



Graduation (1948), by Jacob Lawrence

Explaining the Black Education Gap

The rise of a new black middle class has lifted hopes that African Americans are entering the economic mainstream. But an alarming obstacle has appeared: Many children of this new middle class significantly lag their white peers in important measures of school performance. The gap threatens the goal of quickly achieving racial equality—and the logic of the American experience itself, with its promise of upward mobility and social inclusion. Here, an African American educator offers his view of what's gone wrong.

by John H. McWhorter

There is no surer way to get a whoop of appreciation from a black audience than to affirm how strong black people are, how we have survived. As the title of a popular motivational book for African Americans puts it, *Success Runs in Our Veins*. Yet almost everyone would have to agree that when it comes to schooling, our record of success has not been impressive. Almost 40 years after the Civil Rights Act, African American students, on average, record the poorest academic performance of any major racial or ethnic group in the United States, at all ages, in all subjects, and regardless of class level.

Despite decades of affirmative action and other forms of assistance, the gap extends all the way from the bottom rungs of the American educational system to the top. In 1997, for example, some 70,000 students applied for admission to American law schools. Among them were only 16 black students who scored 164 or higher on the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT)—enough to put them at least in the bottom quartile of the entering class at the nation's top six law schools—and had a college grade point average of 3.5 or better. That year, 2,646 white applicants offered such credentials.

The victimologist mindset that prevails among black Americans, in the news media, and in other quarters of American society, ensures that the lagging academic performance of black Americans is viewed solely as a result of black suffering and deprivation. Victimologist thinking infuses almost all discussions of education with the assumption that “black” means “poor,” and that the dismal school performance of black youngsters is the product of inequities in school resources, racism among teachers, and chaotic home lives. But today the majority of black children do not grow up in poverty. The black middle class is growing rapidly, yet its children, too, are falling behind in school. As I will show, the victimologist roster of black disadvantages provides only secondary causes. These disadvantages affect blacks’ performance in school the same way a weakened immune system leaves a person vulnerable to the common cold. Many factors can increase a person’s susceptibility, but if the cold virus is not present, all the other factors combined cannot cause the illness to emerge.

Why do students in other minority groups with similar vulnerabilities still manage to make excellent grades? Why do black students often continue to perform below standards even in affluent, enlightened settings where all efforts are made to help them? The chief cause is not racism, inadequate school funding, class status, parental education level, or any other commonly cited factor, but a variety of anti-intellectualism that plagues the black community. This anti-intellectualism is the product of centuries of slavery and segregation during which blacks were denied education, but it has been perpetuated by the powerful strand of separatism in black culture, a legacy of the 1960s, that rejects as illegitimate all things “white.” The worlds of the school and books are seen as suspicious and alien things that no authentically black person would embrace—except perhaps to make money or to chronicle black victories and the injustices blacks have endured. A black teacher friend of mine calls this the African American “cultural disconnect” from learning.

This attitude permeates black culture, on both a conscious and a subconscious level, all the way to the upper class. Yet it goes unrecognized because of the widespread insistence on viewing blacks as victims. Programs and policies such as affirmative action, Head Start, campus minority counseling, and African American studies curricula are all based on this misconceived view. They have improved black school performance only a notch or two—a neat measurement of how much black victimhood actually contributes to the problem. Only by taking a deep

>JOHN H. McWHORTER is associate professor of linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of *The Word on the Street: Fact and Fable about American English* (1998), to be issued in paperback by Perseus Publishing in November, and *The Missing Spanish Creoles: Recovering the Birth of Plantation Contact* (2000). This essay is adapted from *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, by John H. McWhorter. Copyright © 2000 by John H. McWhorter. To be published this summer by the Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

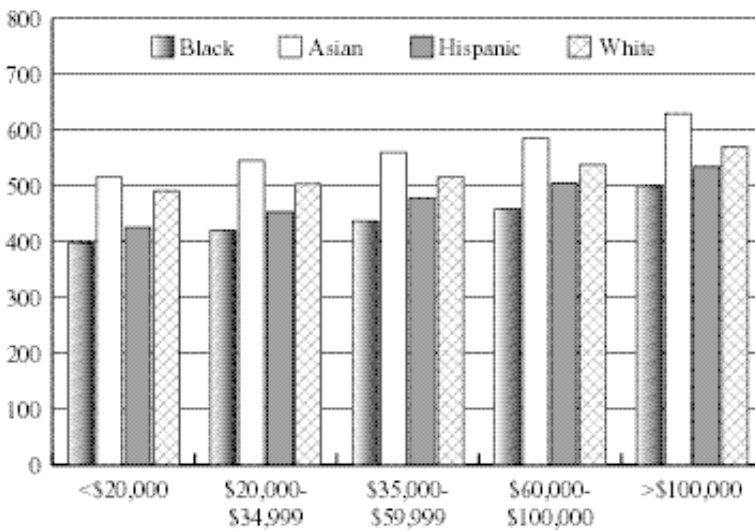


Untitled, Side A, (1999) by James Brantley

breath and devoting as much attention to the cultural problem as we currently do to victimhood can we really start black students on the path to doing as well in school as anyone else—something that has become alarmingly inconceivable to many Americans, black and white alike.

