

Achievement Gap: Where are We Missing the Point?

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## **Introduction**

Educators, politicians and intellectuals alike wrote and talked about this pressing issue in great details. Why high number of students of color are behind in test scores, graduation rates and higher education than their Caucasian counterparts. Many of the inequalities that behind the achievement gap include; lack of early education, stable family, parents' level of education, income, housing, school type and resources of the school, quality of the teachers, neighborhood and community vitality that many poor and students of color happen to live in. All these impact and play role in students' performance in school. Unfortunately, many of these inequalities were manufactured by the system—the root cause of the problem is the system itself. One can take any indexes that measure the qualities of life (e.g., housing, income, employment, education, health, etc.), and he or she can see a disproportionate gap. In this paper, I will address the causes of the achievement gap and how our own education system and policies are feeding these inequalities that created the achievement gap. And finally, I will point out some general recommendations for a longer term solutions.

## **Early Childhood Education**

The first five years of life are the most important part of the persons' life. This is the age when the brain develops vast and rapidly. Scientists and educators indicate that it is during this age that the human brain has the highest potential for new learning in its lifetime. Physical, cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional are the four critical areas of development and positive or negative development in any of these areas has implications for their well-being, school readiness, and later success in life. In further, research shows that the first five years are critical for the development of sensory pathways (hearing and vision), social and emotional development and the basic pathways for reading and mathematics. If these pathways are not adequately

developed in the early years, tremendous human and financial resources must be expended to address deficiencies. Statistics show that every one dollar invested in early childhood education can save 7 dollars in the long-term through remedial education, criminal justice and welfare payments.

### **Lack of Opportunities**

Knowing the correlation between early childhood education and later education in life is crucial in understanding the achievement gap. Why do not many students of color get early childhood education to begin with? Here, is where, understanding the inequality is important. Early childhood education is expensive and challenging. It needs immense resources and human capital. Ideally, for a child to get a better start, she or he needs to have a permanent home; stable family; educated parents with steady income, flexible and permanent job; good school with high quality teachers; health and clean environment; decent neighborhood; and nurturing community. They say, “It takes a village to raise a child” anonymous. We know that majority of students of color do not have many of the above prerequisites for early childhood education due to inequalities that prolonged for many years. We also know that if children do not have this opportunity in this age, most likely, they will not have it when they are 6 years, 10 years or even when they are 18 years old. Many of their Caucasian counterparts are privileged to have these opportunities from early on. Fair question, for what crime does child of color commit to have early childhood education? Majority of parents of color did not have early education opportunity when they were young just like their children. Many of them were raised and grew up in similar circumstance, in which they are raising their children now or maybe they are new immigrants who come from worse situations.

### **Imbalanced School Personal and Environment**

A child of color who missed early childhood education due to all the reasons we described previously and sometimes speaks different language at home comes to school. She or he meets a teacher, a principal, a counselor, a nurse, and basically more than 80% of the school staffs who are whites, who them and their children both had early childhood education. Thus, students on one side, teachers and other school staff on the other side, are completely in different camps with each have their own reasons. Everyone is trying to help the other one to succeed, but in a complete different ways. The gap between the two is huge and the barriers are too many. From the start, students see the disconnection between the lives in their homes, community and the life in the school. Some students develop dual personality, where they try to fit both sides, the school and the home with different attitude. This may create backlash and rebellious attitude for some students and their parents, which may lead into identity and intergenerational crises.

December 18, 2013, Star Tribune published an article, “In Minnesota, race drives school labels, disciplines.” The report vividly explained how our school system unfairly treats students of color. Schools decide who has a disorder and who does not, as well as which behavior students can be suspended for when they committed them. School districts also have special schools where students who have so many suspensions will go for discipline after they are expelled from regular schools. The issue needs fairness and equity. The report gave alarming statistics. The following is an excerpt from the article I would like to share with.(<http://www.startribune.com/local/minneapolis/235894231.html>)

Disabled students account for 13 percent of enrollment in Minnesota schools but generate 39 percent of disciplinary actions, according to state records. Similarly, black students account for 13 percent of special-ed enrollment but more than 40 percent of discipline measures. 90 percent of the school’s [special-ed school] 89 disabled students were black

males. That figure is not much different from its makeup today. Last year, the two schools [special schools] had 10 white students and 133 black students, state records show. Blacks at Harrison were suspended 435 times last year “I thought, ‘Here is the racial dividing line,’ ” Keenan recalled. “When you look at the criteria for EBD [emotional behavioral disorder], it is extremely subjective. It is not a blood test. It is not an IQ test. You simply have to show signs of behavior outside of the norms.” In Minnesota, she said, mostly white educators decide who has a disorder and who doesn’t. “We can’t fool ourselves,” Keenan said. “[Autistic] kids are tearing up the classrooms, too. But it is perceived differently when you have a black student tearing it up than a white student.” Educators “look at a loud, aggressive white child and label them spirited, and the very same behavior with a black child is labeled emotional behavioral disorder,” said social worker Teresa Graham, who has worked in Minneapolis and other districts.

