Confronting the Achievement Gap

Why is there an achievement gap? Why has it persisted in spite of everything we’ve tried to do to eliminate or at least narrow it? What should we be doing? Mr. Gardner takes a hard look at these questions and offers some answers that we don’t usually hear.

By David Gardner

Over the course of 33 years, I have taught in schools with high concentrations of low-income families, children of color, and students and families who speak little or no English, and I have taught in schools in mostly affluent, white neighborhoods. The difference in achievement levels will surprise no one: high in the affluent, white schools; much lower in schools where poverty is common.

The question is, Why is this so? Why do so many urban minority students come into fifth grade with low skills in virtually every area? Many cannot add or subtract accurately; they don’t know their multiplication and division facts; they can’t write a decent paragraph or, in some cases, a decent sentence. Why do they have so much trouble reasoning out problems?

For example, during a discussion in an American history class made up of students from the South End of Seattle, I handed out tables that showed how much money was spent to educate white children in the South.
in the 1920s as opposed to how much was spent for black children. One of the tables showed a breakdown by county in Mississippi. I asked my students to find the difference in the amount spent for white students and black students in each county. Most of the students had a very difficult time even understanding what I wanted them to do. When they did grasp the concept, they had still more difficulty using the table to determine the answer. And even then most of the answers were wrong because of problems with subtraction. I posed questions about another table, asking students to identify a particular state. Most answered with dollar amounts.

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When I ask why this should be so, I’m repeating a question that continues to be asked by educators, schools, parents, and communities across the country. Why is there such a large achievement gap between so many children of color and their white peers?

Of course, this quandary is nothing new. The gap dates back to the first mass-administered achievement tests given by the U.S. Army in World War I. Even as crude as those tests were, they measured an achievement gap between black recruits and white recruits that persists today, in spite of everything we have tried.

The first and most obvious response to my question is almost always unequal funding. Throughout most of our history the funding disparities between white schools and those serving children of color have been enormous. Scott Nearing, in Black America (from which I took the tables I used in the history lesson above), first published in 1929, documented these disparities as they existed in the South in the 1920s. For example, in 1927, South Carolina spent $2.74 per “Negro” student and $27.88 per white student. Or even more astoundingly, Mississippi counties in 1926 averaged $3.59 a year per black student as opposed to $68.15 per white student. Nearing cited 162 kindergartens for white children in eight southern cities, but just eight for black children. All eight were in Kentucky: seven of them in Louisville, one in Lexington.

While disparities of that magnitude no longer exist, it’s still true that affluent districts outspend their poorer counterparts. Ironically, though, even as funding disparities are reduced, the playing field for students of color remains badly tilted. Spending the same amount of money on each individual student harks back to a time when teachers would say, “I treat every student exactly the same.” We know that notion has been discredited: all students are not the same, and to treat them as if they were does them a disservice. Funding schools as if all populations faced the same problems and had the same needs is an equally ineffective means of addressing the achievement gap.

My own district of Seattle instituted a weighted student funding formula several years ago. This formula distributes money to schools based on a number of factors, including such things as the number of students on free or reduced-price lunch, the number of special education students, and the number of English-language learners. Schools with greater needs receive more money per student. Has this approach made a difference? There has been some slight, but by no means significant, movement toward closing the achievement gap. But there has been no way to tell how much of that change is the result of the funding formula and how much is the result of other efforts the district has undertaken.

Soon after the funding answer to my question has been proposed, another common response — this one spoken more softly — is that children of color must be inherently less capable, less intelligent. I’m tempted to dismiss this as utter nonsense, except for the tremendous harm such thinking has caused and continues to cause. To believe it is to say we might as well give up on these children. Except for the occasional anomaly, they’ll never make it. As a result of an at least tacit belief in this answer, many teachers, schools, and even whole communities have given up on children of color. When this belief prevails, teachers can transfer much of the responsibility for the failure to learn from their own shoulders to those of their students. Teachers go through the motions of educating these children, pay lip service to the ideals, but don’t believe, deep down, that these children will ever catch up. And if teachers don’t believe in them, how in the world will the children ever believe in themselves?

Let me parse the problem into two separate questions and deal with each one separately: What causes so many children of color to underachieve throughout school? And what are the remedies?
WHY THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP?

The reasons for the achievement gap are as varied as the students who pass through my classes every year. First, many come from a background of poverty. One of the detrimental effects of growing up in poverty is receiving inadequate nourishment at a time when bodies and brains are rapidly developing. Proper human development requires a steady and healthy diet. Poor children rarely get such a diet. Add to that the fact that poor mothers-to-be are rarely well nourished themselves and don’t often receive adequate prenatal care, and you have a recipe for lower achievement among the children.

Poverty also means that there are fewer resources in the home for the child to draw on. Parents (or other caretakers) often work two or more jobs, or they work a night shift, either of which takes away time they might spend with their children. In such circumstances, parents can’t be as involved with their children’s education as they need to be or would like to be.

