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Historical Analysis: Tracking, Problematizing, and Reterritorializing Achievement and the Achievement Gap

Justin Olmanson, Zoe Falls,
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Abstract

For more than a century, state and federal governments and organizations have used different measures to determine if students and groups of students have achieved in a particular subject or grade level. While the construct of achievement is applied irrespective of student differences, this equal application turns out to be anything but equitable. In this chapter, we work to understand the way achievement plays out for Black students by deconstructing how the word achievement works. In doing so, we track the history of education, testing, and curriculum as it has been applied to Black youth and youth of color.

Keywords: Achievement, curriculum, deconstruction, race, school, education

It is assumed that those who succeed worked harder, studied longer, and thought smarter, while those who failed did so because they did not sufficiently exert themselves.

– Powell (2015, p. 12)

Institutional racism in schools still makes it necessary to teach black youth that surviving this system requires more than being equal or getting an ‘equal opportunity’ to compete. You’ve got to ‘be better’ because no matter what we do to prepare you and protect you from society’s hostile forces, it is still a society divided along racial lines.

– King and Mitchell (1990, p. 39)

We ask schools to promote equality while persevering privilege, so we perpetuate a system that is too busy balancing opposites to promote student learning.

– Labaree (1977, p. 256)

Announce that you have data and new insights into student educational achievement and everyone leans forward in anticipation. Parents want to know how they can better ensure their children have every opportunity to achieve. Teachers want to know what new pedagogies, emerging technologies, and best practices they might implement or adapt to their classrooms to boost the achievement of their students. Administrators want to know how they might reallocate the resources in their schools to maximize achievement within and across student demographics. Legislators want to know how new findings on student achievement might be supported with new funding and legislation. Finally, researchers want to know how they might integrate these new findings into what they already know about achievement to widen and deepen understanding and plot paths for new research. All of these efforts are, in their own way, positioned as progress – specifically as attempts toward making things better by doing what we have come to see as the project of schooling, namely, ensuring student learning and growth – most commonly referred to under the umbrella term *achievement*.

What people don’t often question is the idea of achievement as a de facto good. Few people consider how the collection, study, and dissemination of data that is seen as evidence of achievement in learning

settings has a number of outcome-defining implications that limit how we understand and go about the project of education. This limiting effect impacts who benefits and who suffers from measuring educational experience and effort in the usual ways. The presence and acceptance of the usual ways also gives society little reason for seeking out and using other ways of understanding how students are learning, becoming, growing, and doing, as well as how their teachers, schools, and states support or impede student learning experiences. Questions like *How does Nebraska stack up in terms of national achievement? How is Lincoln Public School district doing compared to statewide achievement results? How are the students in Pershing Elementary doing? How is LaQuan doing?* All drive a sense that our societal ways of holding everyone up for credit and blame based on the existing systems of accountability is the obvious way to measure and ensure *achievement*. These systems and metrics direct our curricular, pedagogical, and school models toward them.

The way we typically decide the answers to these accountability-related questions is rooted in our traditions of measuring the quantifiable academic performance of individual students and using them for purposes of comparison, but not so much to help the student. We compare the combined and categorized student scores by school, by district, state, and nation as well as by gender, race, and socioeconomic status. In other words, society first uses one or several measures to determine how LaQuan Green, Ignacio Gonzalez, Bry Mikolay, and Ji Liu are doing individually. The real societal utility, however, comes in the ways student scores will at some point be grouped together to measure how well and possibly how differently they are achieving and if there are any pervasive differences in achievement based on demographics.

Schools are simultaneously tasked with both *preserving privilege* and *promoting equity*. According to Labaree, this creates “a system that is too busy balancing opposites to promote student learning” (1977, p. 256). Often, the idea of *promoting equity* is explicitly stated in education policy, and this idea carries a high profile within societal meta-narratives of schooling and upward mobility. Conversely, *preserving privilege* is not explicitly stated. Instead, the preservation of privilege operates on an implicit, systemic level. It is so well hidden from members of mainstream society that most people, and even most educators, do not recognize how *preserving privilege* circulates within their schools, classrooms, and instruction. In other words, students, parents, teachers, and members of society in general are encouraged to see school as a safe haven from injustice and prejudice. Without a thorough unpacking or a lived sense of the incongruities we highlight, most people expect that

achievement is good, best practices are the best way, and schools act as *equalizers* for the social futures of their students.

In this chapter we look for, consider, and historically trace the institutional baggage and systemic racism that circulates within US education. We then connect these institutional inequalities to the way terms like *achievement* and *achievement gap* function. We acknowledge that, for many readers, this may feel like a counter-intuitive leap to connect the way society frames achievement and efforts to improve achievement to a systemic apparatus that impedes, limits, and denies equity. However, the narratives about education and the lived reality of education are often at odds for students of color. Deconstructing these narratives around education and achievement decenter and question longstanding instructional and accountability projects that are normally positioned as a necessary part of the solution.

We begin our critique of these narratives by problematizing the notion that the US education system offers a level playing field. We continue with a historical tracing from Emancipation and The Thirteenth Amendment (1865) to school desegregation (1954–1971) and to present day. Specifically, we focus on the ways the US system of education has played out for students of color, specifically Black students. We then connect the history of how accountability measures such as achievement tests and grades have come to be accepted as the primary source of proof that the US system of education is doing its part in meeting the learning needs of all students it serves.

In the long term, we hope that the work we do in this chapter (a) connects to the work that others are doing along these lines and (b) brings about change in the tools, metrics, and orientation that schools and governments use to support and evaluate learning. We aim to shift the way people understand and respond to the construct of *achievement* as it circulates within the US system of education. Specifically, we mean to complicate the notion that programs termed achievement-oriented or designed to close the achievement gap ought to be seen as the most useful direction in which to invest our educational resources – the idea of usefulness being coopted due to the pressing nature of a failing system.