The size of the education gap comes most clearly into focus at that all-important break point in the American educational system, the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). For all the anxious discussions about SATs and affirmative action, few Americans are aware of the size of the performance gap between black students and others in this nationwide college entrance exam—and even fewer are

An SAT Snapshot (Mean math SAT scores, 1999)



Copyright © 1999 by College Entrance Examination Board.
Reproduced with permission of the College Board. All Rights Reserved.

Average SAT scores rise with family income, regardless of group membership. But African Americans' average scores are lower than those of other groups in every income bracket. In the highest income bracket, the white-black difference is 70 points on the math portion of the SAT and 51 points on the verbal portion (not shown).

aware that the gap remains large regardless of income. The numbers are disheartening. In *The Shape of the River* (1998), their important pro-affirmative action study of students at 28 selective universities, William G. Bowen and Derek Bok found that almost three-quarters of the white students who applied to five elite institutions in 1989 scored over 1200 out of 1600, while little more than one-quarter of the black applicants did so. The practical implications of such differences can be striking. At the University of California, Berkeley, where I teach, the top scores among black freshmen in 1988 clustered in the lowest quarter of all scores at the university. Nationwide, the black-white gap in SAT scores has changed little since the late 1980s.

Is black poverty to blame? It is only a subsidiary factor. Indeed, few poor black students take the SAT. Even those who aren't poor don't do well. In 1995, the mean SAT for black students from families making \$50,000 or more was a mere 849 out of 1600. Compare that with the mean score in 1995 for white students from families earning \$10,000 or less: 869. The level of parental education is not a factor: In the same year, the mean SAT score for black students whose parents held graduate degrees was 844, even lower than the overall middle-class black mean.

Statistics can deceive, but here a simple headcount tells the

story: In 1995, exactly 184 black students in the United States scored over 700 on the verbal portion of the SAT—not even enough to fill a passenger airplane. Only 616 scored over 700 on the math portion. (The top score possible in each case is 800.) This was 0.2 percent and 0.6 percent, respectively, of the black test takers. Among white test takers, by contrast, the proportion scoring over 700 was five times greater on the verbal portion and 10 times greater on the math portion.

Bowen and Bok, the former presidents of Princeton and Harvard Universities, respectively, highlight the fact that the SAT scores of most blacks at top schools are above the national white average. The average scores of black teens, they add, exceed the national average among all test takers in 1951, the first year the test was given. But these points distract us from the crucial question. Even if blacks at top schools have higher SAT scores than the national white average, why are their scores still the lowest among their peers at the elite schools? Even if blacks score better on the SAT than some prototypically middle-American Archie Andrews did in 1951, why are their scores still closer than those of any other group to the lower averages of yesteryear?

Many critics attack the validity of SAT scores, asserting that the tests do not measure the true competence of black students. Black students may not score well on the SATs, it is said, but they go on to perform as well as other students in college. During the debate that erupted at Berkeley in 1995 when Californians endorsed Proposition 209 barring affirmative action at state institutions, one Berkeley professor, mocking white objections to affirmative action, put it this way: “We hear these abstruse philosophical discussions: ‘I got a higher SAT score than you, it’s not fair.’ Let’s know what SAT scores mean!” But there are figures on what they mean, and lower SAT scores mean lower grades in college for both blacks and whites.

The correlation between SAT scores and college performance is nowhere near a lock step, but it is significant. Even Bowen and Bok concede this point. After tabulating data from their 28 universities, they found that

the simple association between SAT scores and grades is clear-cut. As one would have expected, class rank varies directly with SAT scores. Among both black and white students, those in the highest SAT interval had an appreciably higher average rank in class. . . . Moreover, the positive relationship between students’ SAT scores and their rank in class . . . remains after we control for gender, high school grades, socioeconomic status, school selectivity, and major, as well as for race.

Indeed, studies have shown that SAT scores *overpredict* the performance of black students. In other words, black students tend to make poorer grades in college than white students with the same SAT scores.

Some critics, insisting that test scores are unrelated to students' performance in the classroom, argue that high school grades ought to be the central criteria in college admissions. Yet in *Beyond the Classroom* (1996), Temple University researcher Laurence Steinberg and his colleagues found that in nine high schools in California and Wisconsin, including both predominantly white suburban schools and inner-city minority-dominated ones, black (and Latino) students made the lowest grades regardless of family income. Low-income Asian Americans regularly outperformed middle-class black students by a wide margin.

If some doubt the ability of the SAT to predict school performance, others doubt the validity of the tests in measuring intelligence at all. Some critics still claim that the SAT is culturally biased, but since the creators of standardized tests have become almost obsessed with eliminating such bias, the grounds for these complaints have vanished. A newer argument charges that the SAT measures only certain varieties of intelligence, what psychologist Howard Gardner calls "linguistic" and "logical-mathematical" intelligences. Gardner urges teachers to take into account spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal, existential, and musical intelligences as well. He may have a point, but unless teaching techniques change radically, "linguistic" and "logical-mathematical" intelligences will remain the most applicable to the tasks at hand: reading critically, writing coherent papers, and doing problem sets. In any case, almost every other group in the country manages to develop its "linguistic" and "logical-mathematical" intelligences and achieve average scores or better on the SAT. Why can't blacks?

