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Closing the Performance Gap in a 4th Wave and Post-Modern Society: Lessons from the Field

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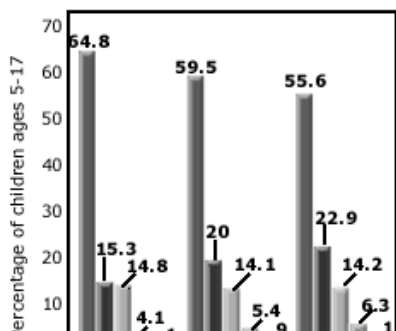
Abstract

The USA is undergoing tremendous cultural changes as we open the first decade of the 21st century. In this paper the author discusses the need to close the performance gap that exists between White, African American, and Latino/a students. To do so, educators must carefully consider several important cultural forces. The author examines the shift in demographic patterns as well as the impact of the 4th Wave and the emergence of post-modernism on education and society.

The USA is undergoing tremendous cultural changes as we open the first decade of the 21st century. To close the performance gap existing between White, African American, and Latino/a students, educators must carefully consider several important cultural forces. In this paper we will examine the shift in demographic patterns as well as the impact of the 4th Wave and the emergence of post-modernism on education and society.

Demographic Changes

According to Suarez-Orosco, co-director of the Harvard Immigration Project, as recently as the 1960s eighty-five percent of the immigrants entering the USA were from Europe (Adams, 2001). Since that time there has been a dramatic continental shift. As the twenty-first-century opens eighty to eighty-five percent of immigrants are coming from Latin America, the Afro-Caribbean Basin and Asia. This demographic shift is changing the student population in our schools and increasing the cultural gap between our students and the teachers and administrators who work with them.



Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census.

Figure 1. Population projections: 2000–2001.

This phenomenon is exacerbated by the hyper-segregation many of these new ethnic groups face as they transition

into this nation's communities. Latino/as are more likely to be in schools in which they, a "minority," are the majority.

Minority entry into predominately white neighborhoods can trigger "white flight" which also helps to fuel the new voluntary segregation of ethnic minority groups. While the student core is changing, however, the teacher core usually remains the same. Many of these schools have rapidly changed from nearly all white to nearly all minority schools. The cultural gap between veteran white teachers and their minority students that results may contribute to the performance gap of these students. This is especially true if teachers are not able to connect to the different linguistic, religious, and other cultural differences of these ethnic minority students and their parents. Gordon (2004) and other researchers have identified a lowering of expectations by white teachers when they are dealing with African American and Latino/a students under these conditions.

Wave Theory

For the first time in recorded history there are four distinctive human developmental periods co-existing on the planet. Each wave is distinct and marks one of the major ways in which the six billion people live on the planet today. The **1st Wave**, or the Hunter-Gatherers, dominated the planet some 50,000 thousand years ago. They were largely nomadic, lived in clan and tribal societies, and developed rudimentary tools that aided their ability to hunt and forage for food. The fact that this way of life is still successful speaks volumes about the resiliency, creativity, and intelligence of the humans who still practice this way of life.

The vast majority of the world still lives in the Agrarian **2nd Wave** which in many ways has changed very little in the last 12,000 years. While farming technology has evolved most **2nd Wave** societies are still dominated by patriarchal extended families, a bifurcated class system with a large peasant class, and a primary education system geared to maintaining the status quo.

The Industrial **3rd Wave** is marked by a shift from the country to the city, from the farm to the factory, from extended to nuclear families, and from primary to secondary

education. The development and spread of technology creates an evolution that consumes natural resources at a rate never experienced before. This has led to an addiction to the consumption of consumer goods which in turn fuels the production of these goods. A by-product of the rise of capitalism is the multibillion dollar marketing and advertising industry that is a seductive distraction for many young people and may play an important role in the choices students make with their time. This Wave also seems to promote democratic principles and the advancement of women and minority rights for equity and social justice.

The emergence of the Post-Industrial High Tech 4th Wave has separated the planet into a system of haves and have nots. This digital divide for some countries may take decades to close. For the first time in the history of the planet what a person knows from the neck up is more important than what their body can do from the neck down. Advanced literacy and numeracy skills are absolutely essential for competing within the 4th Wave workforce in which employers will search for their workers on a global level, harvesting the best and the brightest talent from wherever it can be found.

