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Reflection 1: Achievement Gap

The achievement gap that is evident between white and minority students in the United States is a controversial topic in the education world. In a nation where all students have the right to a free, public education that meets their academic needs, there continues to be major discrepancies in the academic performances of various types of students. Despite the introduction of a special education system, requiring all teachers to be highly trained in their field, and programs such as English as a Second Language, many African American and Latino students are not performing as well in school as their Caucasian peers. Many researchers, psychologist, and education gurus have spent years trying to determine the underlying causes of this achievement gap, and what can be done to change it.

John U. Ogbu is an anthropology professor that has been studying the academic performance of black versus white students throughout his career. In his new book “Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement” he boldly suggests that the African American cultural attitudes are partially to blame for the achievement gap between white and black students (Lee, 2002, p. 1). After studying the behavior and performance of 5000 students from Ohio, he concluded that middle-class black students were aware of the necessary steps to be academically successful, but instead chose not to put forth the effort because they are “looking at rappers in ghettos as their role models” (Lee, 2002, p. 2). Essentially, he believes that the cultural beliefs in the African American community are counterproductive to being a scholar. Doing well in school and taking challenging courses is often associated with “being too white” and therefore, cultural behavior patterns come into play. The students’ beliefs about what it means to be black or white are tested.

Another, very different perspective on the achievement gap was studied by Robert K. Ream who focused on the achievement gap between Mexican-American students and their peers. Because the Mexican-American population is “the largest and fastest growing minority group in the United States” their underperformance should be a major concern for school reformist and politicians. Many believe that factors such as SES, lack of school resources, teacher expectations, and cultural differences between teachers and students are partially to blame for the discrepancy in Mexican-American and white academic performance. Ream, however, chose to investigate how social capital and the mobility of students influenced their performance. He noticed that changing schools and/or having social connections with teachers and peers could affect a student’s performance and therefore questioned its association with the achievement gap. As a result, he found that the transient tendencies and inability to gain significant social capital negatively influenced the Mexican-American population’s educational performance. One suggestion to solve this problem was to create programs that target high-risk students in order to reduce student mobility (Ream, 2003, p. 254). If students only changed schools because of school promotion, then they would be more likely to follow a sequenced curriculum and build relationships between teachers and peers.

The achievement gap that exists in our schools is an area of concern for me as a future teacher. Not only does the performance of all my students affect my job retention, but I am responsible for educating individuals who will eventually run our country. They will someday become tax-paying, voting adults who will hopefully have the educational background necessary to keep our country relevant in this competitive economy. Prior to reading these two articles, I’ve developed my own philosophy on teacher expectations and felt as though it has a major impact on the performance of minority students. Unfortunately, there are many ignorant teachers who are unaware of how their racial views are translated and potentially detrimental on a class’s educational performance. Those students who are held to a lower standard than their peers will only rise to the standard you set for them regardless of whether or not their fullest potential allows them to exceed all the rest. However, having read Lee (2002) and Ream’s (2003) articles, I value their perspectives and appreciate the research they’ve contributed to the educational community. Although Ogbu is no stranger to controversy, I commend him on publishing such controversial work. We cannot dismiss the influence that our students’ cultural backgrounds have on their behaviors and choices, however, I can see why some of the claims Ogbu makes in his book can cause a riff in society. In my opinion, the reasons for the achievement gap will vary based on the ethnicity, family structure of the student, and the dynamic of the school. For example, the enticing life of a rap superstar may not intrigue all African American students based on backgrounds or personality traits. Therefore, us teachers should remain well-read on any studies regarding the achievement gap in our schools, get to know our students, and use what research is best suited for our students to help them achieve their fullest academic potential, regardless of their ethnicity.