We invite readers to see what inequalities, oppressive features, and/or structures that the use of these notions enables. However, this is not to say that all endeavors that seek to maximize learning as measured via tests and grades are devoid of any positive benefits for students of color.¹ We also consider what alternative avenues for understanding student learning and well-being might be used as to not perpetuate privilege. Finally, we connect how these terms play out both historically and recently with Black students as well as within

Black communities. We prompt readers to reflect on what and who are included when we select a goal of closing the achievement gap for Black students. We then ask what, if anything, can we do about it. We use this inquiry to explore what actions might be possible in terms of equity for Black students' learning, growing, living, and thriving – within, in spite of, and beyond school and institutional settings.

Problematizing the Promise of School as the Engine of the Meritocracy

We are led to believe that it is through individual effort in school that all students can realize their brightest social and professional futures. In other words, schools are positioned as the major equalizing force in US society. The sense that future success in life is enabled via schooling and school achievement rings true, and the dominant societal narrative of US schooling is one that positions education as the primary gateway toward any number of socially desirable futures. Implicit in this meta-narrative is the idea that these futures are only constrained by a meritocracy in which personal determination and ambition propel one to succeed in school.² While schools can function as pathways toward academic, professional, and social mobility, personal determination and ambition are hardly the only determining factors (Powell, 2015). As much as schools are presented as life-changing gateways for those who try hard and never give up, schools more often serve as gatekeepers that exclude access to stable societal futures for many students of color.

Historically, the sorting function of schooling happens in classrooms, school curriculum, the choice of school, and the larger context in which schooling happens (Sorokin, 1959). By the time students find themselves in a particular classroom, many of the important choices have already been made with little to no input from them or their parents. The curriculum and content standards have been designed and written by members of the majority. Questions about what is valuable to teach are answered primarily by members of the governmental, academic, and business communities. Thus, schooling standards, curriculum, and practices are embedded in the dominant culture.

The way school is embedded in the beliefs and values of the dominant culture makes it an engine of the *status quo* that masquerades as an engine of the meritocracy. An equitable meritocracy would afford students many pathways toward growth. It would offer a culturally inclusive curriculum instead of a Eurocentric, seemingly apolitical

one. It would require teachers to enact culturally relevant pedagogy – something that would demand significant effort and insight for the 81% of US public school teachers who have the lived experience of being White (Digest of Education Statistics, 2013) and thereby have been kept from an experiential understanding of what it means to navigate life and school as a person of color. It would require culturally relevant ways of supporting and evaluating growth and well-being. Educational achievement is therefore tightly coupled to a school system whose curriculum, instruction, and testing are embedded within the dominant culture. This embeddedness creates resonances and advantages for those who grow up within the hegemony while creating dissonances and disadvantages for those outside it, whose lived experiences are unique or at odds with the dominant perspective.

Students whose cultures robustly align with the dominant culture receive a curriculum that is a continuation of learning experiences they've had in the home. This means that, for many of them, school feels familiar and welcoming as it acknowledges their experiences as valued and connected to the project of schooling. Those that grow up in communities with differing notions of what is important, whose historical perspectives are significantly different, and whose cultural traditions and histories do not overlap with dominant traditions and histories often end up in classrooms that fail to connect with their values or resonate with their perspectives and under-utilize their home experiences as background knowledge for learning. When students and parents are only offered an artificially narrow spectrum of choices in terms of school models (regular public, charter school), curriculum (standard, advanced placement, remedial), pedagogy (direct instruction, inquiry-based), peer diversity (geographically-determined), measurement instruments (multiple-choice tests, worksheets), and underlying epistemology (positivism, interpretivism), it is the students that are most aligned with the dominant culture that benefit most – to the detriment of students of color, historically.

Unequal Access to Education and Pressure to Adopt Alienating, Assimilationist Curricula

In order to better understand the way the US educational system has always been constrained to a narrow hegemonic spectrum – to the detriment of the Black community – we track how school funding, curriculum design, and assessment played out at two critical points in time, the mid-1860s and post-World War II.

Post-Emancipation Experiences with Education for Black Communities

In the following section we show how groups within the dominant society worked to control access to education and worked to restrict the social and professional futures of Black students by (a) withholding funding from schools created by the Black community, (b) requiring Black students to use White curricula, (c) restricting the education of Black teachers, and (d) replacing Black teachers with White teachers.

The Withholding of Funding from Black Schools

The beginning of formalized education for the majority of African-origin people in the United States began with Emancipation (Franklin, 1990). Formerly enslaved people, no longer subject to the educational prohibitions of their enslavers, quickly began to organize private schools. By the time northern White missionaries entered the post-war South (1863–1877), Black residents had already organized many of their own schools with a wide-ranging curricula that included arts, medicine, architecture, philosophy, and mathematics (Kimball, 1986). For example, The Savannah Education Association, an entirely Black member-run association founded in Virginia, raised \$800 to build several elementary schools (Fairclough, 2000). Recently enslaved members' strong desire for education stemmed in part from a need to protect their freedom and to avoid manipulation by their former enslavers.

However, White Southern farmers, landowners, and workers faced economic upheaval following the Civil War. The type of human labor they had exploited and built their economic society upon was no longer available (Blackmon, 2009). White Southerners were fearful of losing income and their position in a racist hierarchical society, and White landowners were wary of the implications of an educated labor force. Instead of coming together as a larger community to find a new way forward that included Black members of society, they ensured that plantation work disrupted and hindered educational endeavors and developed exploitative labor contracts for Black workers that explicitly required the entire family (including school-age children) to work the plantations they owned (Anderson, 1988).

