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The Achievement Gap: A Dual Nation Perspective

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Abstract

This essay seeks to explore the achievement gap which is a disparity in educational achievement between certain economic and racial groups, specifically in primary and secondary education, that exists in the United States and England. This study analyzes the various issues relating to the causes, effects, and solutions to the gap in both countries. The ultimate outcome will be an examination of the best possible solutions to the gap and how teachers just entering the field can implement their own ways of bridging it. The solutions will be primarily targeted toward U.S. teachers but the dual nation perspective will uncover more causes and greater possibilities for coming up with universal strategies to bridging the gap.

Introduction

The Achievement Gap, also known as the “Opportunity Gap” and commonly referred to in England as the “Attainment Gap,” is defined slightly differently by every person. At its base, it is the disparity in success and academic achievement between different groups of students. A more complex understanding says it is an ongoing problem that exists because certain groups of students who tend to consistently outperform the others for several reasons, and the range of success even within the outperformers and underperformers is vast. It is a gap that exists not only in the U.S., but in other cultures and countries as well. Therefore, this paper will focus on the gaps in achievement that exist in the U.S. and England. It is important to acknowledge that this is not simply an issue of students who are successful, and students who are not. The gap results from a wide variety of causes and has a range of far reaching effects that lead us to call into question the function of education and how we are utilizing our resources to create equal opportunities for all, as well as defining “success” and measuring it accurately. There are several proposals for solutions; some which have worked and some which have not. However, this

problem persists so it is our job to keep searching for solutions, and find solutions that actually work well. This paper will analyze the causes, effects, and attempted solutions in both the U.S. and the England to produce a conclusion about what teachers can do to solve this problem, and what solutions may very well work that have not been tried yet.

Why England

From January 2015 to May 2015, I studied as an exchange student at Keele University in Staffordshire, England. While there, I was fortunate enough to take a class called *Comparative Education* which compared U.S. and UK schools. Throughout this class, one thing that stood out was that England also suffers from a gap in achievement and their problems are similar to ours, but also different enough to be worth looking into. When I decided to research the achievement gap, I knew having been in England I could gather some valuable data and that the data would offer some new perspectives on the gap that the U.S. research would not provide, and ultimately bring about new ideas for bridging it. I was able to conduct interviews as well as library and online research pertaining to the achievement gap while in England that kick-started my research and gave me a solid foundation to build from while crafting similar research in the U.S.

Methodology

The focus of my research throughout the process has been to utilize my experiences in the past year and interview those around me about their perspectives on the achievement gap. I also conducted supplemental research about the studies already being done in the U.S. and England. I have presented the interviews in a manner so they are integrated as part of my research and interviewees are represented in this paper with pseudonyms, to protect their

identities but maintain their perspectives. During each of the interviews I conducted, I asked participants the following four questions:

1. How would you define the achievement gap? (U.S.,UK, or both)
2. What do you believe to be the causes of the achievement gap? (U.S.,UK, or both)
3. Who do you believe is affected by the achievement gap? (U.S.,UK, or both)
4. Can you come up with a solution to the achievement gap? If yes, what would you do to bridge the gap? (U.S., UK, or both)

Having been at Keele University in England during the first stages of this research, I began by interviewing a university education professor, two university education majors, and two university non-education majors:

Name	Title	Gender	Ethnicity
Harry	University professor	Male	Caucasian/White British
George	University education major	Male	Caucasian/White British
Dean	University education major	Male	Afro-Caribbean
Tessa	University non-education major	Female	Caucasian/White British
Anna	University non-education major	Female	Caucasian/White British

Next, I spent the summer working for an organization in the U.S. called Breakthrough Collaborative, which aims at providing extra summer education to highly motivated underserved students. While there, I interviewed Breakthrough teachers (college students) with a wide variety of college majors, as well as Breakthrough administration, all of whom were working together to help underserved students succeed. I interviewed nine people in total:

Name	Title	Gender	Ethnicity
Ted	Breakthrough Teaching Fellow	Male	Caucasian American
Kim	Breakthrough Teaching Fellow	Female	Indian American
Sierra	Breakthrough Teaching Fellow	Female	Caucasian American
Lisa	Breakthrough Teaching Fellow	Female	Caucasian American
Beth	Breakthrough Teaching Fellow	Female	Caucasian American
Angie	Breakthrough Administration	Female	Caucasian American
Claire	Breakthrough Administration	Female	Caucasian American
Jeremy	Breakthrough Administration	Male	African American
Helena	Breakthrough Program Director	Female	African American

Finally, since being back at my U.S. university (BGSU), I have conducted interviews to parallel those I conducted at Keele University in England. I interviewed an education professor, two education majors, and two non-education majors:

Name	Title	Gender	Ethnicity
Karen	University professor	Female	Caucasian American
Jessica	University education major	Female	Caucasian American
Amelia	University education major	Female	Caucasian American
Matthew	University non-education major	Male	African American
Derrick	University non-education major	Male	Caucasian American

The interviews add a very human and real perspective to my research and analysis of the achievement gap because they allow me to hear from the people who are actually living in it. Their voices helped fuel a surplus of new ideas for how to reduce this problem and also why and

how it exists for different people in the U.S. and England. Additionally, the interviews provide logic about the gap on a more individual level, complementing the big picture research that focuses on large group progress. I have included input from these interviews throughout the paper so this aspect of the research can be showcased and add to the discussion of the gap in both countries.

U.S. Gap in Achievement

The U.S. Achievement gap began in the 1970s and has slowly continued to grow between 2004 and 2015; as of now, it still exists but the growth rate of the gap seems to have flattened (Miksic, 2014). It consists, on a basic level, of the disparity in achievement between students in grades elementary through high school. This disparity is mostly between ethnic minority students and students in the majority, as well as between students from low socio-economic backgrounds and students from middle or upper class backgrounds. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), Black and Hispanic enrollment in public school is 40-50% less than that of Caucasian students. Additionally, 24% of America's students are attending high poverty schools. These statistics support a notion that fewer ethnic groups are enrolling and graduating from high school as part of the overall population of students compared to their Caucasian counterparts. Also, nearly 30% of the nation's students attend schools that are highly impoverished, with needs not being met and fewer resources for students attending these schools. Furthermore, on the state of education, President Barack Obama has also recently disbanded the educational policy "No Child Left Behind," which provided funding to schools on the basis of test scores (Parker, 2015). Based on this information, we see that test scores are one factor in measuring student achievement. However, success for students is also measured based on enrollment, graduation, difficulty of coursework, and effort (NCES, 2015). For many students in

America who are not receiving the same opportunities as their counterparts, the American Dream really is a myth (Klein & Rice, et. al., 2012), and in short, America's achievement gap is measured in several ways but the disparity is strongly tied to race and socio-economic status, and persists because of cycles that remain for students in these situations.

