Falling into the gap: The coloniality of achievement gap discourses and their responses

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Abstract

This paper critically analyzes gap discourses in student learning, starting from the achievement gap, education debt, and opportunity gaps, applying the lens of coloniality, racial capitalism, and modernity (CRCM). Gap discourses are the prevalent rationale behind educational policies and school reforms globally. Specifically in the United States, achievement gap discourses contribute substantially to the educational framework that minoritized students (students of color) are inherently – intellectually and academically – behind White students. This paper will show the pervasive power of achievement gap discourses and their influence on school policy, practices, and norms. Additionally, we highlight how some of the most formidable achievement gap critiques fail to grasp the power of gap discourses. In some cases, these critiques end up reifying White supremacy ideologies. We propose a decoloniality framework or a layered and multi-disciplinary response to help re-think the entire gap discourses informed by White supremacy.

Keywords: Decoloniality, coloniality, CRCM, achievement gap, opportunity gap, education debt, discourse analysis

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Introduction

A Google search of the achievement gap nets over 1.5 billion results, and its most popular responses, education debt, about 4.25 billion, and opportunity gaps, almost 2.5 billion. These search results reveal the impact and influence of the notion of 'gap,' a fundamentally global educational issue. In this article, we frame the achievement gap as a discourse. According to Gee (2012), discourses are used to either better understand the world or as exploitative power grabs. Additionally, they are inherently ideological – fundamentally theoretical about who people are and the meaning of their actions. We also agree that discourses 'define what counts as acceptable criticism' and therefore are 'resistant to internal criticism and self-scrutiny' (Gee, 2012, p. 159).

Researchers in the United States (US) identify achievement gaps as racialized educational inequities that led to inquiries and explorations around why. Subsequently, the achievement gap enveloped educational policy and practice for decades (Carey, 2014; Henfield, Washington, & Byrd, 2014; Lee & Reeves, 2012; Milner, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015; Taylor, Kyere, & King, 2021). With the rise of focus on systemic inequity and its impacts on education, several scholars shifted gap discourses from individualistic and outcome-driven to structural and resource-driven approaches by highlighting structures, systems, and norms steeped in a history of racialized inequity (Carter & Welner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012).

While these discursive shifts repurposed academic disparities as not originating with historically minoritized students, we highlight, through concepts of decoloniality, various blind spots. Recognizing the term 'gap' itself implies a deviation from a norm or a standard, we aim to revisit and critique gap discourses in education by applying the idea of coloniality. Coloniality as an interdisciplinary concept historicizes modern societies' relationship to the origins of colonization starting in the sixteenth century, the birth of Eurocentrism, and White supremacist institutions, organizations, systems, practices, and norms (Grosfoguel, 2013). In this paper, we argue for decoloniality by identifying pervasive White supremacy – Eurocentric norms and practices masquerading as reform using Wright's (2022) conceptual model Coloniality Racial Capitalism and Modernity (CRCM). CRCM informed our analysis of gap discourses and shaped our critiques on the coloniality

of knowledge/power – Eurocentric conceptions of the world, which do not accommodate pluralistic, geohistorical ontologies/epistemologies (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

We aim to construct praxes in decoloniality and identify counter-narratives that align with decoloniality perspectives. To do this, our historiographical analysis outlines the genealogy of gap discourses in academic research focusing on US schools. The US offers unique contexts due to its history of colonization, enslavement, and legal patterns of systemic injustices such as Jim Crow[1] and Mass Incarceration,[2] vestiges that permeate US educational systems. Aside from the US, achievement gap discourses are also prevalent internationally. Our analysis can also be applicable and inform implications for other places like the Global South where the lasting legacies of colonization persist.

Framing the study

Coloniality, racial-capitalism, and modernity (CRCM)

Coloniality is not a description of reality; it is the reality of modern Western societies. This depiction allows us to reframe Western institutions as not objective but reflexive based on Western ideology shaping modern systems such as education.

Wright's (2022) CRCM conceptual framework describes coloniality as historically privileged Eurocentric epistemologies built upon inherent racially iniquitous economic systems influencing education (See **Figure 1**). CRCM highlights Capitalism and Slavery, Williams's (1994) historicity that details how the accruement of capital through enslavement and the planter's economy seeded/financed

