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Keywords

Achievement Gap, Urban Education, Discourse, Talk

Rethinking Achievement Gap Talk in Urban Education

In her presidential address to the American Educational Research Association, Ladson-Billings (2006) challenged us – educational researchers – to rethink the use of achievement gap when discussing and explaining disparities that exist between different groups of students in education. In the United States (U.S.), these disparities include the following, for instance:

- Race/ethnicity: Black/African-American and Brown/Latino/Hispanic students tend to score lower than White/European-American students on standardized exams
- Socioeconomic status: Students from lower socio-economic statuses tend to score lower than those from higher socio-economic statuses on standardized exams
- Language: Students whose first language is not English tend to struggle more than native English speakers in their academic courses.

Although the disparities outlined above exist, focusing on gaps in achievement may be misleading. Ladson-Billings (2006) concluded that in the U.S. there is not as much of an achievement gap as there is an “education debt” that the educational system owes to so many students it has poorly served. This education debt carries several important features, according to Ladson-Billings: historical debt, economic debt, sociopolitical debt, and moral debt. Employing these four frames as research and analytic sites, Ladson-Billings challenged educational researchers to re-conceptualize and move beyond achievement discourse to address myriad layers of debt owed to so many students in education.

Irvine (2010) explained that a perceived achievement gap shepherded through the language we use is the result of other gaps that seductively coerce people into believing that an achievement gap actually exists. Rather than focusing on a perceived achievement gap, from her analyses, Irvine recommended that attention should be placed on closing other gaps that exist in education, which cause theoreticians, researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and administrators to believe there is an achievement gap. For Irvine, other gaps that shape our belief in (and consequently our discourse about) an achievement gap include: “the teacher quality gap; the teacher training gap; the challenging curriculum gap; the school funding gap; the digital divide gap; the wealth and income gap; the employment opportunity gap; the affordable housing gap; the health care gap; the nutrition gap; the school integration gap; and the quality childcare gap” (p. xii). From Irvine’s perspective, when we address the many other gaps that structurally and systemically exist in educational practice, achievement results can improve.

Irvine’s descriptions of gaps that exist in education beyond achievement can assist us in talking about “gaps” – if we must focus on gaps at all – to make sense of reality, particularly in urban education. The gaps that Irvine describes are pervasive in urban sociopolitical contexts as too many students have not necessarily fared well in an educational system that can be described as broken. Elsewhere I (Milner, 2012), building on and from Ladson-Billings’ charge, argued that we should focus on opportunity gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2010) that exist in educational practices when attempting to make sense of, describe, rationalize about and explain unfortunate inequitable opportunities in some communities. In that article, I elaborated on a framework to assist researchers, theoreticians and practitioners in explaining opportunity gaps: (1) Colorblindness; (2) Cultural Conflicts; (3) Myth of Meritocracy; (4) Low Expectations and Deficit Mindsets; and (5) Context-neutral Mindsets and Practices.

In addition, I described additional challenges and shortcomings, which appear to be consequences of our focus on achievement gaps:

- Achievement gap explanations of educational practices can force educational researchers to compare culturally diverse students¹ with White students without compelling, nuanced, and illustrative pictures of the reasons undergirding and behind the causes of disparities and differences that exist between and among groups.
- Achievement gap explanations can frame White students as the norm from which other racial and ethnic groups of students are to be

compared (Foster, 1999).² White students can be covertly and tacitly constructed as intellectually and academically superior to others.

