

POVERTY NOT RACE , HOLDS BACK URBAN STUDENTS

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One of the greatest challenges facing educators today is the achievement gap between white and minority students. Educators are expected to close this gap by applying new knowledge effectively.

In this age of accountability, schools often are compared against one another to measure performance. Many consider such comparisons essential in determining how students are doing.

But often, the characteristics used to compare "similar" schools or school systems do not truly depict the students. Two frequently used features -- size and type (urban, rural, suburban) of school system -- tell very little about the students actually found there.

Performance is often compared among types of students, as well. Many urban school systems, including every big-city system in Ohio, track performance on achievement tests by race or gender to assess how different groups of students compare with one another.

Significant differences do appear between races and, to a lesser extent, between genders. It is well-established that black students generally perform below their white peers on standard achievement measures. The news media and academic press continue to report this gap and lags in minority achievement.

Almost always, such reports leave the mistaken impression that gaps in performance are related to skin color. No single cause for such disparities has been determined, but no legitimate, concrete evidence has ever been found that a characteristic such as race itself affects students' abilities.

In fact, many studies of mixed-race children and children adopted by parents of another race suggest that "racial" differences in test performance are perhaps entirely environmental.

Stereotypes matter

Some evidence suggests that the very act of focusing on race influences students' abilities. Research from Stanford University shows that if students know about the historic poor performance of their group on tests, their own performance might suffer. This controversial phenomenon is called the "stereotype threat."

In the past, when black and white students were told they were being tested on their academic abilities, blacks did worse than whites. But when a control group was told the tests did not matter and were a laboratory tool, the difference diminished.

Similar findings apply to other racial groups and to gender. When women were told their performance was being compared with men's, women's scores decreased. When white males were told their performance was being compared with Asian students', the whites' scores fell. Take away the threat of comparison, and all groups of

students tend to perform better.

Dividing test scores by race might have another unintended effect: increasing the inequality between more wealthy, white schools and less wealthy, minority schools. Because teachers are often told to raise scores for minority or poor students, they set aside the regular curriculum to spend class time teaching to the test. Scores might go up for these students, but the teachers have lost crucial time needed for higher-quality learning. The attention paid to improving the test scores of minority students might actually reduce their overall performance and knowledge over time. And we still see measurable differences between races.

What, if not race, accounts for the differences? The answers involve social, family and economic factors.

Far more relevant than race or gender in predicting academic achievement are family socioeconomics and the education levels of students' parents (and of other adults close to them). The best predictor of a child's success in school is the education level of the parents, particularly the mother.

Recent studies suggest that early childhood experiences affect learning and development, with children from poor environments generally achieving less than those from more enriching ones.

Researchers now know that race matters, but that it does not determine student performance. In the words of Professor Amitai Etzioni at George Washington University: "Race does not determine a person's response (or performance) and often, on all important matters, Americans of different social backgrounds share many convictions, hopes and goods, even in recent years as we see the beginning of the decline of the white majority. Moreover, each racial group is far from homogeneous in itself. Differences within each group abound."

Those within-group differences are what make education so complex.

Poverty has consequences

History shows the relationships among race, poverty and education.

Several generations ago, white Americans operated plantations via slavery. Laws forbade educating slaves. When the slaves were emancipated in 1865, no GI Bill of Rights assisted their adjustment to the mainstream culture. Most people of color lived in poverty without any means to become knowledgeable workers.

As a result of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the civil-rights laws passed in the 1960s, actions were taken to bridge the gap between white and black. Nevertheless, the gap between rich and poor continued to grow, with most negative impact on nonwhites. Now, blacks are three times more likely than whites to come from poor families.

The educational plight of the many non-English-speaking immigrants entering the United States is not much different. Their parents often have little formal education and cannot provide academic stimulation or appropriate diets. Hispanic children are twice as likely as white ones to live in poverty.

Poor families usually are less able to afford good health care, buy nutritious food or provide enriching experiences for their children. Students need these things to succeed at school.

Findings emphasize the importance of mental stimulation in the home and the benefits of a high-protein diet. During the past two decades, research has shown that most of the brain is "built" after birth in a process that depends on factors such as these.

Joseph F. Murphy of Ohio State University and Patrick B. Forsyth of the University Council for Educational Administration documented a body of findings regarding the declining social welfare of children and their families: "These data reveal a society populated increasingly by groups of citizens that historically have not fared well in this nation, especially ethnic minorities and citizens for whom English is a second language. Concomitantly, the percentage of youngsters affected by the ills of the world in which they live -- for example, poverty, unemployment,

illiteracy, crime, drug addiction, malnutrition and poor physical health -- is increasing."

If environmental factors are a significant cause of student performance, then all who educate poor children have a special burden. Teachers can and do make a difference in how much students learn. Yet their job can be made more effective by influencing students' lives before they begin school.