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1. Named after a popular Black minstrel show character, Jim Crow state and local laws began in the US post-Civil War era around 1865 and lasted until the Civil Rights era in 1968. Jim Crow laws restricted Blacks' access to wealth, education, and the political arena, and those who resisted or defied risked prison, violence, and death.
2. A name for a pervasive criminal justice system of racial and social control. Mass incarceration best describes the 600 percent increase in incarceration from the mid-1960s to 2000, which disproportionally impacted Black and Latinx men and devastated their communities. This criminal justice process named its captors criminals and felons, relegated them to permanent second-class citizenship, stripped them of fundamental civil and human rights, and subjected them to various degrees of discrimination.
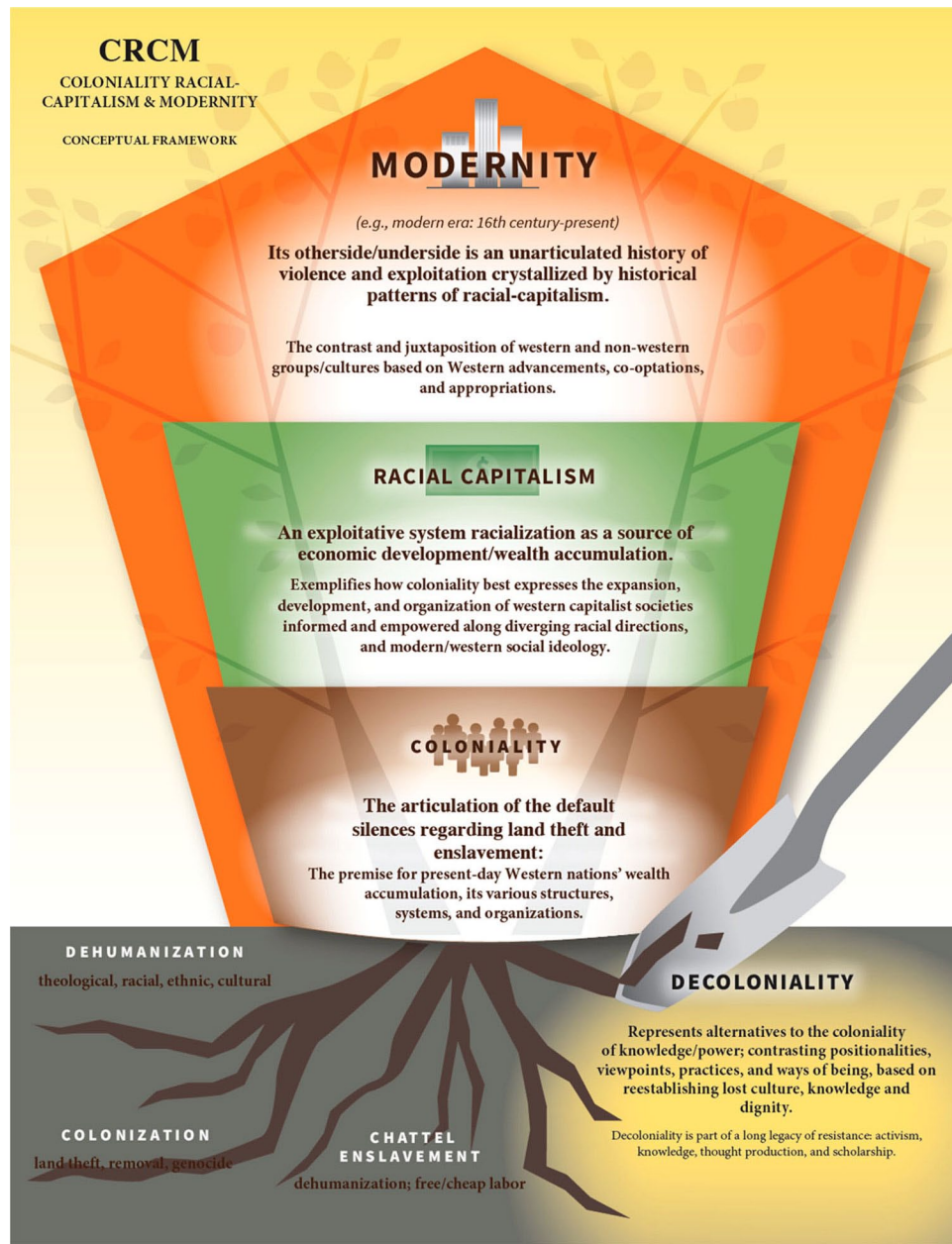
CRCM
COLONIALITY RACIAL-
CAPITALISM & MODERNITY

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

MODERNITY

(e.g., modern era: 16th century-present)

Its otherside/underside is an unarticulated history of
violence and exploitation crystallized by historical
patterns of racial-capitalism.

The contrast and juxtaposition of western and non-western
groups/cultures based on Western advancements, co-optations,
and appropriations.

RACIAL CAPITALISM

An exploitative system racialization as a source of
economic development/wealth accumulation.

Exemplifies how coloniality best expresses the expansion,
development, and organization of western capitalist societies
informed and empowered along diverging racial directions,
and modern/western social ideology.

