

Topics in SESP: Understanding Racial Disparities in Academic Achievement

SESP 351 section 23
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2-3:20pm
Annenberg 317

Instructor: Fatima Varner

email: fvarner@u.northwestern.edu

phone: 847-467-7405

office: Annenberg 113

office hours: Tuesdays 3:30-4:30pm and by appointment

Course Description:

Over the past few decades there has been much focus by researchers, policymakers, and administrators on racial and ethnic disparities in education. Disparities in academic achievement and educational attainment have significant consequences for employment opportunities, income level, and other life opportunities. This course will explore the prominent arguments used to explain these disparities. Topics we will discuss include the influences of socioeconomic status, discrimination, and educational policies on academic achievement. We will also discuss interventions and policies developed to narrow achievement gaps.

Core Questions:

- What are the major arguments that attempt to explain academic achievement gaps? Which ones seem most explanatory? How do these arguments conflict or support one another?
- What practices can help narrow racial disparities in academic achievement?
- What are future directions that are needed in research on the academic achievement gap?

Learning Objectives:

1. Students will be able to draw distinctions between cultural and structural arguments.
2. Students will be able to identify and critique major arguments used to explain racial inequalities in academic achievement.
3. Students will synthesize major arguments from readings and explain how they compare and contrast.
4. Students will apply readings to critique a popular press article that discusses issues regarding race and education.

Course Requirements:

The class is structured as an undergraduate seminar that meets twice a week. Students must attend and participate in each class.

- Class Participation & Attendance (10%).
- Seminar Paper/Leading Discussion (15%)
- 2 critical response papers (40%)
- Final paper (35%)

Class Participation:

Class discussion is an important element of this class. You are expected to read all the readings each day and come to class prepared to discuss them. As you read, make note of the main ideas, main findings, strengths and weaknesses, and any questions you have for each reading to help prepare you for discussion. Also, you should post one question on Blackboard regarding the readings the day before class by 8pm. Some of these questions will be used to help guide discussion during class.

Some of the topics we discuss in class may be sensitive topics. It is important that we remain committed to respectful discussion throughout the course, especially as class members may have contrasting viewpoints on class topics. If you have any concerns at any time about the class discussion, feel free to discuss them with me.

Attendance:

Attendance is expected. If a situation arises that requires your absence, let me know in advance. Unexcused absences will result in a lowering of your grade.

Seminar Paper:

Each student will sign up to lead one class discussion about a reading. For the discussion, you will prepare a seminar paper. The paper should 1) discuss the main issues or questions addressed in the reading 2) describe in general the method in which the authors address the question/issues 3) discuss practices or policies that emerge from the reading or are related to the reading and 4) provide at least 3 questions that the reading brings to mind. The paper should be no more than 3 pages. The paper should be posted on the discussion board on Blackboard by 8pm the night before class During class discussion, you will discuss the paper and use your questions to help guide the discussion (which may go up to 30 minutes).

Critical Response Papers:

There will be two critical response papers throughout the quarter. You will be asked to apply class readings and discussion to answer a question given in class about educational disparities. A rubric will be given out in class. You will be graded on the clarity of their arguments and their application of class readings, lectures, and discussion in their answer. These papers should be no more than 3 pages double spaced.

Final paper:

For this assignment, you will be given a popular press article discussing racial and ethnic disparities in academic achievement. In the paper, you should briefly describe and categorize the main explanations of achievement gaps used in the article and the solutions proposed. Then, critique the explanations and solutions based on the class readings, lecture, and discussion and make additional recommendations. A rubric will be given out in class to describe in more detail the grading of this assignment.

Academic Integrity Statement

Students in this course are expected to comply with the policies found in the booklet, "Academic Integrity at Northwestern University: A Basic guide". For details regarding academic integrity at Northwestern, visit: <http://www.northwestern.edu/uacc/>. If you need a copy of the brochure visit the SESP Student Affairs Office. Plagiarized papers will result in a zero for the assignment.

Students with Disabilities

Any student with a documented disability needing accommodations is requested to speak directly to the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) (847-467-5530) and the instructor, as early as possible in the quarter (preferably within the first two weeks of class). All discussions will remain confidential.

Required Reading:

Readings are on Blackboard under Course Documents

Schedule:

Part 1. Introduction & Trends in academic achievement

- What are the trends in academic achievement? What racial & ethnic disparities exist?
- Why do these disparities matter?