The separatist impulse encourages some activists to believe that African Americans possess a "black intelligence" separate from wonky "logical-mathematicality," but this assertion recalls some highly unsavory arguments. An America where black students are encouraged to nurture their artistic and spatial intelligence out of respect for their culture is an America where black people are our house entertainers and athletes. Last time I checked, we were trying to get past that. Isn't this what Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein told blacks they should sit back and be satisfied with in *The Bell Curve* (1994)?

To me, the depressing statistics about black academic performance are not merely numbers. They have been sadly confirmed by my own experience during five years on the faculty at Berkeley. I have taught large numbers of students of every race, and I spent a long time trying not to give credence to a pattern that ultimately became too consistent and obvious to ignore, namely, that black undergraduates at Berkeley tended to be among the worst students on campus. I tried my best to chalk up each experience to local factors and personalities, but as one

episode piled upon another it became impossible to avoid the conclusion that there was a connection among them all.

There was the black student who, with a jolly smile, handed in a test containing an answer to an essay question that consisted entirely of two literally incomprehensible sentences. There was the student in a class in which I had repeatedly told the students they could write on any pertinent topic for their final paper except for one thing: They could not write a biographical essay, since it would be too easy simply to parrot other books. Left under my door two months after the end of the class was none other than a biographical sketch of a performer derived entirely from one book.

The stories go on and on; for each one, I could tell another two. One black student set out to write a senior honors thesis transforming episodes of her family history into fiction. At the beginning of the semester, she submitted a three-page selection she had written for a previous class. As the semester passed, while my white senior honors students were deeply engaged in research for their papers and consulting with me weekly or biweekly, this student came by only twice, regaling me with tales of her family history and promising written work “soon.” I let her know that she would have to submit some kind of written work before the end of the semester. Even that was generous, but I got nothing from her until just before Christmas break—her family tree, drawn in pencil on a piece of notebook paper. I never saw her again.


A black student joined one of my linguistics department classes. He had never taken linguistics before, but the nature of the subject was such that this was not a great handicap. I assured him that I would help him through any rough spots. He was very good at giving dramatic speeches about discrimination when race issues happened to come up in class, but his homework showed that he was simply not taking in the concepts of the course, and he did not improve even after I had tutored him in my office several times. Shortly before the final he vanished, and I did not hear from him again until months later, when he said he had frozen at the thought of taking the exam.

I arranged for this student to take an African American studies course I also taught, hoping he would be able to cancel out the failing grade I had been forced to give him. But it was the same story: an almost strangely clueless first midterm and spotty attendance. He disappeared before the second midterm, later explaining that a relative had died. When he came back, I made up a few extra-credit research questions for him to take home and answer. What he gave me showed some effort, but little understanding.

These stories are painful to recount because I felt a certain kinship with these students, and many of them have been among my personal favorites. I have also taught some excellent black students, notably during a year I spent at Cornell

University, but they are exceptions. In my experience, the stories I have told do not represent occasional disappointments but the norm—though the quality of black students at Berkeley has risen since the first post-affirmative action class was admitted in 1998. The behavior of these students has nothing to do with the ‘hood. Not a single one of them grew up penniless in the ghetto, or anything close to a ghetto. Black Berkeley undergraduates are almost all upwardly mobile, bright-eyed young people, many with cars, none of whom would be uncomfortable in a nice restaurant.

The urge is very strong to frame each of these students as individuals and avoid “stereotyping,” or to tacitly assume that racism is ultimately to blame for their behavior. This is what I did during my first years at Berkeley. But two other experiences made it painfully clear that something else was at work. Twice during my years at Berkeley I have had the occasion to teach the same course to nearly all-white classes and nearly all-black classes. The contrast was too stark and too consistent to be explained away.

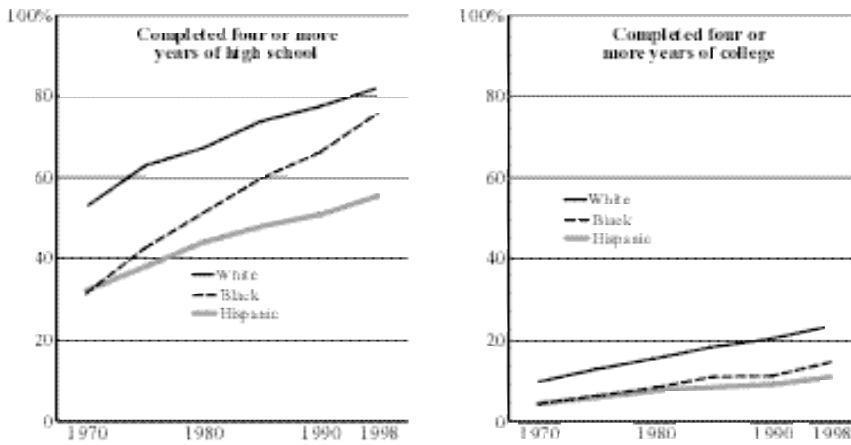
ne of the courses covered the history of black musical theater. The first year, most of the students happened to be white or Asian American, and the class was a success. The students loved the material, many of them wrote great papers, and some of them kept in touch afterward. The black version was another world. The white students had enjoyed the historical material, such as anecdotes about bygone performers, old recordings, and weird film clips. In presenting the same material to the black students, I might as well have been reading out of the phone book. The glazed eyes, aggressive doodling, and, in one case, comic book reading, were things I had never encountered as a teacher. Attendance was terrible; after the first couple of weeks I was lucky to have half of the class in the room on the same day.