COLONIALITY

The articulation of the default
silences regarding land theft and
enslavement:
The premise for present-day Western nations' wealth
accumulation, its various structures,
systems, and organizations.

DEHUMANIZATION
theological, racial, ethnic, cultural

DECOLONIALITY

Represents alternatives to the coloniality
of knowledge/power; contrasting positionalities,
viewpoints, practices, and ways of being, based on
reestablishing lost culture, knowledge and
dignity.

Decoloniality is part of a long legacy of resistance: activism,
knowledge, thought production, and scholarship.

COLONIZATION
land theft, removal, genocide

**CHATTEL
ENSLAVEMENT**

dehumanization; free/cheap labor

Figure 1. Coloniality Racial Capitalism and Modernity Framework.

the Industrial Revolution and Modernity (Robinson, 2000; Wright, 2022). Thus, racial capitalism, the amalgamation of racial and economic injustice, as highlighted in this paper, has been fundamental to school practices for centuries in the US (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Courtney, Gunter, Niesche, & Trujillo, 2021; Horsford, Scott,

& Anderson, 2018; Lipman, 2011). Using CRCM to analyze gap discourses allows us to look past the deficit rhetoric of failing racialized students toward the history of violence rooted in all racialized disparities, such as educational gaps.

Coloniality: knowledge and power

Coloniality extends beyond rightful Indigenous claims of land theft and sovereignty. Instead, coloniality challenges two pillars of modernity – the Western/modern logic silencing Indigenous land theft and sovereignty claims, as well as enslavement and human trafficking – and the sociocultural/political norms that these pillars helped generate. Coloniality amplifies and centers land theft and enslavement as the premise for Western nations' wealth accumulation, its various structures, systems, organizations, and the assortment of professionals currently invested in maintaining these matrixes. Coloniality highlights and counters the relative omnipresence/omnipotence of modernity and its superstructures (Grosfoguel, 2013; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Wright, 2022). It is also important to note that coloniality is differentiated from critical theory – a derivative of modernity – a Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism (Mignolo, 2012; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Coloniality's period of analysis begins in the sixteenth century. In contrast, critical theory, particularly the Frankfurt school, and its offshoots' analysis begin in the eighteenth century, the enlightenment period, 'the second phase of colonial histories…[and] modernity' (Mignolo, 2012, p. 19). Thus, coloniality aligns with the first phase of modernity, the sacking of Al Andalusia (modern Spain), where colonization and enslavement, later brought to the Americas, originated, according to Grosfoguel (2013).

In contrast, coloniality is congruent with and constitutive of modernity; it describes and amplifies the origins of Western traditions, the identity markers, and the taxonomies imposed on non-White people and cultures. Although often analyzed separately, the coloniality of knowledge/power is an inextricable matrix, an unaccommodating, ontologically/epistemologically Eurocentric conception of the world (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Santos (2014) argued that the 'coloniality of modern Western capitalist power consists of collapsing difference and inequality while claiming the privilege to ascertain who is equal

or different' (p. 177). In other words, the hierarchical structures predetermine that everyone is different from the White Western male and that no one is equal to him.

The achievement gap discourse, an instance of the coloniality of knowledge, permeates Western educational systems, policy, university research, grant funding, and practice (e.g. Abdi, 2022; Bainazarov et al., 2020; Battiste, 2013; Dei & Adhami, 2022; Patel, 2015; Smith, 1999). The global spread and trajectory of the achievement gap discourse and its racialized and deficit-laced embellishments exemplify the coloniality of power.

Racial capitalism

The coloniality of knowledge and power is inextricably linked to Cedric Robinson's racial capitalism (Grosfoguel, 2018; Wright, 2022). Robinson (2000) refers to racial capitalism as 'the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society' (p. 2) along diverging racial directions, informed and empowered by modern/Western social ideology. Critical scholars often describe the force of racial capitalism in public policy as the 'economic style of reasoning' (Berman, 2022) and in education as neoliberalism (Courtney et al., 2021; Horsford et al., 2018; Lipman, 2011; Wright, Whitaker, Khalifa, & Briscoe, 2020). Berman (2022) noted that the economic style embedded itself into public policymaking in the US during the peak of the Civil Rights Movement. Further, economic-based policy and education approaches precede morality and the public good. Berman (2022) argued that 'policies were not good because they were well-intentioned, or because they reflected moral values... ' instead, they 'maximized economic well-being' (p. 39). Additionally, educational scholars discussed neoliberalism as aligned with administration and governance systems, interconnected with sociopolitical beliefs and practices favoring deregulated access to capitalists' control of educational reforms (Lipman, 2011; Trujillo & Horsford, 2021). Moreover, Bowles and Gintis (2011) understood education as a means of social policy whose contemporary reforms are fundamentally competitive, capitalist, and, by design, racially inequitable.