The fallout from the 4th Wave is having both inter- and intra-national consequences. The intra-national impact on the family has been profound. The frequency of single parent families, families with two moms or two dads and a variety of other combinations are now common place. This also contributes to the performance gap, a puzzle that will have ominous consequences if education is not able to help these students compete for the jobs that will allow them access to the middle class. As the need for solid educational skills increases, African Americans and Latino/as are graduating from America's high schools with about the same knowledge as the average white eighth-grade student in math and science.

Table 1
NAEP Scores for Grades 8 and 12: Science, Mathematics, and Reading

	Grade 8		Grade 12	
	1996	2000	1996	2000
Science				
Blacks	121	122	124	123
Hispanics	129	128	130	128
Whites	159	162	159	154
Mathematics				
Blacks	243	247	280	274
Hispanics	251	253	287	283
Whites	282	286	310	308

The Nation's Report Card: Science 2000 and Mathematics 2000

The inter-national implications of Wave Theory will continue to grow in significance since most of the new immigrants are coming from 2nd Wave cultures. These families face not only culture shock but also Wave shock. The cultural distance between the 2nd and 4th Waves is immense but is often not considered by the educational community.

With the exception of Bilingual/ESL programs, most schools have assumed that their only responsibility is the formal education of these students, not their cultural transition. In order for schools to be successful they must effectively deal with the cultural divide that exists within our changing communities.

Post-Modern USA

Along with the tremendous changes taking place as the result of our changing demographics and our emergence into the 4th Wave, the USA is dealing with a cultural shift from Modernism to Post-Modernism. The late eighteenth through the twentieth century was dominated by the modernist belief in the scientific method, reason over ignorance, order over disorder, high culture/the classics over folk knowledge, and the emergence of egalitarianism as well as meritocracy. However, as the twentieth century became plagued with world wars, eugenics movements, racism, genocide and the threat of nuclear war, philosophers began to question whether these modern ideas have been responsible for these cataclysmic events. This has led to a rejection of a variety of social foundations including the scientific method as the only way of knowing the truth. According to O'Hare and Anderson (1991), the post-modern world is shaped by pluralism, democracy, religious freedom, consumerism, mobility, and increasing access to news and entertainment. Residents of this post-modern world are able to see that there are many beliefs, multiple realities, and an exhilarating but daunting profusion of world views; they see a society that has lost its faith in absolute truth and in which people have to choose what to believe.

In the arts composers like John Cage challenge the conventional structures of classical music while Hip Hop goes about redefining world music in both its popularity and message. In architecture the skylines of our cities are changing as traditional landscapes give way to styles that challenge basic modern forms. The Las Vegas strip skyline may be the best example of these new post-modern forms.

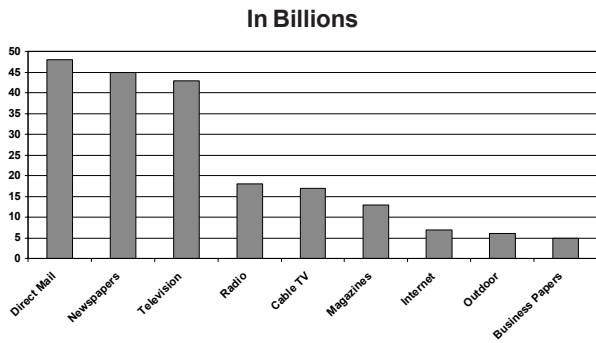
Many of our African American and Latino students have rejected the traditional rhetoric of the mainstream, choosing instead to listen to the alternative voices within their own ethnic identity or the persuasiveness of "pop culture" (Dyson, 2000).

Cutting Through the Clutter

Media critic Sut Jhally (1997) states that Americans are bombarded by more than 3600 commercial messages every day. Marketing strategies are designed to flood consumers with their messages using every medium possible including television, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards, and the internet. This competition to reach the consumer has led advertisers to develop strategies that are able to cut through the clutter. The messages in their ads have become more dramatic, obnoxious, and erotic in order to get our atten-

tion. The objectification of the female body is now common place in ad campaigns that appeal to both males and females.

This competition for attention spills over into the educational realm, desensitizing our students because of the overwhelming saturation they are subjected to everyday. It takes powerful messages to cut through the clutter of ads surrounding the average adolescent in our society, especially African American and Latino/a adolescents. Companies like Coca Cola, PepsiCo, Ralph Lauren, Nike and others spend billions in advertisement dollars to capture the attention of young people in today's society.



