The Achievement Gap

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The term “achievement gap,” also known as the excellence gap, is used when discussing deviations among different groups of students. The term generally refers to a significant and enduring discrepancy in academic achievement or educational attainment between groups of students as a result of an unbalanced distribution of educational benefits (Great Schools Partnership, 2014). There are many characteristics which affect the depth of the achievement gap such as gender, socioeconomic status (SES), stereotype threat, and the usage of teacher-reported tracking systems.

In order to go into detail about the consequences of the achievement gap, the roots of the issue must first be discussed. One of the most prominent sources of this gap is stereotype threats. Stereotype threat is a term used to describe “a situational predicament that prevents members of negatively stereotyped groups to perform up to their full ability” (Appel & Kronberger, 2012). When students who are part of a stereotyped group grow to learn that people who resemble themselves can only achieve so much, they begin to perform to that level. By doing so, they are capping off their abilities at a level much lower than their full potential truly allows them to reach. There are three stages of stereotype threat for students who are part of a negatively stereotyped group: disidentification due to the threat, presence of the threat during preparation and learning, and the presence of the threat during test taking. If any are present, the student’s ability and performance will be negatively impacted (Appel & Kronberger, 2012).

Stereotype threat also results in students limiting their occupational decisions later on in life. Appel and Kronberger (2012) found that a false narrative, that women have less talent in STEM-related subjects, was popular among both men and women. This false narrative resulted in additional stereotype-induced pressures for women during testing in STEM courses (Appel & Kronberger, 2012). The field of science tends to be dominated by males, both on a national and
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international scale. Further studies have found that when women consciously or subconsciously feel discouraged or limited by the impacts of stereotype threat, they are far less inclined to pursue a degree or follow a career path in specific fields. This is found to be true even if the field is something they are passionate about (Danaher & Crandall, 2008). Additionally, African Americans are also affected in the same way with regards to the impact of stereotype threat and STEM central course completion, degrees earned, and careers (Danaher & Crandall, 2008).

Additionally, further research suggests that an evaluator or educator’s behaviors and preconceived notions of students can falsely create an achievement gap on the basis of social class status. A French study conducted by the Université de Lausanne handed participants fake student files and asked them to pretend as though they were a secondary education language teacher assessing a test based on a specific method. The files indicated SES through factors like parental occupations, number of siblings, and extracurricular activities (Autin, Batruch & Butera, 2019). The researchers utilized generalizations pertaining to the aspects above, such as blue-collar jobs automatically placing someone within a lower-SES grouping and white collar jobs automatically placing someone within a higher-SES grouping, to observe how the provided information would affect the participant’s evaluations of the fake student files. The results revealed that “participants found on average 1.49 more mistakes in the low-SES tests than in the high-SES tests when using assessment for selection” despite the exams being within the same score range of each other (Autin, Batruch & Butera, 2019). This information illustrates how teachers’ perceptions can drastically affect students’ performances and widen the achievement gap.

Teacher-reported tracking systems employed by educational institutions also work to push evaluators and educators to formulate an achievement gap. Educational tracking is when
students are placed on different educational paths or tracks. Each track has its own modified curriculum which is tailored to students who are assigned to that difficulty level based on the assessment of their supposed academic potential by the teacher. This system almost runs parallel to the stereotype threat mechanism in that it is heavily dependent on teacher-reported indicators. Tracking matters quite considerably due to the fact that those placed on lower tracks are less likely to learn the necessary information than their higher-tracked counterparts (Karlson, 2015). When schools require teachers to abide by a tracked system for students, they are requiring them to wrongfully cap their students’ intellectual capabilities.

The long-term effects of this process have been found to be incredibly beneficial to students placed on higher tracks; however, it makes it even harder for students placed on lower tracks to achieve at the same level. A study facilitated by a sociologist at the University of Copenhagen studied the effects of teacher-reported tracking at various levels for eighth and tenth graders in English and math classes. The results established higher levels of expectations and success of students who were placed in advanced/honors courses than those in general studies (Karlson, 2015). Furthermore, Karlson (2015) estimated that students placed in advanced/honors courses experience a difference of approximately 0.4 years of expected education in each subject as compared to students in general studies. The difference of 0.4 years’ worth of expected education is already an exceedingly large amount, but the more time students spend on a higher or lower track, the more consequential the division becomes. Over time, those 0.4 years compounded for the higher-tracked students build an insurmountable barrier between them and their lower-tracked counterparts. In turn, this results in lower-tracked students being stuck at that level because of teacher-reported assessments.
With some of the roots of the problematic achievement gap having been assessed, the question as to what can be done to eliminate the issue still remains. Out of the many previously discussed excellence gaps, the one pertaining to men and women in STEM related fields can be closed through the help of positive media exposure. Research performed by Ohio State University studying the gender-math stereotype threat sampled women enrolled in Midwestern University by exposing them to five different categories of magazine articles ranging from beauty to science and technology to see how each would impact their perceptions of themselves and their own capabilities in math. The results found that the more time the women spent exposed to each category of magazines, the higher their personal assimilation to its content became, which helped counter stereotype threat for the women exposed to science and technology magazines (Luong & Knobloch, 2017). By understanding this information, educators can be made aware of the impact exposure to female representation in STEM will have on their female students. Actions such as supplying their classroom library with books representative of females in STEP and including said representation in their curriculum are ways in which this male-female achievement gap can be closed.

Moreover, a case study of Mead Valley Elementary School in California depicts how evaluator and educator perceptions and their effect on student performance and self-perceived notions of ability can be rectified through less variation in expectations between student groups. The school set aside three hours of what was called “sacred time.” Teachers were meant to use this time for collaboration while students were meant to use this time to focus on improving skills that required practice or remediation (Reeves, 2007). By having their teachers hold each of their classes to relatively similar standards, issues caused by biases and tracking were avoided. In addition, this time also allowed students to cultivate skills that they were passionate about early
on in life. For teachers, collaborative time was spent sharing their observations of students, level of effectivity of different educational practices, and learning agendas for all students. The results were outstanding with the school’s Academic Performance Index (API) going from a 450 out of 1000 to a 774 on the same scale (Reeves, 2007). Through discussion with other educators and reduced variation of expectations, biases surrounding students from low-SES households and other societal groupings were eliminated, which helped students perform at far greater levels.

There is still so much that needs to be uncovered regarding this subject and my paper has only skimmed the surface of it while encouraging me to dig deeper into the subject on my own. Through my own personal education regarding the topic, I hope to avoid failing my students by not perpetuating the excellence gap through means of stereotype threat and systems of teacher-reported tracking. I aim to prevent contributing to the achievement gap by utilizing aforementioned preventative measures to ensure a fairer education.
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References