Was it me? The other class had eaten up the same material—and a class about singing and dancing is not exactly difficult to make interesting. When Todd Duncan, the original Porgy in *Porgy and Bess*, died during the semester, I did a little tribute to him, dimming the lights and playing one of his recordings. A couple of weeks later, when we got to *Porgy and Bess*, I showed a video of him being interviewed shortly before his death. On the midterm, one question was “Name one of the principal performers in the original production of *Porgy and Bess*.” Only two people out of about 20 wrote “Todd Duncan.” Another named John Bubbles, who played Sportin’ Life. The others either answered incorrectly or gave no answer at all. I had to curve way up to avoid flunking most of the class.

I couldn’t help noticing a particular contrast. In the white class, interest waned a bit as we passed the 1970s. They got a kick out of the vintage stuff. *The Wiz* and *Once on This Island* were more recognizable and thus less interesting; they reveled in learning the

The Rise in Educational Attainment, 1970–98

(Persons 25 years old and over)



Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1999

Rising graduation rates have narrowed some group differences in education. The proportion of adult African Americans with high school diplomas more than doubled over the past 30 years. The proportion with college degrees more than tripled. Today, 15 percent of black adults and 25 percent of white adults hold college degrees, compared with four percent and 11 percent, respectively, in 1970.

unfamiliar. The black students, on the other hand, perked up a bit just as we got to the '70s—the official moment was when a few of them boogied in their seats to “Ease on Down the Road” from *The Wiz*. They were happy when we got to material they already knew, but the older material that required more active concentration was a turnoff, even though all the artists were black. Throughout the semester, however, I could count on a bit of a “click” when I talked about the discrimination these black artists had encountered. These students were open to reinforcement of the victimologist ideology, but close-minded when it came to new information. New ways of thinking and close engagement with the written word entail an openness, a sense of integral commitment and belonging to the world of the school, that black students tend to teach one another out of beginning at a very early age. Such “nerdy” thinking is painted as incompatible with membership in the group.

In 1998, several months before the arrival at Berkeley of the first entering class to be admitted after the demise of affirmative action, I spoke to a black undergraduate who was involved in recruiting black high school seniors. I asked why no one seemed terribly excited about the black students who had made it

in, a not inconsiderable number despite the sharp drop. The response: “We’re afraid that black students who perform at that high a level aren’t going to be concerned with nurturing an African American presence at Berkeley.”

There it was. The dissociation of “blackness” and school is so deeply ingrained that the black student admitted to Berkeley under the same standards as other students was regarded with suspicion. In other words, black students are not supposed to be star students, because then they’re not exactly “black,” are they? As it happened, come September, I heard two new black students, quite unprompted, say they had encountered a certain social coolness from black students in classes above them. Both were disappointed, having come to campus as outraged at the ban on affirmative action as the older students and having expected to take their place in the campus black community. But in embracing school openly enough to compete with whites and Asian Americans, they had almost unwittingly signaled disloyalty, even treachery.

Black anti-intellectualism has deep roots. It first gained a hold on African American culture under the slave system, which cut off Africans from black intellectual role models in their indigenous cultures. A Jewish person can look back to countless generations of Jewish scholars; even the most uneducated Chinese knows that China has been home to millennia of scholarship. But African slaves came from dozens of different kingdoms and societies and were thrown together in the New World, which prevented any single African cultural tradition from predominating. Their African heritage survived only as a generalized, although rich, element in a new, American-bred mix.

After slavery, blacks in America were brutally relegated to the margins of society and allowed, at best, only the most woefully inadequate education. Generation after generation of African Americans thus lived and died in a cultural context in which books and learning were actively withheld. The ways of thinking that are necessary to scholastic success came to be classified as alien or “other” —an idea powerfully reinforced by the separatist mindset of recent decades. Indeed, it was that separatist tendency, coming to the fore during the late 1960s, that helped undo the legacy of black academic excellence at exceptional black institutions such as Spelman College and Howard University.

When I finally recognized the pattern among black students at Berkeley, I began to recall that I had seen such attitudes at other schools throughout my life, as a graduate student at Stanford University, as an undergraduate at Rutgers University, and earlier.

The very first memory of my life is an afternoon in 1968 when a group of black kids, none older than eight, asked me how to spell *concrete*. I spelled it, only to have one of the older kids bring his little sister over to smack me repeatedly as the rest of the kids laughed and egged her on. That afternoon, the little girl was taught an explicit lesson:



Earlier in the century, all-black institutions such as the Tuskegee Institute, shown here in 1902, exemplified a commitment to educational excellence.

Disparage black kids who like learning and, by extension, school.