Modernity

Modern Western technological achievements and advancements posit cultural and ethnic superiority yet are silent about Western Europe's history of pillage and exploitation (Grosfoguel, 2018; Maldonado-Torres, 2004; Wright, 2022). Thus, the other side of modernity's technological revolution is an intractable history of colonization, enslavement, genocide, appropriation, and the propagation of White Supremacy, which led to an economic system maintained by racial-capitalist ideologies, structures, norms, and pedagogies (Grosfoguel, 2018; Horne, 2018; Marable, 2000; Rodney, 1981; Wright, 2022).

Counter narrative: decoloniality

Decoloniality represents alternative positionalities, viewpoints, practices, and ways of being based upon re-establishing lost culture, knowledge, and dignity. Decoloniality is part of a long legacy of resistance, re-existence, and restoration traced back to Maroon and Slave insurrections throughout the Americas, to the knowledge and activism of W.E.B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, Gloria Anzaldúa, Walter Rodney, Derrick Bell, Cedric Robinson, and Toni Morrison among many others (Grosfoguel, 2018; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Wright, 2022). The commonality among groups whose practices, cultures, and dispositions reflect decoloniality are shared grievances against Eurocentric/colonialist encroachments on their land, bodies, culture, dignity, and subsequent erasure and destruction of their knowledge systems and communities.

While decoloniality and decolonization are related, they are different. For example, decolonization denotes struggles for political power, nation-state independence, and similar dynamics heightened during the Cold War. In other words, decolonization – the removal or replacement of Europeans in power and control of formerly colonized African, Asian, and Latin American countries, primarily through force or the threat of force, was a necessary first step. Decolonization movements to end political oppression inform the orientation of decoloniality, identifying and demolishing imposed knowledge and social and political constructs. Decoloniality aims to unlearn accrued and accumulated Eurocentric knowledge, values, and norms that demean

colonized peoples. Additionally, decoloniality seeks to restore the ontologies, epistemologies, dignity, and cultures of colonized people. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) explained that decoloniality emerged in response to the shortcomings of decolonization:

> Decoloniality denotes ways of thinking, knowing, being, and doing that began with but also precede the colonial enterprise and invasion. It implies the recognition and undoing of the hierarchical structures of race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class that continue to control life, knowledge, spirituality, thought, and structures that are clearly intertwined with and constitutive of global capitalism and Western modernity. (p. 17)

Efforts to address the coloniality of knowledge/power are on the rise in education as researchers across various fields from educational leadership, administration, and policy have begun reframing perspectives and recalibrating long-held beliefs, even critical beliefs (Abdi, 2022; Bainazarov et al., 2022; Dei & Adhami, 2022; Khalifa, Khalil, Marsh, & Halloran, 2019; Patel, 2015; Wright, 2022). Educational scholars have illustrated how educational practices and norms strip historically minoritized Black and Brown students of their language and culture and negatively affect all students, including Whites. Accordingly, counter-hegemonic knowledge production in the Western academy should be the responsibility of Black and other racialized scholars (Dei & Adhami, 2022; Lopez, 2021). Lastly, scholars suggest that the interdisciplinary capacity of coloniality is beneficial for dismantling disciplinary silos in education. Further, that policy failure to diagnose achievement gaps results from the coloniality of knowledge/powers' geopolitical impact (Bainazarov et al., 2022; Baquedano-López, Hernandez, & Alexander, 2014; Gonzales & Shields, 2015).

A critical overview of the gap discourses

We identify achievement gaps in education as a discourse in modernity. The term suggests that Black people, the historically marginalized, and poor people deviated from a Eurocentric, White, Western standard or norm. Furthermore, this deviation is the root cause

of educational gaps. Nevertheless, in classic modernity discourse, no mention of the histories and legacies of violent legal, economic, and sociopolitical systems and structures hidden in the foreground. Nonetheless, significant critiques, analyzes, and shifts emerged responding to 'achievement gap' discourses informing educational research and practice. We analyze these trends and shifts using CRCM in search of and to highlight counternarratives aligned with decoloniality.

Falling into the achievement gap

The disparity in educational outcomes between Black and White students in the US led to inquiries and explorations centered around a deficit and ahistorical decree, the 'achievement gap.' Patel (2015) observed that racialized 'inequity in education is both so ubiquitous and so persistent' (p. 16) that we nicknamed it the achievement gap. The achievement gap illustrates modernity discourses by positing that European, White students are ethnically and culturally more advanced and superior to Black students. However, when viewed under the lens of modernity, it is easy to notice Eurocentric ideology embedded in achievement gap discourses, which inherently advantages Western White students. Based on the premise of modernity, the superiority of Western culture and ethnicity, the achievement gap decree became one of the most pervasive contemporary educational issues and has shaped education policy and school practice for several decades (Carey, 2014).

