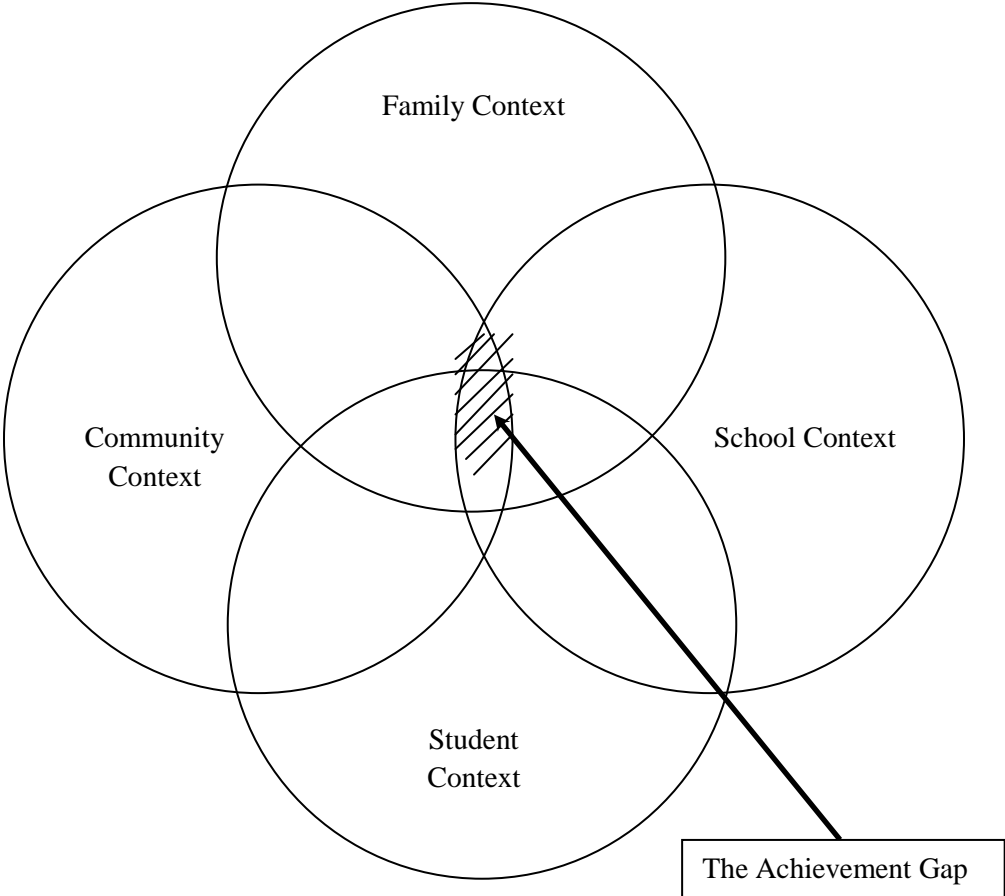


Achievement Gap Model



In addressing the achievement gap not one individual cause can be isolated as the exclusive reason for why this gap in student performance continues to persist within our educational systems. Rather, I believe that there are four overlapping factors that equally contribute to perpetuating the achievement gap. Those factors I have labeled as the Family Context, Community Context, School Context, and finally the Student Context. Each of these reasons will be addressed individually and but it is as a collective that bring about the achievement gap and inequality in student achievement, “only comprehensive, multifaceted, integrated, and coherent designs offer hope of success” (Murphy, 2010, p. 234).

To begin looking at the contributing causes and one ultimate solution to the achievement gap the *School Context* is the most accessible and most flexible to augment for change. The School Context is an umbrella concept that I have labeled to encompass some sub-causes of the achievement gap including, but not limited to, teacher quality, support program effectiveness, school funding, and an educational culture of success within the school.