The use of intentionally cumbersome and obtuse language in written contracts forced the mostly illiterate Black population back into

servitude by setting nearly impossible labor hours, maintaining pre-Emancipation living conditions, and ensuring the worker's children were included in the contracts. Many Black victims of these and other contracts deeply believed that through literacy development they could better preserve their freedom and protect themselves from White landowners who sought to exploit and disenfranchise them (Anderson, 1988). The pervasive and widespread use of exploitative work contracts caused newly-freed slaves to adopt strong beliefs about education and its relation to freedom.

The organizing of education for Black students by Black community members threatened the *status quo* of racial inequality and dehumanization upon which the Southern economy had been built. In the warped vision of White plantation owners, the Black population was little more than unskilled labor (Blackmon, 2009). To a group intent on maintaining its social, economic, and political advantages, what purpose would education have to people meant to fill a labor force consisting mostly of menial tasks, except to disturb the economic imbalance in the South via the expansion of opportunities for southern Black citizens? The Southern White conviction that the few "skilled" jobs available needed to remain White male-only positions made unskilled agricultural jobs the only option for the Black population who represented 69% of the agricultural workforce (Anderson, 1988). Blindly consumed by the need to maintain their exploitative agricultural labor model, and fearful of personal economic instability through the loss of their formerly enslaved working population, southern Whites worked to suppress Black residents' efforts on all fronts including the development and maintenance of community schools.

Education became one of the largest and therefore costliest public endeavors in the post-Civil War US (Kluger, 2011), and the Southern states drastically increased taxation for the purpose of building new schools from 1900 to 1920. As a result, money poured into developing a system of universal free education at the turn of the century. Despite this increase in funding, Black schools suffered deficits as monies intended for them were diverted to and invested in White schools (Franklin, 1990; Washington, 1982).

In order to build school houses for their children, Black communities suffered double taxation by self-imposing additional taxes on themselves to pay for school-related costs in their communities. Funds were raised through the donation of labor, natural resources, fundraisers, and banknotes against properties owned by community members. One account from Autauga County, Alabama describes,

“Children without shoes on their feet gave from fifty cents to one dollar and old men, and old women, whose costumes represented several years of wear, gave from one to five dollars” (Anderson, 1988, p. 162). Thus, Black families who were now to be treated as equals were instead required to pay taxes for the construction of White schools, and give additional money if their own children were to have a place to learn.

Unlike The Savannah Education Association, not all Black communities were able to raise enough money to fund schools and even those that did ran into issues of fiscal unsustainability. Due to the limited resources available to them, many schools functioned with too many students and too few teachers. A need for a continuous source of income for teacher salaries, instructional materials, and facilities maintenance, coupled with increasing student populations required communities look to outside sources for funding that enabled their continuation (including The Savannah Education Association) and their establishment in other areas. In efforts to raise more funds, Black members of US society actively employed a range of fundraising strategies including seeking aid from both northern Republicans and the Freedmen’s Bureau, a US Federal Government agency established in 1865, to build better school houses and buy school materials (Anderson, 1988). While they recognized the need for the monetary support available from White missionaries, philanthropists, and government agencies, Black educational pioneers strived to maintain autonomy in managing their own educational institutions.

Pressure to Adopt Assimilationist Curricula

Realizing that the movement for Black education could not be stopped, Southern Whites refocused their attention on shifting the curricular focus to align with plantation owners’ needs. In this way, education would reinforce the lower status of Black members of society and mark them as qualified only for a life in the fields as unskilled labor while state and local governments complied with laws requiring the provisioning of some form of schooling to all children. When Black communities pushed back against curricula limited to industrial education, Northern philanthropists threatened to deny funding in those areas unwilling to follow their educational model. Thus, the education of Black students within these assimilationist frameworks became another vehicle for disenfranchisement (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Moreover, the Rosenwald Fund (1917) began its mission to increase the number of rural, Black school houses in the south. The collaborative work between Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington led to the building of 5,000 schools – allowing greater access to education for Black children (Aaronson & Mazumder, 2009). This mission operated under the ideology of societal betterment (Anderson, 1988), but like The Hampton model, it served to further disenfranchise the southern Black population. The educational systems established by the Hampton model and the Rosenwald Fund restricted education to training for manual, unskilled labor jobs previously carried out by enslaved people. In the early twentieth century, Black men received less education than Whites, and what education they did receive was not of the type likely to expand their thinking or professional options due to the previously described curricular focus and White perspective, as well as the modest per-pupil funding, larger class size, and a shortened school year by an average of two months to ensure extra help in the fields (Margo, 1990).

Rosenwald-funded schools, with an industrial curriculum based on The Hampton model, became a mechanism for perpetuating and exacerbating the double taxation endured by the southern Black population. Even with the monies offered from the Rosenwald Fund, the majority of the financial burden remained on rural, Black communities (Aaronson & Mazumder, 2009). A Black population shunted into an industrial-centered education created a ready-made reason for a systemically racist society to reject graduates of this system for anything but the lowliest positions. Over time, this system ignored, rejected, and devalued the funds of knowledge (González & Moll, 2002) that Black students brought with them to school, thus cultivating apathy and establishing a foundation for students to reject or struggle within the system. This rejection and these struggles were often positioned by White society as evidence not of a history of subjugation and alienation but of a lack of student motivation, resilience, aptitude, and achievement.

White lawmakers wanted a Black population comprised of citizens well versed in their place in society, appropriately educated to carry out unskilled tasks, and unsupported in explicitly unpacking the meta-narratives associated with what was and was not a part of the curriculum. The formalization of free public schools established a “feel-good” narrative of access to education for Black students, but this encouraging message is undercut when questions about access to what type of education are asked. These competing ideological themes play out throughout the history of education in Black communities via increasing both access to education and the restrictions on what type of

education was available, namely the culturally alienating and professionally limiting varieties.