England Gap in Achievement

The popularization of studies done on the English Achievement Gap specifically related to education has been around since the 2000s, with less than a 1% improvement rate in bridging it up to now (Centre for Excellence and Outcomes, 2011). However, it is important to note that direct correlations to this gap, such as the social class gap, have been around in England much longer. Studies done starting in the 1970s indicate the class gap and its negative effects on education (Finn, 1999). The gap here consists of a disparity in achievement between students belonging to different groups at the primary and secondary levels of education. One disparity that exists is between ethnic minorities, particularly Muslims (Parker-Jenkins, 2009), and their white British counterparts. Although the gap does involve ethnic minority students at the lower end to a degree, the main disparities are between students of the upper and middle class and students with low socio-economic status, and between males and females. A study conducted by the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (2011) found that students with low-income status are less likely to get five good grades at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) than students who are not low-income, which suggests that achievement in England is mainly measured based on test scores. However, other factors such as advancing to the next year in school and attending post-secondary school are also considered. For example, in recent years studies have shown that 80% of men have successfully graduated high school, whereas only 76% of women have, and more women complete tertiary education

with a 43% average compared to men who are at 41% (OECD, 2015). In short, England's attainment gap, the English designation used interchangeably with achievement gap, is strongly tied to class and gender, as well as ethnicity to an extent. Many social and government policies have been introduced to try and address these problems, but with a less than 1% improvement rate, the gap continues to persist (Centre for Excellence and Outcomes, 2011).

How it Looks in the Classroom

In U.S. and English classrooms, these statistics look differently depending on the situation. A teacher could have a class with primarily Caucasian students and very few ethnic minority students, which may create cultural barriers for those ethnic minority students to have to overcome, putting them at a disadvantage. At the same time, the population of Caucasian students may come from various socio-economic statuses with some coming to school hungry or dirty because of a lack of resources at home, others coming with full stomachs and refreshed, and many coming from somewhere in the middle, which causes a disparity because if immediate needs are met for certain students and not others, this could affect the way those students whose needs are not being met, concentrate on their work. Additionally, the gender gap between students may exist in England, depending on the ratio of boys to girls and the way the social stigma of learning as "feminine" is manifested at one particular school versus another (Perry & Francis, 2010). Just as well, racial barriers exist more prominently in the U.S. and ethnic minority students may face teacher bias and social prejudice which can affect their learning (Webb and Thomas, 2015). This is not even taking into account students with special needs whose needs put them at a disadvantage when learning standard curriculum, as well as talented and gifted and all students somewhere in the middle. Keeping in mind each of these demographics, we should also note that many times students are part of more than one

disadvantaged group or more than one privileged group, and yet each student is expected to learn the same material and perform at the same level on standardized tests such as the state mandated test in the U.S. and GCSEs in England. This is what the gap in achievement demonstrated by all of these statistics boils down to in a classroom setting.

The Problem

Now that we have some background on the achievement gap and how it persists in both countries, we need to get into the problem we are facing and exploring in this study. The problem is not necessarily that a gap in achievement exists. It is that the gap is significantly large and there are patterns between groups at the top and groups at the bottom based on opportunity, and not hard work. Even if we could, as Dean, a UK education major suggests, “hypothetically, take children from their homes and educate them all in the same isolated environment” (Dean, personal interview, 2015) so that they may all receive equal opportunity and circumstance, the gap would still persist at the very least due to biology, types of intelligences, and human biases. It is impossible for everyone to be born with the same amount of privileges or disadvantages in life, and for all students to be equal. However, there are things we can do to make opportunities more equal when it comes to our schools and our ideology. First, we have to understand the ins and outs of the gap: what causes it, its effects, and what has already been tried to create equal opportunity in our system and in England’s system. Then, the goal is to analyze and understand why the gap in opportunity for certain groups has not lessened due to previous efforts and what we can do to stop it from persisting, so if it must exist, it can exist based on effort and not privilege. Looking at these aspects of the disparity in opportunity between different groups in both countries will give us a wealth of information to reference and interpret, ultimately coming

up with new ways to provide everyone with as much equality in opportunity as is possible, and get people thinking in favor of success for all.

Causes

As we look to the causes of the achievement gap, it is impossible to discuss every single contributing factor. There are a number of minor contributions to the inconsistency in opportunity such as geography and biology. However, our focus will be on the areas I see as major causes for the gap, as well as areas that have been studied more thoroughly. When looking at two countries, and by extension two different cultures with different systems for doing things, it is difficult to find overarching themes, but based on the research conducted for this study, the very broad topics we will develop further in this exploration are Funding, Segregation, Attitudes, and Early Childhood. These topics may differ based on others' perceptions of the research that has been done, but based on the information, these causes represent a general discrepancy in nations overall, as well as reasons that people may not have heard of often, but nonetheless exist and contribute to the gap in both countries. Funding will be used to indicate how schools are funded differently in each nation, and yet there is still a disparity in achievement because some schools are still receiving more than others, and this leads to a disparity in resources to students and overall a gap in achievement between various schools in the public sector. Segregation has been found to be a problem manifested in both countries, which is generally underrepresented as a cause for the achievement gap, but it is important because it illustrates that disadvantaged groups and privileged groups are not being integrated enough, and the maintenance of advantages going to the majority in many cases, causes the gap to persist. Attitudes represent ideologies present in both countries for why students cannot succeed, and this keeps them from trying, which can be argued as a necessity for change, so this cause is important. Finally, Early

Childhood and eliminating the gap at an early age seem to be a central focus of quite a few studies surrounding the gap, and also accounts for many of the disadvantages perpetuated in the other topics discussed because it involves the situations students are born into, so it makes sense to discuss it. First we will look at how these causes are manifested in the U.S., and then look at England to see where they stand in comparison.

U.S. Causes

Funding

Now that we have a brief understanding of the achievement gap in the U.S., we must look at the causes of its existence in the U.S. The National Center for Education Statistics' (2015) data shows that the majority of American students are enrolled in public schools. Funding for public schools in the U.S. is based on property taxes (NCES, 2015), which means it directly relates to the type of area in which the school resides. Since geographically in America there is an immense disparity in wealth from area to area, there is also an immense disparity in the wealth from school to school (Hannah-Jones, 2015). The way this works is that impoverished people reside in impoverished areas. Schools in impoverished areas rely on their funds to keep running and to run effectively. The impoverished people in the impoverished area lack funds, and therefore, so does the school. This works in the opposite way in affluent areas, "and schools in more affluent areas generally have higher levels of per pupil spending" (Bradbury & Corak, et al., 2015, p. 46) thus creating a cycle of each group remaining where they are in terms of their level of academic achievement and success. The impoverished students and families who need the most resources provided to them by their schools because they do not have access to it themselves are getting the least amount of resources. This is because they are essentially funding their own schools; and the affluent students and families are getting the bulk of resources, which

in many cases they already have access to at home, because they are able to afford it. In terms of what resources consist of, they are things such as access to technology, libraries, practiced teachers, school supplies, field trips, extra-curricular activities, and other study tools or opportunities that a school can provide for its students with the proper funding. Some students, typically impoverished, have little to no access to these tools and opportunities, and others, typically affluent, have unlimited access. This creates a disparity in the levels of success students are able to reach, thus contributing to the gap.