Poverty can also make it difficult to develop a child’s self-esteem. Poor children have fewer opportunities for enriching experiences. Poor people don’t take trips to Europe or Africa; indeed, some rarely leave their neighborhoods. They may have trouble even taking trips to the zoo or art museum or library. This is not to say that poor children have no enriching experiences, for they clearly do. However, their experiences may not be the kind valued by the larger community. When the greater society does not value a child’s culture, what is his or her likely response? Anger. Resentment. Loss of trust. Seeing school as an obstacle rather than a way out. These factors drive down motivation, drive down confidence. Many poor children are stuck in this cycle.

Still another factor that can adversely affect a child’s learning is the parents’ own experiences with school and teachers. For many poor parents, these experiences were negative. These parents will thus be more reluctant to come to school, to participate in school events, to contact teachers, or to place any confidence in the school and the education system. Add to the mix the large and increasing number of people who are new to the country — who do not speak English, are unfamiliar with the culture, and in many cases are themselves minimally educated — and the problems are magnified.

Still another reason for the achievement gap has to do with what in academic circles is called “locus of control.” People with an internal locus of control see themselves as primarily responsible for their successes and failures. People with an external locus of control tend to attribute their successes and failures to outside factors: luck, fate, the boss likes me, the teacher doesn’t like me, etc. A great example of external locus of control can be seen in a “Peanuts” comic strip in which Peppermint Patty bemoans the F she got on a test. “I think I got an F,” she tells Franklin, “because I have a big nose. Sometimes a teacher just doesn’t like the way a kid looks. I’ve got a big nose so I fail. It’s as simple as that.”

Research shows that many people of color have an external locus of control. And there are some good reasons for that. People of color generally experience success (promotions, raises, upward mobility) at lower and slower rates than do whites. They may work as hard or harder and be just as competent, but their efforts are not routinely rewarded. Does this affect their children? It seems entirely possible. After all, they see their parents struggling, year after year, and they hear their parents talking about the difficulty or impossibility of getting ahead. Then they come to school, work as hard as other students, and see that they, too, fail to achieve at the same rate as their white and Asian peers. They deduce, not unreasonably, that external factors, things beyond their control, must be responsible. This conclusion leads them to reduce their effort and resign themselves to not doing well.

Finally, the long-term effects of racism on the achievement gap should not be underestimated. Schooling for whites in this country extends back for several centuries. Though not equally distributed even among whites, free public education has nonetheless an expectation that education leads to success — at least for those in the majority. For people of color no such centuries-long positive history exists. From the slave codes that forbade educating those who were enslaved, to the Jim Crow laws that followed, to the institutional racism that has only been weakened, not eliminated, all have had

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a devastatingly negative impact on the education of children of color, an impact that continues to this day.

In all of this, can any blame be assigned to today’s schools and teachers? Sadly, the answer is yes, for there’s plenty of blame to go around. There are bad schools, and there are incompetent teachers. And, once again, both are all too often found in African American neighborhoods or in the barrios or on the reservations. And in these locales, even the good schools with good teachers are affected by an undercurrent of racism that undermines what we try to do. This is not intentional racism; it is racism that we’re not even aware of practicing. It’s a colleague who stands, smiles, and shakes hands with white parents at the start of a parent/teacher conference but fails to show the same courtesies to black parents in the next conference. The teacher is doubtless unaware of the differential treatment. But the unconscious stereotypes and expectations we carry around with us can and do affect how we teach. You can hear those stereotypes just beneath the surface of the frequently voiced assumption that minority parents don’t care as much about education as white parents.

For all of these reasons, closing the achievement gap presents us with an extremely difficult problem. However, the idea that schools alone are responsible for the existence of this gap and so bear sole responsibility for closing it is disingenuous at best. And attributing blame to the schools, which has been going on for at least a decade, has simply made teachers defensive while failing to improve the situation. Hundreds of millions of dollars are expended on the problem every year. Expensive programs are implemented, attempted for a couple of years, and then tossed out when they fail to produce results, like the long line of failed efforts that preceded them. School staffs attend workshop after workshop in an effort to acquire the skills and the attitudes needed to close the achievement gap, but their efforts are doomed before they start, as long as schools alone are deemed to be responsible for the problem. The achievement gap and the problems that continue to feed it are a reflection of society and its attitudes. And until these change, we will meet with little success.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

The solution to the problem of the achievement gap lies within each one of us as citizens and within each of us who teaches. This is not the kind of problem that is going to be eliminated by an institutional response. No school system and no state or federal department of education will ever be able to mandate a solution. The achievement gap will begin to disappear when attitudes in this country begin to change, when eliminating poverty becomes a national priority. It will begin to disappear when racism is recognized as the pervasive and insidious cancer that it is and when Americans are united in their willingness to do something about it.