- Achievement gap explanations can force us into studying and conceptualizing students of color from a deficit perspective (Moll, 1998). Researchers focus on the perceived shortcomings of students rather than the assets that students and their families possess.
- Achievement gap explanations can force us to focus on individual students as well as groups of students rather than inequitable, racist, and sexist structures, systems, contexts, policies, and practices that lead to perceived achievement gaps.³

While achievement gap discourse in education usually focuses on students' scores on standardized tests, it may also concern student graduation rates or even patterns in gifted and advanced placement courses. Standardization of policies and practices is at the heart of many reform efforts aimed to decrease and eventually eliminate achievement gaps. However, based on my analyses, standardization, in many ways, is antithetical to the diversity that communities of people possess because it suggests that all students live and operate in homogeneous environments with equality and equity of opportunity afforded to them (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Milner & Williams, 2008; Tate, 2008).⁴ Standardization reform efforts advance a sameness agenda when the playing field for many students of color, English language learners, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in urban environments is anything but even or level (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Results on outcomes such as standardized tests provide information about a particular, socially-constructed way of thinking about what students know and need to know. However, the results on standardized examinations only seem to report one-dimension of a much more complex and nuanced reality of what students know. Moreover, results on standardized exams do not adequately explain why some students are not performing well or the other aspects of students' knowledge that do not show up on examinations. Students' outcomes on standardized examinations will vary based in part on the instruction and learning opportunities they experience as well as a host of outside of school variables such as poverty, employment or the lack thereof, and where students' homes are located (Milner, in press). Researchers and theorists socially construct what achievement means as well as academic and social success. For instance, Apple (2006) stressed that those of us in education must persistently question what knowledge is, how it is constructed and validated, and who decides the worth, value, and meanings of knowledge. Similar

questions should be posed, I argue, about achievement. As with knowledge, certain areas of achievement are privileged and valued over others, and there appears to be a socially constructed hierarchy of *which* and *what* achievements and knowledge matter more in comparison to others. Unfortunately the knowledge and skills that students of color, those living in poverty, and English language learners possess are often seen as substandard or not as essential. In this sense, there are societal high and low cultural ways of conceptualizing achievement and knowledge (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005).⁵

Thus, I invite those of us in urban education to consider the following questions:

- To what extent is achievement synonymous with learning?
- What does it mean for one group of students to learn and achieve in one school community and not succeed in another?
- Who decides what it means to achieve, why, and how do we know?
- How do we address the kind of learning and knowledge acquisition that never show up on achievement measures—including high-stakes, standardized tests?

Addressing these questions – while complex and dynamic – can help those of us in urban education rethink how we talk about achievement. Indeed, as Haberman (2000) maintained, “language is not an innocent reflection of how we think. The terms we use control our perceptions, shape our understanding, and lead us to particular proposals for improvement” (p. 203).

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Notes

1. Throughout this article, I use culturally diverse students to refer to African American students, Latino/a and Hispanic American students, students whose first language is not English, and those living in poverty. I recognize that each person possesses layers of diversity; however, for the sake of space and clarity, I use culturally diverse students. In other cases, I use “students of color” to refer mainly to African American and Latino/a American students.
2. It can be argued that white students are viewed as the norm by which all others are compared. Even when other racial and ethnic groups, such as Asian students, out-“perform” White students on academic measures, they are still compared to the norm: White students.

3. Some sociologists would argue that it is actually ineffectual to focus extensive amounts of time comparing one group with another (see, for instance, Carter, 2005).
4. Although similar, equity and equality are not synonyms. They are different in that equality means sameness, while equity is more responsive and context specific. Secada (1989) pointed to a major difference between equality and equity. He wrote: "There is a history of using terms like equity and equality of education interchangeably. Though these constructs are related, equality is group-based and quantitative. Equity can be applied to groups or to individuals; it is qualitative in that equity is tied to notions of justice." (p. 23)
Equity, according to Secada, is defined as judgments about whether or not a given state of affairs is just. For instance, equity in education may mean that we are attempting to provide students, regardless of their racial, ethnic, cultural or socioeconomic background with what they need to succeed—not necessarily the exact same goals and visions across multiple and varied environments.
5. For instance, in literacy, knowledge about and achievement related to traditional canonical readings from authors such as William Shakespeare or Charles Dickens are considered high culture while African (American) literature written by authors such as Zora Neale Hurston or James Baldwin, for instance, may be classified as low culture (from a White-dominated societal perspective).

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