Segregation

In the U.S. today, segregation is no longer a law. However, segregation on the basis of race and social status still exists in our school systems. According to researcher Nikole Hannah-Jones (2015), between 1971-1988 the achievement gap decreased by half, and from 1988 all the way up to now, schools have become re-segregated and the gap has widened again. This segregation exists primarily between Caucasian pupils and African American or Hispanic pupils and in many cases students in each racial group attend schools where they belong to the majority by almost 100%. The reasons for segregation are not abundantly clear, but one can assume it has to do with the difference in SES between the races, and the areas in which they reside. According to Pitre (2014), directly after the Civil Rights Movement, ethnic minority students were given access to quality schools outside of their neighborhoods, which gave African American, Hispanic, and other ethnic minorities access to well-funded schools with advanced curriculum and well-prepared teachers. This would seem to decrease the disparity in achievement between different races. However, this is no longer the case and in general the schools that minority students attend have much worse conditions than those of white students (Hannah-Jones, 2015). Opportunities for advancement are also segregated based on privilege given to majority groups

based on test scores. Students who do well on college entry exams such as SATs and ACTs, tend to be granted more money for college (Fitzpatrick & Jones, 2015) and since minority students, particularly students of low socio-economic status come into these test already at a disadvantage, the cycle continues and this shows that the U.S. system privileges the majority. This notion of segregation, regardless of its causes, works against efforts to diversify schools and not only educate students on acceptance of others who are different from them, but to mix advantaged and disadvantaged pupils in an effort to equalize opportunity and bridge the racial gap in achievement, thus causing it to persist.

Attitudes

In order to examine why attitudes are a factor in the existence of the achievement gap, we must look at attitudes in our nation surrounding race, class, and education. In segregated American schools today, there are many who want to keep the schools segregated but claim their reasoning is not based around race (Hannah-Jones, 2015). Their claims are based on stigmas about students who are primarily African American and Latino and what they will bring into the primarily white, affluent schools. This demonstrates the effort for certain ethnic groups in society to be kept where they are (Karen, personal interview, 2015). In an example from one district attempting to integrate a primarily black school, Normandy Public, and a primarily white school, Clayton Public, white parents responded by saying things like, “I hope that their discipline records come with them, like their health records come with them” and “is there going to be metal detectors?...I have read about the violence” (Hannah-Jones, 2015, np) demonstrating quite clearly the attitudes that some citizens in privileged positions possess toward black individuals, and most likely other minorities as well. Although these examples have only come from one place, it is safe to say they reflect cultural views that we see projected every day in our media.

Therefore, they demonstrate that a large reason for the underachievement of minority students is the negative ways in which they are perceived. This cultural stigma is something that students may also hear and associate with themselves, and as Matthew, an African American U.S. university non-education major points out, because of this, “motives are not as strong for minorities,” (Matthew, personal interview, 2015) thus continuing the trend of ethnic minorities such as African American and Hispanic individuals at the lower end of the gap.

Additionally, we must consider the attitudes that many teachers have toward students of ethnic minorities. This comes into play in two primary ways. First, there are teachers who may come from privileged backgrounds with the best of intentions, but who are unable to connect with their disadvantaged students. Teach for America is an organization aimed at helping bridge the gap in education. Their mission is “enlist, develop, and mobilize as many as possible of our nation's most promising future leaders to grow and strengthen the movement for educational equity and excellence” (teachforamerica.org, 2015, np). However, despite good intentions, an article covering this organization has revealed that at least some of this mission may not be getting fulfilled due to teachers’ attitudes being transformed upon working with minority and underprivileged students. The article “Teach for America Accused of Sending Idealistic Young White People into School Districts they Don’t Understand” (2015) claims that the TFA teachers sent to low-income minority neighborhoods to teach are 40% white, and 80% of these white individuals are also female, idealistic, and unprepared (Otiko, np). The demographic of teachers in general in the U.S. as recent as 2012, also suggests 76.3% of teachers are female, and 81.9% of all teachers are white (NCES, 2012). This can cause disconnect between teachers of this demographic and minority students, particularly racially diverse males, across the entire nation, not just in TFA schools, and is likely a factor in the high suspension rate among black male

students. Based on stereotypes and portrayals in the media, words such as unmotivated, unwilling, and incapable have been associated with black males particularly and when white male teachers do not understand the culture of their students already, they lower their expectations of these students and provide them with less opportunities (Webb and Thomas, 2015). Although Otiko's investigation goes a little far when questioning teachers' intentions and saying that TFA "cultivates racism," (Otiko, np) it is worthy to note that these criticisms exist and the attitudes teachers possess toward minority students have a major impact on their success.

The other more extreme part of this is that there are some parents and teachers who simply believe minority students can achieve less. In Pitre's article (2014), she discusses the experiences that one of her graduate students recalled about conditions of a local school, stating, "The teacher expressed a belief that the ethnic minority students (primarily African American) were not capable of higher levels of academic work, and he told her that he spent most of his time trying to get them to 'behave like human beings'— words that he yelled at the students often, by her account" (Pitre, np) and this serves as another example for how minority students are at a disadvantage because of how their teachers view them and in this case, oppressed by their own teachers. It also causes a disparity in success when parents, in addition to teachers, do not expend efforts on behalf of their children. This is not a problem unique ethnic minorities, but can occur in any family setting. As Ted, a Breakthrough Collaborative teaching fellow puts it, "We need parents who give a crap" (Ted, personal interviews, 2015). Negative attitudes and lack of support from parents can cause a large disparity in how well students are learning and what they believe about themselves, also causing minority students to struggle much more when trying to succeed.

Early Childhood

Since discussing societal, school-related, and community causes, we must also look at the students' backgrounds and what kinds of supports they have or barriers they face in trying to get ahead before even entering grade school. A significant portion of the gap in skills between low- and high-SES children is present before they enter school (Bradbury & Corak, et. al., 2015), meaning that children in low-SES homes probably face more barriers. For impoverished students in the U.S., barriers may be that parents cannot afford pre-school or are not around to teach them the basics. Unlike other countries, underprivileged families in the U.S. have no paid parental leave, no universal preschool, no reliable income supports, and no access to health insurance (until recently) (Bradbury & Corak, et. al., 2015). This information shows that despite families' desires to provide resources for their children to succeed, they may not have the means and our country's system does not lend itself to helping all that much. Rothstein (2014) writes that attending preschool really does have long term benefits, stating that adolescents and adults who attended preschool face less teen pregnancy, better employment outcomes, fewer criminal arrests, more high school graduation, and have higher earnings, supporting the idea that with students of low SES being less likely to attend and more affluent students being more likely to attend, this factor also contributes to the gap.

In addition to this, other factors from students' backgrounds can affect their performance. If students are being raised by a single parent, which many in America are, this parent may be forced to work extra jobs to support the family and have less time to work with the student one on one in preparation for entering school (Rothstein, 2014). The same goes for families with parents who have low paying jobs. They may have to work extra jobs or shifts just to make ends meet or to receive much needed funds for their family to keep going, taking away time that they

can be engaging with their child to further development. We can also look at how some ethnic groups view the education system and view certain aspects of American culture that may hold students back. One factor particularly for the immigrant population is that immigrant students may be entering school without English as their first language, and without parents or family who speak English to help teach them. This puts them at an immediate disadvantage because everything they will be learning is in English, and learning to read and write English is one of the first basic skills that sets the foundation for students in preschool and kindergarten in the U.S. (Paik & Walburg, 2007).