The only way this kind of change will happen is for each of us, individually, to want it to happen and to be willing to make it happen. As a teacher, I do many things that are designed to help my students change their attitudes toward themselves and toward school and learning. They, too, need to be a part of a national change of heart. Here are two places to start, places that are within the ability of each individual educator to control.

First, I believe in my kids. I know they are capable, and so I’m not reluctant to set high standards for them. But believing in them isn’t enough; they need to know that I believe in them. I communicate that belief to them every day, and I do it in many ways, both explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly, I tell them they’re capable. I tell them I believe in them. I tell them each of them has a good brain and is capable of doing what I ask of them. I tell them I have high expectations of them, that I will not accept poor work, and that I will return slipshod work to them to be redone. I routinely refuse to answer the standard “I don’t get this. How do you do it?” lament when it’s about a problem or question that I know a student can figure out. And I let students know that they must do their part. I draw analogies for them: body builders develop their muscles by gradually increasing the weight they
lift. Students increase their abilities by accepting the challenges posed by their teachers to do work that steadily increases in difficulty. I also challenge them to take risks. There are no wrong answers, I tell them. If you give me a wrong answer, it tells me two good things about you. One, you’re paying attention. And two, you’re thinking. If you’re doing those two things, you can’t help but learn.

I talk to my students explicitly about failure. I tell them that failure is not only okay, it’s critical to learning. When you were learning to ride a bike, you fell. And every fall marked a failure in learning to ride a bike. When you were learning to skate, you fell, and every fall marked a failure in learning to skate. But those failures guided your learning, and persistence paid off. The same thing happens when you’re learning at school. You’re going to fail before you succeed. Long division, writing a decent paragraph, thinking through a difficult problem, success in any of these comes about only after failures. At first, you’ll get wrong answers more often than not in long division, but your failures let you see what you need to do differently. You’ll write many bad paragraphs before you write a good one. You’ll stumble over difficult problems before you’re able to solve them. If you’re willing to work at it, success will come through these failures. Children need to hear these messages regularly, because they’re afraid of failure, which means they’re afraid to take risks. And when they don’t take risks, of course, they do fail, only they fail in a much more significant and dangerous way: they lose the opportunity to learn a skill, and they reinforce their own feelings of deficiency. To get them out of that self-defeating loop, I do everything in my power to get them to believe in themselves. Once that happens, they will begin to close the achievement gap on their own.

Another critical step in helping students to do well is to make learning fun. Think about it: the things we all do well tend to be the things we enjoy doing. But when I say learning must be fun, that doesn’t mean it comes without effort. When learning is fun, it is interesting, challenging, and rewarding. Drill and kill, rote memorization, round-robin reading, dull textbooks, a 100% teacher-centered classroom, all of these are poisonous to learning because they do not engage students. On the contrary, students are turned off and tuned out, losing the opportunity to learn a skill, and they reinforce their own feelings of deficiency. To get them out of that self-defeating loop, I do everything in my power to get them to believe in themselves. Once that happens, they will begin to close the achievement gap on their own.

How does a good teacher go about making learning fun? It may sound like an oxymoron, but making learning fun is hard work. You need to be prepared to discard much of the conventional wisdom of teaching and most of the commercially produced texts and worksheets. And you’ll have to deal with the dual anxiety that can come from not having a manual to guide you while you do have a principal who insists that you use the prescribed texts.

Then, too, to make learning fun you’ll have to be willing to bust your brain thinking up better ways — more interesting, more challenging, more rewarding, more enjoyable ways — of covering the curriculum in each content area. This means scrounging for materials in the stockroom, in vacant classrooms, in garage sales and flea markets, in stores that sell school supplies, and in many other places. This means making many of your own teaching materials, such as graphs, posters, and charts. It means creating your own worksheets for each lesson, tailoring them to fit both the specific objectives you have in mind and the needs of your students. It means being creative and flexible. It means giving students more autonomy and a greater say in how they’re going to learn. It means that humor and laughter are integral parts of the classroom environment, an environment that leads to achievement rather than boredom.

Making learning fun means using games and manipulatives. And for me, a key part of making learning fun is interspersing brain games and other short, quick activities throughout the day. For example, after I take attendance and we listen to the opening announcements each day, my class solves some kind of puzzle on the board, or we engage in some brain teasers. We always have time for two or three students chosen randomly to do “Acting in a Can” (like charades), to play Taboo® (using the words from the commercially produced game), or to play categories. Throughout the day, when there are a few minutes to fill, we do mental math or mental spelling and play word games or “Guess My Number.” I put a premium on humor, imagination, and creativity. All of these activities engage students and keep them coming back for more.

Believing in my students and letting them know I believe in them and making school a place they find rewarding will not, in and of themselves, eliminate the achievement gap. But these measures are within our control as educators, and they will have a positive effect on our students, both now and in the future.
