Chapter 2. Literature Review

Introduction

The literature review contains an overview of theories and empirical studies related to (a) the achievement gap between Black and non-Black students, (b) parental involvement among Black families, and (c) Black-Hispanic educational differences in the Virgin Islands. Collectively, these three research domains offer various forms of explanatory leverage on the problem of why Black students do not tend to do as well as non-Black students in the Virgin Islands, subject to the limitations discussed below.

It should be acknowledged at the outset of the literature review that there is a paucity of educational literature on the U.S. Virgin Islands. With their low population, and given their unique status in the framework of both U.S. and Caribbean education, the Virgin Islands have not been an attractive research site for scholars. On the other hand, the volume of educational research on the United States, and in particular on Black students and Black contexts in the United States, is vast. This body of research is highly likely to be applicable to the Virgin Islands because the larger forces shaping the Black educational experience—poverty, cultural differences, family struggles, structural disservice under school systems with Eurocentric pedagogy and approaches, and other factors—are common to Black people throughout both the United States and the Caribbean. As such, the literature on the educational experiences and contexts of Black students in the United States is most probably relevant to Black students in the Virgin Islands.

An Overview of the Achievement Gap

The achievement gap is the name given to the phenomenon of differential academic achievement in the American educational system. Achievement gaps have been observed between various groups of students, and are typically measured by scores on standardized tests. Achievement gaps exist between boys and girls, students from wealthier families and students from poorer families, disabled students and able-bodied students, African Americans and White Americans, and many other groups of students (Torff, 2014). For purposes of this study, the relevant achievement gap is the one between Black students and non-Black students of any race.

Five decades of research have revealed that African-American students consistently do worse than White American and Asian students on standardized mathematics and English tests. Current data on the achievement gap is provided by the National Assessment of Educational Process (NAEP). In particular, NAEP tracks the racial achievement gap for both fourth- and eighth-graders, in the subjects of mathematics and reading. In 2012, the average Black score in mathematics achievement was 224, compared to 249 for White students (Appel & Kronberger, 2012). The gap has closed slightly; in 1990, the average fourth-grade Black scored 188 in mathematics, as compared to 220 for White fourth-graders (Appel & Kronberger, 2012). However, there is still a statistically significant gap. One reason why it is important for researchers to address the root causes of the achievement gap among younger students is that, once established, the gap widens. Appel and Kronberger noted that, by the time students reached the eighth grade, the difference in mathematics scores between White and Black students had widened to 31 points, six points greater than in fourth grade.

The achievement gap data for reading are comparable to the mathematics data. According to NAEP, the national average reading score for fourth-grade Black students was 205, whereas their White peers scored 231, and their Asian peers scored 235 (Appel & Kronberger, 2012). The reading point differential between Black students widened by the eighth grade, when the average African American reading score was 249, the White American score was 274, and the Asian score was 275 (Appel & Kronberger, 2012).

Mathematics and reading are foundational academic skills, which is why it is necessary to devote special attention to them. However, NAEP has also established the existence of a statistically significant gap between Black and non-Black students in arts, civics, economics, geography, science, U.S. history, and writing. These statistics, which are based on national data, should be considered as conclusive proof of a racial achievement gap between Black students and students of other races.

Theories Explaining the Achievement Gap

The previous section of the literature review contained a description and statistical exploration of the achievement gap between Black and non-Black students. The purpose of this section of the review is to examine theories that attempt to explain the achievement gap. These theories not only examine the root problem of the achievement gap, but also create a context for examining the role of parental involvement and student achievement in Black families.

    Discredited genetic-biological theories.

The 19th century saw the emergence of scientific racism, which construed Black people as inferior to White people on the basis of inborn biological factors. Support for scientific racism lessened given scientific proof that innate intelligence, or *g*, was no

different between Black and White people (Borg, Mary, & Harriet, 2012). In addition, scientific racism was weakened by scientific discoveries that the concept of race is weaker than once thought; for example, there are many people with stereotypically Black features of European descent (Cooley Fruehwirth, 2013). These two developments—psychometric proof that innate intelligence does not vary across races, and the discrediting of racial typology—reduced most of the support for scientific racism. Even though scientific racism has no genuine support in recent scientific literature, scientific racism should be acknowledged as the first theory that attempted to explain the achievement gap between African-American and White American students (Davis, 2012).

The school failure explanation.

In the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, educational researchers argued that the academic differences between African-American and White American students were due to the existence of a separate and unequal system of education. Between the first arrival of Black people on the American continent, as slaves in the 16th century, and between 1863, Blacks had no legal right to education in the United States (Kaniuka, 2012). Two years after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, the United States Congress created the Freedmen's Bureau, which for the first time created a formal system of education for Blacks (O'Sullivan, 2013).