England Causes

Funding

In order to understand multiple perspectives, we must now look at similar causes for the gap in England, and how they relate to those in the U.S. Unlike the U.S., schools in England receive funding that is more equally distributed by the government. In England, funding for schools comes from the national government, is generally equal across all schools, and in 2011 a pupil premium began which provided extra funding to schools with more disadvantaged students (Bradbury & Corak, et. al., 2015) which means for the most part, the schools in England that need the most funding are getting it. However, despite efforts to equalize attainment through funding, many other factors apply. For example, “Well-off parents can afford better schools for their children, by buying either private schooling or housing in a good catchment area” (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2014, p. 4) and these schools offer the newest resources and more one-on-one attention for pupils, which still leaves impoverished students who receive equal funding at a disadvantage. It is also still a disadvantage to be impoverished attending school because school funding only provides certain resources at certain times. The school can provide nutritious

meals for lunch, but during the other two meals, students may still be getting insufficient nutritional value from lack of food or having to eat whatever is available regardless of its nutrients. They may also be required to share a room with parents or siblings, not offering them a quiet place to study and focus when trying to do well on homework (Perry & Francis, 2010). Another contributing factor is that unstable financial situations may cause families to move a lot, and despite a uniform national curriculum, moving schools requires having to readjust socially and may cause students to fall behind. The English perspective suggests that despite equal funding and greater assistance for impoverished families, there are still several factors that may contribute to students of low SES being disadvantaged. Simply providing schools with equal funding may not be enough, and this knowledge could save the U.S. the trouble of testing it as a solution only to find out the gap may still exist even if equal funding were provided to all public schools.

Segregation

In England, schools seem to also be segregated by race. In English schools, 94% of people considered white British are in schools with a white British majority and 61% of ethnic minority pupils enter schools where ethnic minority pupils are a majority (Coughlan, 2015). Similar to the U.S., this is evidence that the inter-mingling of race and most likely to an extent, status, is not being celebrated or taught in English schools. The article goes on to talk about how English schools are now more segregated than the areas they reside in. One insight that Coughlan gives for this is that segregation results from a pattern of local families making choices to send students where they feel they are the most “comfortable” which is apparently with other students of the same race.

Although racial segregation does exist in English schools, another factor for the English is Social Segregation. An article on English social class gaps states, “the UK has a particularly high degree of social segregation” (Perry & Francis, 2010, p. 5) and this segregation has been increased due to heavy focus on educational standards based on geography and test results. Basically, the government’s insistence on standardized achievement has caused marginalization between students considered high achievers and students considered low achievers. As Tessa, a UK university non-education major points out, “the English system privileges a certain kind of person and people who don’t fit, lose out” (Tessa, personal interview, 2015). The kind of person usually privileged by this system is a majority student who performs well on tests. Since attainment in England is primarily based on tests scores and grades (Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, 2015), the majority are privileged because high scores are needed to advance and underprivileged students come into testing already at a disadvantage. With this large gap not likely to change overnight, this is a problem because rather than mixing schools and utilizing high achieving students to develop leadership skills while assisting students considered low achieving in succeeding, the split reinforces the notion that one is either successful or not and continues the trend of the gap.

Attitudes

In England, attitudes of prejudice more largely surround the working class and how the privileged view them but also how their own beliefs about the system of education affect achievement. According to an article on the English state of education, Sir Micael Wilshaw, of Ofsted, England’s educational evaluation organization, “will on Wednesday blame teachers' low expectations and a failure to instill the right learning culture for holding back improvements in the education system...he will say that attainment levels for white children from poorer families,

in particular, have improved more slowly than for all other ethnic groups since 2007” (Boffey, 2013, np). This observation by Ofsted of the outcomes of teachers’ attitudes toward these students suggests a particular correlation between teachers’ low expectations of white working class students, and their low achievement. In reference to the Leicester City Council, a report by the House of Commons Education Committee (2014-15) states that in this area, white working class cultures are characterized by low aspirations and negative attitudes towards education, which reveals that it is not just teachers who possess these attitudes toward the working class of society.

In addition, a large portion of the negative attitudes surrounding white working class students, particularly boys, is self-induced. According to Perry and Francis (2010), in reference to the English education system’s culture surrounding success on league tables, working-class students are statistically more likely to ‘fail’ which can cause them to become unmotivated and subsequently see themselves as having no value or use in society, and this is demonstrated in how they perform. There are also parental factors that play into this in that as George, a UK university education major says, “several working class parents do not think education is needed for a job” (George, personal interview, 2015). Furthermore, boys in particular are less motivated in English schools because many working class boys are focused on achieving “manhood” which to them means finding a job immediately that demonstrates a specific skill and will earn them money, as opposed to pursuing their academics which as Harry, UK University Professor points out, has been “feminized” and “boys think they’re cool to be anti-school” (Harry, personal interview, 2015). The combined attitudes of teachers and higher ups, working class students themselves, and the construction of education as “feminine” are major causes for why white working class boys are considered the lowest academic achievers in England.

Early Childhood

Although the U.S. offers early childhood programs and other supports to impoverished families, England seems to offer a larger amount of support overall. The English healthcare system provides “universal child benefit, a housing benefit and a sizable public housing sector, cash grants for nonworking adults, universal health insurance, and so on” (Bradbury & Corak, et. al., 2015, p. 45). All of these systems clearly work to help sustain families with little or no income and yet the gap still very much exists in the lower classes of England. This suggests that even if the U.S. were to increase its social welfare programs, this would not guarantee a significant change in the rate of achievement. It is important that Early Childhood Programs receive equal funding everywhere and that help is provided to families who need it but it is also important that they offer this money intertwined with equal opportunity, increased ambition, and ensure it is spent on adequate resources for it to work.

Effects

Now that we have looked at causes, we must discuss the effects this disparity has on the U.S. and England. Although not as similar in the ways they have been affected, we do see similarities emerging between the two countries once again in that the gap in both countries affects everyone in some way, whether directly or indirectly. The major effects we will focus on are effects on the underserved minority populations, the affluent majority populations, economic effects, and effects on teachers.

