

Harvard Education Letter (Nov/Dec 2006 issue)

Recent Research on the Achievement Gap

How lifestyle factors and classroom culture affect black-white differences

An Interview with Ronald Ferguson

For more than a decade, economist [Ronald Ferguson](#) has studied achievement gaps. In 2002, he created the [Tripod Project for School Improvement](#), a professional development initiative that uses student and teacher surveys to measure classroom conditions and student engagement by race and gender. The findings inform strategies to raise achievement and narrow achievement gaps. A senior research associate at Harvard's [Kennedy School of Government](#), Ferguson is director and faculty cochair of the [Achievement Gap Initiative](#) at Harvard University. He spoke with the Harvard Education Letter about the most recent findings from the Tripod Project surveys.

How do you define "achievement gap"?

There are a lot of different achievement gaps. The achievement gap that I focus the most on is the gap between students of different racial groups whose parents have roughly the same amount of education. It concerns me that black kids whose parents have college degrees on average have much lower test scores than white kids whose parents have college degrees, for example. You can take just about any level of parental education and we have these big gaps.

How much progress has been made in closing black-white achievement gaps?

Huge progress since 1970, not much progress since 1990. Sixty-two percent of the overall black-white reading-score gap for 17-year-olds disappeared between 1971 and 1988. About one-third of the math-score gap disappeared during the same period. Over the last several years the gap has narrowed significantly for both 9- and 13-year-olds, but there's been a bit of backsliding for the older teens.

There's been enough progress to establish firmly that these gaps are not written in stone. Even IQ gaps are narrowing. Measurements of the intelligence of kids less than one year old show virtually no racial or social-class differences, yet racial and social class achievement gaps are firmly established by the time students start kindergarten. Something happens before kindergarten that produces differences in proficiency.

Achievement gaps are not facts of nature. They are mostly because of differences in life experience. We've got to figure out how to get all kids the kinds of experiences that really maximize access to middle-class skills. That's the challenge.

Some say that social inequities must be solved before we can close achievement gaps; others say it's the schools' responsibility to close them. Where do you stand?

First of all, it's not an either/or question. If you are talking about having black achievement levels and white achievement levels that are completely the same, then yeah, you have to deal with quite a few challenges in the domain of wealth and social capital, but that's in the long run. In the near term, I think we can make substantial progress by affecting home intellectual climate and lifestyle as they affect achievement. The big idea that frames my thinking these days is lifestyle. Even in school, the notion is to try to provoke lifestyle changes that cause people to be a bit more focused on cultivating a love of learning among kids.

Isn't talking about lifestyle factors a way of blaming the victim?

Your motivation can be to explain why we have achievement gaps or it can be to seek levers to pull in order to reduce achievement gaps. I'm seeking levers to pull in order to reduce the gaps. I don't care whose fault it is really. If it's the case that reading scores could rise if parents pushed their kids to do more leisure reading at home or took the television out of the bedroom, why not do it? Or why not at least tell parents that that's an option that they have? I think most parents would want to know.

Still, virtually every school can make progress even if the family achieves zero change. They'll do better if parents do more, but no school, no institution, none of us is as good as we can be. Pretty much every school has a way to improve. I've been working in schools for almost a decade, paying a lot of attention to teacher-student relationships and some of the ways that teachers understand or misunderstand kids. There's a spiral of mutual causation that can lead classrooms to be either terrible places or really nice places. A lot of it you can characterize as lifestyle.

How does your research help schools change their lifestyles to support achievement?

The project that I run is called the Tripod Project because we address three pieces: content, pedagogy, and relationships. And what vexes me most in the schools that I work with is that it's so hard to get people to spend time studying the work of the students who don't do very well. Because if our main concern is material on which students don't do well, then why don't we look at where the breakdown is and work on that? Just take the assignments of the students who have done poorly, sit down together, and figure out what it is that they didn't know; why we think they didn't know it, and talk about how to alter instructional approaches to help them.

We use a protocol called Teaching the Hard Stuff to talk about whether success was feasible for the student, whether the kids were focused or not, and why they may not have been focused. People like the protocol, they enjoy using it and they almost always get up from the table with new insights, but they don't set aside more time to do it more frequently.

What does Teaching the Hard Stuff involve and what do teachers learn?

It's an hour-long protocol for looking at student work. Teachers discover all kinds of things. At least half the time the problem is with the way the assignment was written: The assignment wasn't really testing what the teacher was trying to test; or there was a vocabulary word that had two meanings; or the context for the problem was a context the students weren't familiar with and so the student couldn't solve the problem. If the achievement gap is based on the nature of the experiences that students have, and if schools don't scaffold appropriately on the understandings that kids bring from their different experiences, then kids can't construct the new understandings.

One of my favorite examples is a Pythagorean theorem problem: How far does a catcher need to throw the ball in order to throw out a runner who is trying to steal second base if the bases are 90 feet apart? If kids don't know there's a right angle at first base, they can't solve that question.

Where schools may contribute to the achievement gap is by not scaffolding appropriately for different kids, not differentiating instruction in ways that are grounded in what kids actually bring to the classroom. Teachers try to make work interesting and relevant by using real-world examples. But which real-world example will your kids understand? And if they don't understand it, will they admit it? In our surveys we find that black kids in particular are concerned all the way through school with whether people think they are smart or not. If you are concerned with whether you think people think you're smart, you are not going to speak up and show your ignorance as often. So if what the teacher just said doesn't make sense to you—particularly if you are in a racially integrated classroom and you think the other kids are

ahead of you—you are more likely to misbehave and pretend like you weren't trying anyway, because it's better to look lazy than stupid.