Sources: PwC/IAB Internet Ad Revenue Report; McCann Erickson

Figure 2. 2003 U.S. Advertising Spending

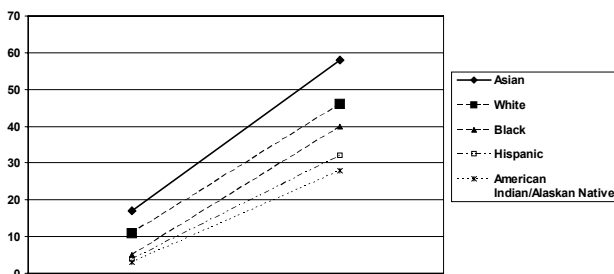
Educators find it difficult to compete financially or creatively for the attention of our young people. The typical allure of K-12 education in the public sector is that it is free and compulsory.

The Emergence of Ethnic Identity in Social Space

Today's schools are prime examples of where competition for social space is being waged. As ethnic minority groups grow they are challenging the traditional control of the white middle class. As "white flight" takes place and "hyper-segregation" expands, the characteristics of the tra-

Percentage of High School Graduates with Substantial Credits in Academic Courses, 1982 and 1998

Percentage with four years of English, three years each of social studies and mathematics, and two years of a foreign language



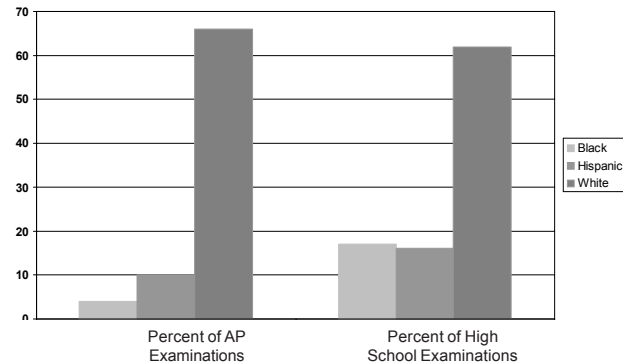
Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2001, Table 143. Original data from the National Center for Education Statistics, High School Transcript Study

Figure 3. Rigor of Curriculum

ditional student are being redefined. The new ethnic student possesses cultural dimensions that can lead to dissonance within the teacher and administrative core that is entrenched within most of our schools. This becomes expressed in the overrepresentation of these groups in Special Education programs, in suspensions, and in expulsion rates.

Additionally, this phenomenon is expressed in the under-representation of these groups in Gifted, Honors, and Advanced Placement Programs.

Distribution of Advanced Placement Examinations Compared with the Distribution of the High School Population, by Race/Ethnicity, 1999/2002*



*AP examinations are for 2002; high school population data are for 1999

Sources: AP data are from the College Board; High School population data are from the National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2001, Table 42

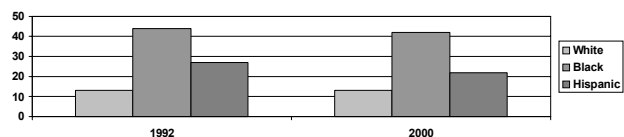
Figure 4. Rigor of Curriculum

However, in the social and athletic aspects of school, ethnic minority students often compete remarkably well. If they have the abilities they can quickly distinguish themselves in athletics and become popular enough over time to be elected as homecoming king or queen.

Time on Task Issues

One of Jawanza Kunjufu's favorite statements is "What you do most is what you do best." According to Kunjufu this is the reason African Americans excel in sports: In this area they work as hard or harder than anyone else (Adams, 1991). The question is why African Americans choose these activities to concentrate their time and energy on. The answer is simple. They have observed a visible chain of success in these endeavors, and these successes lead to family and community status, which can lead to scholarships and the possibility within a small elite to earn millions of dollars at the professional level. This formula seems to work in sports as well as other forms of entertainment in our society. In addition, while in school these students must maintain passing grades in order to stay eligible. In the "High School and Beyond" (Tuma, Geis, & Carroll, 1995) study, researchers found that African Americans spent less time studying than any other ethnic/racial group in the USA. On the other hand, they spent more time watching television.

**Percentage of Fourth Graders
Watching Six Hours or More of TV
per Day by Race/Ethnicity
(All Schools), 1992-2000**



Source: National Center for Educational Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics 2001, Table 112.

Figure 5. Television Watching

Additionally, they spent more time engaging in other social activities that are not academically related but may enhance their social ability skills.