Meredith Phillips, assistant professor of policy studies and sociology at the University of California-Los Angeles, and colleagues wrote, "Our results imply that we could eliminate at least half, and probably more, of the black-white test score gaps at the end of the 12th grade by eliminating the differences that exist before children enter the first grade."

Society often unfairly expects effective teachers to get the same results from students who come from widely varying households. What students have experienced before they enter school will differ dramatically and will influence their performance.

Comparisons can be faulty

Most comparisons of school districts unfairly use data such as total corporate and individual tax base per pupil or size and type of school, all factors that have virtually no relationship to learning. Students from affluent homes have great advantages in doing schoolwork. They are more likely to have access to computers and other learning while not in school. Their parents probably are adept readers with wide vocabularies.

Some surprising findings have indicated that the effects of poverty extend beyond individual families. In schools with 25 percent of the students living in poverty, all students -- poor, affluent or in between -- tend to do worse than students from schools in wealthy communities. Even after a family has achieved a higher income, the effects of poverty can linger. If two families have the same incomes, children from the one that became wealthy more recently might lag behind children from the other.

School characteristics such as building size, type (rural, urban, suburban) and tax base per pupil have limited relationships to the performance of individual students. The current mania for small schools is based as much on emotion as on evidence. Although small schools appear to foster better attendance and lower dropout rates, researchers have been unable to clearly establish that student achievement in such schools is consistently superior to that in large schools.

If school size is important, the effects might be more pronounced for poor children; they tend to do better in small schools in small districts. Variables such as parental education, quality of diet and access to stimulating environments are more related to the ability to learn.

Educators and reformers who focus on systems or teacher quality without giving attention to social and environmental factors will continue to be frustrated by more failure than success. True, individual pockets of success with high-need children will occur for a variety of complex reasons. But for schools to be broadly successful, society must continue to address social- and economic-justice issues. The most dramatic way to do so is to ensure quality preschools in high-poverty areas and to pay for schools in ways that recognize differences in students' needs.

Preschoolers living in poverty must have access to educational opportunities that develop literacy, particularly at an age when so much brain development occurs. This means seeking more money for schools. Some states are seeking creative solutions. Florida has created an "equity and adequacy" concept to send more dollars toward some high-need urban districts. This is not a complete answer, but such approaches are imperative to give students entering school the capabilities for success.

If the achievement gap is to be closed, educators must find better ways of addressing the demographics that make America both rich and culturally complex.

Schools' ethnic and cultural diversity is growing. Research has shown, however, that focusing only on students' differing physical characteristics not only is inaccurate but in fact might hinder students' ability to excel.

Educators must look at race and beyond it.

Some need extra help

Understanding the relationships among poverty, family education levels, race and achievement can help school leaders establish effective, fair plans for distributing resources and even for organizing schools. The fit between home and school environments is important for addressing student diversity. Part of this has to do with how teachers interact with students.

Black children do not need specialized instruction, but they do need teachers who vary their strategies and try to make learning more culturally relevant. Many authors have argued that this is essential in urban classrooms.

One element appears especially critical: The teacher must believe that all students can succeed. Emerging evidence suggests that when this is so, and students know it, they do achieve more, and the gap does close.

Culturally relevant teachers understand that diversity requires new approaches to their craft. Traditional strategies such as direct instruction might be essential for developing basic skills, but fostering students' full potential requires teaching that helps them connect what they know with what they need to know.

Many reform critics argue that students in poverty require traditional, skill-focused teachers. We agree. They also need teachers, however, who teach skills in a relevant context for them to make sense of what they are learning.

Evidence comes from an elementary-school classroom that uses Success for All, a reading program that is one of the systemic reforms embraced in urban schools (including some Columbus schools). New York City's Public School 159 implicitly moves beyond the scripted basics.

In one fourth-grade class, James Traub of The New York Times Magazine observed a group of students as they began a 90-minute period sitting on the floor, listening to the teacher read a story. The teacher asked about the main character, an Indian named Iktomi.

"He's acting selfish," said a boy.

"Selfish? How? Give me some evidence," the teacher said. The boy complied.

The teacher asked who the antagonist of the story was, and again demanded evidence.

"Nature," said another child. The hot sun was punishing Iktomi. The Success for All script was abandoned, Traub reported, as the children became involved in discussing the story. They groaned in disappointment when the period ended.

That groan was an outgrowth of learning and of students' wanting to learn. To meet that desire often entails varied and complex instruction. A scripted Success for All teacher might be able to start students learning, but it takes a more complex set of teaching and decision-making skills to know how to move students to higher performance. And that's where achievement-gap differences really can be closed.

This task won't be simple or inexpensive. We need to cast aside the notion that anyone is in sole possession of the truth. Our work will require new approaches to understanding demographics and diversity.