U.S. Effects

Impoverished and Minority Students

An analysis of the causes for the gap then leads us into exploring who is affected in the U.S. and how. When asked who they felt was most affected by the achievement gap, most college students in the U.S. stated things like “students, students’ families, and teachers” or “all students are affected” (various names, personal interviews, 2015) which are both true statements. However, it is important that we recognize it is not just the people directly involved who are affected, but it is everyone. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), approximately 21% of school-age children were in families living in poverty in 2013 and this percentage ranged across the U.S. from 9% in New Hampshire to 33% in Mississippi which demonstrates not only the vast amount of students suffering far greater obstacles than their well-off peers, but even the difference in how success will be measured from state to state. Once again, statistics also show that schools with black and Latino students have the worst teachers and resources and the highest percentages of students growing up in poverty. The list of minority groups accounted for in the educational report are as follows: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, White, Hispanic or Latino, and more than two races. African American, Native American, and Latino children are among the poorest ethnic groups and the most negatively affected by the achievement gap (NCES, 2015). Hispanic students in particular are facing some of the greatest challenges. Although the number of Hispanic students in public schools has dramatically increased recently, they still as a group have the lowest levels of education and the highest dropout rate (Paik & Walberg, 2007) so it is important to realize that even within the group of negatively affected students, each group, and even each student, has individual needs. The

achievement gap will certainly impact each group and each student differently, but also may impact some a lot more than others. For example, although Latino students may be the most affected, African Americans for the most part are affected very differently. Whereas for recent immigrant minorities or minorities who are sometimes overlooked such as Latinos, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans, a great deal of the struggle may have to do with cultural differences and language barriers. However, for African Americans who largely speak English as their first language, other factors such as representations of African American males in the media as violent, disrespectful, and threatening can cause associations with these traits in teachers' minds as well as African American male students themselves (Webb and Thomas, 2015), and these factors can lead to under achievement because of a stigma that puts people against them.

Majority, Middle Class, and Wealthy Students

According to NCES (2015), White and Asian children have the lowest poverty rates at 13%. Asians, although a minority, are considered, as Kim, a Breakthrough teaching fellow calls it, "an accepted ethnicity" (Kim, personal interview, 2015). However, White and Asian children who are born into middle class families also face challenges in affording the best opportunities and furthering their education. In the U.S., "Parents in the middle worry about whether their children will do well enough to get into a good college, and they worry about how they will manage to pay for it. Thus, to close the unacceptably large achievement gap in the U.S. will require doing something about the achievement not only for low SES families but also middle SES families" (Bradbury & Corak, et. al., 2015, p. 19). This demonstrates challenges that the middle class is also suffering from the achievement gap. Granted these problems may not be considered as severe as failing to graduate or underperforming in secondary school, but they are still evidence of a gap in achievement between two classes of families.

Furthermore, although the affluent population may not immediately suffer from lack of opportunity or access to resources, they still suffer negatively as a result of the achievement gap. First of all, as Matthew puts it, “Caucasians have a disadvantage because they take the blame,” (Matthew, personal interview, 2015) suggesting that when it comes to the disparity among race, those who are at the top are being blamed. Also, segregation between the haves and the have nots and from exposure to other cultures and diverse individuals can cause affluent students to grow up quite sheltered. However, it is likely that when they enter postsecondary education or the workforce, they will be working alongside a very diverse population of people and there is a chance they will struggle to relate to others who are very different from them whether financially, culturally, or both. Affluent students who are ahead, or gifted students, could also benefit from teaching others (Amelia, personal interview, 2015). Affluent students when sheltered and segregated from other students, as they often are in the U.S., can lose out on these opportunities to be leaders and to use their power and privilege to help those who need it.

Economic

In addition to specific groups who are targeted and affected by the achievement gap, the U.S. economy in general is affected, and this affects all citizens. First, without equal opportunity, employers are losing out on valuable potential employees simply because they cannot afford to get to the level where they may be considered for certain positions, and this is impacting economic growth. Second, we must also remember that the services being administered to individuals stuck in poverty are “draining public resources” as Ted puts it (Ted, personal interview, 2015). Using Pennsylvania as one example of the amount of money the gap costs our economy, we see that “race-ethnic gaps in student achievement, when applied to the current Pennsylvania workforce of approximately 552,000 African-Americans and 284,000 Latinos (see

Appendix C), imply an aggregate annual loss of \$1.25 billion to \$2.89 billion” (Karoly, 2015, p. 61) and this demonstrates just how vast the implications are for the achievement gap’s existence. Furthermore, if we explore the gains to the economy that could be made if the gap were to close, we see that “future cohorts of Pennsylvania workforce entrants would gain approximately \$1 billion to \$3 billion in present-value lifetime earnings if race-ethnic gaps in achievement were eliminated for that cohort” (Karoly, 2015, p. 64). This information proves that the achievement gap is having a negative effect on every U.S. citizen because the economy is suffering in a major way as a result of educational inequality.

Teachers

Both the way teachers think and the state of their employment are affected by the achievement gap. As discussed, the highest determinants of whether students are considered high achieving or low achieving are gender, race, and social class. According to the article “Teachers’ Perceptions of Educators’ and Students’ Role in Closing the Achievement Gap” (2015), because the achievement gap has portrayed certain minorities as the lowest achievers and likeliest to behave violently or leave school, teachers are now starting to believe it too. Additionally, the rate of teacher turnover in underserved communities with high populations of underperforming and minority students is much higher than that of affluent districts, suggesting that teachers are losing jobs or losing motivation without the proper resources to help students succeed, which all comes back to the gap.

England Effects

Impoverished and Minority Students

To maintain our perspective, we can now look at who is affected in England and how, and compare it to the effects in the U.S. When asked who they believe is most affected by the achievement gap, most English University students responded with things like “people with less motivation,” “young people,” or “underachieving and children labeled ‘problem children’” (various names, personal interviews, 2015). Again, each of these answers is correct. However, those in England seem to be universally affected by the gap as well. As we know, in England the group most largely affected is boys of the white lower working class. We also know that white working class girls and ethnic minorities of both genders are highly affected. According to government statistics 37.9% of students from low income homes scored A to C on GCSEs versus 64.6% of affluent students who scored A to C (Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, 2015) and this demonstrates the clear disparity in attainment on the basis of test scores. National reports confirm this trend by listing charts that compare both the GCSE scores of students getting free school meals and those not getting it, and also the GCSE scores of boys and girls. In every instance, students on free school meals and boys were the lowest (Department for Education, 2014). Additionally, the report shows White British background, any other white background, or any other black background as the lowest achieving groups on GCSEs. The list of main ethnic groups included when indicating race in England are: White, Mixed, Asian or Asian British, Black or Black British, Chinese or other, and Not known (Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration, 2008), which is notable because America does not offer an option for unknown.

When it comes to ethnic minorities in England, they are disadvantaged because of cultural and economic differences no doubt. In some instances, especially for lesser known

minority races, they are also mixed in with the “white working class category” (Perry and Francis, 2010) rather than having their own data. This shows they are underrepresented in many ways and they do also achieve at a lower level than affluent white students. However, ethnic minorities, regardless of SES status or representation, tend to not be at the bottom of the gap because they advance faster than white students of low SES status (Perry and Francis, 2010). This is in many ways due to ideology because white working class students tend to try and protect a ‘street’ reputation while minorities who have immigrated for a promising future work harder in school as a way out of poverty (House of Commons Educational Committee, 2014).