Restricting the Education of Black Teachers

Similar dynamics were playing out with the education of Black teachers. White philanthropists and northern politicians established normal schools in order to train the next generation of teachers. Normal schools were positioned as lower-level, and separate from secondary and collegiate institutions that focused on law, medicine and business (Herbst, 1980). These normal schools established by The Freedman's Bureau, Hampton, and later Tuskegee were designed to train Black school teachers to become the face of education within their own communities while teaching limiting curricula from a White perspective and remaining subordinate to White leadership (Spivey, 1978). In other words, the Black school teachers were under pressure to act as mouthpieces for a system that did not have their best interests in mind. For example, The Hampton Model of the Normal School, which remained dauntlessly focused on industrial education and the preparation of its students for jobs in manual labor, began to develop in the South in 1868 (Anderson, 1988).

The Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute became the standard for educating Black students. This restrictive educational model constrained Black education in a way that favored southern plantation owners and the poor White labor force. Samuel Chapman Armstrong, a self-proclaimed "friend of the Negro race" (Anderson, 1988, p. 37) and mentor to Booker T. Washington, helped to establish the hidden curriculum of voluntary servitude through The Hampton school's model of conditioning Black residents to accept only those positions available to Black workers in the South. This educational model would ensure Black members of the community had no educational pathways to leadership positions in the social hierarchy of the New South by institutionalizing and normalizing the continued economic and educational subordination of formerly enslaved people (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The Freedman's Bureau, established by President Abraham Lincoln to assist Black individuals in adjusting to their new status, enrolled approximately 150,000 students in Hampton-modeled schools by 1896. However, this only served a fraction of the population because while the Bureau schools were established in cities, the majority of Black residents still lived in rural communities (Margo, 1990). As more industrial-focused schools were built, Black students recognized the aims of

the Hampton model, which valued the dutiful manual laborer over the critical, divergent thinking citizen. The Hampton Model conceptualized success based upon the student's ability to perform manual labor tasks, and those who excelled at such tasks became the standard by which all other students were evaluated (Anderson, 1988). As Hampton-modeled normal schools became more prevalent in the south through the efforts of Northern politicians, philanthropists, and the American Missionary Association, Black residents began opting out, resisting the push toward technical, sub-par education for their children.

Replacing Black Teachers with White Teachers

In addition to these efforts to limit access to education, the insertion of White teachers into positions previously held by Black teachers further undermined what little pedagogical autonomy the Black community was able to realize. Many Black residents resisted the displacement of Black educators by White teachers in their schools. In Prince Edward's County, Virginia, a committee of Black men, appointed by the area's Black population, petitioned the school board for Black teachers (Turner & Bound, 2003). In 1882, parents in Prince Edward's County chose to keep their children at home when their demands for Black teachers was refused (Turner & Bound, 2003).

Post-World War II Experiences with Education for Black Communities

America's participation in World War II brought accepted racial hierarchies into stark relief. American troops fought against a fascist system predicated on the racist Nazi belief in the superiority of the Aryan race. Yet, many Americans did not see or acknowledge the racist double standard at home involving the subjugation of the Black population by "custom, law, and social policy" (Seay, 2011, p. 80). At the close of World War II, The Serviceman's Readjustment Act (1944), more commonly referred to as the "G.I. Bill" presented a new educational opportunity for servicemen and servicewomen. Designed to be a benefit for all service members, it held the promise of significantly reducing Black-White student educational gaps (Turner & Bound, 2003).

While it granted equal rights to all service members, the segregationist policies of many universities denied Black veterans access to their programs (Herbold, 1994). As the GI Bill enabled greater access to educational institutions for poor Whites, Black-only colleges and universities felt the strain of increased enrollment rates as White-run institutions typically restricted the number of spaces for Black students. In 1946, of the 100,000 Black veterans who applied for educational benefits, only one-fifth successfully registered for college (Herbold, 1994).

In 1950, Oliver Brown was unable to enroll his daughter, Linda, in a White elementary school. This led Brown and other Black parents to sue the Topeka, Kansas school district. In the landmark court case that followed, Thurgood Marshall argued that the segregation of public schools violated the 14th Amendment and the court declared state-mandated segregated schools unconstitutional. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) overturned the longstanding *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which legalized the segregation of schools. Following the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, the desegregation of schools held great promises for Black students. For the first time in American history, Black students were provided access to the same educational services as White students, and many believed this access would increase “self-esteem, academic achievement, and educational attainment” for Black students (Wells and Crain, 1994, p. 532).

While desegregation gave Black students access to White schools, which were historically better funded, staffed, and supported, it failed to ensure an equitable education. First, integration took nearly two decades to see implementation. As the courts mandated no timeline for desegregation, individual and institutional resistance to desegregation continued (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). For the first decade of integration, only a handful of Black students moved to White schools. While the court orders were nation-wide, southern school districts were most affected by the legislation due to their historically mandated segregation and unequal schooling practices (Reber, 2005). In districts with court-mandated integration policies, White families quickly left the urban districts for the suburban districts not impacted by integration policies (Reber, 2005). Despite 16 states in the North having laws prohibiting segregation, several of the highest-profile protests against societal and educational oppression occurred in the North, including Chicago (1919), Detroit (1943), and Los Angeles (1965) (Ashmore, 2010). Second, the mandate to integrate Black students into better-funded schools did not come with a mandate to integrate Black perspectives into the curriculum or curricular materials. White values, White teachers, and

White perspectives on current and historical events were waiting for Black students at the school integration finish line.

