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Discussing the Achievement Gap from a Sociological Perspective: Inner City Schools vs Suburban Schools

People mainly gain knowledge through experiences and education. Without education the world would not function the way it does, and students would not learn the skills, values, and information they need to become independent and contribute to a functioning society. The education system has developed and improved drastically since the first public school was founded in Boston four centuries ago. Some of the major improvements include the end of segregated schools, the support and resources being made available to students with exceptionalities, the integration of new content aimed to improve students' academic performance nationwide, the use of technology and other resources that contribute to the success of the student, and the ongoing reforms taking place to promote an inclusive and culturally responsive classroom that puts each child's individual needs first. However, these ongoing reforms while effective, have still not been successful in ending the achievement gap that inevitably exists between urban inner-city schools and suburban schools.

The achievement gap refers to the noticeable difference when comparing grades, standardized test scores, dropout rate, and college dropout rates between different racial groups (Gopalan 4). This gap is visible across the map in the United States and specifically when comparing urban inner-city schools to suburban school districts. For example, blacks score between .82 and 1.18 standard deviations lower on standardized tests compared to white students (NCES). However, the reasons for this gap are not understood by most of the public. Instead of an achievement gap, the issue is sometimes referred to as an opportunity gap because it is the

lack of opportunity, in all aspects of their lives, that the students in urban inner-city schools receive that causes them to perform worse in school (Richmond, Sibthorp 302). This includes limitations placed on them because of the area they are born into, failure in funding distribution, the instability caused by frequent changes in staff, and the daily struggles that students with low socioeconomic status (SES) face. More so, it is a societal issue stemming from the inability to change the norms established in those areas. Sociology offers a variety of theoretical frameworks that can be used to offer an explanation and understanding of what causes an issue given the circumstances and social context and then applies them to real life. Some of the ones that will be discussed throughout the paper include the Anomie/Strain Theory, the Subcultural Theory, Frustration/Aggression Theory, and the Ecological Theory. These four frameworks can be used to better understand the external factors that contribute to the achievement gap and help find a solution to close the gap.

ESTABLISHING THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

ANOMIE/STRAIN THEORY

One framework used to explain what can cause a break down in society and help understand what causes different priorities and norms in urban inner-city areas vs suburban ones is Robert Merton's Anomie/Strain Theory created in the late 1930s. This theory emphasizes that in society there are broad cultural goals that everyone aspires to achieve. These goals are framed in terms of wealth, power, and prestige. Following this premise, comes the fact there are normative means of goal attainment that people are expected to follow in order to achieve these broad cultural goals (Romania, 42). Typical normative ways of achieving these goals would be through education and hard work. However, for some, specifically for those in low SES areas, "it may be that family responsibilities and other sources of adversity have simply proved obstacles

too great to overcome for these well-intentioned and well-prepared but unlucky individuals” (Alvarado, 293). More specifically, for a student attending a failing urban inner-city school where the achievement gap is very high, they will also view themselves as a failure and unable to achieve the normative means of education for goal attainment.

However, just because these students realize that they will not achieve those broad cultural goals through education, does not mean that they will stop aspiring for those goals. They still want to become wealthy, powerful, and successful, and the realization that their education might not provide this could lead to strain. The way to relieve strain is by finding other ways to achieve those goals, and that is what leads them to deviant behavior. Deviant behavior causes many students to become truant in school, get suspended, and find other ways to become successful in their community such as turning to drug dealing. This becomes the logical response to strain followed by disconnect to the normative means of goal achievement in these lower SES communities. Which leads into Albert Cohen’s 1955 Subcultural theory.

SUBCULTURAL THEORY

The Subcultural theory argues that deviance is a response to habitual strain and thus becomes the new norm. Individual value structures emerge to allow for opportunities to succeed that were previously not present. Subcultures develop their own system of norms centered around crime and specifically deviance (Wickert, 2020). An example would be the expectation for a seven-year-old to learn how to fight on the streets instead of learning how to read a book. In fact, the child would be more stigmatized for not getting into their first fist fight. Likewise, another example is if students know that their peer who takes part in the open choice program, a statewide program sponsored by the Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES) that allows the opportunity for urban students to attend suburban public schools if they choose to do so and

vice versa(CT.gov), is beat up and ridiculed when they come home, they will be less likely to want to participate in those educational programs. The goal of this program is to improve academic achievement, reduce racial, ethnic and economic isolation, and provide a choice of educational programs for students. Instead students who experience and witness this type of stigmatism will feel less obligated and less motivated to pursue an education because that is not the societal norm that they are used to. There is also a sense of masculinity that specifically black men in these areas feel that they need to live up to. This can be explained through John Dollardetal's 1939 Frustration/Aggression Hypothesis.

