

Why Eurocentric literacy measures may be creating the illusion that Black students are underperforming.



Many have written about the apparent ongoing ‘achievement gap’ between young Black and White students, but in new research [Patriann Smith](#) and [colleagues](#) write that this ‘gap’ may not give a true picture of Black students’ literacy. They find that Black immigrant youth often speak multiple dialects just as their Black American peers do, and also often outperform them, but still do not meet the average literacy standard measure. These measures, the authors argue, do not take into account that while Black youth tend to say they speak “English” on a literacy test, it does not always mean that they are referring to Standard English. This in turn may lead to inaccurate comparisons with their white peers.

There continues to be much debate about what many refer to as the ‘achievement gap’ between white and ‘non-dominant’ (often Black) students in the United States. Those who support this gap quote statistics such as the following: 50 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that asked the Department of Education to examine inequality of educational opportunity across elementary and secondary schools in the United States, the average Black student in grade 12 continues to be placed in the 13th percentile of the score distribution on reading while 87 percent of white students in the same grade scored ahead of them. They argue, more often than not, that because of the disparity in achievement between white and Black students, there is a gap in the achievement between these populations that must be fixed. But, as a number of scholars have repeatedly asked, “Is there really a gap?”

It’s not an achievement gap, but an opportunity gap

Those who challenge the idea of an ‘achievement gap’ have shown that we tend to use Eurocentric ways of assessing and instructing all students in schools even though underserved students may show their knowledge and learning differently. Others have argued that the gap is based on a deficit model that reinforces racial superiority by constantly comparing Black students to whites, which in turn dehumanizes Black students.

In proposing a solution, some scholars have asked us to think instead about opportunity gaps that exist in teaching, learning, assessment, and policy- making for underserved students. Joining these scholars, we also ask for a brief moment, that the focus be taken away from comparing Blacks so often to whites and instead, (re)humanizing Black youth by comparing them, as it were, to themselves.

In thinking about restricting comparisons of achievement to just Black populations of youth, we acknowledge that there are tensions among Black American youth, Black immigrant youth from Africa, and Black immigrant youth from the Caribbean. These tensions often come from the perception that Black immigrant youth are somehow “better” because their performance as a group tends to be higher than that of their Black American counterparts. Some have even referred to Black immigrant youth as the “new model minority”, further exacerbating these tensions.

But neither Black immigrant youth nor their Black American counterparts are a monolith. Just as there are many instances of excellent performance on assessments that often remain overlooked in the broader narrative of achievement that tends to characterize the Black American population, there are also many Black immigrant youth who struggle to perform on achievement measures. In fact, scholars have recently pointed out that this latter challenge faced by Black immigrant youth often remains unaddressed as these youth are either subsumed within the Black American population, expected to do as well as their peers, or placed in classrooms such as English as a second language or special education classes that do not meet their literacy needs.

Studying the opportunity gap for literacy among Black youth by examining their reported language

The tensions and debates surrounding achievement which persist and characterize Black youth motivated our research: we hypothesized, based on the research so far, that there are opportunity gaps in literacy for Black youth, which we could explore through comparisons within the young Black population. To do so, we examined the language that Black American and immigrant youth say they speak on the international assessment measure, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). We also examined the differences in their literacy performance on this measure when they identified “English” as their first language on this test.

We chose literacy as our focus because it is so important if students must “do well” on so many other subject areas. Without it, students tend to struggle with most of their schooling, which is inadvertently premised on Eurocentric practices. We also chose to focus on how the youth identified as English speakers because English and its many forms (i.e., Englishes) still seem to be given priority on so many assessments in (and beyond) the United States. We chose PISA because it tells policy-makers around the world how to make decisions about how students are treated in the educational system. Results from PISA can have a significantly negative influence on students’ futures if inaccurate interpretations are made based on this measure. And to be fair, this measure focuses less on what students know about literacy and more on how they can use literacy to address problems, which we believed, seemed more aligned with what underserved students possessed the capacity to do.

The importance of which ‘English’ students speak

Not surprisingly, we found that as previous research has shown with other literacy measures, Black immigrant students significantly outperformed Black American students on the PISA measure. This was the case despite the fact that Black immigrant students tend to speak multiple languages and/or dialects, much like their Black American peers who also often speak an English dialect either with or without “Standard English”. Since previous research has consistently pointed to the role of African American Language as a key predictor in the literacy outcomes of Black American youth, this caused us to wonder: “To what degree was the “(under)performance” of Black “English-speaking” American students explained by English dialectal differences, on the one hand, and hypothesized to be the result of (discrimination against) Black youth’s English dialectal differences, on the other?”

While one might say that difference in English language learning is a reason for this disparity in achievement across these Black subpopulations, in many African as well as English-speaking Caribbean countries, English functions as an official, and not foreign language in much the same way that this occurs in the US. Alternatively, another might argue that while students from Africa, for instance, can identify a language other than English as their first language, African American students, many of whom speak a dialect of English, cannot identify their first language as such. Instead, what they seem to be forced to do is identify their first language as “Standard English”, a language that many may not speak. This, in turn, predisposes them to be inaccurately and inadequately compared, more often than not, to their white peers, many of whom do speak a form of Standard English.



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Speaking of English, we also found that though students who said they spoke English as a first language outperformed those who said they did not, interestingly, this outperformance was moderate and not statistically significant. If this is indeed the case (more research is needed across additional assessment measures to further solidify this finding), then it seems that there is very little disparity among students that say they speak English as a first language and those who say they do not, regardless of whether they are Black immigrant or Black American.

Overall, the key finding that caught our attention was that Black immigrant youth, though significantly outperforming their Black American peers, just like these counterparts, somehow “failed” to meet the average PISA literacy standard, suggesting “underperformance” for all Black youth as a whole.

The need to move away from Eurocentric literacy measures

At this point, then, we propose that perhaps the question isn't: “Is there an achievement gap?” But rather, “How do we close the opportunity gap?” For Black youth who speak multiple dialects, PISA (and other literacy measures) can allow students to classify as “English as a (second) dialect” speakers given that the language of the test (i.e., Standard American English) often tends not to be their first dialect (or language). Beyond this, Black youth have literacies that they cannot often portray on Eurocentric measures. Those who create literacy assessments must increasingly use technological tools to vary our assessment measures. In the absence of such, it seems imperative that we revisit and challenge our interpretations from such measures.

A final step to be taken is disaggregation of literacy data of Black immigrant and Black American youth at local, state, district, and national levels in much the same way that scholars have called for data to be differentiate among racial “minorities.” This will help to better determine which elements of Black students’ dialects along with sociodemographic elements, most influence their literacy achievement. Together, these steps will move us away from reinforcing the idea of the ‘brokenness’ of Black youth through a persistent narrative of ‘underperformance’ to creating equal opportunities in literacy assessment and learning based on Black students’ knowledge and experience.

- *This article is based on the paper, ‘Rethinking “(Under) Performance” for Black English Speakers: Beyond Achievement to Opportunity’, in the Journal of Black Studies.*

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