Black youth were not the only population affected by desegregation policies. Charles Thompson, a long-time editor of the *Journal of Negro Education*, believed the desegregation of teachers would endure more challenges than the integration of students (Fultz, 2004). In the wake of court-mandated integration, schools, predominantly those in the South (which were controlled by the White community), began pushing out or demoting most Black school employees – band directors, teachers, principals, and cafeteria workers (Fultz, 2004). In Oklahoma, for example, 144 Black teachers and 21 Black principals were dismissed within the first year of *Brown v. Board* (1954) (Fultz, 2004).

As a result of racist sentiment within the US society and school system, integration yielded only limited numbers of Black students in well-resourced schools and it saw scores of Black school employees removed. Additionally, Whites moved out of urban areas leading to decreases in funding for integrated urban schools (Reber, 2005). The integration of Black students into well-resourced schools hit a peak in the 1980s. After that, new and old ways of re-segregating emerged. These included unenforced desegregation orders, modification of school district and attendance policies, and re-zoning practices (Blanchett *et al.* 2005).

Moreover, The National Commission on Excellence in Education (established in the 1980s by then-president Reagan) concluded that American schools were failing to adequately educate students. The commission published their findings in *A Nation at Risk* (1983), citing test scores as evidence that American students performed lower than students in other countries. From *A Nation at Risk* to the George W. Bush-era *No Child Left Behind* (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) in 2001, schools became increasingly more segregated with high-minority-concentration schools more likely to also be high-poverty schools with fewer resources, industrial-age pedagogies, and lower student academic success (Rebell & Wolff, 2009). While both *A Nation at Risk* and NCLB overtly examined the achievement gap between students of color and White students, the comparative lag in achievement scores was not attributed to educational oppression lasting more than a century. Instead, it was seen as a deficit to be overcome via more time with the existing White-perspective curriculum and more pressure on teachers and administrators to use industrial-age pedagogies more intensively to make adequate yearly progress on high-stakes tests measuring discrete skills. More than a decade after NCLB passed, it had not lessened the gap between Black and White student achievement.

What NCLB did do, however, was substantially increase the testing requirements for all students and subgroups of students (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002). This increased pressure made it more difficult for teachers and local education agencies to do anything but use explicit instruction to teach to the test. In 2005, only 60% of Black fourth graders scored at or above the basic level in math while 90% of White and Asian fourth grade students scored at or above the basic level (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). In this way, NCLB became, like other initiatives before it, a societal technology that offered promising rhetoric and apparent advocacy for Black students. Yet, what it delivered was rooted in the existing restrictive educational system – the existing curricula and White-oriented instructional materials, the existing industrial-age pedagogy, and the existing high-stakes quantitative approach to evaluation.

In 2009, President Obama presented *Race to The Top* (RTTT) as a discretionary grant program where states would compete against each other in order to qualify for an opportunity to win additional funding (Abbott, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The aims of RTTT included: more standards and assessments designed to help students succeed in college and workplace environments; the use of performance data to determine student success and help guide instruction; and recruiting, retaining, and rewarding top educators where they are most needed (Abbott, 2013).

Funding based upon competition attracted private businesses and philanthropists who were eager to support reform efforts (McGuinn, 2011). These efforts were reminiscent of the Rosenwald Fund. While Rosenwald-funded schools of the early twentieth century used industrial-age education models, RTTT philanthropists in the early twenty-first century used charter schools and versions of a no-excuses, industrial-age curriculum. Educators and policymakers have championed charter schools as a vehicle for new innovative ideas and educational approaches – to be utilized especially with historically underserved student populations. For nearly 20 years, charter schools have had the opportunity to try new things and re-imagine schooling. Instead, due in part to testing and accountability constraints, many of the highest profile programs (e.g., Knowledge is Power Program [KIPP]) have doubled down on many traditional elements of schooling by increasing contact hours with the existing curriculum, instituting heightened levels of discipline and indoctrination, and peer pressure to increase student achievement (Gladwell, 2008; Lack, 2009). While this approach does produce increased test scores and college placement, the price for this success appears to be a more intense pressure to assimilate and accept cultural colonization (Hill & Lake, 2010; Lack, 2009).

With the passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA, 2015), which will take effect at the beginning of the 2017–2018 school year, policymakers have again set their legislative sights on creating policies aimed at improving achievement and closing the achievement gap (Alexander, 2015). Like NCLB before it, ESSA is the latest version of *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), which was first signed into law by then-president Johnson in 1965 and funds US preK–12 public education (ESSA, 2015). In each iteration, the act has outlined how school funding is to be spent, with the overarching goal of educational equity, accountability, and standards in terms of student achievement. The new ESSA, like many previous iterations of the ESEA, bases academic achievement primarily on annual state tests. In the next section we unpack what achievement has come to mean, how metrics of achievement came to be so prevalent in education, and how they often end up reinforcing systemic inequalities.

What Does Achievement Mean?

As discussed in the previous section, while overall access to schooling increased steadily for all US youth, the narrowly constrained options in terms of school models, curriculum, pedagogy, teachers, and epistemology acted as technologies of filtering, exclusion, and inequality for students of color throughout the history of post-Emancipation education and continue to have a constraining impact today. Within the education system, curricula, tests, and teachers play leading roles in determining what gets taught, from whose perspective, who achieved, who didn't, and which students get sorted where.

Curricula and pedagogy exert an enormous influence on the experience of schools; the uptake of this experience gets measured via grades, projects, and tests. Of this triad, there is – to paraphrase Orwell (1945) – one “animal” that is more equal than others. Specifically, tests designed to show how much students have learned, how much potential they have, and how well the schools have taught them have been historically and increasingly centrally synonymous with measures of achievement and used for the purposes of accountability.

