graders in Virginia are proficient in reading

Numbers continued
• 49 percent of African-American eighth graders passed the 2003 SOL for reading compared to 76 percent of whites
• The average score for African-American eighth graders on the NAEP was 244 out of 500 compared to 272 for whites

Achievement Levels are Decreasing
• The pass rate for African-Americans on eighth grade reading SOL's dropped from 53 percent in 2001 to 49 percent in 2003
• The scores on the NAEP for eighth grade African-Americans dropped from 245 to 244 from 2002 to 2003

Reasons for the Achievement Gap
• The most common perceived cause of the achievement gap is low socio-economic status. 55 percent of teachers surveyed cited poverty as the number one reason for the achievement gap. 86 percent of those surveyed placed poverty in the top three reasons for the gap.
Socio-economic Status continued

- Students who live in poverty are less likely to have
- Access to literature at home
- A computer in the home
- Visits to the library
- Access to summer programs
- Travel opportunities

SES continued

- Low income families tend to live in low income neighborhoods that usually, not in all cases, have below average school systems.
- Urban and rural school systems spend an average of $7,000 per pupil while suburban school districts spend an average of $12,000 per pupil.

SES continued

- In the state of California, only 35 percent of classes in high poverty schools are taught by qualified teachers.
- In Virginia, 73 percent of classes in high poverty areas are taught by qualified teachers.
- 40 percent of math teachers who teach in schools where at least 49 percent of the students qualify for free/reduced lunch are not qualified to teach math.

Standards and Testing

- The implementation of No Child Left Behind has sparked a standards movement across the country
- Testing follows standards
- Schools that succeed will be rewarded
- Schools that fail will be punished (usually funding will be cut)
- Students who fail (Virginia SOL's) will not get a diploma

Language Bias

- 50 percent of those surveyed cited the ability to use standard English as a cause of the achievement gap
- Many African-American students speak in African-American Vernacular English
- Students are thought to have a deficit in their language skills
- In reality, the student is usually highly competent

Class Size

- Many of the nation's inner cities have over 40 students in a class with one teacher
- The gap in achievement is highest in these schools
- Example: Washington, D.C. where African-American students scored 183 out of 500 on the NAEP. The national average for African-Americans is 216.
### How to Bridge the Gap
- Higher standards to include teacher quality
- Culturally relevant teaching
- Smaller classroom size
- Education for teachers regarding linguistically diverse students
- Awareness

### Standards to Promote Achievement
- Improve quality of teachers
- More enriching curriculum

### Culturally Relevant Teaching
- Scaffold instruction
- Use of prior knowledge
- Differentiation of instruction
- Active participation on behalf of the students
- Build on cultural and experiential strengths of the student
- Critical thinking

### Smaller Class Size
- In Tennessee, an experiment in the reduction of class size called Project STAR took place in the 1990's. The project assigned African-American students to smaller classes with an aide in grades K-3. The achievement gap was cut by 15 percent. These same students participated in college entrance exams at an eight percent higher rate than their peers in regular classes.

### Language Diversity
- Correctionist model vs. Contrastivist model
- Deficit vs. Difference
- Home Language vs. School Language

### Awareness
- Of the 100 persons surveyed, only five percent knew of the severity of the achievement gap between African-Americans and whites. All know of its existence, but only a few knew that only 15 percent of African-American eighth graders in Virginia are proficient in reading.
Conclusion

• The achievement gap begins in the classroom and without the effort of teachers and administrators, it will only continue to grow.