

2007

A Simple and Prudent Proposal for Ending the Black Student Achievement Gap in Public Schools

Judith Owens
University of Houston

Follow this and additional works at: <http://cedar.wwu.edu/jec>

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Owens, Judith (2007) "A Simple and Prudent Proposal for Ending the Black Student Achievement Gap in Public Schools," *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol2/iss1/8>

This Article in Response to Controversy is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

ARTICLE

A Simple and Prudent Proposal for Ending the Black Student Achievement Gap in Public Schools

Judith H. Owens

University of Houston

BETWEEN me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word (W.E.B. Du Bois, 1897, p.194)

But I do know that it's true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could -- if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down. That would be an impossible, ridiculous, and morally reprehensible thing to do, but your crime rate would go down (Bill Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education, Media Matters.org, 2005).

Jonathan Kozol wants public schools in America to be accountable to students. He advocates an end to the corporate model of education currently being practiced in school districts across the country and asks that we no longer allow schools to frame their students' realities by transmitting the values and beliefs of the powerful elite (Kozol, 2005). After four decades of critically examining and witnessing about the structure and operations of our modern-day educational system that descended from the decision rendered in *Brown v. Board of Education* 10 years prior, he asks that our nation begin to pay up on its promise to provide an educational experience in which black students learn *because of* and not in spite of their attendance in school.

We have a system of public education today that values student capital instead of student agency, statistics and scores instead of scholarship and substance, a system that has become expert at producing human *beans*, not developing human beings. It collects and counts and sorts its charges then bundles them into sinewy packages that restrict almost any movement within or between them. Those with the misfortune of placement and usually permanent membership in the "underachievement" categories find that as they progress through school the suitability of their original diagnoses strengthens the longer they remain in school.

If you are a black student in a public school, odds are you are underachieving by that school's standards. And that's if you are still enrolled. With a dropout rate reported to be 50% - 75%, black children are our nation's most endangered students. Upon graduation, they can expect to have acquired the equivalent of a white student's eighth-grade education. Many will be unable to read proficiently or do basic math. This phenomenon can be found in almost any school setting across the nation and collectively it is referred to as the Black Student Achievement Gap. This concept, now a universal understanding, of black students as underachievers has become so ingrained in our collective social consciousness here in America that few of us stop to question its truth or legitimacy. Black student underachievement permeates any discussion about school reform, ratings and accountability – it is a cultural meme that is an accepted casualty of developing an educated populace. As a nation we have framed and then accepted why black students have difficulty learning; low socio-economic levels, dysfunctional family structures, parental/guardian apathy and neglectful home environments. This acceptance has made it easy to blame the affected and assuage institutional and social guilt. What's interesting is that even when these factors are basically non-existent as was the case with the groundbreaking study of an affluent middle-class interracial neighborhood conducted by anthropologist John Ogbu, other victim-centered phenomena are proffered as explanations (poor study habits, less attention to assignments, oppositional cultural identity, lack of positive and varied ethnic role models, inability to link education to future endeavors, etc).

Recently, the principal of a majority black, suburban Fort Worth, Texas high school resigned following a racially charged debate that was precipitated by her announcement over the intercom system that some black students' poor showing in mathematics on the state's standardized test had caused the school to be rated unacceptable. In her own defense, principal, Kathy Culbertson, a 29-year educator, said she was simply trying to motivate students. Perhaps most interesting is the comment made by one of the black students who passed the test. Lester Bell was quoted as saying, "If it was us, it was us. I can't be offended" (Associated Press, 2006). All stakeholders, educators, administrators, politicians, parents and even students, have accepted the existence, the prevalence and the permanence of the achievement gap.

Whether you believe that the school reform strategies in NCLB can redress the achievement gap, or that it is impossible for schools to ameliorate the societal disadvantages many blacks possess (including poor academic performance) without addressing the overriding issue of poverty (Berliner, 2005), there is history behind the design and development of an educational system for blacks. This design had hegemonic sponsorship that supported transmission of the acceptable traditions and practices of obedience, servitude and political apathy. *Race and Education – The Roles of History and Society in Educating African American Students*, provides an analysis of the sociopolitical process used in developing early black education.