Nevertheless, and true to modernity discourses, early achievement gap frameworks were silent about US history rooted in land theft, genocide, and enslavement, the launchpad for modern racist institutions and systems (e.g. Horne, 2018). This resulted in silence about an economy skewed by colonization and enslavement (Quijano, 2000; Robinson, 2000). Instead, achievement gap discourses primarily focused on disparities in academic success between Black–White students' scores in standardized testing, such as NAEP (e.g. Lee & Reeves, 2012).

Beyond its focus on outcomes, scholars extended the achievement gap discourses to include culture, class, gender, ethnicity, immigration status, and students' proximity to poverty (Delgado & Stoll, 2015; Flores, 2018; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Henfield et al., 2014;

Ishimaru, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015; Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Patel, Barrera, Strambler, Muñoz, & Macciomei, 2016; Wiseman, Damaschke-Deitrick, Park, & Bell, 2020). Although achievement gap discourses brought attention to variegated student outcomes based on racial and other student identity categories, we argue that the discourses generated several problematic aspects. Below, we offer an analysis revealing modernity and racial capitalism embedded in achievement gap discourses.

Modernity in standardized tests and mis-measuring the gaps

As standardized test scores most likely determine achievement gaps, various scholars have problematized the overemphasis on test scores (e.g. Battiste, 2013; Dei & Adhami, 2022; Khalifa et al., 2019; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Perry & Steele, 2004). Informed by CRCM, we view achievement gap discourses as drawing on Eurocentric epistemologies using quantifiable evidence and methods as unassailable truth. This logic narrowly frames test scores as the most representative and reliable determinant of students' intelligence and 'achievement' while ignoring and negating a long history of other factors, such as knowledge systems found in different cultures (Anderson, 1988; Battiste, 2013; Foster & Tillman, 2009; Moll et al., 1992; Smith, 1999; Tillman, 2004; Walker, 1996).

Eurocentric discourses, practices, and norms have yielded the idea that standardized testing is an innovative and modern tool to evaluate students' capacity and ability. Even some critical theory-informed scholars' analyzes are enveloped in modernity discourses. For example, Carter (2008) posited that (a) high achievement within the school systems is a desirable trait and (b) race-informed ideology can facilitate improved academic achievement for students of color. Furthermore, in exploring high-achieving Black students in a White suburban high school, Carter (2008) concluded that a critical race achievement ideology could help students develop 'adaptive behaviors and strategies they enact in order to achieve within a racist environment' (p. 479). While such discourses espouse the ability of minoritized students to do well on testing, which we recognize and applaud, the students are not the issue. From the perspective of the CRCM framework, we are concerned with Carter's (2008) approach to encourage

students to adapt to school systems rooted in problematic modernity discourses. We view this approach as problematic in that 1) it avoids resisting and challenging the omnipotent coloniality shaping school culture and 2) it validates the racial capitalism inherent to the development of White suburbs in the US; and the notions of White ethnic and cultural superiority.

The racial capitalism in the gaps

Another group of researchers suggests that the achievement gap discourses are entangled with racial capitalism. Under the lens of racial capitalism, achievement gap discourses espouse deficit views of Black and historically minoritized students of color as below the standard of modernity and Western culture (e.g., Meyers, 2012; Wright, 2022). Further, policy discourses often frame high 'achievement' as desirable 'capital' necessary for students to compete successfully in the global market economy. A market economy built from wealth accumulation systems of exploitation and racialization – unarticulated in modernity discourses. Framed as such, students become economic objects, whereby Black and historically minoritized students are historically disadvantaged compared to their White counterparts. Economic-oriented school practices exacerbated and perpetuated deficit views of minoritized students as deviant, pathological, and needing others (e.g. White Western men/knowledge) (Stein, 2004; Wright et al., 2020).

The education debt: shifting gap discourses from outputs to inputs

Ladson-Billings's (2006) AERA presidential address proposed the most notable shifts of the 'achievement gap.' She argued that omnipresent educational discourses regarding disparities in standardized test scores between Black/Latinx and White students in the US were improperly termed achievement gaps. Instead, similar to the concept of the national debt, she argued that over time an 'education debt' accumulated, which was the 'foregone schooling resources that we could have (should have) been investing in (primarily) low-income kids' (p. 5). The shift from 'achievement gap' to 'education debt' was significant as it sparked broad attention to sociohistorical contexts of Black

and historically minoritized students' 'failures' in standardized testing. This movement shifted 'achievement gap' perspectives from outcome-driven to more input-driven ones. Furthermore, it helped generate an understanding of established sociopolitical historicity fundamental to student outcome gaps.