Knowing the lives and back ground is really important. Many teachers do not understand the lives of these students. When these children are identified with emotional behavioral disorder, what perspectives are looked at to make that decision? Who and what comparison were used? Which norms we measured against what is right or wrong behavior? I think this is where we are missing the point. This is where knowing the culture, background and upbringing of these children may play a role. This is where mistakes start and take root. This is where many children lose their self-stem and eventually their future; and this is where many generations are diminished. What do we expect when these children get older and have their own children? Would we expect something different than the trend? Students are given suspensions disproportionately and majority of the time, they were given suspensions because the way they

express themselves is not matching the way of the teacher and sometimes majority in the class. They are victims of being different. Where in a normal situation difference will be praised and diversity attitude will be welcomed, for it adds value to our school system. Schools need to provide culturally competent education; this is a serious and often over looked issue when so many parents of color depend on schools. Culturally competent education does not mean hiring an outreach person and translate some flyers into specific language. The system need to become culturally competent by diversifying the school staff, curriculum and be able to know the living environment of these children.

### **Systemic Race Issues**

With much our country made a progress in racial discrimination, race plays a big role in our day to day living and resource allocations including equity in education. Our communities are still segregated and divided based on their race and income level. Even the insurance company charges higher bills based on the zip code one lives not driving record. The systematic racial profiling trend is still in effect when it comes to opportunities. Thus, education is not different, when parents have the means, jobs and livable neighborhoods, the children will have the means to have good education. The system already deprived and diminished the future of the parents so these children, who become the statistics for the achievement gap, are part of that deprived and diminished future. Ironically, the same system, which manufactured and employed the unfair policies is also paying the price now to deal with food stamps, incarcerations and health care costs. It would be wise and beneficial to everyone to make our system fair and just, so we can prevent the disparities instead of looking for none existing solutions. Only then, we can deal and fix the problem in one generation instead of fighting it at every generation.

### **Recommendations**

What changes that needs to happen is the question that people can answer, but to implement the answer and make it work is the complexity of the issue. This gap did not appear in the students' scores over night, but rather, it has been going on for many years. It affected many generations, so it needs many years of hard work and resources to close it. It needs a collaborative effort from bottom to top. It needs the overlapping work from home, school, district, county, state, and federal level. All these mentioned parties participated in its creation in the first place, so to close it, each has to take its part. Thus, in the long term elimination of the gap, every stakeholder has to work toward achieving the following goals.

#### **A. Poverty Free Communities**

It seems an ambitious goal, but I believe, it is possible. In the past people have done it, and I think some countries are doing it now or are heading that way. The poverty free communities means just to have basic life (e.g., livable homes, income, health and enough food, health, safe environment, communities and good schools). We know the correlation between poor children and prison. We also know the discrepancy between dollars allocated for education and dollars allocated to keep inmates. In analyzing two separate reports from the Department of justice and the National Education Association conducted over similar periods, research shows “California spends about \$47,000 per inmate while only spending about \$9,000 for every student enrolled. New York State spends about \$56,000 per inmate and approximately \$16,000 for every student in the school system. Michigan pays about \$34,000 for every prisoner and about \$11,000 for a student“. Even those who graduated from high school and go to college, our system keeps them in debt, the amount of debt they accumulate over the course of their collage and jobs available after graduation are also disproportionate. This is the richest country on the planet, and it cannot provide its families with basic economic needs like jobs is somewhat shameful. We

have the money, but we just need to prioritize it and reverse the numbers above. Thus, the poverty free communities start for us to accept that the poverty is the common denominator of the achievement gap and many other disparities in our communities. This process of eliminating poverty will lead us to reach the ultimate goal, which is justice and fairness. We know without justice, poverty cannot be eliminated. With justice, we can create a fair system that gives everyone appropriate and applicable fair share. This fair system will lead us to a society where no one is left behind.

### **B. System of Inclusiveness**

Many in developing countries where dictatorship and old utilitarian systems are employed, opportunities are given based on ones 'clan or party affiliations. With much advancement our country made, it seems like many people, opportunities were denied based on their color of skin, beliefs and sometimes residential status, or their accents. This is one of the reasons that we see the segregated schools and jobs in our communities, which created lack of opportunities as well as disparities for some, people of color, in our society. We need to create a system of fairness that gives everyone a fair share. We need to establish polices that eliminates the old polices that created the disparities, discriminations, segregation, and inequalities. We have to be intentional about it and pay attention to the equities. We have to look into all the levels of the society from individuals, families and vitalities of all the communities and neighborhoods. We have to look into disparities in housing, health, income, education and overall opportunities. This fair polices will lead us to fix our school system.

### **C. The School System**

After reading many reports about achievement gap, which in reality is more like opportunity gap as we described, the schools are in need for system change. The school

curriculum is outdated. People, time, and life style has changed. The education system is still based on life style and jobs of 20<sup>th</sup> century not the life style and jobs that are available at 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. Students – teachers demographics, take an example for any school in the Twin Cities metro area, especially Minneapolis and Saint Paul, one will find the imbalance between teachers and students demographics. In addition, the leadership, where school curriculum and overall decisions are made are even more disproportionate. We know teachers teach by their experience and experience is not matched here in the school. In many cases, the teaching is out of touch here, not because the teacher is bad or student is bad, but instead, they do not share a common denominator which is a life experience. This is why we see disproportionate suspensions and widen achievement gap. We have a deficit for educators of color. We have to programs to retain them. Studies shows there is no lack of teachers of color, but there is a lack of retaining them. Many teachers of color quite teaching in the first couple of years. This suggested that there is hostility within school system towards minorities/educators of color.