

CREATING *the* OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

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PART I

Understanding the Achievement Gap

Before undertaking efforts to eliminate the disparities in academic outcomes that, in most districts, correspond to the race and class backgrounds of students (what we now refer to euphemistically as “closing the achievement gap”), it is essential that educators understand the nature of the gap and why it exists. Absent a clear understanding of the causes of the gap, it is easy for schools to adopt strategies that either do not work or, in some cases, even exacerbate the problem. We have a long history in this country of pursuing “quick-fix” reforms—phonics-based reading programs, smart boards and computer-based learning programs, scripted curricula, “teacher-proof” curricula—that promise a great deal but often seem to deliver little.

In many schools, it is also common for educators to fall into the trap of blaming others for the underperformance of their students. Uninvolved parents are a frequent target of blame, as are students typically accused of being unmotivated and not working hard enough. Misplaced priorities of district administrators and politicians are also commonly cited as reasons why more progress in raising student achievement has not been made. Although these issues may not be irrelevant to the persistence of the achievement gap, it would be a mistake for them to be treated as the cause. In the following chapters, we show that the achievement gap is actually a multidimensional phenomenon—one that must be confronted with an awareness of how the dimensions interact. Unless such an approach is taken, it is highly unlikely that efforts to counter the achievement gap will succeed. Importantly, to the degree that a school or district is mired in debate over who is to blame for the existence of the gap, and there is a reluctance to accept responsibility for finding solutions, there is little chance that the achievement gap will be closed or even reduced.

PART II

Analyzing the Research

We face a daunting number of challenges as we work to eliminate academic achievement gaps. Our task becomes more feasible, however, when we embrace an evidence-based framework (Slavin & Fashola, 1998). Too much educational practice is based on hearsay, on what sounds good, on how things have always been done, or even on who knows whom. Instead, we must build our practices on sound, rigorous research and systematic evidence—evidence of what works but also on *how* and *why* things work, *where* things work, and *for whom* they work (Slavin, 2002).

What does an evidence-based framework entail? First, we must glean the research literature to identify the best evidence that can help shape and

direct the practices to be implemented. What qualifies as best evidence? To determine this, ask three questions. Did the obtained findings actually result from the practices that were implemented, or are there plausible alternative explanations for the outcome(s)? Are there indications that the results have been repeated and are not just one-time occurrences? Have the results been obtained at other sites beyond the place of origin? (In other words, is there evidence for similar findings occurring more generally and not just under a special circumstance or in a unique situation?) These three questions (and the framework they imply) are familiar to research methodologists and have been correspondingly labeled as matters of internal validity, reliability, and external validity (or generalizability).

Having stated these standards, we believe some cautions are in order. The literature that focuses on learning and performance among Black and Latino students has not produced a sizable number of studies that yield definitive results born out of methodologies that meet the highest standards of research evidence. Such a barometer would make use of rigorous experimental research designs in which treatment groups/conditions are contrasted with control groups/conditions or in which there are varying treatment conditions, and assignment to condition is done on a strictly random basis. Deploying such techniques is the best way to ensure that outcomes meet the highest test of internal validity, whereby competing or alternative explanations for results can be substantially ruled out.

Although several studies included in our review did deploy experimental designs, much of the work we present deployed correlational designs. Nonetheless, these designs incorporated sophisticated multivariate analyses, so predictor variables for relevant outcomes have been discerned, and insights can be attained on causal pathways among potentially operative factors. In this way, factors that have direct impact or indirect influence (or no impact at all) on relevant outcomes can be systematically ascertained.

Many studies have drawn on national secondary data sets, rather than on primary data. This approach has its advantages in that it yields findings that are generalizable across the United States, rather than applicable only to a particular locale. However, it requisitely relies more on self-report data and

instruments that are of the investigators' own choosing. Thus, constructs are formulated in a post-hoc fashion and may not be as precisely captured as they could be. Beyond this, many studies have not asked specific and direct questions to discern which actual learning processes are at play, whether there are racial or ethnic divergences, or whether certain factors or conditions would lead to gap-closing performance outcomes.

The Pursuit of Promising Conceptions and Processes

In spite of these limitations, certain conceptions and processes have emerged in recent research studies that promise to account for ethnic-group performance differences; provide insights into the *whys* behind performance deficits; explain or predict academic proficiency levels for certain minority students; and suggest avenues to improve minority student achievement outcomes, close majority–minority achievement gaps, raise the achievement of U.S. students relative to international standards, and better prepare all of our students for the 21st century.