What other misperceptions does your research point to?

There are sometimes misperceptions about how much parents care. In our surveys, the higher the percentage of black kids in the classroom, the lower the teacher's estimate of how many kids will say that their parents asked them what they learned in school that day. When we ask kids the same question, we don't pick up racial differences.

Now you do pick up racial differences when you get at parenting practices more directly: TVs in the bedroom, which our studies show are associated with sleepiness in class; whether kids say they watch TV at home more than anything else; how much leisure reading they do; how many books are provided in the house. Eighty percent of black kids in our surveys at the elementary level have TVs in their bedroom. Much smaller percentages of white kids do.

Another misperception that folks often have is that kids who misbehave don't want to learn. Teachers see that black kids misbehave on average more than white kids do. There's not much dispute about that—the kids self-report worse behavior. Also, black kids have lower homework completion rates than white kids do, which they also self-report. So what do you infer? You say, well, they don't care as much and they aren't trying too hard.

In my surveys, I find that even though black students self-report more misbehavior and less homework completion, they also self-report spending almost exactly the same amount of time on homework as their white classmates. They also self-report equal or higher endorsement of the statement "My friends think it's important to work hard to get high grades in school." They are motivated, but there's some subtlety to it, because they have conflicting motivations, conflicting pressures. Sometimes they're just trying to fit in with friends, to be liked inside a culture of behavior that no one student created and no one student can single-handedly reform. They are part of a peer culture where certain patterns of behavior do have oppositional elements, but they are not opposition to high achievement. Paradoxically, their assertiveness is a quest for respect: It shows opposition to the kinds of subordination and toleration of disrespect that blacks have had to put up with over centuries. Kids are saying, "We're not taking that.... You can't face me down in front of one of my friends and yell at me or fuss at me and have me not say something back to you."

This seems to challenge the "acting white" hypothesis —that black kids are afraid to achieve because high achievement is seen as acting white.

Based on the survey results that I get back from students, I believe it's a misperception that kids think getting high grades is acting white. It's really a matter of personal style. Students who get high grades will often have personal styles that seem to violate the endorsed expressions of racial authenticity: they may speak proper English too much in informal settings; they may listen to rock music instead of rap; they may be a little too happy-go-lucky in their attitudes. In order to fit in with your friends, you don't have to be a low achiever or resist high grades, but you do need to be able to speak in informal settings the way kids speak in informal settings, you do have to be the kind of kid who doesn't tolerate disrespect without a response even if it comes from an adult in an authority position. Among black kids, self-esteem rises as grades rise all the way through an A, except if it's the kid who doesn't fit in socially, in which case—if it's a male—self-esteem drops as they move from a B to an A average. This is not true for white kids.

How do these findings relate to your research on teasing?

Some of the peer dynamics around achievement, such as teasing each other for making mistakes, may not be visible to teachers, but they are problems as early as first grade. In first grade classes where fewer than 25 percent of the students are white or Asian, I find that more than half agree that classmates tease other kids for making mistakes. Teasing for making

mistakes in majority white and Asian classes is about 20 percentage points lower. Kids who worry that other classmates tease kids for making mistakes report that they worry more that they may not measure up to their classmates. Worry is anxiety, and anxiety interferes with concentration.

What can teachers do to foster student engagement and create a positive peer culture?

I have data at the elementary level that show that if kids don't think the teacher both loves to help them and holds them to a high standard—what I call a “high help/high perfectionism” classroom—their behavior can deteriorate and their engagement can deteriorate, and the teachers are more likely to think that the kids just don't want to learn. If the class is less than 25 percent white or Asian and the students rate the teacher as offering both low help and low perfectionism, kids can treat each other pretty poorly. All you need is about a quarter of the kids in the class who don't think their questions are welcome to get a pretty uncollegial classroom environment. The challenge to the teacher is being able to signal, “I love to help you” and “We're never fully satisfied until we can do it correctly.” When working with kids who come from difficult backgrounds, and who don't bring a whole lot for you to scaffold on some of the time, you've really got to understand these kids. You've got to understand what they don't understand and what their misunderstandings are, and you've got to have the confidence to say, “If these children tell me what they are thinking, I can clear up any confusions that they have, and at the end of the day they're going to understand what I am trying to teach them.”

Over 80 percent of kids in any classroom say they plan to do their best all year long, if you ask them in the fall. The only ones that are still near that level in the spring—if the vast majority are nonwhite and non-Asian—are kids in high help/high perfectionism classrooms. We need to give teachers the learning experiences that help them reach and teach some of the kids who they are struggling to understand if we want kids to persist and do their best work all year.

For Further Information

J.B. Diamond. “Are We Barking Up the Wrong Tree? Rethinking Oppositional Culture Explanations for the Black/White Achievement Gap.” Available online at <http://aqi.harvard.edu/events/download.php?id=79>

W.T. Dickens and J.R. Flynn. “Black Americans Reduce the Racial IQ Gap: Evidence from Standardization Samples.” Available online at <http://aqi.harvard.edu/events/download.php?id=66>

R. Ferguson. *What Doesn't Meet the Eye: Understanding and Addressing Racial Disparities in High-Achieving Suburban Schools*. Oakbrook, IL: North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2002. Available online at <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/tripodproject/about.html#whatis>

R.G. Fryer Jr. and S.D. Levitt. “Testing for Racial Differences in the Mental Ability of Young Children.” Available online at <http://aqi.harvard.edu/events/download.php?id=93>

The Tripod Project. www.ksg.harvard.edu/tripodproject/