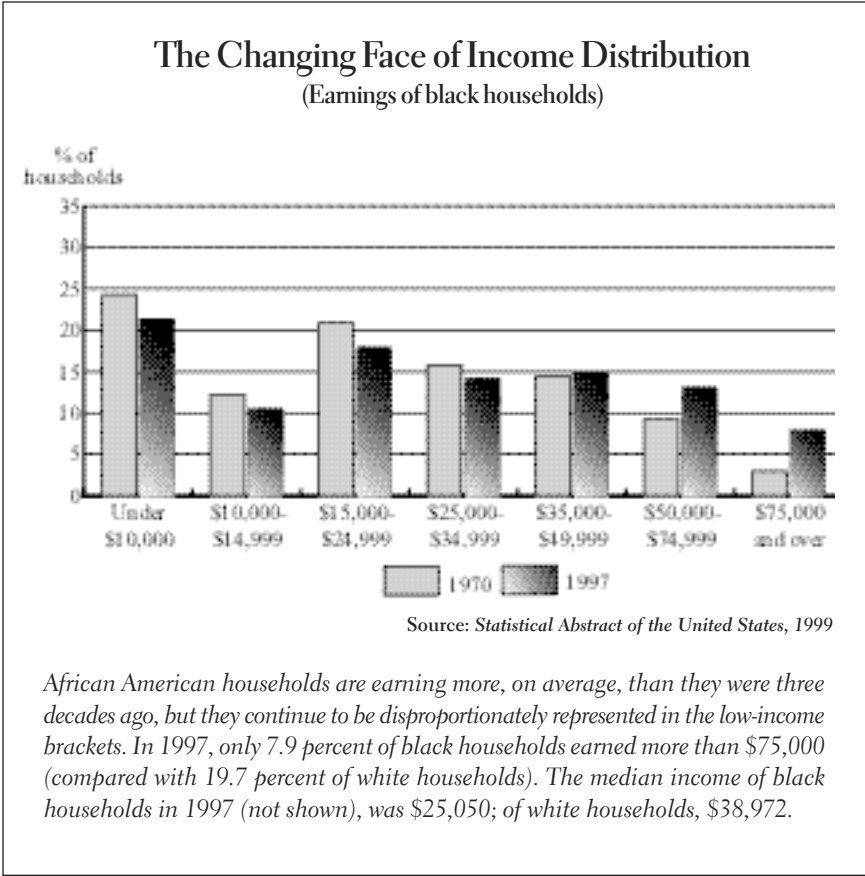
This happened in one of the first deliberately integrated neighborhoods in the country, Philadelphia's tree-shaded, middle-class West Mount Airy, where I spent most of my childhood. Not long ago, on one of my frequent visits back to the neighborhood, I ran into one of the ringleaders of that encounter, now grown up, smoking on a street corner at two in the afternoon. We shook hands in joyous surprise. But when I asked him what he was doing these days, he said "not much." He is not the only member of that old crowd who has not gone on to much, and yet he grew up in a quiet middle-class neighborhood with a solid public school staffed with a good number of black teachers. What did him in was not racism but a culture that taught him not to commit himself fully to education.

Teasing is one of the important ways this cultural legacy is kept alive. Berkeley High School Principal Theresa Saunders (who is black) told the *East Bay Express*, "We see it time and time again: [black] kids come in quite talented, and by the end of ninth grade, they're goofing off. The peer culture is such that it doesn't acknowledge or reward academic achievement."

The cultural disconnect from learning does not dissolve after childhood. For example, in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a much studied suburban school district that is half black, white parents vastly predominate in parent-teacher organizations

and as volunteers in the schools. There is no doubt that black parents are deeply committed to their children’s well-being, but such discrepancies reveal the lower priority accorded to “the books” in black culture. This often operates in subtle ways. The connection between education and earning power and status is too obvious to ignore, and many black adults do praise the value of education. Indeed, academic credentials often have a *higher* value in the black community than in the white—my own black students persist in calling me Professor McWhorter or even Dr. John long after my white students have taken to calling me simply John—but that is in part precisely because they are seen as something won in an alien realm.

Studies suggest that black parents demand less of their children in school than white and Asian American parents do. When asked in one study to state the lowest grade their parents would tolerate, black students specified a C minus, an average lower than whites and Asian Americans did. Many Asian American students said their parents would tolerate nothing less than an A minus! In a revealing study of eighth and ninth graders, education researcher Clifton Casteel found that white students were more likely to say that they



did schoolwork to please their parents, while black students were more likely to say they worked for their teachers.

Most discussions of black school performance remain shrouded in myths of victimology. Many focus on the barriers to learning in inner-city neighborhoods, as if “black” were synonymous with “poor.” When it is pointed out that poor school performance persists among blacks in the middle class, the usual response is that a rise in income does not guarantee a rise in class status. Black families considered “middle class” financially are generally “working class” or lower culturally, this response goes. The poor performance of the children is traceable to their parents’ lack of advanced degrees, the scarcity of books and magazines in their homes, or the absence of conversations about current events. But we have no trouble imagining a Chinese immigrant family that runs two restaurants sending their children to fine universities. Such parents are not very likely to talk politics over dinner or to read the *Economist*, but we do not conclude that their children are cursed by a “working-class culture” and condemned to low SAT scores.

What about racism? It is often said that the burdens of societal racism hinder all but a lucky few from doing well in school. This apparently sympathetic notion has mutated into nothing less than an infantilization of black people. Only victimology makes black thinkers so comfortable portraying their own people as the weakest, least resilient human beings in the history of the species. Racism is not dead. Being a middle-class black person in America still involves being classified as second-rung in all kinds of interactions. But this is rarely a matter of “endemic hostility,” as our Ralph Wileys and Derrick Bells would have it.

