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Overview of Black Achievement: Current Trends at all Levels of the Education Trajectory

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**An Overview of Black Achievement:
Current Trends at all Levels of the Education Trajectory**

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This brief review of literature seeks to provide an overview of the achievement of Black students at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels of education. Trends in achievement outcomes, psychological factors related to achievement, and contextual contributions to the achievement gap are discussed. Implications for future research are provided throughout.

On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that separate but equal education was a violation of the 14th amendment; thus, unconstitutional. Approximately 60 years after that ruling, the nation is again faced with equally pressing issues: a widening racial-ethnic achievement gap at every level of education, astronomical high school dropout rates for ethnically diverse youth, and the persistence of the school-to-prison pipeline. The achievement gap between Black¹ and White students remains one of the most pressing concerns in education. Studies and reports reveal that at every level of education, White students outperform their Black counterparts. The trend appears before formal schooling begins, with Black children scoring roughly one standard deviation below White students on standardized reading and math tests, and continues to increase about 1/10th of a standard deviation each following year of school (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). This consistent underperformance of Black students has caught the attention of scholars, policy-makers, and educators.

Interest in the educational performance of Black students traces back to early measurement of Black intelligence and the use of intelligence testing during desegregation. Soon after the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that banned school segregation, schools in the south used another approach to keep Black students from attending White schools, namely, intelligence testing (Bersoff, 1982, as cited in Valencia & Suzuki, 2001, p. 22.) In his text entitled *Even the Rat was White*, Robert Guthrie (1998) discussed early intelligence testing which set out to support the idea that Blacks were intellectually inferior to Whites. While racialized intellectual testing practices have changed over time, it is important to consider the historically rooted research interest in Black intellectual ability. More recently, scholars speculate that, to an extent, previous practices and characterizations of Blacks being intellectually inferior may have caused members of the Black community to mistrust the education system and may have also resulted in internalized oppression and racism (Delpit, 2012; Feagin & McKinney, 2003). These ideas have served as reasoning to include a consideration of culture and context in many of the current frameworks of Black student achievement.

While the theory suggesting a difference in intelligence, and thereby, academic performance at birth has been disproved, educational studies and statistics detailing the achievement gap between Black and White students continue to highlight the various academic areas in which Black students underperform (Gould, 1981). Converging evidence showed that achievement differences do indeed exist, and educators and policy-makers appeal that something

must be done to lessen the gap (Haycock, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Rothstein, 2004). Most commonly, scholars took a comparative approach to understanding why this gap in achievement existed by comparing low-performing ethnic minority groups to their White peers (Hilliard, 2003). However, more recent research seeks to look at Black student achievement as separate, instead of comparing it to White achievement, in order to discover unique trends and areas of resilience (Hilliard, 2003; Spencer, Tinsley, Dupree, & Fegley, 2012). Scholars acknowledged that each stage in education presents its own unique challenges. Additionally, researchers realized that Black students have experiences that may differ from other groups based on the role that culture plays in their development (Swanson et al., 2003). To this end, scholars of the achievement gap have discovered different sources of achievement trends from primary to graduate and professional school education, including specific attention to environment and culture. This brief review of literature highlights important research, at each level of education, in an attempt to consolidate what is currently known and areas requiring further research.

Education Trends and Research

Before a deeper discussion of the trends of the achievement gap, it is important to note that there are achievement gaps that exist other than the Black-White comparison. In addition to Blacks, Native Americans and Hispanic Americans also perform lower than same-aged White peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Additionally, a gap in STEM achievement between girls and boys is also found in high school and beyond (Beede et al., 2011). However, an account of gaps within all of these groups would be lengthy and would ignore unique trends of each group. Therefore, in attempts to get a richer understanding of the underperformance of Black students, this group will be the focus of this literature review.

Preprimary and Elementary Education

The foundation of education begins before a student enters their kindergarten classroom. Consequently, preparing children for classroom learning is an important task in the early years of life and is accomplished through pre-k education. However, research has found that a gap exists between Black and White students in their readiness for school and have coined the term the “school readiness gap”. This gap is characterized by differences in parental care, informal care (e.g., a nanny, relative, or babysitter), and preschool (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). School readiness requires that development has occurred in children’s cognitive and literacy skills, and the readiness process provides students with other skills that are necessary to have a smooth transition to first grade (Winter & Kelley, 2008). Since it has been shown that preschool attendance is important and that students who attend preschool enter school more ready to learn, study in the field of early childhood education has increased (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). Erkan and Kirca (2010) studied the effects of preschool attendance on the school readiness of 170 children. The researchers found that children with preschool education were significantly more prepared for school and learning that will occur later in educational years.

