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October 3, 2009

History of “the” Achievement Gap

A steady stream of state, district, and school test results (from last spring’s state assessments) currently is being released to the public. School newsletters, local television reports, and national news outlets therefore are filled with familiar language: AYP (adequate yearly progress), sub-groups (economically disadvantaged, special education, limited English proficient, racial/ethnic groups), and failing (when sub-groups do not make AYP in core subjects). Another term likely will show up as well: achievement gap.

For many years it was assumed that “achievement gap” meant some type of gap between white and black students; therefore, we read a lot about the achievement gap. However, as our schools have become more racially and ethnically diverse, and socioeconomic status has proven to be as much of (or more of) a factor than race, the term “achievement gaps” is beginning to enter our lexicon. This week’s issue of *Education Week* includes [an article](#) that demonstrates how the two terms are being used.

A few years ago, my curiosity about the origins of “achievement gap” led me to do some research and write this mini-history. At one point it was going to be a part of my dissertation, so the language and format are in an academic style. References from the text are listed at the end of the post.

Gaps in school performance have existed and still exist among various groups of students: disabled and able, low-income and affluent, English language learners and native speakers, and racial minority and white. The popular press in the United States can be credited with the first recorded usage of “achievement gap” to describe these differences. In his 1963 article on desegregation in Englewood, New Jersey, Walker reported on the “two-year educational achievement gap” (1963, p. 8) between the mostly black, low-income students in Lincoln Elementary School and the mostly white, higher-income students in the district’s other elementary schools. The term’s first appearance in a public report was in 1964, when the city of Chicago’s “Hauser Report” asserted that “intensified educational opportunities for Negro boys and girls would result in a major closing of the achievement gap between group performances of Negro students and other groups of students” (Hauser et al., 1964, pp. 20-21). Shortly thereafter, the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966) used the phrase “gap in achievement” (p. 220) to describe the variance in achievement between white and minority students. The term made its first appearance in an academic journal four years later, when Gwartney found a “widening achievement gap between [whites and nonwhites] as the general level of education increases” (1970, p. 878) in his piece on nonwhite/white income ratio. Though the term “achievement gap” can be used in reference to multiple groups of students, “most studies and reports on the achievement gap have focused on differences in achievement test scores between white and African American students” (Anderson, Medrich, & Fowler, 2007, p. 548).

Sources

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