The Negro education system was carefully planned and implemented. As a case in point consider the Lake Mohonk Conferences in the Negro Question. Some of the leading White educators of this country met at Lake Mohonk, New York (a resort area) on June 4 – 6 1890, and June 3 – 5, 1891, to read papers and discuss what they officially called the "Negro question." By the time the second conference ended they had decided that the primary goals of education for Blacks should be morality and the dignity of labor (i.e. working for White folks). (Watkins, Lewis and Chou, 2005, p. 43)

David Berliner, another outspoken critical pedagogist reminds us to be discerning of attacks on the public school system because of the politics behind them that promote support for privatization and corporate modeling. He calls our view of school reform, which includes addressing the achievement gap as well as other education issues, "impoverished." Our investment should focus on economic and social parity and he provides many studies that show the causal relationship between poverty and underachievement (Berliner, 2005). John Ogbu, Claude Steele, Gary Orfield, Lisa Delpit, Richard Rothstein, Ron Ferguson and Jean Anyon are just a few of the scholars who have researched and written extensively on this topic and they have inspired many others to do so, too. There is no dearth of attention to the topic and still more than four decades later it's as though it's being looked at for the first time. Even when studies include findings that suggest specific classroom strategies for improving achievement, we seem to be unable to disaggregate them from the deep-seeded cultural belief in the inherent connection between race and academic failure. In their September 15, 2006 issue, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported on an experiment that focused on the correlation between stereotypes and academic achievement. The study found that black students in the seventh-grade performed better in school after spending 15 minutes thinking about their identities and values. To emphasize their belief in the results the researchers repeated the experiment one year later. Sounds good, right - a fifteen-minute exercise that could be implemented in just about any classroom at virtually no cost? But then at the end of the article, Timothy Wilson, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia adds these comments of caution about the application potential of the study's findings: "The achievement gap is surely caused by multiple factors, including poverty, racism, and lack of parental involvement." (Monastersky, 2006, p. A18).

The data are overwhelming, albeit arguable with regard to causation that black students underachieve academically. Racism, teacher quality, home life and family income, involuntary immigration, opportunistic neglect, oppositional identity and intellectual inferiority have all been posited as possible causes for this. But since nearly half a century has gone by with little to no change I think it's time to

look at this issue through a different pair of lenses. It is my opinion that within the current public education system we will *never* be able to impact the black student achievement gap in any significant way. Depending on the prevailing economic and political climates, this gap may decrease a few points here and then rise a point or two there but it will remain inexorably anchored in America's psyche as a by-product of public education. And it is because of the gap's construction as an irremediable cultural truth that I see only one solution. If we do not want to see another generation of black children whose future prospects are illiteracy, poverty, marginalization, degradation, and prosecution then we have to stop sending black children to school - for their good, and for the good of our nation, we must stop.

Just so you don't think that I am being hysterical and reactionary, I want it to be known that I have been thinking about this extensively over the past few years. Two years ago when my son entered middle school I transformed from being the parent of a child with an exceptionally high I.Q., into the parent of an underachieving black student. And I have thought of other less drastic approaches to solving the gap problem. One was to adopt a formula that included the 65% rule for in-class spending of educational funds. In my approach, the other 35% comprised the teacher's salary if students reached their educational goals for the year. This means that at an average national spending rate of \$10,000.00 per student a teacher in a classroom of 20 students could earn \$3,500.00 for each student showing adequate progress or up to \$72,000.00 per year. A committee comprised of the student, teacher(s), parents, a school campus administrator and an independent mediator would draft these goals. Another solution would have parents receiving refunds for some portion of their property taxes when their child didn't demonstrate academic advancement. Of course there are some bugs that need working out in both scenarios but that isn't my real problem with these solutions. In both cases, there is still too much wiggle room with regard to defining academic progress. Truthfully, I see no hope that we can simultaneously define academic achievement in a just way, reduce poverty, change culturally-situated realities, improve teacher quality and distribute education dollars equitable. Any of these alone is enough to impede change.

So let's look at the advantages to black-students-in-public-schools cessation. First, the drain on the educational system that can be attributed to the attendance of black students in public schools has financial, social, political and cultural roots. If black public school students, reported to be 7 million this school year, did not attend school, think of the money that the state education agencies and the U.S. Department of Education would save on transportation costs, special education programs, expulsion and alternative programs, free and reduced lunches, before- and after-school remedial programs, home visits, black history month programs, curriculum modifications for learning differences, cultural awareness and sensitivity training, security, athletics and the hiring of black teachers and staff, just to name a few areas. This money could be used to support and bolster the programs already serving the achieving populations in the public schools, making better students, better adults, better workers, and better people. Who can argue with this? Now, here's what can be done with the money saved. Give each black student who does not attend public school a yearly stipend of \$10,000.00. This is about the national average per pupil cost in 2003 (Standard & Poor's, 2006). So for a typical family of 2.3 children, this would be an additional \$20,000.00 - \$23,000.00 in annual, non-taxable family income; \$10,000 per child each year for 13 years. This sum could seriously impact the financial well-being of a black family by allowing for additional and improved housing options, better healthcare, transportation assistance and increased employment opportunities and access (on average a gallon of gasoline now costs close to one-half of the hourly minimum wage), reduction in stress and relief from economic pressures, decrease in the need and desire to engage in high-risk and/or illegal behaviors, reduced legal costs and more discretionary money for enjoyment and relaxation (which we know would "trickle-down" through the national economy). Currently, blacks have about 10 cents for every one-dollar of wealth a white person has. This is a win-win situation and with my plan we can close not just one but two gaps - the achievement and economic gaps.

