Black Skin, White Masks": Normalizing Whiteness and the Trouble with the Achievement Gap

by David E. Kirkland — August 17, 2010

The article critiques the logic guiding the achievement gap. The author argues that most academic uses of the construct prop up what he terms 'white-superiority ideology," thus reinforcing differences in achievement between whites and nonwhites. The article questions whether or not the achievement gap is real or, better yet, useful.

I believe that the fact of the juxtaposition of the white and black races has created a massive psychoexistential complex. I hope by analyzing it to destroy it. (Fanon, 1952, p. 12)

For students of color in American schools, there is only one acceptable goal: achieving Whiteness. This means succeeding in school by virtue of rejecting the palette of “othered” identities that defies “normal” (Trainor, 2002). Normal, in this sense, associates fully with being white and the range of social and cultural scripts and geographic scenes that constitute it (Fendler & Muzaffar, 2008). This paradigm has ubiquitously evolved from the splinters of colonialism to puncture the existential logic that currently drives the achievement gap discourse. To echo a sentiment made famous by Frantz Fanon (1952), “how do we extricate ourselves?” (p. 10).

We can begin by understanding where the phrase “achievement gap” originated. Before it entered the academic dialect, the phrase gained purchase in the public sphere most likely in the early 1960s when critics of America’s desegregating schools sought to draw attention to the elastic yet pervasive achievement differences between black and white students. The city of Chicago’s 1964 Hauser Report, for example, used the concept to underscore how “intensified educational opportunities for Negro boys and girls would result in a major closing of the achievement gap between group performances of Negro students and other groups of students” (Hauser, McMurrin, Nabrit, Nelson, & Odell, 1964, pp. 20-21, emphasis added). The now iconic Coleman Report of 1966 also stressed the “achievement gap” between white and minority students but as a way to illustrate structural inequities that blanket American schools (Coleman, et al., 1966, p. 220). And as early as 1970, the concept made its way into the Academy, when economist James Gwartney (1970) used it as a way to index what he then described as the “widening achievement gap between [whites and nonwhites] as the general level of education increases” (p. 878).

More modern uses of the phrase appeal to such racialized descriptions of performance as the ones depicted in Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) Bell Curve,
which obscured, through the failed lens of “intelligence,” important socio-historical differences (as well as similarities) between groups. And, according to Anderson, Medrich, and Fowler (2007), “most studies and reports on the achievement gap have focused [specifically] on differences in achievement test scores between white and African American students” (p. 548). Indeed, this seems to have been the case when Jencks and Phillips (1998) published *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, painting a dark and disturbing portrait of struggling black youth, flailing beneath the severed veil of mediocrity thus reinforcing notions of black inferiority.

While the invocation of the achievement gap into the national and intellectual mainstreams began as way to name the nation’s failure to educate all youth equally, it soon devolved into a mechanism for normalizing Whiteness and further obscuring past and current histories of racial oppression. Instruments (or, perhaps more accurately, social weaponry) such as aptitude and achievement tests provided (and continue to provide) the blunt force for this invasive effort, both visibly and rationally upholding white-superiority ideology over all student populations regardless of race. In this way, Hilliard (2003) argued, “The current use of intelligence testing in education is a meaningless practice that offers us no help in understanding the differences in achievement between Africans and others” (p. 136). While this may be the case, the constant and continuous comparison of students of color (African and otherwise) to white students as buffered by test scores reinforces those differences in the extreme.

Consequently, our nation’s unfettered appetite for apple-to-orange-type comparisons between whites and nonwhites creates separations between the races as real as the fictive boundaries between national borders, partitioning peoples much like the contrast between the non-colors black and white, or ripples in the dents of time that evidence “for blacks only” facilities displaced in the wasted margins of the “for whites only” world. It satisfies the easy observation of racial regression, particularly as school and school systems even to this day struggle to desegregate (Orfield & Yun, 1999) and offer equal educational opportunities to all youth. But what it doesn’t seem to do is articulate very well the hybrid conditions of multiracial America or the pluralistic demography of the new century American school.

For African American and Latino students, the comparisons are almost exclusively and unfairly to whites (Anderson, et al., 2007). Other useful comparisons could and should also be made, such as comparisons within groups, for instance, among African Americans (cf. Carter, 2008) or between nonwhite groups such as Latinos and Asians (cf. Paris, 2009) or even among Asians and whites—a case in which whites might find themselves on the other side of the gap (The National Task Force on Minority High Achievement, 1999; Zhou & Kim, 2006). Commendably, however, this discourse rarely pits groups of color against one another, yet it too often uses groups of color as foils to mask the
historical complexity that overwrites school achievement. But based in the achievement gap discourse, associations among nonwhites seem odd to the common ear. A kind of white superiority—having been firmly established in the discourse on achievement—angles performance squarely in the direction of Whiteness, which occupies a central space in the performance paradigm, a space against which all other things, people, and places are measured.

Then the achievement gap as it has currently been conceived is a flaky idea. It seems to blame oppressed groups for their oppression as well as their identities, for suffering and for not being white. It compares relatively unlike groups as if they were the same. While I am in no position to bash the residents of today for the crimes of yesterday, I must note that the uneven access to knowledge and power, to schooling and instruments of assessment in this nation is cause alone to question the achievement gap ideology. Had white wrists been clasped to chattel chains like black ones, had white borders been bent and breached like red ones, and had white feet been made to travel the desert dirt like brown ones, then comparisons of whites and nonwhites would be defensible and the basic logic driving the achievement gap, justified.

Of course, it would be irresponsible to suggest that there is no need to rethink schooling and school policy in this country. Indeed, our continuing search for strategies to inspire the performances of youth of color in this country requires renewed commitment, particularly in relation to our much longer quest to redress historical inequities in education. But evoking the achievement gap discourse as matter of fact doesn’t get us closer to our goal. In fact, it moves us farther away because the construct of the achievement gap digs deep into those psychoexistential wounds—the same wounds that first severed this nation. Left unexamined, it yields the weight of Whiteness, which itself is a gross reflection of a corrupt master narrative so fully justified by social and educational institutions that it has become as normal as the norms it seeks to construct (Morrison, 1992). However good- or ill-intentioned the construct of the achievement gap may be, its supposed claims to urgency and its fierce repetition in the national discourse reinforces a particular kind of performance—one tied to promoting Whiteness, one that mischaracterizes the true differential between white and non-white students.

References


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