March 30 – Introduction

No readings

April 1- Trends in Academic Achievement & Explanations

National Center for Education Statistics (2009). *Achievement Gaps: How Black and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Highlights*. (NCES 2009-495U). Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Kao, G., & Thompson, J. S. (2003). Racial and ethnic stratification in educational achievement and attainment. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29, 417-442.

Singham, M. (1998). The canary in the mine: the achievement gap between black and white students. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 80, 8-15.

Race & Ethnicity

- Why does race and ethnicity matter?
- How is race defined?

April 6 – Race & Ethnicity: Why do they matter?

Smedley, A., & Smedley, B. (2005). Race as biology is fiction, racism as a social problem is real: Anthropological and historical perspectives on the social construction of race. *American Psychologist*, 60, 16-26.

Interview with Beverly Daniel Tatum (On White Privilege). Accessed at http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-03-04.htm

AAA statement on race (website: <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/racepp.htm>)

Developmental Theories

- What are some important developmental theories that address racial disparities in academic achievement? How do these theories relate to one another?

April 8

Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (1998). The ecology of developmental processes. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Eds). *Handbook of Child Psychology: Vol 1: Theoretical Models of Human Development* (pp. 993-1028). New York: Wiley.

Part II. Socioeconomic Resources & Family Background

April 13- Socioeconomic Resources

- What aspects of socioeconomic resources contribute to the academic achievement gap?
- Does raising income of low income African American families help reduce the achievement gap?

Duncan, G., & Magnuson, K. (2005). Can family socioeconomic resources account for racial and ethnic test score gaps? *The Future of Children, 15*, 35-54.

Orr, A. J. (2003). Black-White differences in achievement: The importance of wealth. *Sociology of Education, 76*, 281-304.

Interview with Dalton Conley (on wealth) Accessed from

http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-background-03-03.htm

Destin, M., & Oyserman, D. (2009). From assets to school outcomes how finances shape children's perceived possibilities and intentions. *Psychological Science, 20*, 414-418.

April 15 - Parenting

Brooks-Gunn, J., & Markman, L. B. (2005). The contribution of parenting to ethnic and racial gaps in school readiness. *Future of Children, 15*, 139-168.

Lareau, A. (2002). Invisible inequality: Social class and childrearing in black families and white families. *American Sociological Review, 67*, 747-776.

April 20 – Early Interventions

- Can early childhood interventions address some of the effects of poverty in early childhood?

Waldfoegel, J., & Magnuson, K. A. (2005). Early childhood care and education: Effects on ethnic and racial gaps in school readiness. *The Future of Children, 15*, 169-196

Barnett, W.S., & Fuller, B. (2006). *Education Sector Debates: Universal or Targeted Preschool?* Education Sector. Accessed at http://www.educationsector.org/analysis/analysis_show.htm?doc_id=374565

Critical Response 1 distributed

Part III. Schools

April 22

- Do schools help close the gap or widen the gap?
- How does racism influence the educational experiences of African American children?

Hallinan, M. T. (2001). Sociological perspectives on black-white inequalities in american schooling. *Sociology of Education*, 74, 50-70.

Feagin, J. R., & Barnett, B. M. (2004). Success and failure: How systemic racism trumped the Brown v. Board of Education decision. *University of Illinois Law Review*, 5, 1099-1130.

April 27

Entwisle, D. R., & Alexander, K. L. (1992). Summer setback - race, poverty, school composition, and mathematics achievement in the 1st 2 years of school. *American Sociological Review*, 57, 72-84.

Downey, D. B, von Hippel, P. T., Broh, B. A. (2004). Are schools the great equalizer? Cognitive inequality during the summer months and the school year. *American Sociological Review*, 69, 613-635.

Critical Response 1 due

April 29 - Teacher Effects

- How do teacher quality, perceptions, and expectations impact African American academic achievement?

Pensek, H. G., & Hancock, K. (2006). *Teaching inequality: How poor and minority students are shortchanged on teacher quality*. The Education Trust.

Figlio, D. N. (2005). Names, expectations, and the Black-White test score gap. NBER Working Papers, 11195, National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc.

May 4 – Teacher Effects

Decker, P. T., Mayer, D. P., & Glazerman, S. (2004). *The effects of Teach For America on students: Findings from a national evaluation*. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research Inc. (Only read Executive Summary xi-xvi)

Jackson, D. B. (2003). Education reform as if student agency mattered: academic microcultures and student identity. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 84, 579-585.

