

AUTHOR: RONALD ROACH

TITLE: Explaining the Achievement Gap

SOURCE: Black Issues in Higher Education v17 no22 p22-4 D 21 2000

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.

NEW YORK

The warm reception accorded Dr. Claude Steele at a New York University School of Education policy breakfast earlier this month signaled the extent to which his social psychology research is finding acceptance among education experts and officials on the Black-White student performance gap in the United States. While his ideas are taking him to prestigious education forums, Steele's research nevertheless points to the growing complexity the Black-White academic gap issue has taken on in recent years.

Steele's theories on "stereotype threat" pay special attention to the lagging performance of middle and upper-middle class, and highly-prepared Black college students who are determined to be falling short of their academic potential. The research identifies the psychological reasons why racial anxiety can inhibit the academic performance of well-prepared Black students.

"Professor Steele's work on 'stereotype threat' has played a critical role in shaping the debate [on the Black-White performance gap]," says Dr. Ann Marcus, dean of the NYU School of Education.

Earlier this month, officials from the U.S. Department of Education convened the federal government's first ever Symposium on African American Male Achievement, which was held at Howard University in Washington. The symposium highlighted the decline of Black male academic achievement largely over the past decade. Declining Black male academic achievement represents a significant factor in the overall measurements of Black-White student comparisons.

Reversing the slide among Black males is believed to be a critical task for education experts and officials who are committed to closing the overall Black-White student gap.

Since the late 1980s, scholars have sought answers and solutions to improving Black student performance at all grade levels from kindergarten through college and graduate school.

According to the work of prominent Black scholars, such as Steele, that task has grown more complicated rather than less so, inviting in a broad range of experts to study the issue.

"We know that there's a need for more research," says Dr. Edmund Gordon, the symposium moderator and a Columbia University dean.

Steele's NYU presentation and the U.S. Education department symposium highlighted the multi-disciplinary approach that is taking root in American higher education to solve the Black-White performance gap. The existing research indicates that poor schools and Black poverty provide only part of the picture of the Black-White performance gap. Psychologists, economists and public health experts are joining the ranks of scholars involved in examining the performance gap.

"This effort goes beyond the purview of education schools," says Dr. Ronald Ferguson, a public policy lecturer at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

THE OPEN-AND-SHUT GAP

Ferguson, who was the keynote speaker at the symposium at Howard University, presented test score data that captured the essence of the Black-White performance gap over the past 30 years. Using data drawn from the National Assessment of

Educational Progress (NAEP) standardized test, he showed that Black student performance, which began to rise in the early 1970s, improved dramatically in the 1980s where it hit a peak in 1988 and has declined and remained flat.

In reading, the gap between scores for 17-year-old Black and White students on the NAEP test fell from 52.7 percent in 1971 to 20.3 percent in 1988. By 1992, the gap had grown to 36.8 percent.

In math, the gap between Black and White 17-year-olds on the NAEP was cut from 40 percent in 1973 to 21 percent in 1990. By 1992, the gap had reached 26.1 percent.

Ferguson told the symposium audience of 200 that he believes the decline in Black student progress is linked to the decline of leisure reading among young Blacks. He suggested the leisure reading decline may be related to the dramatic rise in popularity in hip-hop music among Black youth from 1988 to the present.

“Listening to and understanding hip-hop requires an investment of time that may help explain the drop-off in leisure reading by Black kids,” Ferguson says.

Ferguson, an economist, noted that he has examined the Black-White student performance gap for the past five years.

After researching labor economic issues for much of his career, Ferguson began focusing heavily on the Black-White gap because of the potential it has to lead to even deeper divisions in American society.

“There’s tremendous implications for the future of race relations in the nation. If something isn’t done, we’ll end up with a bifurcated society,” Ferguson says.

RESEARCH AGENDAS

Dr. Pedro A. Noguera, a faculty member at the Harvard University School of Education, addressed how culture affects the academic performance of African American males. Presenting a research paper entitled *The Role and Influence of Environmental and Cultural Factors on the Academic Performance of African American Males*, Noguera argued that it’s possible to devise strategies that will disrupt harmful environmental and cultural factors.

“When there are high expectations [on the part of teachers], our kids do in fact perform at high levels,” he says.

Noguera stressed that research is lacking on topics where it’s possible to develop new strategies. “African American males are in trouble by almost any standard,” Noguera told his audience, noting that Black men have high incarceration rates, declining life expectancy, an increasing suicide rate and other social ills.

“Making that connection is important because it helps to put [the academic performance issue] in context. In fact, it would be much more surprising if Black males were doing well academically in spite of the broad array of difficulties that confront them,” Noguera added.

Noguera said researchers have to begin looking more at culture and identity to understand the variety of responses African American males exhibit in the face of poverty and negative social influences. In spite of obstacles, there is a sizeable number of African American males who manage to succeed, according to Noguera.

“I think there’s need for more research on youth culture and how it influences [Black male attitudes] on schools ... We have to look at how masculinity is constructed among African American males,” he says.

At NYU, Steele presented research on student performance that showed how student self-perception in relation to his or her classroom peer group can negatively affect performance. Steele’s notion of “stereotype threat” comes into play when a student whose race, culture or gender is associated with negative stereotypes, such as intellectual inferiority. Stereotype threat is felt by students in an academic setting

heavily populated by peers and teachers who are likely to perceive individuals as representing the stereotype. Even though the students may be highly prepared, the anxiety they could experience from worrying whether their peers and teachers believe the stereotypes is distressful enough to lower performance.

Steele, who is chair of the psychology department at Stanford University, says solutions to stereotype threat focus on ways that teachers can improve their interaction with students who are at risk for low performance. “[The Black-White gap] is not likely to be solved overnight. It’s going to be with us for some time,” he says.

Dr. Troy Duster, a sociologist at New York University, told the audience that Steele’s research helps steer the debate on Black-White performance away from being politicized. He says conservatives point out that the gap exists because Blacks and Whites aren’t being held up to the same standards because of affirmative action. Liberals treat the gap as evidence of the disinvestment shown towards urban areas and urban school districts, according to Duster.

“This is a political minefield ... When you see Black-White gap, you see ready-made answers,” Duster says.

ADDED MATERIAL

Dr. Claude M. Steele, chair of the psychology department at Stanford University, left, confers with Dr. Troy Duster, professor of sociology at New York University. Steele presented research findings on “stereotype threat” theory at an education policy meeting at NYU early this month. PHOTO BY LEROY HENDERSON

Dr. Edmund Gordon, dean, Columbia University. PHOTO BY RON AIRA

Dr. Pedro A. Noguera, professor, Harvard University School of Education. PHOTO BY RON AIRA

Dr. Ronald Ferguson, links decline in achievement to decline in leisure reading. PHOTO BY RON AIRA