Preschool education may be even more important for students who are from lower socioeconomic (SES) homes. Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm, and Waldfogel (2004) explored the impact of preschool education on children’s achievement and found that preschool had a significantly positive impact on the reading and math skills of students from low SES families. Unfortunately, access to preschool education has not always been attainable to low SES families

and the attendance of these populations is consistently lower than their peers. In 2008, 61% of Black children in the United States were in low SES families (Chau, 2009). Researchers of school readiness have found that both economic and racial/ethnic gaps exist, but have not concluded what factors are contributing to these discrepancies (Halle et al., 2009). In search of a solution, programs have been developed to increase access and utilization of preschool education; however, these programs are not federally regulated which sometimes results in inadequate service delivery (Waldfogel, 2006). Thus, although Black children now attend preschool at the same rate as White children, these Headstart programs do not provide the same outcomes of school readiness as private preschools or school-based pre-K programs (Waldfogel, 2006). However, research of these preschool programs shows that the school readiness gap is slowly decreasing as a result of their efforts (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005).

While it is reassuring that the readiness gap is decreasing, there is still progress that needs to be made. In an analysis of Head Start program's progress in reducing the ethnic and racial gaps in school readiness, Magnuson and Waldfogel (2005) concluded that although these programs have made substantial progress in diminishing the school readiness gap, long-term achievement gap reductions are still inconclusive. In addition, they recommend that programs focus on increasing the quality of services to promote better and more long lasting gains in student test score outcomes. To this end, more research is warranted in the area of school readiness to better understand contributing factors and how preschool programs can help increase the number of Black students prepared to enter elementary school.

Similar to school readiness, early childhood literacy is important for ensuring later academic achievement. Reading skills are a crucial foundation of education as later courses (e.g., history and science) depend on a student's ability to read and comprehend content material appropriately (Ritchie, Bates, & Plomin, 2014). An early study on the importance of childhood literacy highlights the daunting trajectory of underperformance that children struggling with reading may face. Juel and Leavell (1988) conducted a study on nine minority children, three of which were Black. Their findings revealed an 88% chance that students deemed as poor readers at the end of 1st grade would continue to struggle at the end of 4th grade. This points to the lasting impact of reading difficulties and highlights a need for prevention efforts. In Washington's (2001) exploration of early literacy skills of Black children, the importance of early prevention programs and a need for an improvement in current reading disability identification efforts were both noted.

Secondary Education

At later levels of education, Black student underachievement persists. On average, White students in the fourth and eighth grades score 26 points higher than Black students in both mathematics and reading (Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). So not only are Black students starting out behind their counterparts, they are also having difficulty catching up. A study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics reported that in 2005 only 55% of all Black students graduate on time from high school with a diploma in comparison to 78% of their White peers (Editorial Projects in Education, 2008). Similarly using nationally representative data from the U.S. Department of Education, Greene and Winters (2005) found that of the Black students who started public high school only 23% completed prepared for college, compared to 40% of their White peers. Furthermore, according to a College Board (2014) report, Black students scored lower than all other racial and ethnic groups

on all three parts of the SAT with only 15.8% of Blacks meeting the career and college readiness benchmark. These troubling statistics confirm that the achievement gap observed in elementary school continues to have an impact on later school readiness and attainment.

Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hillard (2003), authors of *Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African American Students*, suggested that the conversation regarding Black student achievement is “problematic because it fails to begin with a careful examination of all aspects of the school, with an eye towards understanding how the school’s day-to-day practices participate in the creation of underachievement” (p. 9). While many factors such as poverty, racial isolation, family values, and culture may contribute to Black students’ poor school performance, researchers recognized the negative effects that systematic American education experiences can have on Black students (Delpit, 1988, 1995; Hale, 1994; Irvine, 1990; Shade, 1994). These education experiences include standardized testing, student label and tracking, and teacher/student racial composition and when combined with environmental factors (e.g., poverty), may lead to inferior academic performance and behavioral problems among Black students (Delpit, 2012; Perry et al, 2003; Tatum, 1997). Scholars that emphasize the contextual elements within the school that may impact academic performance of Black students are attempting to prevent victim blaming and situate the problem outside of the student. They purport that some of the practices within the school disproportionately affect Black students (Gregory, Skiba, & Noruega, 2010). Of these practices, the strict disciplinary policies, in place in urban schools, have received significant attention (Losen & Martinez, 2013).