The History of Accountability Measures

Like the funding and curricular initiatives discussed earlier, achievement tests function as both a promised way out of longstanding societal inequalities and a primary factor in the continued marginalization

of entire groups of students. Societally, testing has become our default approach to student, program, and system evaluation. While tests can be used to better understand how to support student learning, those most often used to gauge achievement are both summative and either normative by design or normed after the fact. In the paragraphs below we unpack the history of tests and testing in the United States as a way to understand achievement not as actual measures of generative growth but as a constructed social practice that benefits some and disadvantages others.

Two hundred and thirty years ago, the concept of requiring students to take a written examination that could be reviewed and assigned a numerical value that represented a test taker's knowledge was fairly novel. Since the late 1700s, however, the quantification of knowledge has become more prevalent and forms the primary mechanism by which generations of school-age youth have been evaluated regarding their learning. In 1792, students at Cambridge University took some of the first written and scored English language exams (Postman, 2011). These written exams replaced oral examinations. The written exams and the scores affixed to them persisted in time as artifacts in ways that the memory of an oral recitation did not and, thus, afforded different ways of analyzing and, eventually, comparing performances. Additionally, the technologies embedded within the tests (reuse of test items, simultaneity of test taking, and quantification of test performance) created new efficiencies and possibilities that soon found their way across the Atlantic and into US schools.

By the 1860s, the practice of written exams and achievement testing was embedded within a US system of education that was experiencing unprecedented levels of population growth via immigration, urbanization, and emancipation. Population growth coupled with the push for universal free elementary schooling saw half of all youth in the United States receiving formal instruction (Office of Technology Assessment, 1992). Forty years later in 1900, the national population nearly tripled and the percentage of youth (between five years and 17 years) attending school increased to 80% (Office of Technology Assessment, 1992). These dynamics created significant pressure on school systems to expand their capacity to accommodate more students. Increased taxpayer investment in schools brought with it a growing interest in justifying the expense. One way administrators and politicians began to address these concerns was through maximizing efficiencies via age and ability grouping (Katz, 1968; Tyack, 1974). By the mid-1920s, nine in 10 elementary schools were grouping their students by ability as measured on aptitude and intelligence tests. Additionally, over 100 curriculum-based tests designed to gauge achievement in elementary and

secondary content areas were in circulation (Office of Technology Assessment, 1992).

In the 1930s, Mabel Byrd (a social scientist from Fisk University) conducted field research to help the Rosenwald Fund decide if a high school education was necessary for Black students (Gasman & Geiger, 2012). Byrd's report found that secondary education could produce more efficient workers – placing Black workers in a position to threaten the moderately skilled labor positions held by poor Whites (Anderson, 1988). Byrd's survey methodology was influenced by the work of sociologists best known for their ideas about mass intelligence testing (Seay, 2011). These ideas included beliefs about intelligence being fixed at birth, and in the racial superiority of Whites. Even though the Byrd survey indicated additional education would improve learning, it would be limited to the industrial-type of education established in primary schools with the primary educational goal of labor efficiency. In this way, schooling at an expanded level could maintain the social hierarchy with White laborers maintaining their lead on Black workers in the economic system. The use of such surveys was new to the field of education and was embraced as a scientific way to align the aims of education with the needs of the political economy (Anderson, 1988). The widespread use of surveys and intelligence testing such as the Army Mental Tests – a precursor to the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) – created a powerful technology to rationalize the denial of most Black students to equitable, culturally relevant, and critical, let alone higher, education.

Jumping ahead to the 1980s, American education began utilizing standardized testing as a means to hold educators accountable for (a) the low performance of students, as compared to other countries, and (b) disparities in performance between groups within the United States. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* used test results to make the argument that the US educational system was under-delivering on the whole, and specifically in terms of marginalized populations. According to the report, functional literacy among students of color was as low as 60% (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). As these disparities were identified via quantitative statistics derived from test scores, the outcomes of interventions intended to address low achievement would also be measured via grades and standardized test scores. The use of test scores as both the means of illuminating the problem of inadequate achievement and the means of confirming its resolution placed testing at the center of how student achievement is measured and the US education system is judged. More recently, Wilder (2014) studied the effects of parental involvement on academic achievement from pre-Kindergarten to 12th grade. In total, more than

300 published studies of student achievement were analyzed. We use Wilder's meta-synthesis to consider the data sources that the authors of these studies used in constructing achievement. Across the 309 studies (Wilder, 2014), 10 data sources were used in different combinations to represent achievement. Of these, the five that show up across multiple meta-analyses can be grouped into three categories: test scores, grades, and teacher ratings.

For nearly a century, many of those developing and promoting the use of assessments such as *The Iowa Tests of Basic Skills* and the SAT have held their use up as a way to democratize education and make it more of a vehicle for the redistribution of societal privilege based on aptitude and educational merit instead of familial background (Grotsky, Warren, & Felts, 2008). Yet, despite nearly a century of learner-centered rhetoric, standardized tests have been used to make high-stakes decisions regarding the future of students, the abilities of teachers, and the quality of schools. Such practices of sorting and filtering have advanced the agendas of school officials and politicians more than they have supported students and classroom teachers (Office of Technology Assessment, 1992; Pinar, 2012).

Using tests in these high-stakes ways has significantly constrained curricular and instructional innovation and diversity. It has created competing narratives of testing as democratizing education and testing as limiting access to social and academic advancement. What testing does best is confirm the social stratification of the US system of education (Grotsky et al. 2008). This is so in part because the tests we use were designed to test uptake of a curriculum taught in a particular way from a particular perspective. The knowledge, skills, cognitive orientations, and inquiry practices most desired by politicians, business leaders, Ivy League professors, and citizens with a rather zealous sense of patriotism and an interest in perpetuating the *status quo* are privileged at the expense of competing perspectives, alternative pathways to understanding, and unique cultural and familial funds of knowledge. The results of testing as a democratizing factor have, at best, been to replace the very lowest-achieving children of privilege with the most gifted children from marginalized groups (Grotsky et al. 2008).