Expectations

Steinberg's (1996) study clearly found ethnic and racial differences in student perception of how they thought their parents would react to low grades. Asian American students felt that if they brought home anything lower than an A- they would be in trouble with their parents. European American students stated anything below a B- would result in parental disapproval. For Latino/as and African Americans the lowest acceptable grade was D+. When these data are combined with time-on-task characteristics there should be little wonder why African Americans and Latino/as find themselves performing significantly below their white and Asian counterparts academically.

Ethnic Propriospect

Propriospect can be defined as the "sum total of ones experiences" (Adams, 2001). The experience of ethnic and racial minorities is significantly different from whites due to their long-term historical association to oppression, racism, and prejudice in our society. This difference in how they see the world may have an impact on their decision making and explain why African Americans and Latino/as do not invest in academics at the same level of intensity as their white and Asian counterparts.

White middle- and upper-class children perceive the world through a propriospect of privilege, open-ended opportunity, a belief in individual effort, and access to successful role models in their family, community, and nation. This is not to say that whites do not have obstacles to overcome, but few would argue that these obstacles have been as severe or as long lasting as those African Americans and Latino/as have experienced. Many African Americans and Latino/as simply do not buy into modern education's saccharine view of how to make it in our society. Their folk vision suggests to them that there are viable options other than academics at this stage in their lives which will enable them to make it in American society.

Implications for Educators in the 4th Wave Postmodern Era

During the 1980s I was involved in the resettlement efforts of Southeast Asian refugees into our country. Communities all across our nation reached out to help these strangers integrate into our neighborhoods and schools. One group in particular, the Hmong, seemed to have more difficulty in their transition than many of the other groups. In hindsight it is now clear why they had so many problems. The Hmong were from 1st Wave societies. While most of the other refugees were from 2nd and 3rd Wave cultures, the Hmong had more cultural differences to overcome. These were people from the highlands of Laos who were primarily nomadic and who had an oral tradition rather than a written language. This made their transition more difficult. Learning English and adjusting to the rapid pace of a 4th Wave society presented a huge challenge.

Hmong cultural traditions created problems in other ways. For example, the Hmong are very particular about their bodies and disrobing in public was strictly taboo, but the physical education requirements in the junior and senior high schools they attended required all students to do this. The Hmong girls in particular simply refused to comply. This resulted in matriculation and graduation requirement issues. In one particular school district students were forced to disrobe or be suspended from school. This is a clear example of the additional hurdles culturally different students can bring into our schools. How do schools build bridges across these cultural gulfs? Should the culture of the school be negotiable as it changes from predominately white and middle class to a population that includes increasing numbers of children of color from a spectrum of Wave and social class experiences?

Our schools are now places of identity politics, where ethnic or cultural groups compete for control of the social space. Teachers, administrators, and researchers must become acutely conscious of these changing forces if we are to understand why students make the choices they do in this 4th Wave post-modern milieu. The keys to closing the performance gap lie within the dimensions of our cultural propriospects as well as our pedagogy.

Lessons from the Field

I have worked in the area of educational reform for over twenty years and here are a few of the lessons that I have learned that may be helpful in closing the existing performance gap:

1. In order to compete for the attention of African American and Latino/a students a tri-focal approach is necessary. Community, family, and school must unite with single-mindedness and high expectations for all students.
2. School Districts must commit to continuous ongoing faculty and staff development that emphasizes and champi-

ons cultural literacy and intercultural communication skills.

3. Using the tri-focal approach School Districts must strive to create learning communities that develop the knowledge and will to bridge the gulf between the cultural differences and misunderstandings that may arise when the “other” comes into existence.
4. Schools must transition from vessels of assimilation to models of acculturation that respect the cultural identity of each student while encouraging them to reach their highest academic potential.
5. Schools must practice democratic principles, which take advantage of positive teacher intrusiveness, promote student self-regulation and value service learning.

Final Thoughts

Our ability as educators to recognize, understand, and learn about the differences as well as the similarities of our culturally diverse students will be the key to closing the performance gap in our schools. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work given the impact of the Post-Modern influences challenging everything from evolution and creationism to what art is. The cultural distance between the early Waves and the 4th Wave will continue to expand as this century continues. The absolute necessity of advanced literacy will mark the lines of stratification between those who have agency and those, as Freire (1970) has described, who are only objects of history. Given our changing demographics we must have a national commitment to close this performance gap or condemn much of our future majority (African Americans and Latino/as) to less than a middle-class existence.

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