Majority, Middle Class, and Wealthy Students

As well as in the U.S., those considered well off in England are also suffering from the disparity in attainment. In addition to less exposure to diversity and lower opportunity for leadership, the majority in England also suffer from less attention. With a primary focus on class and gender, it seems efforts in England to increase attainment are primarily being focused on boys of lower class achieving at the lower end of the gap (Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services, 2011). This will hopefully see an increase for that group, but if too much effort is placed solely on the lower classes and the minorities, the students in the majority, and of the higher classes may be neglected. Furthermore, the class gap is much larger than the gender gap and yet, there is a strong focus on boys of the working class and not girls. This causes issues that girls of the working class face to be neglected (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2014). Therefore, these students may not be challenged to succeed and reach their full potential. In a way, this is also creating a gap among the more affluent and the girls in society by decreasing their attainment levels as well.

Teachers

After taking an education class at an English University, one discovers that in England, teachers' salaries are on the lower end of the spectrum and their jobs are not highly regarded in the public eye. Additionally, their pay is merit-based (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2014). This means that teachers in England are paid and stay employed based on how their students perform on standardized tests. Therefore, teachers who teach in underperforming school districts, despite their best efforts, probably get paid less and are in danger of losing their jobs as a result of the achievement gap.

The catch with this is that as a way to try and counter the achievement gap, talented teachers are being encouraged to teach in these underperforming districts where they have a strong chance of losing their job if they cannot get test scores to quickly improve. The government's logic is that the best performing teachers should be put in the schools that need them the most, and as an incentive for teachers to perform at their best and get students performing at their best to raise test scores, the standards and expectations for teachers are being raised. The same goes for headteachers and the government is denying any grace period if improvement is not made (Boffey, 2013). Therefore, because of the gap, teachers in England run the risk of little pay and the risk of losing their jobs.

Solutions

Now we have not only looked at causes for the achievement gap, but at effects as well. From this we can see the achievement gap has been around in our nation for a while, and yet it still exists. To understand this, we can now examine what solutions have been attempted to help bridge this gap, and why they have not worked as well as we'd hoped.

U.S. Attempted Solutions

Beginning in 2001 and up until very recently, the No Child Left Behind Act and later Race to the Top, have been at work in America to try and “motivate” schools to better help all students, particularly low achieving, succeed to their fullest potential. These reforms provide funding to schools that meet certain criteria or reach the raised standards set by the government such as adopting college prep programs, improving instructional practices, maintaining effective teachers, and increasing attainment of low-achieving schools (Klein, Rice, and Levy, 2012). The problem with this solution for bridging the gap, is that it does not address the causes for the gap at their core. Schools cannot possibly perform at the same level in this evaluation and competition for funds when some schools can barely afford to keep operating and others have top resources. Therefore, rather than bridging the gap, the top performers which are most often schools with higher resources, receive the funding and therefore the gap is maintained.

Additionally, in recent years the Common Core standards have been introduced which attempt to unify the curriculum nationally and are born out of international standards of educational success (Klein, Rice, and Levy, 2012). The idea is that by adopting these standards, the U.S. will first of all increase its level of success in comparison with other nations, and second of all if each state will adopt the same standards, students who re-locate between states will not be behind or ahead. The problem with this in the first place is that not every state has agreed to adopt the common core standards and this throws uniformity for students who have to relocate to these states out the window. It also does not account for how students are being taught the material and whether or not they have access to certain resources or effective methods of learning at the same rates. There is also a problem with comparing U.S. curriculum and test scores with other countries because our government, system, and culture are largely different and

therefore our scores may not reflect our capabilities the same way other countries do by measures of success.

Other government programs exist across states as well, such as Reading First which funds the Third Grade Guarantee and other similar initiatives. Reading First uses government funding to give to states to conduct their own scientifically based reading research and corresponding programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). These are programs such as Ohio's Third Grade Guarantee, which forces a stronger focus on reading and literacy, and forces students who do not score at a certain level on their reading tests, to stay in the third grade (Rosenkrans, 2014). All of this is supposed to counter the effects of social promotion of students to the next grade when they are not academically ready, and raise the reading fluency of students. However, the problem with this is that one test is being used to determine a student's fluency and the test can be argued to be tailored to certain intelligences more than others. Some students may not have English as a first language, and others may have special needs that put them at a disadvantage, which does not mean these students are incapable, but means they may be less likely to perform well on such a test and then will be held back without legitimate reason. Also, students whose needs are not being met at home, are likely to come to school tired, hungry, dirty, etc. which can also affect focus and alter the way students perform.

Furthermore, programs exist such as Teach for America and grants that are meant to incentivize successful and willing individuals to teach in low performing school districts. The problem with these programs as solutions for bridging the gap is that some teachers are in these schools for the wrong reasons. In many cases, these programs invite teachers in with the promise of a resume booster or free money to pay off college loans without requiring a college education on how to teach and break things down, and without requiring a willingness to connect with and

care for students. This creates a disconnect between students and teachers and does not do enough to bridge the gap. Also, even for the individuals who truly care and do their best for students, in low-income districts there are very limited resources, and for teachers who do not recognize their power this limits what even the best of them can access to help their students.

England Attempted Solutions

Similar to the U.S., England has tried many government and government-related policies and organizations in attempts to reduce the gap. The Pupil Premium, as mentioned in the discussion of causes, was introduced as a way to reduce the social class gap in education. This premium provides additional money to schools in the form of grants, to help students on free school meals (Lupton and Thomson, 2010-2015). In order to ensure that the funds given to schools are going where they are supposed to, the coalition required schools to report on the level of the gap in socio-economic status within their schools and Ofsted reports on how well the schools are distributing these funds to disadvantaged students (Lupton and Thomson, 2010-2015). This may offer effective ways to hold schools accountable for spending money on their disadvantaged students but the gap in England overall has not reduced significantly in recent years since this premium has been implemented. This may be because funding is only one part of the gap and if students are not motivated, are not taught effectively, or are not succeeding for many other more direct and personal reasons, then increasing funds is not getting at the root of the problem, and is not helping students succeed.

In addition to funding, England has introduced a new national curriculum in the last year as well as modifying several of the standardized tests taken by students throughout primary and secondary schooling (Lupton and Thomson, 2010-2015). The problem with this is that changing the curriculum and modifying tests will not change the problems students are facing at home, the

resources they have access to, their motivation to learn, or any other factor that motivates them to succeed. Changing and modifying curriculum and tests simply changes what students are learning, when the focus for helping them succeed needs to be on how they are learning.

England is also implementing literacy programs early on in life and in schooling. England has implemented a Sure Start Program, similar to that of Head Start in the U.S., that provides lower class families access to a plan that promotes literacy from birth and helps prepare students for pre-school and primary schools. The problem with this is that even with this help, families may not be able to afford to send their children to pre-school and even still, they will have to send their children to local impoverished schools with fewer resources. This is not the primary reason for the gap, but may still stall a child's potential. Later on, England is looking to improve its literacy in primary schools by implementing similar programs as Reading First. The problem is that the programs it is looking to implement have not been tested in England and instead they are pulling from programs being tried in the U.S. (Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services, 2011), which may not work in a very different school system with different demographics, etc.

Finally, England's equivalent to Teach for America is Teach First and this presents very similar problems in teacher motivations and relatability to students as it does in the U.S. However, the one difference in England may be that many Teach First applicants are Caucasian as are the struggling students, so the ethnic gap may be less of an issue. However, the class gap is still likely to persist and cause disconnect.