The logic behind what evidence should be used to judge whether processes or practices are gap closing deserves further discussion. We look especially for findings where the achievement gap closes or narrows under a certain condition or intervention, which contrasts with conditions in which the gap does not narrow. We also look for cases where students in general seem to benefit from a particular practice or intervention or where the presence of a given attribute is associated with or correlates with a desired outcome. This is particularly helpful if the cases are coupled with empirical data that show the attribute is markedly lower in its expression—or, if maladaptive, markedly higher in its expression—among Black and Latino students. Finally, we look for cases where lower-performing or less skilled students seem to benefit comparatively more from a given practice, intervention, or strategy than do skilled or high-performing students.

A fourth decision rule that is deployed in the absence of other, more convincing evidence is when a given practice seems to elevate performance. This is the least compelling option; if the intervention lifts all students to the same degree, then it is not gap closing, but it cannot be ruled out in the absence of

countervailing evidence. Of course, having low-achieving students achieve at a proficient level of functioning has merit in its own right, even if it does not close gaps. Having a greater number of students function at or above an acceptable level of performance has greater societal good than if this were not the case. In fact, the effective schools movement of the 1980s had this as its objective (Edmonds, 1986). Cutting off the proverbial tail of academic failure was the benefit that such practices were supposed to produce—not closing achievement gaps per se.

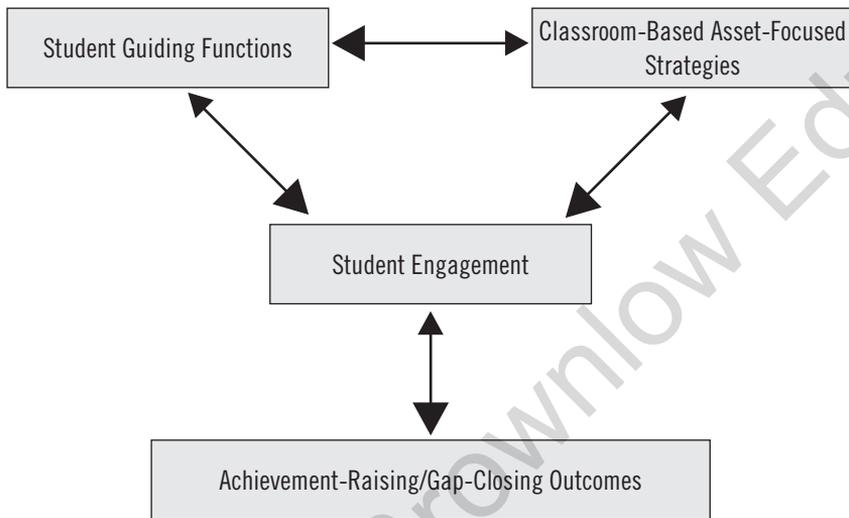
When we examine the extant literature, a picture emerges of what makes certain processes particularly effective in raising achievement and closing performance gaps. The chapters that comprise Part II are devoted to identifying, explaining, and providing the research support for these attendant factors and how they seem to interrelate. In examining the extant research that meets the standards outlined in this introduction, a set of interconnected factors emerge and form into a reasonably coherent scheme of what should occur inside classrooms on a daily basis in the transactions that transpire between teachers and students and among students themselves.

It will be argued and documented that if more of these factors are manifested in the ongoing teaching and learning activities that occur inside classrooms, then we can make significant progress in raising achievement for all students while closing achievement gaps between minority and majority group students across the K–12 spectrum. This proposed scheme is presented in the graph on the next page. As depicted, the most proximal factor to achievement outcomes is student engagement in academic tasks. Engagement is the bellwether for enhanced student achievement. It is the precursor to gap-closing academic outcomes. It is the beacon of greater opportunities to learn for all students.

Engagement is impacted by what we term guiding functions, or adaptive learning postures. We label these as such because they represent beliefs about or ways of orienting toward academic tasks and demands that will likely promote positive academic outcomes when they are embraced by students. It is further argued here that suitable engagement levels and appropriate guiding functions are more likely to occur when they are functionally connected to

or impacted by asset-focused strategies. These are practices, techniques, or approaches that are explicitly designed to optimize learning opportunities for all students.

RESEARCH-BASED SCHEME FOR PROMOTING ENHANCED CLASSROOM TEACHING AND LEARNING



Note: Although arrows between boxes are bidirectional, the larger arrowheads indicate the more typical direction of influence.