An Analysis of the Achievement Gap in Elementary Education

Amy Y. Li, Levi Jones, McCall Bowcut, Amy McDonald (Matt Bradley)
Honors Program, University of Utah

Current national educational policies tie funding for public education to standardized testing performance. These tests often show significant achievement gaps between different racial groups in the state of Utah. The 2003 Utah Core Criterion Reference Test results for the fourth grade showed that several minority groups such as African-Americans and Latinos have a large percentage of students performing below the level of proficiency as compared to Caucasian populations. These disparities caused us to explore the motivations that younger students have for performing well on standardized tests.

By researching the education settings at Riley Elementary school through tutoring and involvement in classroom activities, we attempted to investigate the factors that motivate students to adequately perform on standardized tests and how outside cultural factors could play a role. Our research focused specifically on how students’ classmates and families influenced their opinions regarding standardized testing as well as its relation to actual performance on these tests.

We obtained qualitative data through the usage of classroom setting observations and interviews with students and teachers to receive a better sense of the variables contributing to students’ perceptions of standardized testing at Riley Elementary School. We discovered that students had varying degrees of concern for the implementation of standardized testing to determine the proficiency levels of Utah schools. Some of the minority and refugee students at the elementary school did not have familial structures and social resources that prompted diligent concern for standardized testing and performance in the public school system, thus possibly contributing to the achievement gap that exists between different ethnic groups. More teacher attention towards individual students and assessment of the specific needs of each student would be useful in preparing for required standardized tests in Utah. The intellectual and motivational capabilities of students need to be taken into consideration at the elementary school level to promote acquisition of skills for all ethnic and racial groups, aiding in the closing of the achievement gap.

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