Watch *Stand and Deliver* – streamed on Blackboard

May 6 – How do everyday interactions influence achievement?

Lewis, A. E. (2006). Whiteness in school: How race shapes black students' opportunities. In E. M. Horvat & C. O'Connor (Eds.), *Beyond acting white: Reframing the debate on black student achievement* (pp. 176-200). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Grant, L. (2001). Everyday schooling and the elaboration of race-gender stratification. In J. H. Ballantine and J. Z. Spade (Eds.), *Schools and Society: A Sociological Approach to Education* (pp. 279-290). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

May 11 – School Resources

- Are there differences in school resources by minority enrollment?
- How do school resource differences relate to student achievement?

Carey, K., & Roza, M. (2008). *School funding's tragic flaw*. Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education.

Wenglinsky, H. (1997). How money matters: The effect of school district spending on academic achievement. *Sociology of Education, 70*, 221-237.

May 13- School Composition

- Does school racial composition impact academic achievement?

Orfield, G., Frankenberg, E. D., & Lee, C. (2002). The resurgence of school segregation. *Educational Leadership, 60*, 16-20.

Rumberger, R. W., & Palardy, G. J. (2005). Does segregation still matter? The impact of school composition on academic achievement in high school. *Teachers' College Record, 107*, 1999-2045.

May 18 - Classroom Composition

- How does classroom composition influence academic achievement?

Rosenbaum, J. E. (1999). If tracking is bad, is detracking better? *American Educator, 23*(4), 24-29.

Burris, C. C., Wiley, E., Welner, K., & Murphy, J. (2008). Accountability, rigor, and detracking: Achievement effects of embracing a challenging curriculum as a universal good for all students. *Teachers College Record, 110*, 571-607.

Nye, B., Hedges, L. V., & Konstantopoulos, S. (2004). Do minorities experience larger lasting benefits from small classes? *Journal of Educational Research, 98*, 94-100.

Critical Response 2 distributed

May 20 - School Interventions

- What are some school interventions that have been effective?
- Do financial incentives for grades work?
- Are interventions in late childhood and adolescence effective?

Jackson, C. K. (2008). Cash for Test Scores: The impact of the Texas Advanced Placement Incentive Program. *Education Next, Fall 2008*, 71-77.

Harlem Children's Zone – Whatever It Takes: A White Paper on the Harlem Children's Zone.

Listen to Brian Lehrer Show: Assessing Harlem Children's Zone Accessed at <http://www.wnyc.org/shows/bl/episodes/2010/02/08/segments/149738>

Part IV. Oppositional Culture and Psychological Theories

May 25- Oppositional Culture Theory

- How do the authors conceptualize oppositional culture theory differently? Do these differences impact their results and interpretations?
- Is there evidence of pervasive racialized pressure that negatively impacts African Americans' academic achievement

Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1985). Black students' school success: Coping with the "burden of 'acting white'". *The Urban Review*, 18, 176-206

Mickelson, R. J. (1990). The attitude-achievement paradox among Black adolescents. *Sociology of Education*, 63, 44-61.

Critical Response 2 due

May 27

Fryer, R.G. (2006). Acting White. *Education Next*, Winter 2006, 53-59. Accessed online at http://www.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/fryer/files/aw_ednext.pdf

Tyson, K., Castellino, D. R., & Darity, W. (2005). It's not "a black thing": Understanding the burden of acting white and other dilemmas of high achievement. *American Sociological Review*, 70, 582-605.

Final question distributed

June 1- Stereotype Threat

- Does stereotype threat explain the underperformance phenomenon among African American college students?

Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52, 613-629.

Cohen, G. L., Garcia, J., Apfel, N., & Master, A. (2006). Reducing the racial achievement gap: A social-psychological intervention. *Science*, 313, 1307-1310.

Richeson, J. A., & Shelton, J. N. (2007). Negotiating interracial interactions: Costs, consequences, and possibilities. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 16, 316-320.

June 3 - Identity/Wrap-up

- What are some factors that explain variation in achievement among African American students

Oyserman, D., Brickman, D., Bybee, D., & Celious, A. (2006). Fitting in matters: Markers of in-group belonging and academic outcomes. *Psychological Science*, 17, 854-861.

Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2007). A question of belonging: Race, social fit, and achievement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 82-96.

Final paper due Tuesday June 8th at 5pm.