During Reconstruction, there was a brief period of time during which 17 states had a single educational system (O'Sullivan, 2013). However, starting in 1876, the so-called Jim Crow laws institutionalized segregation in the American school system, and in 1896, the Supreme Court's decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* created a nationwide basis for

school segregation (Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2012). It was not until 1954, with the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, that formal school segregation came to an end (Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2012). During the 1950s and 1960s, scholars argued that, when schools were integrated and reformed, Black students would no longer have an achievement gap with White students (Rios, 2012). This hypothesis was, at least in the minds of some researchers, disconfirmed when the achievement gap continued to persist into the 2000s (Kinsler, 2013). In response to statistical data about the achievement gap, some researchers abandoned the school failure explanation, whereas other researchers argued that schools, although integrated, were still failing Black children (Meyers, 2012).

In the contemporary literature, school failure theorists place emphasis on a number of crucial facts. First, although schools are integrated, curricula remain dominated by textbooks, teaching methods, tests, and assumptions that are aligned with White majority culture (Jeynes, 2014). Second, there is a national disparity between the number of White teachers and the number of Black teachers (Hartney & Flavin, 2014). Researchers have emphasized that Blacks tend to enter school in need of mentors and role models who might have been absent from their homes and communities, and that Black teachers inspire and support Black students (Hall Mark, 2013). Thus, by not hiring Black teachers in proportion to the Black population, schools might be depriving Black children of much-needed mentorship and guidance (Griner & Stewart, 2013). Third, the quality of schools is associated with funding, and poorer schools are often located in urban neighborhoods of color (Condron, Tope, Steidl, & Freeman, 2013). Given the various obstacles to busing students out of their districts, there is a high statistical likelihood that

Black students, who are poorer than White and Asian students, will attend a budget-challenged school that cannot provide as high a quality of education (Condron et al., 2013).

Another factor often cited by school failure theorists is that White teachers are not as invested in their Black students (Hyson, 2008). This claim ought to be considered distinctly from school failure theorists' viewpoints about cultural bias, school funding, and teaching hiring issues, for all three of which there is sound evidence (Borg et al., 2012; Davis, 2012; Durham, 2012; Jeynes, 2014). The claim that White teachers do not care as much about their Black students is a more controversial one, and has been circulating in various formats for quite a while. Some theorists suggest that there is an active racial animus between White teachers and Black students; this animus need not be overt, but can manifest itself in subtle, sometimes unconscious assumptions about the intelligence of Black students (Cooley Fruehwirth, 2013). Other researchers have argued that, if such an animus is widespread among White teachers, then it is a self-fulfilling prophecy (Diette, 2012). Research has demonstrated that teachers' opinions of their students shape their performance, for both good and ill (Dodson, 2012). A widespread argument in the literature asserts that, even if White teachers are devoid of any overt or subtle racism targeting Black students, Black teachers are still better motivators and teachers of Black children (Ispa-Landa, 2013; Julie, 2012; Marsh, Chaney, & Jones, 2012; Theron, 2013).

The sociocultural explanation.

The sociocultural explanation of the achievement gap takes social and cultural differences between the Black community and other communities as its starting point.

For example, researchers have observed that non-Black families are, in comparison to Black families, more likely to have two parents who function as role models in the life of the child (Chaney, 2014). Research has also demonstrated that, when both parents interact with their children in a consistent fashion, children learn vocabulary more quickly. In addition, two parents can provide better pre-school preparation by reading to their children, co-playing, and imparting knowledge (Cokley et al., 2014; Gibson, Wilson, Haight, Kayama, & Marshall, 2014; Marsh et al., 2012). Thus, according to sociocultural theorists, one of the roots of the achievement gap arises from family differences (Cokley et al., 2014; Gibson et al., 2014; Marsh et al., 2012).

Another aspect of the sociocultural explanation involves educational values. Some theorists have argued that Black parents are more cynical about, or indifferent to, the value of education than are non-Black parents (Reid, Golub, & Vazan, 2014). Some Black parents have told researchers that education is unlikely to raise the status of their child; others, especially under-educated parents, have expressed the concern that education will somehow turn their children against them (Reid et al., 2014). Finally, scholars have noted that other cultures in the United States prioritize early childhood development, such that children are systematically exposed to learning opportunities from an early age and expected to do well (Reid et al., 2014). Black families might lack the money to purchase educational materials for younger children, and parents in broken Black families might also lack the time for interaction, because many single Black fathers and mothers are working multiple jobs solely to survive (Dodson, 2012; Durkee & Williams, 2015).

According to social dominance theory, subordinate group children are less likely to be exposed to the cultural aspects of the world they live in. Without the capital to enrich their children's lives, field trips, museums, and experiences outside of the home are less likely to occur (Ispa-Landa, 2013). Social capital results in higher levels of intellectual and academic proficiency, greater general stores of knowledge about the political and social world, and highly useful social networks. Higher-status parents—who are statistically more likely to be White—can negotiate educational institutions and are more able to support their children's various educational needs (Schaefer, 2004; Tischler, 1999).

The psychological explanation.