Amidst the underachievement trends, Black students are more likely to be suspended or expelled for disrespect, excessive noise, threat, and loitering (Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2000). The term “school-to-prison pipeline” refers to “the collection of policies, practices, conditions, and prevailing consciousness that facilitate both the criminalization within educational environments and the processes by which this criminalization results in the incarceration of youth and young adults” (Morris, 2012). The 2014 report by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights revealed that rates of suspension for Black youth exceeded their overall enrollment in U.S. public schools by twofold in the 2011-2012 academic year. Research regarding the school-to-prison pipeline suggests that there are combinations of systematic practices within education that can result in bleak outcomes for Black youth (Gregory, Skiba, & Noruega, 2010). Programs designed to help change the trajectory for at-risk Black youth have emerged, and additional programs and program evaluations should be considered moving forward.

College: Undergraduate Studies

According to the National Center for Education Statistics’ 2010 report, Black students applied to college at lower rates and graduate at lower rates than White students (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Aud et al., 2011). The report also states that only 32% of Blacks ages 18-24 are enrolled in institutions of higher education, compared to 44% of Whites. These findings have generated a great deal of research interest regarding factors that impact the academic achievement of Black college students, particularly within the field of Black psychology. Variables frequently associated with poor academic achievement among Black college students “range from social and socioeconomic disadvantage to theories related to cultural conflict and differences in academic orientation” (Cokley & Chapman, 2008, p. 350). The role of race, culture, and environmentally based factors has also been examined within this body of research

as variables that impact the academic achievement of Black college students. Recent data suggested that identity (i.e., ethnic identity, cultural identity, and racial identity) impacts Black college students' academic achievement, although the nature of its impact is not fully understood (Awad, 2007; Harper & Tuckman, 2006). Some research has found that ethnic identity has a significant impact on academic outcomes for Black youth (Adelabu, 2008; Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Sellers, Chavous & Cooke, 1998), while countering evidence shows that it may have a negative impact in certain contexts (Byrd & Chavous, 2009; Cokley, McClain, Jones & Johnson, 2011; Worrell, 2007). Although blanket statements about whether racial/ethnic identity leads to better achievement for Black students cannot be made, it can be concluded that its role in the education of Black students is important and warrants continued investigation.

The existing body of research regarding student achievement brings to focus issues of racial and cultural identity development. One institutional factor contributing to the educational experience of Black college students is the disproportionate number of Black students and teachers within higher education (Davis, 2007). Interest in studying key characteristics of particular academic environments and their ability to foster racial and cultural identity within their students has risen. Researchers have studied the influence that both Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) have on Black students. Findings indicate that HBCUs provide a more healthy and positive environment for the racial and cultural development of Black students in college academic settings (Baldwin, Duncan & Bell, 1987; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2010). In addition to providing a positive racial and cultural environment, Allen (1992) found HBCUs produce a greater number of Black college graduates compared to PWIs. This growing interest in the racial and cultural factors that influence academic achievement has expanded to include other psychologically based factors such as academic self-concept, imposterism, and stereotype threat.

Psychological theory identifies the effects academic self-concept and the impostor phenomenon can play on academic achievement (Awad, 2007; Cokley, 2000; Ewing, Richardson, Myers, & Russell 1996). Academic self-concept is defined as the way in which a student views his or her academic ability in comparison to other students (Cokley, 2000). Literature examining academic self-concept in relation to academic achievement within the Black student population finds that academic self-concept significantly predicted Black students' academic achievement (Awad, 2007; Cokley, 2000; Cokley, 2002; Cokley 2008; Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997). The Impostor Phenomenon (IP) is a psychological construct referring to individuals who are academically successful by external standards but have an illusion of personal academic inferiority (Clance & Imes, 1978). While little research has examined IP as it relates to Black college student achievement, Ewing, Richardson, Myers, and Russell (1996) examined the relationship between racial identity, worldview, and Black graduate students' experience of the impostor phenomenon. The researchers found that the greater degree to which ones' belief system is optimal in nature, the less likely they will experience impostor feelings in graduate school. The results of Ewing et al.'s (1996) study begs the question as to whether Black college students experience feelings of impostorism during their undergraduate careers and what impact, if any, it has on their academic achievement.