U.S. Valuable Solutions

Now that we have determined what is out there that is not really working, we must look at some programs that are making a positive difference. First, Breakthrough Collaborative (see second set of interviews) is a program that has been around since the 1970s and has since expanded nationally and globally (breakthroughcollaborative.org, 2015). Students in grades 6-9 must apply to participate in after school programs or six week summer programs that teach them content for the upcoming school year so they can get ahead. The students are taught by late high school to college graduate aged individuals who must also apply and have a passion for providing these students with the most opportunities to get ahead as possible. The program has two missions: first, it increases academic opportunities for highly motivated, underserved students and helps set them on a trajectory toward the future; and second, it motivates skilled and passionate individuals to enter the teaching field and serve the underrepresented community of students for the right reasons. In one year, Breakthrough Collaborative adds an average of 300 hours of academic instruction to each student's school year tuition free (breakthroughcollaborative.org, 2015). Breakthrough Collaborative is not a government program and therefore is not distributed to every school in the country and that is probably why despite its long existence, it has not diminished the opportunity gap to any massive extent. However, Breakthrough Collaborative is mostly successful in diminishing the gap for each student who participates because rather than a remedial program, it is one that admits highly motivated students who are willing to put in the extra work to get ahead at no monetary cost. It also only admits a certain amount of students so classes are kept small enough that students who are at different levels can receive the attention they need and since it takes place outside of the regular school year, everything students do is supplemental to their learning during the year. It is also

successful on some level in bridging the gap for the whole country because it is recruiting individuals to teach and connect with the underserved population before being hired into a permanent job doing so. There is a good chance teachers participating in Breakthrough Collaborative are doing it with the intention of helping students, because the position is only for eight weeks and offers a small stipend in exchange for long days, meaning those who teach at Breakthrough and go on to teach in underserved communities full time, will carry these good intentions with them into schools and help raise attainment. Breakthrough Collaborative inspires some teachers to join this effort and sends highly motivated teachers with prior experience into underserved schools and shows those who might otherwise end up in a full time job in an underserved school that they are unhappy with, that the job is not for them and they can choose another path without restricting students' opportunities first.

In addition to Breakthrough Collaborative, integration and alliance districts are also solutions that have not been widely applied across the country but that seem to be working in their respective districts. One example of integration we know of is the Normandy school district in Normandy, Missouri. This school district performed so poorly that it lost its accreditation allowing its students to open enroll elsewhere and many chose to enroll in the nearby affluent school, Clayton Public. Bussing was provided for students to get to the nearby school and within a few months of the integration, Clayton Public was still performing at its best, but progress for the students who transferred was skyrocketing since they were given the right amount of attention and resources (Hannah-Jones, 2015). Despite tensions, many did what they could to welcome the students and while the school became integrated, success was maintained. When the students were forced to de-segregate once again, progress decreased. This shows that despite the fact that many seem to have given up on this idea or are against it, segregation can teach

students to work together and provide students of all demographics from all areas the same educational opportunities, increasing success.

Additionally, the Alliance Districts are a group made up of the 30 lowest performing school districts in Connecticut who are creating plans for their districts to successfully transition into the new requirements for education such as the common core and k-3 literacy (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2015). These plans earn schools extra funding strictly set aside for underfunded schools to use in accordance with their approved plans to spend the money on underserved students and how to help them succeed. This ensures money will be spent in the right places and allotting a certain amount of funds, but not all of the state's funds, to go toward the alliance districts solves the problem of only providing money to the underserved community. According to Ricks (2015), the effort of the alliance districts has been highly successful, raising the graduation rate up 5% to a total of 87% and a decrease in suspension rates and gaps in achievement between minority and majority students. This shows that when schools come together rather than compete, they can increase success and opportunity for all students.

England Valuable Solutions

England has also come up with some valuable solutions that involve raising aspirations for underrepresented students as well as helping them make connections to increase motivation and success. England has recently been adopting gifted and talented programs that are concentrated on representing the population of students as a whole to include minority students who show ambition and promise (Centre for Excellence and Outcomes, 2011). To increase the amount of students who possess this ambition and motivation, they are promoting initiatives such as AimHigher, which pairs up adult learning mentors with struggling students. The program is voluntary so it attracts students who are highly motivated, and the success rate for the program

shows a GCSE score increase of 2.5 total points (Centre for Excellence and Outcomes, 2011). This program has shown success in its numbers for test scores but its focus is addressing the causes for the gap at their roots: the students and their beliefs in their own success. By helping students to stay confident and motivated in their learning, these programs are not only increasing test scores, but encouraging students to take control of their futures and aspire to succeed and embrace opportunities they are presented with.

England is also implementing incentives that offer experiences and opportunities outside of the classroom for underprivileged students, such as building relationships with local industries, visits to art and drama groups, and visits to higher education institutes. This not only covers a range of opportunities for students to pursue in the future, but also gives them an idea of what they may want to do, and how they can get there. They may also become familiar with individuals from these businesses and institutions, providing them with connections as they advance. These programs have proven to be successful in England and are similar to “valuing and connecting different industries to schools through job shadowing and co-ops in high school, and partnerships with technical schools,” (Helena, personal interview, 2015) as Helena, Program Director for Breakthrough, suggests we should be doing in the U.S..

Furthermore, England’s EAL programs for non-native speaking ethnic minority students seem to be successful. The Local Educational Authorities for each district in England have implemented strategies for teaching EAL and modified curriculum to include EAL in the qualifications for teachers (Library of Congress, 2009). If possible, EAL students are encouraged to use their first language when communicating with bilingual peers and staff, but should also learn English along the way for social and academic purposes. In extreme cases, EAL policies even allow for students to receive course materials in their native language, to understand the

material much more fluently. The advancement rate of ethnic minorities in England increases an enormous amount in secondary schooling as previously discussed, and a reason for this is most likely the effectiveness of these EAL programs. These programs accommodate other languages and encourage classrooms to be inclusive, which will increase the amount of learning non-native speakers can do because their focus will be on content, rather than first fighting through a language barrier. This embraces different needs that students have and acknowledges competency is not based on a student's ability to speak English, but on his or her effort when the playing field is even, thus increasing success.

Analysis and My Solutions

After researching the main causes, effects, and attempts to solve this growing problem of a gap in achievement between certain groups, we can see that for the most part, similar trends emerge in both countries, but we can also analyze the differences and see how looking at the way this gap has manifested itself in not just our nation, but another, can help us to think of ways to solve it. In the research I have uncovered and in looking at the solutions that have already been tried, it is easy to see that an immediate solution is not possible and that one solution implemented by the government or by individuals in high positions of power, will not be the answer. All the time we are hearing of new policies and new ideas for how adding funds here or there, or shifting the focus of achievement, will eliminate the opportunity gap that exists in these countries. However, while all of these ideas are being tested to see if they work, and while the people implementing them are experimenting, more and more children are falling behind. It is the job of future educators and our job as citizens, to save the students who are being forgotten while the government is seemingly only looking at the big picture of test scores and money. Instead, we should focus our attention on the gaps in the research, find out what has not been

tried yet, and determine what we can do with our power to help reduce the gap for our students every day, a little at a time.