Of all the factors beneath the School Context umbrella I feel that quality teachers are the most important factor to removing the achievement gap but have equal influence on perpetuating it as well. While I do not think that poor teachers are the root cause of underperformance of students I do believe that the expectations of teachers matter and how they are able to connect with their class can greatly impact the success rate of those they teach. For those teachers who hold low expectations for their students, “assumes a vicious circle in which the negative perceptions of teachers influence the self-image of students, and they work less hard as a consequence” (Thernstorm & Thernstorm, 2004, p. 196). Teachers who are inspiring and motivating can keep a student on the path to success (Ford).

Ferguson, who is quoted within Murphy,

“...reminds us that ‘no matter what material resources are available, no matter what strategies school districts use to allocate children to schools, and no matter how children are grouped in instruction, schoolchildren spend their days in social interaction with teachers’” (Murphy, 2010, p. 238).

I believe though that teaching is not a calling, not a vocation, but a profession and that profession comes with expected responsibilities and a relationship of mutual respect between the teacher and student as well as teacher and administration. Writing from the perspective and experience of a secondary visual arts teacher it is my job to make my classroom a safe and supportive learning environment that promotes all students’ ability to succeed. When there are students who need additional time or instruction I make myself available to see that their needs are addressed, staying late after school or responding to student emails during the evening. At the same time I have obligations outside of my educational duties that equally require my attention. I continue to struggle with the balance and expectation that teachers are to selflessly give all of their efforts for the benefit of their students. When is the teacher allowed to not be a teacher? Yes, teachers can be an influencing and contributing force in the closing of the achievement gap but that charge is too great to place on the educator alone.

Supporting the teacher must be proven successful programs that promote student achievement. These programs must encompass both rigor and be promoted by a school culture that values success. If a child is unsafe at school or unmotivated to achieve then their performance will suffer as a result. Students “require “much more intensive support” and much more of the quality educational factors (e.g., rigorous

curriculum) that promote higher levels of student achievement whenever they are found” (Murphy, 2010, p. 235).

Even with those supportive factors in place and if the students are able to gain acceptance in to post-secondary programs do not possess the necessary tools to be successful and are continuing a cycle at Thernstorm & Thernstorm brings attention to as, “Students who leave high school with skills at the eighth- or ninth-grade level can’t keep up in colleges that are not geared to teaching students what they should have learned in high school” (Thernstorm & Thernstorm, 2004, p. 33).

Following the School Context as a cause of the achievement gap is the Family Context which takes into consideration the degree of parental education, parental involvement in the education of the child, the family’s socio-economic status, cultural capital possessed by the family. Each of these conditions will need to be measured in respect to the child’s achievement and the continuation of the achievement gap.

Family Context serves a critical role in the educational development of the child by establishing the socioeconomic culture that the child is raised into.

Social scientists have identified significant resources, or forms of capital, that play a role in influencing student academic outcomes. Research has shown that economic capital, that is the wealth and income of the parents, is one of the primary factors influencing student achievement. Student achievement is also influenced by more subtle resources such as social capital – the benefits derived from connections to networks and individuals with power and influence (Noguera and Wing, 2004, p. 31).

Upon reflection of my initial model from earlier in the course a great deal of my attention was paid to the role of parents and their educational experience and viewed the achievement gap and a continuation of our educational system failing those without social privilege. Murphy again gathers, “We know not only that “parents’ education is a critical variable in children’s achievement” but also that educational experiences are not equitably distributed in the United States Minority and low-income youngsters are more likely to have parents with lower levels of education (Murphy, 2010, p. 90).

By creating a cycle linking education to wages and education it is easy to draw a line that connects troubling schools to underachieving students who do not continue their education. Without the sound educational foundation needed for success in these times the opportunities for these people to find gainful employment is limited resulting in social crisis and becoming politically powerless, uninformed as to the social norms necessary for upward social mobility. Unfortunately this leads to racially isolated communities which tend to, because of lack of funding, are the locations of struggling schools that repeats the cycle anew.