Notwithstanding, Ladson-Billings (2006) conceded that her education debt concept was informed by a 'strict economist,' Professor Robert Haveman of the University of Wisconsin. Haveman conceptualized crime, low productivity, low wages, and labor force participation as social problems emanating from impoverished and low-income communities. Further, Haveman described the education debt as foregone resources that could have been used to avoid the above-mentioned social problems, offset the education debt, and help eliminate the achievement gap. From the lens of CRCM, Haveman's silence about the root causes of social problems exemplifies modernity discourses. He illustrates an unarticulated premise of modernity that Western culture and ethnicity are superior and, in this case, the standard by which low-income, crime-riddled communities (e.g. Blacks) have failed to attain. What is also unarticulated is the historical trajectory, laws, structures, systems, and norms that created the social problems that low-income students inherited. Further, Haveman's economic style of reasoning is rooted in racial capitalism because he argues for the development of Black and poor communities on a capitalist premise empowered by modern/Western social ideology, founded upon and continuing along diverging racial directions. Indeed, Berman's (2022) historical analysis of policies in the US showed how the economic style of reasoning became popular and eventually taken for granted norms 'embedded in bureaucratic expertise and that is reproduced in the organizations in and around government' (p. 20).

Accordingly, in expanding an economic metaphor, Ladson-Billings explained four dimensions that created education debt: historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral policies and norms. First, the historical debt is rooted in the US educational system's infamous legacy of inequities premised around race, class, and gender (Anderson, 1988). For instance, Blackamericans had been legally denied access to education during enslavement. After the Civil War, an apartheid-style educational system lasted roughly one hundred years until the Brown v. Board case in 1954/1964 (Bell, 2005; Fenwick, 2022). Similarly, Indigenous

people in the US were subjected to boarding schools, forced assimilation, and disallowed in predominantly White colleges and universities. The history of US education also shows how laws and school systems denied Latinx and Asian American students access to equitable and high-quality education (e.g. Mendez v. Westminster case, Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882). Second, economic debt is related to centuries of racialized inequalities in school funding (e.g. disparities in per-pupil expenditures between urban and suburban areas). Another critical aspect is racialized patterns in earnings ratios and income disparities associated with years of cumulative schooling (Altonji & Doraszelski, 2005; Margo, 1990). Third, the sociopolitical debt refers to the disenfranchisement of historically minoritized Black, Latinx, Native, and Asian Americans in the US. Nevertheless, marginalized groups' control over school trajectories has been historically thwarted and muted by limited access to political capital compared to their White, middle-class counterparts (Bell, 2005; Mackey, 2017; Morel, 2018; Stein, 2004). The fourth component of the education debt is the moral debt, which entails social responsibility to acknowledge and repair historical wrongs (e.g. exploitation of the labor of POC) and prevalent systemic racism affecting daily life.

To an extent, the four dimensions offered by Ladson-Billings as the source of the education debt reflect what is conveyed by decoloniality. It marks an effort to undo Eurocentric hierarchal structures controlling knowledge and production. The context offered in the four dimensions centers on marginalized Black and racialized group members' perspectives, rooted in established ways of knowing and believing. However, we also found the education debt premise is clearly 'intertwined with and constitutive of global capitalism and Western modernity' (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 17) and racial capitalism (Robinson, 2000) structures, which we will address below.

Coloniality in 'debt' discourses

Ladson-Billings's (2006) analyzes of the idea of 'education debt' and related scholarly work are deeply entangled with many aspects of modernity and racial capitalism. First, while Ladson-Billings draws on economic discourse only metaphorically to analyze the relationship between education debt and national debt, this economic relationship

is far more central than metaphorical. Indeed, this input-output economic logic to understand student achievement perpetuates problematic racial capitalism discourses. In this view, students are still objects of and accountable to testing. Such resource-filling approaches validate White, Western cultural superiority in that paying off the debt would increase the achievement of marginalized students.

Nevertheless, the silence about how these debts accrued remains. Granted, Ladson-Billings's argument is more aligned with structural and holistic approaches to paying the debt instead of individualized efforts to fill the resources. Additionally, these sentiments are prevalent and shared in many other studies citing Ladson-Billings (2006) (See, Darden & Cavendish, 2012; Hall Mark, 2013; Milner, 2010; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). The underlying assumptions behind these studies still draw on the logic that narrowing resource gaps from the input stage will narrow gaps in student outcomes, which echoes the prevalent economic 'input-output' approaches to educational policy and practice (Marginson, 1997).

