Racial Achievement Gap: Problems and Solutions

The racial achievement gap is deeply embedded into many aspects of the American culture. As my concept map identified, there are historical, personal, socioeconomic, familial and systemic factors that influence the achievement of students across the different races. My perspective of the racial achievement gap was confirmed by the different readings that were discussed in this class, the audio recordings and even the perspective of my fellow classmates. My original concept map of the racial achievement gap did not alter throughout this course but instead was substantiated by the aforementioned viewpoints.

As previously discussed during module one, my concept map was reflective of the stances taken by both Ladson-Billings (2006) and Murphy (2010). One component of my concept map outlines educational resources and within this group, I identified that different school districts are earmarked a specific amount of funds for their districts. In the Ladson-Billings (2006) article, the author does an excellent job at identifying different forms of debt that are influential in the widening of the achievement gap within U.S. schools. Ladson-Billings (2006) stated "the funding disparities between urban schools and their suburban counterparts present a telling story about the value we place on the education of different groups of students (p.6). The author's statement aligns with my thoughts of how schools that are comprised of primarily minorities receive less funding resources than schools that are comprised of primarily white students. This is one contributing factor to the racial achievement gap. Another element that was outlined in Ladson-Billings (2006) article deals with the historical debt.

Within her article, the author speaks of the historical context in which Black students did not attend secondary schooling until the late 1960's and historically Black college's were

initially the only schools that were welcoming to American Indian students (p.5). This concept strongly parallels to my map, which included segregation as a sub-factor to historical context and outlined historical context as one of the key aspects of the racial achievement gap. In terms of the historical context, students of color were often not provided with the same resources to assist them with pursuing secondary education therefore, contributing to the promotion of segregation between students of colors and white students. Unfortunately, though this was something that was institutionalized decades ago (i.e. where students of color did not have the same physical and financial resources that allowed them to easily perform to the same standards as their white counterparts) we are still seeing this disparity being carried out across cities and school districts in present-day.

Another factor linked to the aforementioned historical and financial debts that Ladson-Billings discussed and that I highlighted in my concept map was identified within the Murphy (2010) readings. Within these readings, the author identifies socioeconomic status (SES) as a factor to why the achievement gap is a societal issue (p.209). I am in complete agreement that this factor definitely plays a large role in the racial achievement gap. In identifying the role of socioeconomic status under the historical context of the racial achievement gap, it touches on several other factors such as segregation, quality and quantity of educators/school staff and familial support for students. When socioeconomic status is low and/or students are deemed impoverished, they have to contend with other issues (i.e. minimal financial backing in their school districts, under educated teachers, lack of educational resources) that some students do not have to consider and can therefore focus entirely on their education.

In Theresa Capra's 2009 article, *Poverty and its Impact on Education: Today and Tomorrow,* she identifies that a proper education should be something that all youth are afforded.

She specifically looks at the role poverty plays in the educational system. She discusses that 1) poverty is discriminatory by race: it effects African Americans and Latin Americans twice as much as White Americans and 2) poverty is discriminatory by gender and marital status: households that are lead by women tend to have higher poverty rates than those head by men which is directly tied to the fact that women make $0.78 to every $1 that men make (p.76). In her highlighting of these statistics, the author is identifying that those who receive post secondary education are "less likely to experience poverty at any time in their lives" (Capra, 2009, p.77). In addition to the statistics, Capra (2009) discusses how poverty is not discussed by educators and is often overlooked in classes throughout America. This is particularly the case for schools in high poverty districts that are forced to focus on literacy and math in order to meet their state testing requirements rather than the environmental issues such as poverty (p.77).

Furthermore, Murphy (2010) mentions that when minority groups underachieve it hurts the overall competitiveness of our democracy (p. 7). Murphy goes on to state that if this disparity were allowed to continue the overall quality of life and standard of living would diminish (p. 7). This is a factor that I did not consider when I initially created my concept map or when I originally read Murphy (2010)'s readings during module one; I had not considered the overall influence of the "weakest link". Often we are told that a society is only a strong as its weakest link or a person is only as strong as their greatest flaw. So in considering the previously discussed arguments from Murphy (2010), it is at the best interest of all parties to minimize the achievement gap in order to increase the livelihood of the entire nation. In addition, Murphy (2010) pointed out that by leveling the educational playing field the crime rates may possibly be decreased. This factor alone will help to strengthen our economy and global competiveness which in turn would contribute to our nation's overall quality. As described above, many of the

readings that were discussed in this course, poverty, socioeconomic status, finances were all discussed as important components to the racial achievement gap. I think that beyond many of the possible factors it appears that money/wealth happens to be one, if not, the core variable that drives the widening of the racial achievement gap.

As I mentioned in the module two responses, I believe that educators can address these matters by first tackling their own. Educators can take several different avenues in terms of helping to minimize the achievement gap by doing the following: 1) they can consider their own personal stance/role as an educator and how they can effect change through this; 2) consider the role that a student's self-concept and understanding regarding school plays in their desire for academic excellence (generally derived from familial expectations); 3) consider the institutional practices that have been developed and implemented in order to assist some cities/districts in academic achievement versus others. I think, though challenging, if educators were to begin taking on one item within each of the aforementioned steps then they would be able to, at least, assist with lessening the achievement gap. I remain firm in this stance because managing the financial aspect of the racial achievement gap is not necessarily something that teachers can directly and on a day-to-day basis challenge to change but the aforementioned items are things that they can work towards doing to prompt change. While I do think that this matter of the racial achievement gap will continue (as long as race is a divisive and is laden with stereotypes). As previously mentioned, I also believe that educators can institute change by doing the following steps.