The cultural values explanation of the achievement gap assumes that, to some extent, Black students are influenced by their social environment. However, the psychological explanation of the achievement gap suggests that Black students' personal thoughts and motivations are just as important as their social environment. For example, some scholars have argued that Black students are aware that they have reduced chances to succeed economically in American society, and therefore act to minimize their involvement with school (Cokley et al., 2014; Condron et al., 2013; Grantham & Biddle, 2014). The essence of this argument is that Black students make a rational cost-benefit calculation about school, and realize that being better students makes them unlikely to succeed after school. There is in fact statistical evidence that education level, regardless of race, is highly predictive of economic success in American society (Dodson, 2012; Durkee & Williams, 2015; Tambra & Tyrone, 2014); however, according to some psychological researchers, Black students remain genuinely convinced that school

achievement will not avail them in later life (Marsh et al., 2012). Another type of psychological explanation of the achievement gap is rooted in social pressure. In some studies, Black students have been observed to avoid doing homework, volunteering in class, and taking other academically-productive actions because of their fear of acting White (Grantham & Biddle, 2014; Julie, 2012).

The multifactorial explanation.

The multifactorial explanation of the achievement gap is a hypothesis that African-American students perform less well than White American and Asian students because of a combination of factors. Theorists who accept this hypothesis argue that each of the hypotheses discussed in the literature review—school failure, cultural values, and the psychology of Black students—explains the achievement gap (Anderson, 2012; Biswaro, 2012). Multifactorial theorists see the lagging results of Black schoolchildren as indicating a systemic failure that encompasses American society, the school system, Black cultural values, and the beliefs and attitudes of Black students. For example, Milner and Howard argued that there are "important connections among Black teachers, Black communities, [and] Black students" (Milner & Howard, 2004, p. 285), and that weaknesses in Black communities and Black families have manifested themselves in the educational underperformance of Black youth. According to Milner and Howard, all stakeholders need to work cooperatively, and to negotiate the challenges of the dominant American culture for Black students to succeed.

The main implication of the multifactorial hypothesis is that Black student achievement takes place in a complex environment, and that no easy method of addressing the achievement gap exists. Theorists who believed the achievement gap was

due to school failure were certain that, if schools became more equitable, the achievement gap would also vanish (Cooley Fruehwirth, 2013; Hall Mark, 2013; Hartney & Flavin, 2014; Jeynes, 2014; Tambra & Tyrone, 2014; Torff, 2014). However, multifactorial theorists argue that making an isolated change in the environment of Black students is no guarantee of closing the achievement gap (Anderson, 2012; Milner & Howard, 2004). For example, multifactorial theorists have argued that, even if Black students attend equitable and pedagogically exemplary schools, their academic achievement can still be compromised if they live in a social and cultural setting that is hostile to educational values (Chaney, 2014; Marsh et al., 2012; Reid et al., 2014).

The multifactorial explanation thus predicts that Black parental involvement is one of many possible success factors for Black students; however, parental involvement cannot be considered a panacea for the achievement gap. Multifactorial theorists have argued the best approach is for Black parents to not only intensify their involvement in their children's academic lives, but also take more prominent roles in schools and among the Black community (Chaney, 2014; Marsh et al., 2012; Reid et al., 2014). The conclusion is that academic change with roots in a parentally-involved household, but also in a setting of equitable schools and a concerned community, is more likely to last.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is one of the most overlooked aspects of American education today, which is why it remains a problem for all communities and educational leaders on a nationwide basis (Hayes, 2012). Many parents do not realize how important it is to get involved in their children's learning (Williams & Sánchez, 2012). As the child grows older, for example, there is a tendency for parents not to be involved as much as

they were in the elementary grade level (Williams & Sánchez, 2012). A misconception in getting parents to remain involved is that they often perceive their involvement in school to have to be a physical presence (Adamski, Fraser, & Peiro, 2013). Parents do not grasp the fact that assisting students with homework and reading to students are ways of maintaining involvement in their education (Hampden-Thompson, Guzman, & Lippman, 2013). Children who have little to no parental or family support often drop out of school, become unemployed, or possibly get involved in criminal and illegal activities (Stacer & Perrucci, 2013).

If parental involvement in a child's education is so beneficial, it is not clear why it is not being stressed as a fundamental need at schools to a greater extent at the present time. There are many reasons for this lack of involvement that are linked to the parents themselves, and also to the schools. The typical Black family is struggling to deal with many factors that affect every member of the family, and it is evident that the needs of Black children are very complex (Cokley et al., 2014; Davis, 2012; Durkee & Williams, 2015; Hunn, 2014; Theron, 2013).

Parental involvement can take the following forms: (a) Working within school systems, for example, in parent-teacher associations and school boards, to create an educational culture that is more mindful of Black students' needs (Abdul-Adil & Farmer Jr, 2006); (b) exposing young Black children to educational and intellectual opportunities (Chaney, 2014; Reid et al., 2014); (c) serving as emotional pillars for Black students who are unsure about the value of education (Cokley et al., 2014; Davis, 2012; Durkee & Williams, 2015; Hunn, 2014; Theron, 2013); and (d) working within the community to try to spread pro-education values (Milner & Howard, 2004). The literature thus suggests

that Black parents have many domains for involvement, from trying to initiate social

change in schools and communities to being full partners in their children's education.