We argue that the danger of embodying this economic logic is that framing the education process as instrumental to measurable outcomes objectifies student achievement. For example, Chambers (2009), instead of an achievement gap, suggested a 'receivement gap' that 'focuses attention on educational inputs – what the students receive on their educational journey, instead of outputs – their performance on a standardized test' (p. 418), in response to deficit views on Black students' achievement. Chambers's (2009) findings show how Black students could negotiate their way into the coloniality, racial capitalist, and modernity (CRCM) dominant school culture to attain academic success. Instead of challenging the existing (CRCM) testing system or logic of success itself, Chambers (2009) frames Black students as agents who own and exercise capital to attain successful outcomes determined by 'Others' in a system centered on Eurocentric ideologies – racial capitalism and modernity. As a result, while we applaud individual acts of success, these arguments are not enough to overcome a deeply rooted CRCM matrix of discourses and structures. Generating counternarratives in response to deficit models might be successfully approached by researchers like Chambers and Ladson-Billings. However, we point out that their arguments and evidence are still grounded in modernity and racial capitalism discourses.

The opportunity gap: seeking decoloniality in discursive shift

Like 'education debt,' scholars suggested opportunity gaps in response to the achievement gap. The opportunity gap discourse 'shifts our attention from outcomes to inputs – to the deficiencies in the foundational components of societies, schools, and communities that produce significant differences in educational – and ultimately socioeconomic outcomes' (Carter & Welner, 2013, p. 3). Carter and Welner (2013) suggest that thinking of 'achievement gaps' emphasizes symptoms while thinking of unequal opportunity emphasizes causes. While we wholeheartedly agree that the achievement gap emphasis on symptoms is inappropriate and deficient and avoids the causes, the opportunity gap and its focus on causes still leave the door open to deficit depictions. Deficits that implicate Black and other historically minoritized children, their culture, and communities as the root-cause of their deficient academic performance (see Putnam, 2015, 2016).

For example, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University Robert Putnam's (2015) book, Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis discusses opportunity gaps using meritocracy discourses. Putnam (2016) argued that America was in a crisis due to overwhelming opportunity gaps and saw meritocracy, talent, plus hard work, equating to success, as the solution. He argued that 'high-test-scoring kids from poor backgrounds are less likely to finish a college degree now than low-test-scoring kids from rich families' (Putnam, 2015, p. 4). Symbolic of this quote, Putnam (2016) omits fundamental historical, economic, racial, and legal factors contributing to his equal opportunity and meritocracy discourse. This conflicts with an overwhelming amount of structural and systemic barriers highlighted by CRCM. The following quote by Milner (2013) supports this, showing how meritocracy without considering structural barriers can be flawed:

> There is enormous variation in students' social, economic, historic, political, and educational opportunities, which is in stark contrast to the 'American dream' – one that adopts and supports meritocracy as its creed or philosophy. Still, many educators believe that if people, their students in particular, just work hard enough, they will be rewarded and will achieve success. They can fail to recognize systemic barriers and institutional structures that prevent opportunity and

success, even when students are hard working. (pg. 36) This suggests that, although Putnam adopted the opportunity gap language to apply to his modernity discourses to identify the causes of unequal opportunity, he did not include the US's colonial origins, racialization, and the economic launchpad that resulted from enslavement.

Seeking decoloniality in approaches to opportunity gap

While we find the coloniality of knowledge/power intertangled with opportunity gap approaches, others illuminate decoloniality perspectives and are helpful toward reimagining Black and racially minoritized students' school experiences. As suggested by Mignolo and Walsh (2018), decoloniality conveys ways of thinking, knowing, and being that contrast the demands of oppressive racialized economic hierarchies and structures. Granted, research addressing opportunity gaps cited in this section does not articulate decoloniality. However, we seek possible approaches to unlearn harmful Eurocentric knowledge constructs; toward decoloniality. This paper focused on gaps in education and the discourses driving them to re-think, reframe, and inform scholarship and practice of educational leadership.

Centrally, the recent discursive shift from achievement to opportunity gap reframed academic achievement as detailed herein. Milner's (2012) analysis shows that many reform efforts to eliminate achievement gaps result from the standardization of policies and practices that are not universal but rooted in and reflective of the norms and values of a White male-dominated society – modernity. Further, Milner criticized standardization as 'antithetical to diversity' by suggesting that 'all students live and operate in homogeneous environments with equality and equity of opportunity afforded to them' (p. 694). Such redirecting focuses on the structure of knowledge and power, shaping how achievement gaps are framed. Furthermore, this approach reflects efforts and actions toward decoloniality.