Noguera and Wing (2006) discuss in their book " Unfinished Business: Closing the racial achievement gap in our schools" that the Diversity Project understood the importance of

"teachers' time, and the inclusion of teachers as full partners in designing, collecting and analyzing data" (p.167). By allowing teachers to partake in each aspect of the project that was influencing them and their students, the teachers were able to understand their role as an educator and were able to directly see how their relationship with students and their instructional practices influence their students overall development and understanding of the academic material (p.194). I think the first and the most important aspect of an educator is for them to understand their role as a teacher. When teachers are unaware or do not know how their disposition as a teacher/authority figure influences their students outcome, it can be detrimental to the learning environment (Brophy, 1996). Therefore, teachers should know whether they are patient, caring, have positive and appropriate expectations for their students, are good at building rapport with students and/or are empathic (Brophy, 1996, p.22). In knowing what personal stance they naturally house, they can then use it to help engage students who may have challenges due to other factors (i.e. poor self-concept, environmental/familial factors, poor resources at their schools). Furthermore, if teachers are aware of the stances that come naturally and then they hone those things then overtime they can learn what stances may not be the easiest for them and learn those so they can best assist their students. Murphy (2010) details the importance of teachers having proper and encouraging expectations of their students in terms of their academic achievement. Murphy outlines that when teachers have affirmative and appropriate expectations of students that their academic achievement performs on par with this and student and teacher effectiveness are also correlated to this one stance (p.176). Therefore, I believe that this step (beyond all others) is arguably the most important. This is so because even when the other factors (i.e. institutional practices and self concept derived from familial expectations) are present a teacher can be the one beckon of hope that can help a struggling student succeed.

Murphy (2010) discusses the multitude of ways in which familial home environment influences the academic achievement outcome of a child (p.106). Murphy (2010) and Brophy (1996) outline that the lack of familial resources (i.e. if the family is impoverished, if the child comes from a single parent household, etc) are an associated risk factor to the academic success of a student. When a family is lacking in one area (i.e. economic resources) this definitely can be harmful to a student's academic success; however, when one area, such as economic conditions, are compounded with other areas such as race and geographical location then this widens the achievement gap and makes the challenge for a student in this circumstance even more damning (Murphy, 2010, p.107). Therefore, as an educator it is important that we consider how the role of the familial environment can be translated into the classroom via a student misinterpreting the instructional information or being in a maladaptive manner.   So while thinking about how the familial expectations may be different for those who come from a lower economic class, as educators we have to consider what our purpose is for working with this population and how we can assist in their understanding of their expectations as students. Again, this reinforces the importance of step 1, the educators' personal stance.

It is important that we consider the institutional practices that have been developed and implemented in order to assist some cities/districts in academic achievement versus others. When discussing the achievement gap as an educator, it would be careless of me to negate the historical events that have taken place and aided in the development of our present-day educational systems. The United States has a colorful history and in the development of this country many racial, ethnic and gender groups have had a treacherous journey to equity. These groups have had to combat persistent and deeply embedded institutional practices that have prevented them from receiving some of their natural human rights. In this instance, many people due to race, ethnicity

and/or gender were not given the right to an education. Initially, people of color were not afforded the opportunity to read, write or attend school. Overtime this changed and they were allowed to do these things so long as they were separate from their white counterparts. Present-day people of color are allowed to attend school with any person regardless of their race, ethnicity or gender however, due to this history; there are many institutional practices in place that perpetuate the historical thinking of separate schooling systems. For example, people of color are allowed to attend school with their white counterparts but many cannot because they do not reside in the same districts (and in this case do not have the proper busing systems to allow them to get to schools outside of their districts) or do not have the grades to attend the schools that require passing a standardized test to gain access. This type of system plays into the reinforcement of the achievement gap for students who do not have the same resources (i.e. well educated teachers, updated course books, economic resources in terms of school funding). So even though students are all given access to schools/education, the type of education students are receiving vary greatly based on their access to resources (Murphy, 2010).

As previously noted, I believe that educators can take one aspect of each of these three steps to help minimize the achievement gap. In working towards any goal, small, feasible steps are generally the best route to take because overtime they will build on themselves. Therefore, I believe that while race is the key component as to why the "racial achievement gap" will remain. Educators can assist in the reducing of this gap by implementing the aforementioned steps, proactively understanding the history surrounding this gap and actively working with their students in order to give them the best education possible.

Brophy, J. (1996). Teaching problem students. New York: Guilford.

Capra, T. (2009, Fall). Poverty and its impact on education: today and tomorrow. *Thought and Action,* pp. 75-81.

Murphy, J. (2010). The Educators Handbook for Understanding and Closing the Achievement Gaps. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Noguera,P.A. and Wing,J.Y. (2006) Unfinished Business: Closing the Racial Achievement Gap in Our Schools.San Fransico, CA: Wiley.