How the Phrase "Achievement Gap" Reinforces Systemic Racism

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Theoretical Framework

- Critical Race Theory

- Systemic Equity Leadership

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Critical Race Theory

- Interdisciplinary

- Places race/racism at the center of analysis

- Recognizes race as a social construct but addresses race as "real" in the sense that law/society treat it as such (anti-essentialist/essentialist tension)

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Critical Race Theory

- Insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color in analyzing law and society (naming one's own reality, voice, counter-storytelling)

- Has an activist agenda to transform and redeem (not just to critique and deconstruct)

- Works toward eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of eliminating all forms of oppression.

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Systemic Equity Leadership

- The equity agenda in our system of K-12 public education is urgent and progress is not linear

- Inequities in our system of K-12 public education are intricately tied to issues of power

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Systemic Equity Leadership

- Systems are perfectly designed to get the results they are getting

- Each of us perpetuates systemic inequities in education

- Leadership is a subversive act to disrupt and transform systems

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Let's Talk

What do we mean when we say there is an "achievement gap" by race?

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Our Initial Goal

- Our work in Southwest Ohio started with traditional "achievement gap" investigations

- Our stated goal was to "close racial achievements gaps in Southwest Ohio while raising the achievement of all students"

- The data on race were compelling…

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Ohio's "Gaps"

Average ACT Scores by Parental Income and Race/Ethnicity in Ohio, School Year 2005-2006

Income Level
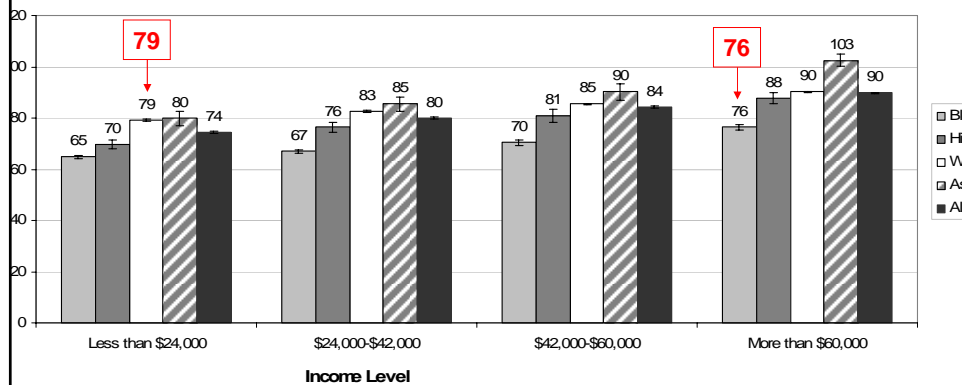
Describing the racial "achievement gap"

We asked educators participating in a year-long program on racial equity, "What does the term 'racial achievement gap' mean to you?"

Sixty-three participants—including teachers, administrators, school board members, and community members—responded. We grouped their responses around three topics.

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Topic 1: What *is the gap?*

- Disparity
- Difference
- Discrepancy

- Situation
- Lack of
- Distance between

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Topic 2: Where *is the gap?*

- Achievement
- Performance
- in Learning (amount, level)
- in Outcomes
- in Growth
- in Success

- Access
- Opportunities

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Topic 3: How do we measure *the gap?*

- Assessments
- Standardized Tests
- Written, multiple choice tests
- Achievement tests

- Outcomes
- Gifted/AP Rates
- Graduation Rates
- Disciplinary Rates

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Data Dilemma

- One superintendent—a self-professed "data geek"—wondered why, despite all of the data he collected, his staff was not more motivated to face race in their system

- We wondered how his staff was making meaning of the data

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Locating the Problem

The way we talk about a problem does several things:

- It locates the source of the problem

- It defines the range of solutions we consider

- It tells a story that conveys values and reinforces beliefs

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Defining the Problem

If the problem is <u>underachieving students</u>, the solution might be *remediation.*

- This allows us to shift the burden/blame onto students of color, their parents, and their communities

- This allows us to focus on "fixing the kids" instead of fixing the system

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Defining the Problem

If the problem is <u>underserved students</u>, the solution might be *targeting resources:*

- This *begins* to implicate the system (funding, equitable distribution of highly qualified teachers, etc)

- But, it does not go far enough (What does it mean when we consider offering incentives for our "best" teachers to work in high poverty and/or high minority schools? Where is critical cultural competence in our definition of highly qualified?)

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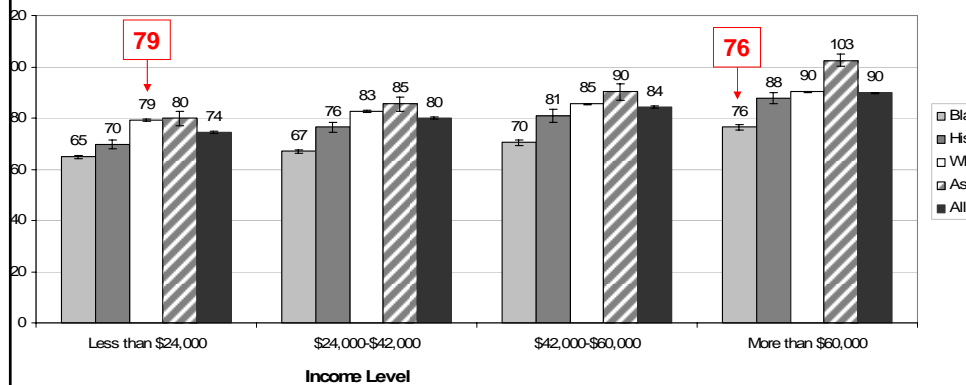
Defining the Problem