The third conditional context that I have labeled as a causation of the achievement gap is the Community Context, how the social and peer influences outside of the classroom and family setting impact the educational success of the learner. For the student to be successful, “Educators must be knowledgeable of the cultures in which students live to have clear expectations in the classroom (Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford, 2010, p. 107). When addressing the achievement gap, particularly focusing on the needs of African Americans, Ogbu approached this issue anthropologically and found, “a culture among black students to reject behaviors perceived to be “white,” including making good grades, speaking Standard

English, being overly involved in class, and enrolling in honors or advanced –placement courses” (Goldsmith, n/d).

Although an overarching concept the current national climate and federal policies such as No Child Left Behind do play a significant part in influencing the Community Context’s contribution on the achievement gap. If our culture continues to perpetuate these inequalities it becomes increasingly difficult modify or collective behavior to enact the changes necessary to abolish the achievement gap. As Noguera and Wing explain in the context of Berkley “the achievement gap is not a racial phenomenon but one rooted in socioeconomic inequality, there is little they can say to counter the reality that this is how the issue is generally perceived. As often the case, perception has a way of creating its own reality” (Noguera and Wing, 2004, p. 5).

I would be remiss if I did not, at least briefly, address the issue of race and racism as a contributing factor to the persistence of the achievement gap. While I would like to believe that in the 21st century we as a collective global community would be able to move past the bigotry that has stood in the way of our children’s progress as it has in the past. Unfortunately race and racism cannot be fully removed from the achievement gap discussion since it is specifically minorities and low income students that are not seeing the same levels of success within the classroom. Murphy explains, “. . .researchers document that some African American responses to marginalization can weaken connections to schooling and reduce the work effort required for higher academic achievement, and ‘Aspects of the black culture contribute to the gap’” (Murphy, 2010, p. 127).

Finally the last cause of the achievement gap is what I have labeled Student Context. Though not greatly discussed within the readings I have observed that the within my classroom and in the schools that I have taught the achievement gap exists as a cultural phenomenon. Ultimately though it is the students that are doing or not doing the work and should hold some accountability for their education. John Ogbu was brave enough to say it, “It wasn’t socioeconomics, school funding, or racism, that accounted for the students’ poor academic performance; it was their own attitudes, and those of their parents” (Goldsmith, n/d).

Yes, these factors are complex and yes, they are not easily resolved but I believe that ultimately success comes down to an individual choice and behavior. I am willing to concede that some individuals are blessed to have the good fortune and socio-economical capital that promotes achievement but then there ultimately they too have to do the work. It is why I list Student Context as the final factor in my concept map. Those are the ones that are ultimately responsible for their education. Poor schooling conditions can factor in alongside a difficult Family Context in addition to a community that does not promote education as a valuable venture but the student is provided the opportunity and should make the best of that chance.

I realize that this perspective may present itself as a harsh criticism of those who are trying to overcome the achievement gap. My first teaching position upon relocation to South Carolina was in a very economically depressed, rural region of the state where predominantly the population was black. By comparison, a disproportionate number of my white students, based on averages in relation to population at the school, were achieving proficient evaluations while many of the black students struggled. Not completing assignments, not doing well on exams. Following the opportunity to move to an affluent suburb from the capital I found that during this course I became more aware of where I was directing my attention. As stated above the teacher is the easiest factor to change and I wanted to make sure that I was

giving each of my students an equal chance to succeed. But ultimately it is their responsibility to meet me in the middle.

I arranged my model as the overlapping circles with the intention of achieving two points. The first is to display that each of the contributing factors toward the perpetuation of the achievement is not linear or sequential but a collective condition that cannot be separated individually. Second, that by overlapping the circles we see these contexts influence each other and a joint causation is the final result. As previously expressed, the achievement gap is not something that will be resolved with one singular implementation of strategy or concept but rather a continuing effort to insure equality within the education system where each student is provided well funded schools, teachers who will motivate them to succeed in a rigorous curriculum so that no matter their family or social background they will do their best to maximize their educational potential.

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