Imagine a young black man. This 18-year-old comes from a two-parent suburban home; his mother is a social work professor and his father is a public university administrator. He goes to good private schools, and on a day-to-day level leads a comfortable existence that includes a number of white friends and the same basic acknowledgment of his achievements as that accorded to whites. Once in his life he has been called “nigger.” He was once explicitly denied a summer job because of his race. Once he entered a store only to meet an expression of anxiety on the proprietor’s face, and was then followed. He can remember a few teachers over the years who, while well intentioned, obviously had rather lower expectations of him than they had of other students. On the first day of one undergraduate class, the professor told him he must be in the wrong class, openly implying that no black person could be interested in the subject. He is aware of media portrayals of blacks that are subtly racist. In innumerable ways he is now and then aware of being per-

The Opportunity Gap

Dysfunctional families, lazy and unmotivated students, and the “culture of poverty” in inner-city neighborhoods are all frequently cited as causes of the racial achievement gap. Left overlooked and unaddressed are the conditions under which children are educated and the quality of schools they attend. Since popular explanations often determine the types of remedies that are pursued, it is not surprising that the renewed attention directed toward the racial gap in academic achievement has not led to calls to address the real problem: inequality in education. . . .

Explaining why poor children of color perform comparatively less well in school is relatively easy: Consistently, such children are educated in schools that are woefully inadequate on most measures of quality and funding. . . . What makes the racial gap uniquely paradoxical is the fact that the benefits typically associated with middle-class status don’t accrue to African-American and, in many cases, Latino students. . . . This is the issue that has prompted 15 racially integrated, affluent school districts to form a consortium called the Minority Student Achievement Network. With the support of researchers assembled by the College Board, the network, comprising districts in such communities as White Plains, New York, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Berkeley, California, seeks to understand the causes of the racial achievement gap and to devise solutions for reversing it.

On the face of it, the potential for success in these districts would seem high. All 15 school districts have a track record of sending large numbers of affluent white students to the best colleges and universities in the country. Additionally, unlike schools in high-poverty areas, funding is largely not a major obstacle to reform. Each district is located in an affluent community with a highly educated population known for its commitment to liberal political and social values. Yet in all 15 districts there is a persistent, deeply ingrained sense that even this ambitious and well-intentioned effort will fail to alter student outcomes.

The pessimism in these districts, and in others that have launched efforts to overcome the racial achievement gap, must be understood in historical context. In many areas greater emphasis has been placed on how to achieve racial integration in schools than on how to serve the educational needs of a diverse student population. Even in the liberal districts in the Minority Student Achievement Network, some of which were among the first in the nation to voluntarily desegregate, the arrival of significant numbers of students of color in the late 1960s and early ’70s met with considerable opposition. From the very beginning, the presence of African American children, especially those from low-income families, was perceived as an intrusion, and because the children were perceived as disadvantaged and deficient in comparison with their white schoolmates, educating them has always been regarded as a challenge. Since students of color were framed as “problems” and “challenges” from the very start, it is hardly surprising that they would continue to be treated as a problem requiring special intervention years later.

Moreover, educational practices often have the effect of favoring white students and hindering the educational opportunities of African Americans and Latinos. This is particularly true when it comes to tracking and sorting students on the basis of ability.

A large body of research has shown that students of color are more likely to be excluded from classes for those deemed gifted in primary school, and from honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school. The Education Trust has shown, through its research on science and math education, that even students of color who meet the criteria for access to advanced courses are more likely to be turned away based on the recommendation of a counselor or teacher. They are also more likely to be placed in remedial and special-education classes, and to be subject to varying forms of school discipline.

A close examination of access to AP courses in California reveals how certain educational practices contribute to the maintenance of the racial achievement gap. Since the mid-

1980s, the number of AP courses available to students at high schools in California has tripled. This increase has been attributed to a 1984 decision by the University of California to give greater weight to the grades earned by students who enroll in AP courses. However, AP courses are not uniformly available to students. At some inner-city and rural schools, few if any such courses are offered, while at private and affluent suburban schools, it is not uncommon for students to have access to 15 or more AP courses. Moreover, our own research at Berkeley High School has shown that even when minority students are enrolled at schools that do offer a large number of AP courses, they are more likely to be actively discouraged from taking them by teachers and counselors.

Beyond the policies and practices that contribute to the achievement gap, a number of complex cultural factors are also important. Missing from the research and policy debates is an understanding of the ways in which children come to perceive the relationship between their racial identity and what they believe they can do academically. For many children, schools play an important role in shaping their racial identities because they are one of the few social settings where kids interact with people from different backgrounds. To the extent that a school's sorting processes disproportionately relegate black and brown children to spaces within schools that are perceived as negative and marginal, it is likely that children of color will come to perceive certain activities and courses as either unsuitable or off-limits for them.

In schools where few minority students are enrolled in AP courses, even students who meet the criteria for enrollment may refuse to take such courses out of concern that they will become isolated from their peers. The same is true for the school band, newspaper, debating team or honor society. When these activities are seen as the domain of white students, nonwhite students are less likely to join. . . .

There are also cultural factors related to the attitudes and behaviors of students and the childrearing practices of parents that influence student performance. Several studies, for example, have indicated that middle-class African-American and Latino students spend less time on homework and study in less effective ways than middle-class white and Asian students. Also, despite the visibility of African-American students in sports such as football and basketball, research shows that these students are less likely to be involved in other extracurricular activities (which are shown to positively influence achievement), and in their responses to surveys they are more likely to emphasize the importance of being popular among friends than doing well in school.