Stereotype threat is another relevant psychological construct impacting the academic achievement of Black college students. Claude Steele (1997) defined stereotype threat as the experience of Blacks being viewed based on a negative stereotype and the fear of behaving in a manner that confirms that stereotype (Perry et al., 2003). In their groundbreaking research on Black students, Steele and Aronson (1995) found that when the students were primed with

information that highlighted their group's negative stereotypes, they underperformed on a task. Stereotype threat posits that these students were so anxious about not confirming negative stereotypes about their racial group, that it undermined their performance. Since their seminal article, researchers have tested the stereotype threat theories with more Black samples (and with other stigmatized groups) and find converging evidence that underperformance occurs when the threat is present (Nadler & Clark, 2011). As we consider the historical use of Black unintelligence theories to prevent students from entering better academic environments, along with current trends that show Black students underachieving, it is not surprising that Black students become concerned with confirming such negative, academic-based stereotypes.

College: Graduate and Professional Studies

Trends in the achievement of Black students at the graduate level reveal that Black students are less likely, than their White counterparts, to enroll in graduate and professional programs, subsequently creating an underrepresentation of Black professionals in certain fields (Bell, 2011). Strategies for how to retain Black graduate students have been explored, however, future investigation is warranted. In a study of graduate school admissions conducted by Zwick (1991), findings revealed that White and international students received significantly higher rates of doctoral candidacy and graduation than Black students. Similar studies have been conducted in almost every field to better understand why Black students are not being retained in these graduate programs (e.g., Benson, 1990; Whitla et al., 2003).

One of the key factors found to impact retention of Black students in graduate programs has been a sense of support and mentorship provided throughout the term of the program (Clark, Mercer, Zeigler-Hill, & Dufrene, 2012; Davis, 2007; Proctor & Truscott, 2012; Vasquez et al., 2006). Bowles's (2008) longitudinal study involving a large sample of Black graduate students explored three main support relationships, including those with faculty, students, and the institution. Additionally, he asked whether these students perceived this support to differ from the support their White counterparts received. Bowles found that Black graduate students felt they were significantly more isolated and excluded than their White peers. Further, the students reported that their primary sources of support came from other Black graduate students and Black professors. This study revealed a need for increased enrollment of Black students and hire of Black faculty in graduate programs to serve as a support in efforts to retain Black graduate students. An increased number of Black students and faculty would provide the sense of community that these Black graduate students need to be successful.

Implications

While there are many areas in which Black students are underachieving in comparison to their White peers, great strides have been made in narrowing these gaps. Current research confirmed that there is a need for further study pertaining to the academic achievement of Black students. However, existing theories and frameworks focusing solely on the underachievement and academic disadvantage that Black students may have fall short in their efforts to fix the problem, and rather add to the existing messages of deficits and risks being conveyed to Black students of all ages. A New York Times interview with high school student Tasha Persaud poses the question, "If your doctor told you can't run anymore, would you go out and run? If someone says again and again that you can't achieve, you don't even try" (Lee, 1999). The more research

and data suggests Black students are inferior academically, the more we will continue to see Black students underachieve. Along with the purpose of identifying factors that promote the academic achievement of Black students, research in this field should have a larger goal. The only way to diminish the ideology of Black intellectual inferiority is to conduct research and produce work for the racial uplift of Black people.

To reverse the trend of deficit-based theories of Black achievement, researchers have created positive, culture-based, asset-oriented frameworks to support students' academic experiences (e.g., *Talent Development Model of Schooling* and *Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory*). A common theme of these theoretical frameworks is that they look beyond the trends of underperformance and are identifying what *is* working in educating Black youth. They are exploring areas of resilience and academic excellence and determining in what way that performance can be duplicated to ensure that *all* Black students experience it. Moving forward, as researchers continue to identify variables associated with the positive academic achievement of Black students, they should advocate for the inclusion of research at all levels of education, paying particular attention to characteristics that reveal resilience. Until the achievement of Black students is better understood, efforts to produce an education environment that systematically caters to both Black and White students will be fruitless.

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¹ The authors use the term Black to be more inclusive of ethnicities within the African Diaspora. The term African American would be misleading as both Census and most educational statistics classify based on racial status.