Why Current Notions of Achievement Won't Help Us Close the Achievement Gap

In this chapter, we focused on the history of school funding, curriculum, and testing. We have worked to show how contemporary efforts to attain equity via an educational system rooted in centuries of

privilege for some and marginalization for others is a project that can only be accomplished in spite of itself. While the mostly White middle-and upper-classes are offered schools that reflect their life experience, teachers that look like them, curricula that reflect their history and familial aspirations, and inquiry-based instructional approaches likely to align with parental patterns of interaction, Black communities and youth have been largely denied those generative educational pathways. Instead they have gotten schools that negate or attempt to correct their life experience, teachers that commute to their school and face pressure to act on behalf of the educational system, curricula that offer a single alienating pathway toward growth, and drill and practice instructional methods.

We traced how schools that were founded by Black communities were shut down, unfunded, and supplanted by schools that aligned with racist political and economic agendas. We wrote about how curricula, and teachers that came from within Black communities were resisted, supplanted, rewritten, subjugated, and fired. We wrote about how the system of education came to be populated with teachers who were unlikely to share the cultural traditions or understand history from the perspective of their Black students. We wrote about having to learn from curricular materials that uncritically present math, science, literature, history, and psychology most often from the perspective of the White experience. We wrote about the overuse of instructional pedagogies focused on repetition and training, and tests that measure attainment of understanding via these inequitable pathways. All of these practices, policies, and dynamics tilting toward racial capitalism (Leong, 2012).

When we use testing data to determine how well students and schools are achieving, we are coupling our efforts and constraining our trajectories to the types of understandings and pathways to understanding that are valued by mainstream society. While many of these understandings are useful and important (e.g., critical thinking, literacies, perspective-taking), the US system of education requires students of color to arrive at their understanding within environments that are hazardous to their cultural, intellectual, and sometimes personal well-being. Measures of achievement do not attempt to assess cultural relevance, divergent thinking, or student wellbeing. They are designed to gauge the extent to which *mainstream understandings* are learned via *mainstream pathways*. In this way, for students of color – who have faced historical and present day limits on access to inquiry-based, culturally relevant curricula and pedagogies – we might understand the achievement gap as something engineered into the system going back

more than 150 years. For these reasons, we might frame achievement and the achievement gap in more equitable ways.

Implications, Alternatives, and Sideways Moves

In this chapter, we traced how historical and contemporary educational practices have worked against Black students – creating an educational and accountability system that both calls for and impedes equity of experience. Understood this way, these practices function as a sort of educational technology in the service of hegemony (Pacey, 1983). In this final section, we suggest several practices or educational technologies meant to support educators and administrators, especially White educators and administrators, in building their capacity to create ecologies that do not require students to assimilate to a single pathway toward understanding and demonstrating understanding.

Students of color deserve to be held to the same standards as their White peers. However, if it is the critical thinking and concepts embedded in social ecologies that are the central goal of education, then why not diversify the pathways toward that goal? How do we understand school achievement and the achievement gap in terms of Black students if it is based on the problematic expectation of assimilation and orientation of students of color toward a curriculum and materials aligned with the White middle-class experience? Instead of benignly thinking of it as the *achievement gap*, a more accurate perspective would be to first think of it as the *assimilation gap*.

So, what now? What might we as a society change or implement to repair a system that perpetuates inequalities via the very mechanisms purported to ensure equitable achievement? What can we do about a curriculum and curricular materials that ignore or diminish other perspectives and avoid implication in primarily offering pathways to learning that most closely align with the White, middle-class experience?

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) offers examples of US public school teachers working successfully with Black students in ways that offer critical, culturally relevant educational experiences. The teachers she studied have had an incalculable impact on the academic lives of their students. Their approaches parallel some of the work Luis Moll and colleagues have done with Latino families – working to understand, acknowledge, and connect school experiences to the knowledge that families and communities of color have, but that the educational system largely ignores (González & Moll, 2002). This orientation to funds

of knowledge seeks to identify pathways toward counteracting some of the colonizing and alienating effects of school on children of color. Ladson-Billings as well as Moll counteract these effects in part by cultivating and confirming in educators the conviction that students of color bring valuable and unique experiences, understandings, and perspectives to the classroom.

One way to understand the oppression that a funds of knowledge approach overcomes, and a culturally relevant pedagogy enables, is to think about the school experience via a cookie cutter metaphor. Every student entering Kindergarten or pre-Kindergarten brings different, but roughly the same, volume of experiences. Think about these lived experiences, understandings, and values as the dough. Every school in the United States has goals, expectations, pathways, and targets for their students to achieve. What the school considers a student's building blocks for learning and achieving are those that fall within the boundaries of the educational system's cookie cutter. Students whose experiences align with the goals and curricular perspectives of schooling find that their dough gets centered under the cookie cutter. Students whose experiences and values are different than what schools expect end up having their dough misaligned with the cookie cutter. This misalignment means that, for educational institutions and teachers viewing students through the lens of the educational system's cookie cutter, some students appear to have much less "leverageable" dough than other students. In fact, what actually happens is that schools ignore significant portions of the experiences and understandings children of color bring to school, resulting in a metaphorical cutting-off of part of their dough – a very real alienation of large portions of their identity and an institutional assignment of having significant deficits.