I know you are thinking that I have forgotten something vital in my argument – what do we do with the

black children that are not attending school? Why do we have to do anything with them? In their book, *Successful Failure*, Herve Varenne and Ray McDermott write that there is both historical and cross-cultural evidence to support that humans have progressed without, “overloading either education, enculturation, or instruction with formal concerns about success and failure.” In their opinion, it was a fateful step when the public entrusted educational institutions, “which earlier served the few for limited purposes, the major political task of freeing the person, equalizing chances and building a more just community” (Varenne and McDermott, 1998, p. 155). With today’s technology advancements, media programming and access to the Internet, we know that children can research any subject they want to and become both literate and proficient at least at a basic level.

Am I saying that black students should just stop going to school immediately? No, because that would be illegal. As our president, the very voice behind the No Child Left Behind legislation would advise, don’t cut-n-run! A better strategy is to do this legally by suing the government for violation of the terms set forth in *Brown v. Board of Education*. This is the section of that seminal decision that I think is applicable:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms. (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954)

Now we have identified the *real* black student achievement gap – the gap between what was so ordered by our highest court and what our public schools have delivered.

For those readers who think that I am satirizing this educational issue out of frustration, you are half right. My frustration with endless articles and boundless theories of causation did push me to think in extremes, and it resurrected the memory of reading Jonathan Swift’s piece of raillorous genius, *A Modest Proposal For Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being A Burden To Their Parents or Country, and For Making Them Beneficial to The Public* (Swift, 1729). But I’ve come to believe that there is no conventional solution to this problem because it is by convention that black students have been analyzed and defined and generalized as intellectual inferiors. The achievement gap associated with black students in our public schools is the shame of our great nation and even though there will always be exceptions to the rule, black students who exhibit limitless resilience and excel because or regardless of their public school experience, still too many do not, and with each passing generation the personal and societal toll is exponential. So to answer the question about the seriousness of my plan once again, no, I am not kidding. Was Bill Bennett?

ENDNOTE: In an article that appeared in *The New York Times*, Monday, November 20, 2006, the findings of researchers and several recent studies show very little progress in closing the achievement gap between minority and white students in public schools. These gaps that are present when students enter kindergarten actually widen over the 12 years minority students spend in school. “Not only have all boats stopped rising, but the boats that are under water are sinking further down,” Bruce Fuller, a professor of education at University of California, Berkley, and contributor to the study, was quoted as saying (Dillon, 2006, pp. A1, A23).

References

- Associated Press.** (2006). August 30. *Everman Principal Steps Down Over Racial Remarks*. Houston Chronicle.com.
- Berliner, David C.** (2005). *Our Impoverished View of Educational Reform*. TCRecord. August 02, 2005
- Brown v. Board of Education.** 347 U.S. 483 (1954) (USSC+)
- Dillon, S.** (2006). *Schools Slow In Closing Gaps Between Races*. The New York Times. November 20, 2006.
- Dubois, W.E.B.** (1897). *Strivings of the Negro People*. Atlanta Monthly. New York.
- Kozol, Jonathan.** (2005). *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. New York: Crown Publishers
- Media Matters.org.** (2005). *Media Matters exposes Bennett: "[Y]ou could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down"*. Retrieved February 28, 2007.
<http://mediamatters.org/items/200509280006>
- Monastersky, Richard.** (2006). *Months Later, a Brief Assignment Narrows the Achievement Gap*. The Chronicle Of Higher Education. September 15, 2006.
- Standard and Poor's.** *School Matters*. Retrieved February 28, 2007
<http://www.schoolmatters.com/app/location/q/stid=1036196/llid=162/stllid=676/locid=1036195/site=pes>
- Swift, Jonathan.** (1729). *A Modest Proposal For Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being A Burden To Their Parents or Country, and For Making Them Beneficial to The Public*.
- Varenne, Herve. & McDermott, Ray.** (1998). *Successful Failure – The School America Builds*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Watkins, William H., Lewis, James H., & Chou, Victoria.** (2001). *Race and Education – The Roles of History and Society in Educating African American Students*. Needham Heights: Allyn and Bacon