Finally, images rooted in racial stereotypes that permeate American society limit the aspirations of African-American and Latino students. Despite the daunting odds of success in professional sports and entertainment, many young people of color believe they have a greater chance of becoming a highly paid athlete or hip-hop artist than an engineer, doctor, or software programmer. And with the rollback of affirmative action at colleges and universities, there is little doubt that students who possess entertainment value to universities, who can slam-dunk or score touchdowns, will be admitted regardless of their academic performance, even as aspiring doctors and lawyers are turned away.

When placed within the broader context of race relations in American society, the causes of the racial achievement gap appear less complex and mysterious; the gap is merely another reflection of the disparities in experience and life chances for individuals from different racial groups. In fact, given the history of racism in the United States and the ongoing reality of racial discrimination, it would be more surprising if an achievement gap did not exist.

—Pedro A. Noguera and Antwi Akom

>PEDRO A. NOGUERA is a professor in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. ANTWI AKOM is a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania. This essay is reprinted with permission from the June 5, 2000, issue of *The Nation*.

ceived, despite superficial and sometimes even excessive respect, as on a lower rung than whites.

Do we spontaneously expect this young man's experiences—yes, they are mine—to prevent him from achieving a grade point average higher than 3.0 or an SAT score above 950? Is this the sort of experience that makes a 20-year-old student turn in a family tree as three months' work on an honor's thesis? Why, exactly, do we expect so little of the black person but not of, say, an overweight Jewish woman who experienced some anti-Semitism and cruel treatment for her appearance while growing up and whose parents and grandparents, like his, endured various forms of discrimination?

We are underestimating black people. Frankly, it insults me. Jews can survive centuries of persecution and a Holocaust and still expect their children to reach for any bar; Chinese of the early 20th century can be tortured on the streets of San Francisco and restricted to menial jobs and still expect their children to excel. But pull a well-fed suburban black kid over for a drug check one afternoon and subject him to a couple of teachers who don't call on him as often as other students and he's forever subject to lower expectations.

The victimologist party line claims that the typical black student regularly encounters a much more overt racism than this. "Under the banner of racial neutrality, white students have been encouraged to intimidate, terrorize, and make life miserable for African American students at many of our institutions of higher learning," John Hope Franklin declares in *The Color Line* (1994). Beverly Daniel Tatum writes in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (1997):

Whether it is the loneliness of being routinely overlooked as a lab partner in science courses, the irritation of being continually asked by curious classmates about Black hairstyles, the discomfort of being singled out by a professor to give the "Black perspective" in class discussion, the pain of racist graffiti scrawled on dormitory room doors, the insult of racist jokes circulated through campus e-mail, or the injury inflicted by racial epithets (and sometimes beer bottles) hurled from a passing car, Black students on predominantly White college campuses must cope with ongoing affronts to their racial identity.

Portraits like these are more theater than reportage. Why is being asked about one's hair a "racist" imposition? And wouldn't Tatum be the first person to complain that black students felt "invisible" and "marginalized" if they weren't asked about their perspective in class? Openly racist episodes do occur, but they are very rare. I have spent over half of my life as a black person on white campuses, and the implication that white guys yell "nigger" out of passing cars on a



Studies show only “fitful” evidence that black teachers enhance black students’ performance.

typical day, or that something remotely like this happens to a black undergraduate even once in a typical year, is nonsense.

Victimologists argue that white teachers tend to grade and discipline black students harshly. But in his extensive survey of 20,000 teenagers and their families, Laurence Steinberg found not only that complaints of racist bias among teachers were rare, but that Latinos and Asian Americans registered the same levels of complaints as blacks—yet Asian Americans nevertheless managed to turn in excellent school performances.

Moreover, black students do not perform appreciably better in schools where most or all of the faculty is black. Studies have found only fitful correlations between the presence of black teachers and high performance among black students, with the social class of the teacher as important a factor as race and the results varying significantly by subject. (Apparently, both white and black teachers of higher socioeconomic status get better results.) At the same time, the children of black African and Caribbean immigrants, who share a legacy of slavery with black Americans, usually perform at the same level as whites. In my own teaching career, I have taught American-born black students who did well, but every black undergraduate who has been among the best in a class I taught has been of Caribbean extraction. The devaluation of education is local to black American culture.

In his widely publicized 1992 study *Information and Attitudes*,

psychologist Claude Steele opened yet another front in the victimologist argument. He showed that black students did better on sample tests when they were not required to indicate their race or when the test was not presented as a measure of racial ability. Steele also showed that black scores suffered when the tests were presented as a gauge of “the psychological factors involved in solving verbal problems.” These experiments suggest that the performance of black students is hindered by self-doubt linked to the stereotype of black mental inferiority. The “stereotype threat” was quickly accepted in many quarters.

But any person’s performance would suffer under such conditions. Steele himself showed that women and even white men get lower scores when told the results are to be measured against those of Asian Americans. Considering that students are never required to indicate their race on their schoolwork anyway, are Steele’s findings really that meaningful?