Ladson-Billings underscores the importance of educator awareness about familial and community funds of knowledge. By building the capacity to understand how the history, literature, and culture of Black students intersect with the mandated curriculum, educators can design and support culturally relevant experiences that leverage – instead of leave behind – their students' understandings and values. Furthermore, equipping educators to lead critical dialogue about where, how, and why school-provided curricular materials espouse perspectives that perpetuate harm within marginalized communities creates pathways toward generative, empowering, and authentic educational experiences for Black students.

Given the way curricula and curricular materials supplied by the US public school system align with the White middle-class experience, it

is currently up to educators to identify, adopt, adapt, and design critical, culturally relevant materials and pedagogy that connects with the experiences of their students. This process of redesign asks much of educators. For the 231,000 Black educators working in the US public school system this is a challenging task of curricular and pedagogical realignment and redesign. For the 2.7 million White educators working as teachers in the US public school system, making up 81% of all public school educators (Digest of Education Statistics, 2013), the task requires teachers have or gain insight into the lived and historical experiences of their Black students. For many White teachers this is akin to learning a new language and then using that language to redesign learning experiences – all with little to no societal or institutional support.

Learning this new language or more accurately, these new discourses, is especially difficult due to the low number of meaningful interactions White people in the United States have or seek out with people of color. One study reports that a full 75% of White Americans stated that they did not discuss important matters with a single person of color (Cox, Navarro- Rivera, & Jones, 2014). This cultural and discursive segregation has a history that goes back generations and connects to the ongoing geographical segregation along racial lines in the United States (Frey, 2015; Lichter, Parisi, Grice, & Taquino, 2007). Overcoming these challenges to enable the crafting of culturally relevant pedagogy requires White educators (and administrators) to:

- read at the intersections of their content areas and Black history and current events;
- talk with their students and student's parents to gain a sense of the familial and cultural funds of knowledge they bring to the classroom;
- build literacy in some of the discourses of their students (Gee, 2004);
- read and talk with a wide range of community members about how differences in experience influence perspective and societal interaction;
- work to understand critical theory, critical race theory, and critical whiteness in order to use them as tools in reinterpreting their content areas, teaching, and the larger project of schooling;
- work to understand how their own societally racialized identity impacts their life, their pedagogy, and their politics; and
- join or build working groups of educators committed to designing, implementing, and understanding the effects of critical, culturally relevant pedagogy.

We see the bulleted items above as actionable, ongoing, non-finite pathways forward that reduce the chances of superficially appropriating student discourses and cultural elements (Olmanson & Falls, 2016). Once these actions are underway, educators and groups of educators can create, adapt, and curate: critiques of school-supplied curricular materials; supplementary materials; multiple pathways through the redesigned materials; and multiple ways for students to demonstrate their understanding. Embedding opportunities to unpack societal meta-narratives that influence the experience of learning and school are also part of this effort.

Yet, the effort of creating critical, culturally relevant pedagogy is not and should not be the sole provenance of teachers. The societal subtext in requiring educators to do most of the work in bridging the distance between their students and a White, middle-class school experience, that is often disconnected from students' pasts, presents, and futures, is one of maintaining the *status quo*. Far-reaching and sustained change toward equitable experiences of schooling for Black students requires changes in how districts, states, and the federal government think about the project of education. The significance of meeting students of color where they are, in connecting their experiences and historical pasts with their social and professional futures in a present educational moment that acknowledges and values them as learners and contributors to the classroom learning ecology, goes beyond pedagogy. It requires the creation, curation, and adaptation of primary sources and instructional approaches that align with the familial and cultural experiences of Black students.

While critical, cultural relevance is necessarily a pedagogical endeavor, the pedagogy is bound in a reconceptualization of curricula and the experience of schooling. This curricular reconceptualization frames the process of learning and understanding as a complicated conversation wherein a student's past and future are folded into a present moment where they intersect with concepts embedded within their social contexts (Pinar, 2012). Working toward making this type of educational experience possible for students of color across the United States will take changes in pre- and in-service teacher education, curriculum theorizing, community organizing, and policy changes.

At a policy level, acknowledging and addressing the problematic nature of the internals of both our system of education and its accountability apparatus suggest several possible trajectories. For example, achievement indicators are explained in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (§ 1836, Part V) (Alexander, 2015). It states that at least one indicator in addition to statewide testing is required and should be focused on

school quality or student success. By focusing on school quality from a cultural relevance perspective, an indicator could be designed to evaluate student access to critical, culturally relevant curricular materials. Such a statewide requirement would serve as a catalyst for the curation and creation of materials that align with more than just the White middle-class experience. In this way, schools and districts would need to work to design and gather materials at the intersection of the content areas and their students' backgrounds and life experiences. This would also give an indication as to what kind of role culturally alienating curricular materials play in creating what is known as the achievement gap. In the meantime, measures to suspend the punitive effects of achievement testing for any group for which there is not equitable access to and support for critical, culturally relevant learning experiences would be a good start.

Our hope in writing this chapter is to support other ways of thinking about terms like achievement and the achievement gap. We outlined the oppressive role the US system of education plays when it comes to how public schools educate students and measure achievement and the achievement gap, and we offered alternatives and trajectories in support of youth and communities of color. We hope these ideas and ways forward are adopted, adapted, and taken into consideration by public school educators, teacher educators, test and textbook publishers, and policymakers. In this way, we might better understand and sidestep the constructs and dynamics that undermine the chances for every student to experience equitable, critical, culturally relevant learning experiences.

Notes

1. Rather, these technologies of accountability, and the contexts in which they are employed, entrench longstanding advantages for some groups and supplant more equitable approaches.
2. Some examples include: "If you can dream it you can do it," "Read to Achieve," "If I did it so can you," and "Homeless to Harvard."

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