If the problem is <u>systemic racism</u>, the solution might be *critical race theory and systemic equity leadership:*

- We cannot address racial disparities without addressing race

- It is not (just) about mathematics and reading; it is about race

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A Second Look at Ohio's "Gaps"

Average ACT Scores by Parental Income and Race/Ethnicity in Ohio, School Year 2005-2006

Legend: Bla, His, W, As, All

Income levels: Less than $24,000 | $24,000-$42,000 | $42,000-$60,000 | More than $60,000

Income Level

The "Achievement Gap" Story We Were Telling

- Children of color are not performing at the level of white children

- Therefore, the system is not providing children of color with the same educational opportunities and experiences as it is providing to white children

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The "Achievement Gap" Story We Were Telling

- It is not explained solely by poverty (black children in the highest income bracket are not performing as well as white children in the lowest income bracket)

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A Majoritarian "Achievement Gap" Story

- Children of color are failing to perform at the level of their white peers

- This failure has been relatively consistent and has persisted for decades

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A Majoritarian "Achievement Gap" Story

- That white students in the lowest income bracket are outperforming black students in the highest income bracket suggests that there is something inherently inferior about black students, their families, and/or their communities

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Majoritarian Stories

- "Descriptions of events as told by members of dominant/majority groups, accompanied by the values and beliefs that justify the actions taken by dominants to insure their dominant position" (Love, 2004, p. 229)

Majoritarian Stories

- "Bundle of presuppositions, perceived wisdoms, and shared cultural understandings persons in the dominant race bring to the discussion of race" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 28)

Our Argument

The way we talk about the racial "achievement gap" re-inscribes dominant beliefs about the intellectual inferiority of students of color and reinforces majoritarian stories about the failure of students of color to perform at the level of their white peers.

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Another Way to Think About the Racial "Achievement Gap"

Black male student: On the first day in class, I showed up a little late to this AP Chemistry class. The teacher said, "You must be in the wrong class, this is AP Chemistry." I said, "No, I am in the right class," and showed her my schedule. She looked at it, and said, "this must be wrong, you cannot be in here." She didn't even know me, but she assumed that I didn't belong in her class. She called down to the office, and took about fifteen minutes calling down to the placement center, talking to counselors and everything, and when it was all over, I was in the right class. Am saying, if I was Asian would she have gone through all of that? (as told by Howard, 2008, n.p.)

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Another Way to Think About the Racial "Achievement Gap"

- A Girl Like Me
  (http://www.reelworks.org/watch.php)

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Questions We Don't Ask

- What does it mean that the conversation has shifted from "equal educational opportunity" to "achievement gaps"?

- If it is all about differences in performance, what does it mean that we do not talk about the "achievement gap" between white students and Asian students?

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Questions We Don't Ask

- What does it mean to acknowledge that students of color have different experiences in our systems (e.g., "apartheid of knowledge," discipline, disproportionality, drop out, access to rigorous curriculum, access to culturally responsive pedagogy and effective teachers) without acknowledging systemic racism?

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Questions We Don't Ask

- What do we mean when we say our testing regime is "objective" when it produces the same results as IQ testing, eugenics, phrenology and laws prohibiting education (i.e., data suggesting white superiority)?

- How might our obsession with data be lending the "cloak of science" (Berlak, 2001, n.p.) to a majoritarian story?

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Questions We Don't Ask

- How might our reporting of data be reinforcing a majoritarian story?

- Others?

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Let's Talk

- If you buy the idea—or you are at least willing to *rent* the idea for a little while—that the way we talk about the racial achievement gap re-inscribes dominant beliefs about students of color, **what might each of us do differently?**

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Love's Suggestions

- Find, fund, and implement programs and pedagogies that Work (Asa Hilliard, Ron Ferguson, Pedro Noguera, Gloria Ladson-Billings)

- Find (and support) Teachers Who are Willing and Prepared to Teach Children of Color

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Love's Suggestions

- Deconstruct, challenge, and counter the master narrative

- Change the language we use to describe the problem and what must be done

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Ladson-Billings on "Educational Debt"

- Gloria Ladson Billings suggests we reframe the racial achievement gap as "educational debt"

- Educational debt holds us all accountable

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Ladson-Billings on "Educational Debt"

- Educational debt is:
  - Historical (legacy of education inequities like prohibition, segregation, discrimination)
  - Economic (disparities in funding, earning potential, the "wealth" gap)
  - Sociopolitical (the degree to which communities of color are excluded from the civil process/democratic participation)
  - Moral (disparity between what we know is right and what we do)

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Questions To Leave You With

- What are our roles in disrupting patterns of racial disparity?

- What changes are we willing to undergo to disrupt patterns of racial disparity?

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Additional Resources

- Berlak, H. (2001, Summer). Race and the achievement gap. *Rethinking Schools Online*, 15(4). Retrieved April 16, 2008 from http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/15_04/Race154.shtml.

- Darling-Hammond, L. (2007, May 2). Evaluating 'No Child Left Behind' *The Nation*, May 21, 2007 edition. Retrieved May 19, 2008 at http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070521/darling-hammond.

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Additional Resources

- Howard, T.C. (2008). The Disenfranchisement of African American Males in PreK-12 schools: A Critical Race Theory Analysis. *Teachers College Record* 110(5), retrieved at http://www.tcrecord.org/Home.asp on January 12, 2008.

- Ladson-Billings, G. (2006, Oct.). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), pp. 3-12.

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Additional Resources

- Love, B. (2004). Brown plus 50 counter-storytelling: A Critical Race Theory analysis of the "Majoritarian Achievement Gap" story. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 37, pp. 227-246.

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