Second, opportunity gap discourses assume the capacity for the success of students of color as a norm, not as exceptional or novel, which is an appropriate response to deficit thinking (Dei & Adhami, 2022; Harper, 2015). Promoting minoritized students' success is illustrated by Harper's (2015) inquiry into the New York City Department

of Education's Expanded Success Initiative (ESI). ESI is an NYC public school initiative serving its highest-achieving male students. NYC's Department of Education asked Harper to use his Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework to study 40 ESI public high schools consisting of 325 college-bound juniors and seniors across New York City, 94 percent of whom were Black and Latino. Through interview data, pictures, and responses to questionnaires, Harper demonstrates that these college-bound Black and Latino students were intelligent and ambitious, nothing like the deficit images constantly depicted in the media. All 325 students had visited multiple college campuses, and all were accepted into at least one. Harper's counternarrative offers a rare look at students who are rarely framed as successful and capable; as such, he remains 'unconvinced' that the success and capacity for success found in the NYC schools are outliers. In other words, Harper sees the potential for this success to be the norm – an explicit example of counter-hegemonic knowledge production, the kind championed by Dei and Adhami (2022) and other decoloniality scholars and thinkers.

Finally, opportunity gap discourses have generated possible interventions focusing on care, which have decoloniality implications. Care in education work to recognize and undo the harm caused by Eurocentric knowledge production processes intertwined with school norms (e.g. Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Several scholars focus on Black male students missing opportunities to receive caring interventions supporting their identity development and educational aspirations (Curry, 2017; Noguera, 2003; Taylor et al., 2021; Terry, Flennaugh, Blackmon, & Howard, 2014), even when they are high-achieving and gifted (Ford et al., 2008; Henfield et al., 2014). Bass (2020) called for school leadership that promotes care in schools as one way toward closing opportunity gaps. Bass deduced that students suffering from the perils of the opportunity gap 'respond positively when they feel cared for' (p. 389). Rivera-McCutchen's (2021) concept of radical care further extends caring interventions to redress opportunity gaps in marginalized students in urban settings. Scholars distinguish radical care from the traditional concept of care that emphasizes trust and relationships (e.g. Noddings, 2005). Radical care builds on critical care by centering race, power, and sociopolitical conditions (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Cahill, Alberto Quijada Cerecer, Reyna

Rivarola, Hernández Zamudio, & Alvarez Gutiérrez, 2019; Rivera-Mc-Cutchen, 2021; Rolón-Dow, 2005; Wilson, 2016). These findings exemplify how reframing opportunity gap discourses can embrace and align with the praxis of decoloniality.

Decoloniality scholars aim for ways of thinking about those impacted by European colonization that contradicts imposed, Eurocentric, deficit depictions and frameworks. It recognizes these knowledge constructs (e.g. spiritual, economical, and educational) and works at unlearning them (Grosfoguel, 2013; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). We highlighted ways that the switch from achievement to opportunity gap discursively incorporated decoloniality perspectives. Using CRCM, we also showed how shifts in gap discourses were used in the service of coloniality and racial capitalism (e.g. Putnam, Haveman).

Conclusion

In this paper, we aimed to transcend analyzing gap discourses that are extensive and exhaustive in education, applying the CRCM framework. 'Gap' discourses do not take place in a vacuum. We contend that these discourses are, in fact, ideological. They are wrought from modernity's Eurocentric technologies and modern advancements in racialization: differentiating Black and other historically minoritized students from White students based on standardized tests. However, 'gap' discourses are silent about the root causes of Western technological advancements and racial capitalism, the wealth accumulation resulting from land theft and enslavement. In other words, achievement gap discourses and many of their critiques are locked into a powerful coloniality of knowledge/power matrix. Accordingly, this matrix constructs, informs, and reforms the cannons of academic knowledge, research, and practice. We believe that CRCM is a tool to disentangle from this seemingly omnipotent/omnipresent matrix.

We hope to contribute to the emergence and development of studies whose methodologies and decoloniality concepts and practices inform analyzes. Our discourse analysis highlights the necessity of decoloniality (a process that began in the sixteenth century), as differentiated from critical theory (starting in the eighteenth century), in analyzing current school systems. We illustrate that schooling institutions

are products of deeply rooted coloniality of knowledge and power and racial-capitalists constructs and modernity discourses. Our analysis also points to some critiques of achievement gap discourses that align with definitions and explanations of decoloniality. We also call for future studies building on the CRCM framework – spanning coloniality, racial capitalism, and modernity. Each in their own right – to offer new ways to think about the gap discourses and other inequities and injustices permeating the educational landscape, not just in the US but across the Global South, where the legacy of colonialism still thrives. Our work is widely applicable globally where communities of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are still fending off the vestiges of colonialism's White supremacy, consequences, and socio-political and economic networks.

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