He argues that the subtle presence of the inferiority stereotype “in the air” interferes with black performance. Such a stereotype does exist. But why isn’t the stereotype of female mental inferiority equally crippling for women? Why aren’t Southeast Asian immigrants held back by the hurtful stereotypes they encounter? Some may object that Southeast Asians are not stereotyped as dim, but it would be difficult to tell this to a Vietnamese or Cambodian teen hobbled by a thick accent and partial command of the language, of which there are quite a few in some states.

Another widely cited cause of black-white education differences is the funding gap between mostly black urban schools and suburban white schools. Not only has the spending gap been closing, however, but funding levels don’t correlate well with the performance of schools or individual students. More than one study has found that children of poor refugees from Southeast Asia, arriving with limited English and going to school in the same crumbling, blighted inner-city public schools considered a sentence to failure for black kids, do very well in school and on standardized tests. In any event, the notion that most black students attend bombed-out, violence-ridden schools is an outdated stereotype. Forty-one percent of black children still do grow up in poverty, compared with 27 percent of white youth, but it is no longer the case that all but a lucky few black students are stuck in inner-city schools.

It is true, however, that many black youngsters are “tracked” into “slow” classes in the public school. This is said to snuff out their commitment to learning. There are two possible explanations: One is that racist teachers are responsible, the other is that the performance and commitment of the students themselves is the cause. Several studies show that the latter is overwhelmingly the case;

teachers place students not according to any detectable racial bias, but simply on the basis of prior performance. (See, for example, “Students, Courses, and Stratification,” by Michael S. Garet and Brian Delaney, in *Sociology of Education* [1988].) At Berkeley High School, not far from the campus where I teach, in one of the most “progressive” communities in the nation, blacks have long been overrepresented in the low track. But about 70 percent of entering black students generally read below grade level, according to principal Theresa Saunders, while perhaps 90 percent of whites read at or above grade level.

Victimologist arguments are put to a fuller test in another affluent community halfway across the country, the Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights. The community’s excellent public schools spent about \$10,000 a year per student in 1998, compared with a national average of \$6,842. The town is affluent and racially integrated; half of the student population is black. Students track themselves into advanced courses. There are after-school, weekend, and summer programs to help children whose grades are slipping, and a program in which older black students help younger ones. As early as kindergarten, students needing help with language arts skills are specially tutored. There are special sessions on taking standardized tests. A counselor works with students who have low grades but appear to have high potential. Shaker Heights is beautifully tailored to helping black students, and one would be hard pressed to call the black families sailing through these wide streets in their Saturns and Toyotas “struggling blue collar.” Yet in four recent graduating classes, blacks constituted just seven percent of the top fifth of their class—and 90 percent of the bottom fifth. Of the students who failed at least one portion of the ninth-grade proficiency test, 82 percent were black.


None of the old explanations work here. Teachers and administrators in Shaker Heights are perplexed by the performance of their black students. Straying beyond racism-based explanations is uncomfortable because it seems to feed into the stereotype of black mental inferiority. “If it’s not racism,” we think, “then what else could it be?”

It is not pleasant to think that blacks are held down by black culture itself. But it is absolutely vital that we address anti-intellectualism in black American culture honestly. To deny its pivotal significance is cultural self-sabotage.

We have arrived at a point where closing the black-white education gap will be possible only by allowing black students to spread their wings and compete freely with their peers of other races. More than 30 years of affirmative action have shown conclusively that programs that let black kids in through the back door will not solve the problem. Youngsters coming of age in a culture that does not

value educational achievement are not helped by a system that only reduces the incentives to excel.

Affirmative action was a necessary emergency measure in its early years, and I believe it is still justified in the business world, where hiring and advancement are based as much on personal contacts and social chemistry as on merit. But to focus in the educational realm upon the fact that minorities are underrepresented in top secondary schools, that some white teachers may be less likely to give top grades to black students, that black students may suffer from a lack of confidence because of racist stereotypes, or that vestigial societal racism persists, is less to open avenues to solutions than to embrace capitulation. These arguments imply that black students simply cannot do their best except under utopian conditions, even as other students regularly surmount similar obstacles. They cast black people as innately weak and unintelligent.

ur interest, then, must be in helping black students shed the shackles of anti-intellectualism. Any effort that prepares black students to compete is laudable: For example, secondary schools should urge black children to form study groups, which have been shown to improve minority students' performance. Immersing black students in extended academic work sessions with fellow blacks counters the conception that school is "white." Minority students should also be given standardized tests on a regular basis in all schools, even those with insufficient resources. This alone will raise students' test scores.

There are also strategies for encouraging "diversity" without reinforcing black students' sense of separation from school. Top universities should consider admitting high-performing students from high schools that offer few or no advanced placement courses. Because minorities are disproportionately represented in these schools, minority representation will increase. But it must be a race-blind policy, applicable to whites and others. Otherwise, we risk reinforcing the idea that academic achievement is a superhuman feat for the black student.

In *The Bell Curve*, Murray and Herrnstein told us that we should eliminate affirmative action because black people are simply too dumb to do any better. My reason for opposing it in higher education, by contrast, is practical. We must eliminate this obsolete program not for abstruse philosophical reasons, nor because it can rather laboriously be interpreted as discriminatory against whites, but because it is obstructing African Americans from showing that they are as capable as all other people. I have faith in black American students. I have seen nothing whatsoever in my life to suggest that they are incapable of performing as well as anyone else in school. But the black-white scholastic gap will close only when black students are required to compete under the same standards of excellence as whites. □