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EDUCATION, RACE, RELIGION

Faith and Family Play a Bigger Role in Academic Achievement Than Race or Socioeconomic Status

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The phrase “achievement gap” refers to the well-documented discrepancies between the scholastic achievements of African American and Latinos on the one hand and white students on the other. What explains the gap? My meta-analysis revealed that if an African American or Latino student was a person of faith and came from a two biological parent family, the achievement gap totally disappeared, even when adjusting for socioeconomic status.

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“In the academic and think tank world”—Ronald Roach, the prolific academic writer for *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* has [rightly observed](#)—“pondering achievement gap remedies takes center stage.” The phrase “achievement gap” refers to the well-documented discrepancies between the scholastic achievements of African American and Latinos on the one hand and white students on the other, as well as between those of students from higher and lower levels of socioeconomic status.

There are two schools of thought regarding how best to eliminate the achievement gap. The first group calls on society to focus its attention on eliminating “opportunity gaps,” arguing that this will lead to higher academic achievement among currently disadvantaged students. These opportunity gaps [include factors](#) such as being a member of a racial minority, discrimination, poor nutrition, inadequate health care, not having access to high-quality public education, coming from a family in which the parents are poorly educated or do not speak English as their first language, and lack of internet and computer access.

A second group of scholars and community leaders is focused on reducing the “achievement gap.” They agree that addressing “opportunity gaps” must be part of the

beyond the factors commonly identified as “opportunity gaps.” For example, this “achievement gap” group emphasizes that the personal decisions parents and children make regarding school have a considerable impact on the achievement gap. How involved will parents *decide* to become? How much will the household *decide* to emphasize faith in God, and the sense of purpose in life, and working hard to realize that purpose and please God, which normally follows?

“Opportunity gap” researchers are clearly well-intentioned. But is it wise to relabel the “achievement gap” as an “opportunity gap”? Does the evidence support this change, or is an “opportunity gap” simply a small part of a much broader challenge? Whether American society emphasizes one or the other is particularly important, because most of the components of the “opportunity gap” are external to the family and beyond the realm of the family’s control. In contrast, those who support the “achievement gap” perspective believe that a sizable number of the solutions to educational differences exist internally, within the family’s control. Psychologists have a phrase to highlight this distinction: they assert that, when it comes to solving life’s challenges, generally one has either an internal or an external locus of control. Moreover, they aver that having an internal [locus of control](#) is far healthier than settling for an external locus of control; that possessing an external locus of control leads to what is often called “learned helplessness,” that is, a feeling that one can do little or nothing to ameliorate one’s circumstances.

So which is primary, opportunity gap or achievement gap? To answer this question, I recently conducted [a meta-analysis of thirty studies](#) that examined attempts to reduce the achievement gap. A meta-analysis statistically combines all the relevant existing studies on a particular subject in order to determine the aggregated results of the research. Mine is the first published meta-analysis to examine the factors that most reliably reduce the achievement gap. This meta-analysis yielded results that will surprise many: the variables that most reliably reduce the achievement gap are family and faith.

The Surprising Importance of Family and Faith

The data are clear: parental family structure and parental involvement were major explanatory factors and solutions with respect to the achievement gap. Even

based on the “opportunity gap” model—[admit](#), “These gaps show up even before students start formal schooling—in their knowledge of vocabulary, for example.” If the gaps exist even before children begin to attend school, why is so much attention given to school-based opportunity gaps rather than family factors?

Research by Dick Carpenter, Al Ramirez, and Laura Severn found that [gaps caused by family factors were often larger than those caused by race](#). There is an old adage among many family scientists that when a Caucasian comes from a single parent or a blended family structure, he or she loses the advantage of being white. It is still rather unusual for a white child to be born out of wedlock (a [28.2 percent](#) chance), but it is common for an African American student to come from a single parent family (a [69.4 percent](#) chance).

The family elements that were most strongly associated with a reduction in the achievement gap were coming from a two-biological-parent family and high levels of parental involvement. These are interrelated: when two parents are present, this maximizes the frequency and quality of parental involvement. To be sure, there are many dedicated single parents. However, the reality is that when one parent must take on the roles and functions of two, it is simply more difficult than when two parents are present. Unless we improve family stability, and thus parental involvement, the achievement gap is likely to remain for decades to come.

In addition to family structure, a student’s faith also has a significant impact on his or her academic performance. Regularly attending church, or another house of worship, and defining oneself as being a very religious person yielded the most significant reductions in the achievement gap. There are likely a number of reasons for this relationship; faith can give a person a sense of purpose in life and a disciplined lifestyle that supports academic success.

Perhaps most significantly, the meta-analysis revealed that, if an African American or Latino student was a person of faith and came from a two-biological-parent family, the achievement gap *totally disappeared*, even when adjusting for socioeconomic status. Various other studies have confirmed that people of faith do better in school by a pretty sizable margin. One recent example is [a study by Ilana Horowitz of Stanford University](#), who asserted that there is, as she called it, an “abider-avoider achievement gap.”

Numerous [research studies](#) have concluded that family factors are far more salient than school factors in influencing achievement. Why is it so difficult therefore for so many academics and politicians to understand that the same truth holds with respect to the achievement *gap*? With all the hundreds of billions of dollars that have been poured into reducing the achievement gap with only marginal success, recognizing—and working to improve—family and faith factors would likely be much more effective in reducing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps.

What Should We Do?

To the extent to which the personal faith of students is associated with higher achievement and a reduced achievement gap, the U.S. Department of Education may want to consider adopting policies that are more faith-friendly. First, it should consider more aggressive policies to promote a school choice program that includes private schools. This would encourage the growth of private religious schools. Second, it should consider clarifying and expanding the public school religious liberty guidelines first released by the Clinton administration in 1995 and then updated by the G.W. Bush administration in 2003.

Those who suggest focusing on the “opportunity gap” do not generally acknowledge that this has been the primary strategy in the United States for the past fifty-five years. With the exception of the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, this strategy has done little to reduce the achievement gap. One would think that this would make it clear that a more comprehensive approach to reducing the achievement gap is needed. However, it appears that the more things change, the more they remain the same. There is a tendency among many academics to once again try an old initiative that has not worked especially well and to pretend that it is a new effort, simply by calling it by another name.

My meta-analysis summarizes what studies show actually works to reduce the achievement gap. Although the “opportunity gap” strategy is very appealing on an idealistic level, the meta-analysis points to a broader combination of contributing factors, supporting the perspective of “achievement gap” scholars and leaders.

Is part of the reason for educational differences captured by the idea of opportunity

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to eradicate their harmful effects. However, we must also acknowledge that there are other forces at work here. My research indicates that a combination of factors is at the heart of the achievement gap, factors that include, among others, decisions that parents and children make regarding school. These decisions include the decisions by parents regarding how much to be involved in their child's education and how much to emphasize faith in the home, including one's purpose in life. If we are to close that gap, we must take a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach.

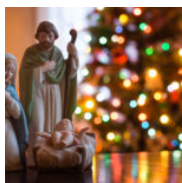
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