



The Achievement Gap Initiative At Harvard University

Opening Comments for the June 2007 Annual Conference

Structures, Cultures, and Achievement Gaps: New Research with Implications for Public Engagement

June 18, 2007

Ronald F. Ferguson, PhD

Faculty Co-Chair & Director

the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University

To Contact the AGI, Email: agi@harvard.edu , 617-495-5066

Web Address: www.AGI.Harvard.edu

Reasons to be Hopeful that Progress is Possible

- Minimal between-group differences among infants — we start from the same place.
 - Black-White IQ gaps are smaller than in the past.
 - NAEP trends showed dramatic gap narrowing between 1970 and 1990, showing that rapid progress is possible.
-

Some Sobering Realities

- Progress mostly stopped around 1990.
 - Most high poverty, high minority schools score very poorly.
 - Racial gaps are largest among children of the college educated.
 - 15 percent of high schools produce half of our dropouts and children of color are heavily concentrated in these schools.
 - There are large disparities between states, with poor states tending to score lower and receive less federal aid on a per student cost-adjusted basis.
 - Schools where scores rise for all groups while gaps get narrower are not as common as we might like.
-

Parenting Practices and Home Life Styles

- Mother-child interactions during infancy help predict test scores in early elementary years and help explain achievement gaps.
 - Parenting practices (warmth and demandingness) during early school years help predict test scores during early adolescence and help explain achievement gaps.
 - Compared to Whites and Asians, Black and Hispanic children in elementary school report less leisure reading at home, fewer books at home, more television watching, more televisions in bedrooms, and get sleepier at school.
 - Low-income immigrant families in one program were more responsive to advice on parent-child communication than were parents born in the US.
 - Immigrant families of different nationalities differ in access to social capital and this produces differential access to information about school quality and services for their children.
-

Peers

- Black and Hispanic students who get the highest grades may suffer a popularity penalty, with fewer peers listing them as friends.
 - There is some evidence that the popularity penalty may be associated more with the “racial authenticity” of personal styles among some high achievers (speech styles, music preferences, trusting attitudes) than with their achievement levels or aspirations, *per se*.
 - There is opposition to hard work and “nerdy” behavior even among white students and racial differences in this domain appear to be minimal.
-

School Reform

- Even for troubled high schools, rigorously evaluated models of school reform have worked in some places.
- Deep reform in dysfunctional schools takes more time than is often allotted and stronger leadership than is often available.

Five Challenges of Effective High School Reform (Quint, MDRC):

- Creating a personalized learning environment.
 - Assisting students who enter high school with poor academic skills.
 - Improving instructional content and pedagogy.
 - Preparing students for the world beyond high school, and
 - Stimulating change.
-

Quality Teachers and Teaching

- Some teachers are better than others at producing learning gains and the differences are detectable within the first few years of teaching.
 - Principals can identify the very best and the very worst teachers, but are not good at distinguishing among the others.
 - Students respond to high quality teaching and are more engaged in classrooms where the quality of teaching is higher.
 - Black student behavior and sense of efficacy seem more responsive to quality teaching than is true for other racial groups, though all groups are responsive.
-

College Access and Success

- Remedial college courses do indeed help raise college achievement.
 - Unmet financial need has large negative effects on college completion.
 - The keys to college success are academic preparation, finance, and timely and accurate information.
-

Out of School Time (OST)

- Constituencies in support of out-of-school time opportunities (what Weiss calls “Complementary Learning”) are growing.
 - Programs tend to produce results if they are well designed and well implemented, but not otherwise.
 - Low income children and children of color (especially Hispanics) often lack access to quality programming.
 - What Gordon calls “Supplementary Learning” should be understood and cultivated as more than OST programs, including all types of experiences outside school that enhance talent development.
-

Balancing the Narrative

- Narrative frames affect who accepts responsibility and what actions they feel inclined to take.
 - Focusing too narrowly on culture and behavioral deficits ignores social injustices and releases the broader society from shared responsibility.
 - There are structural, institutional, and symbolic advantages and disadvantages associated with race and class.
 - Successfully achieving cultural and behavioral change may require acknowledging the injustices, hurts, and struggles with which people are coping.
-

The AGI = Research-to-Practice Networking for:

- *Youth cultures* that more consistently support behaviors consistent with academic learning and the pursuit of excellence;
- *Parenting* that nurtures intellectual growth and balances warmth and responsiveness with structure and demandingness;
- *Teaching* that engages and challenges students;
- *Community supports* to supplement parents and teachers;
- *Civic leadership* that is well informed and supported

for a 21st Century Movement

to reformulate and re-energize our collective striving
to raise achievement for all groups while closing achievement gaps.

Urgency AND Possibility

Conclusion

- *Urgency*, because we only have one chance to raise each child and how well we do it really matters;
 - *Subtlety*, because common sense just scratches the surface of what we need to understand and is sometimes even wrong;
 - *Difficulty*, because we often lack the capacity to do what *we know* we should;
 - *Sensitivity*, because the way that we frame this challenge can make so much difference to how other respond to it; and
 - *Possibility*, because past and present successes show clearly that communities *can* develop capacity, adults *can* reorder their commitments, and children *can* develop in ways that amaze us.
-