Look out for the Students, Don't Wait for the System

While all of these different policies are being tested and changed, and while studies are being done on the vast majorities affected by the gap, students continue to be overlooked and fall behind. Therefore, it is up to teachers, students, and parents to get outside of the system and provide the opportunities for students to succeed on their own. The teachers are the correspondents between the school and the home, and therefore they need to realize their power. As professor of education, Karen, puts it, "Teachers can close this gap. They are the most influential next to parents" (Karen, personal interview, 2015). She also goes on to suggest that we as teachers can find ways to get our own resources for students. Teachers have the ability to make learning fun and engaging for students because we can apply for our own funding to provide equal resources and opportunity for our students to learn. We can also cultivate environments of respect and belief in our students that inspire belief in themselves. Circumstances will not change enough to make every individual equal in our society, so secondary to teachers, parents and students also have to be willing to take circumstances into their own hands and fight for their success. Otherwise, they will continue to fall behind no matter what the circumstances. Many of the solutions that have been successful, involve highly motivated people who work together to achieve success, and that is what teachers, parents, and students must do, so they keep advancing while the system tries to figure itself out.

Equal Representation

The population of students with special needs is a large part of the educational community in the U.S. (NCES, 2015). However, nearly everything I read failed to mention how they were being served or underserved due to certain conditions in schools, and this is similar in the UK (Lupton and Thomson, 2010-2015). Other minorities on the basis of race and social class are studied heavily, but the representation of the opportunities being provided to students with special needs is severely lacking in relation to the gap. Statistics also show that the Native American population is one of the most highly affected populations due to the achievement gap, and yet nothing I read discussed how best to serve their cultural needs or help them to succeed and advance to a higher position in society. Even if we are able to help reduce the gap for the groups that are primarily focused on such as African Americans, Latinos, and students from the lower class, we will only be solving the problem for a few select groups of people. In order to truly examine solutions for bridging the gap all together, we must first study the needs of the severely underrepresented populations who are also affected by the gap. Otherwise, we are only eliminating part of the problem, and the gap will persist for these groups who are less well represented. Therefore, one additional solution to working toward bridging the gap is to study and determine the needs of every single group affected by the achievement gap, and not just select ones.

Individual Needs

Even within the groups that are represented well in these studies, we cannot assume that each of them have the same needs. Within the African American and Latino communities, there is a wide range of class statuses and levels of support that they receive. Even within immigrant communities, there is a range amongst students in terms of how well they may be adjusting to the

new culture or in some cases, to learning a new language. Also, some cultural differences such as, as George points out, “certain cultures’ disbelief in pre-school” (George, personal interview, 2015), can cause inconsistency for some groups rather than others early on.

Amongst impoverished students, there are large disparities between how much wealth families have. Therefore, just because students are the same race or social class, does not mean they have the same needs and teachers need to be trained not to assume that. In a big picture review, it is almost necessary to pick out common patterns among specific groups of students who have certain things in common. However, as teachers, it is our job to assess the individual needs of every single student, regardless of the minority group or groups to which they may belong.

Diversity Training for Teachers

Teachers should be trained on how to engage with other cultures and be required to observe each type of school: urban, suburban, rural, parochial, charter, etc. while they are still in college and before they enter the job market. This observation should focus on how the school runs and what its missions and characteristics are. Following that, aspiring teachers should be prompted to look at the student demographic and assess if there are patterns in how students’ needs are being met individually and as a group by the school. Taking this farther, aspiring teachers should come together and study the different demographics they have each observed to be present in the schools they have seen, so they understand as best they can where students are coming from. Finally, teachers should assess their own goals for the classroom and for the environment and whether or not they are able to handle any setting and still keep their focus on students’ needs and students’ success. We need teachers who are about their students regardless of demographics, and who will fight for their success regardless of circumstance.

Don't Forget about the Middle Class

It is also the teacher's responsibility to not neglect high achieving students simply because it seems as if they do not need them as much. According to one U.S. University non-ed. major, "At my high school we did not differentiate between high and low achievers so teachers taught to the middle and high achievers weren't pushed enough" (Derrick, personal interview, 2015). This demonstrates well that teachers need to look at each of their students as individuals, and take the time to see to it that even students who are doing well, are being challenged and improving rather than just coasting. Although students at the lower end of the gap need attention, if we give all of our attention to them and neglect the high achievers, we will start to see the gap extend among that group as well. All students have needs and should be treated equally and teachers can also challenge high achieving students by asking them to be leaders in the classroom for others who are struggling.

New Measurements for Achievement

Rather than basing achievement and the standards for success on test scores and programs that schools are providing, we should be concentrating on success as defined by the people living it. If we start to give teachers and students surveys about what opportunities are being afforded them, how well they are being prepared for success, aspirations, etc. then we can begin to understand what the real problems are at the heart of the matter. Rather than just throwing funding at schools with high populations of minority students, we should be talking to those students about what they feel they need and what we can be doing to help. We should also be talking to teachers about the same things. Funding and resources cannot be expected to solely bridge this gap. The problems schools are facing are not primarily resources, but ideology, prejudice, lack of education, etc. and we must first understand the people we are helping in order

to actually help. When we understand the problems, we can begin to understand the solutions and actually distribute funds and resources when, where, and how they are needed.

Assess the Needs of each Community

While the bulk of this paper focuses on research surrounding the big picture, many of my solutions are narrowly focused and personal anecdotes to reducing the opportunity gap. This is because the majority of research surrounding the gap is focused on the big picture statistics. However, there are always exceptions when making claims about that significantly large of a population, and the significant improvements are currently being made on a smaller scale. Since we need to focus on individual needs, we can start by concentrating funds, research, and resources on finding a way to form individualized plans for each school district to improve based on its specific struggles and demographics, so that schools are actually receiving what they need to improve. Many of the successful programs so far, are implemented in specific areas and focus efforts on making life better based on that community or communities' needs. If the national reform efforts started to look at districts individually, rather than as either "underperforming" or "successful," they could distribute help to support the needs of each school and funds and resources would be put to good use to actually make a difference. If schools' needs are being met, regardless if the system takes a few years to fully take flight, students' needs will be met along the way because at least schools will be gaining something, rather than being neglected while the next new policies are being tried.

Conclusion

As teachers, we are one of the most valuable resources in helping to bridge the achievement gap and making sure students are not forgotten in the process of policy reform. This

starts with the way we are trained. We should be taught not only to observe what teachers say and do in our field placements, but to engage with students and really get to know their cultural backgrounds and assess their needs, while practicing engagement and acceptance with all different kinds of students based on gender, ethnicity, and social class. If we are taught this, we will go out into the field with this attitude and students regardless of what is working against them should feel empowered, engaged, and motivated to succeed in our classrooms. Students will move up in the world still carrying this example, and when they become the next generation of leaders, this cycle will continue. Along with this, it is our responsibility to treat each and every student equally, and in the process, inspire them all to beat the odds and bridge the gap.

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