FRUSTRATION/AGGRESSION HYPOTHESIS

Dollardetal considered the repercussions of feeling the strain in low SES areas. He understood it as an emotional experience and the response to strain is not just about trying to do better financially or academically which would be a means of getting there. Men in society are measured by their ability to support themselves and their families. When in strain, this becomes hard to do and often this ability is stripped away from the men in these communities. So to restore a sense of power and masculinity, the boys and men will engage in other activities, often deviant ones because in the moment of a street fight they can gain a sense of power and masculinity when knocking down a male counterpart (Breuer, 3). As a direct result, black men in these areas who are focused academically "face a quandary: on one hand, they must convince their peers in the neighborhood that they are as masculine as the rest of them; on the other hand, they must convince school personnel that they are different from the rest" (Gunn, 2) They also view their only chances of 'getting out' being through school or getting famous. They aspire to become one of the lucky few who make it out successfully, however they also are realistic about the fact that very few do. So then there becomes a heavy reliance on what does work which is

following their peers and the street culture established in their area. Alvarado notes this in his study on the formative years of adolescence in urban city communities.

“Still, during the formative years of adolescence, many minority youth in urban areas tend to identify more with their peers (i.e., blacks and second- and higher generation Latino youth) than with their parents, for two main reasons. First, many do not relate to the most immediate practices and behaviors of their parents (e.g., life histories and traditions nested in foreign lands, language, harsh discipline, unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational system, etc.), and second, many of these youth have an affinity to the anomic and socially deviant "street culture"”(Alvarado, 293).

The street culture and the demand of a hypermasculine image of these young men in these urban districts is the precise distraction that interferes with many student’s schoolwork and academic performance and pushes them to focus on violence, drugs, alcohol, sex, and unfortunately end up incarcerated when things get out of hand (Gunn, 78). The students do not want to end up like this, but it is much easier to gain power and a sense of control in their life through those things that are readily accessible to them than through an education system that is failing them. Other studies have found a direct correlation between the deviance and achievement gap in schools. The education policy analysis archives (EPAA) explains their findings on this correlation through a study they conducted.

CORRELATION BETWEEN ACHIEVEMENT AND DEVIANCE GAP

The study conducted by the EPAA shows results that support the sociological framework, Subcultural theory. First and foremost, what many do not realize is that the failure and cause of the achievement gap is complex and involves multiple factors including individual, parental, school, and neighborhood level factors that contribute to these gaps (Gopalan 3). It is not just the

fault or downfall of one causing factor. Some of the correlations between the achievement and discipline gap derive from the loss of instruction that a student receives once they are suspended or expelled (4). There is also a disruption for the other students in the classroom because of the original student causing disruption. This impacts the whole classroom's achievement negatively. It impacts teacher attitude, student attitude, instruction time, and overall classroom environment. These are some of the many contributing factors as to why in urban inner-city schools, where disciplinary issues are more prevalent, statistics show more disparity within the achievement gap.

To put the achievement gap into perspective, a recent study done on an eighth-grade mathematics classroom and recorded by both the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Common Core of Data (CCD) presents the gap results. "Black students who were in schools that were 40–60% Black were found to be performing an additional 4.07 NAEP mathematics points lower than their counterparts in schools that were 0–20% Black. Black students in schools that were 60–100% Black were found to be performing an additional 5.32 points lower than their counterparts in schools that were 0–20% Black" (Bohrstedt 12). These schools with higher density categories of black students happen to be the demographics of urban inner-city schools. Unfortunately, the study does not include names or districts of the schools involved nor does it necessarily include all urban inner-city schools across the USA. However, it does represent "approximately 117,100 public school students out of about 175,200 in the total NAEP sample" (1). That is accounting for about 67% of the schools in the USA. Other important factors that contribute to the achievement gap include some political and economic factors that fall under government agenda. There is also a theoretical theory that helps understand these external factors and their impact on the achievement gap.

ECOLOGICAL THEORY AND IMPACT ON EXTERNAL FACTORS

In fact, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory acknowledges the negative impact that various political and economic decisions have on the achievement gap. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory divides a person's environment into five areas, and each of the five levels has an equal impact on a child development and can also be connected to the impact on school achievement gap. The four levels are: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. The microsystem are the factors that contribute to a person's development that are most personal to them. This includes factors such as family, peers, or caregivers. The mesosystem includes the interactions between a person's microsystem. For example, the opinion of a child's parent with their teacher's opinion. The exosystem is external factors that affect the child's life but are out of their control. For example, the impact that it would have on a child if their parent lost their job. The macrosystem includes impact from media, social welfare services, friends of family, and extended family. The macrosystem also extends to include culture, social class, and the law. Political factors and economic factors fall mainly into the exosystem and macrosystem. The study conducted by the EPAA also focuses on Bronfenbrenner's theory.

“This study draws on Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model as a guiding conceptual framework to examine a set of complex risk factors (1979). In other words, I argue that educational outcomes as well as disparities in those outcomes are caused by a complex set of factors at the micro, meso, and exosystems that students are exposed to (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005).” (Gopalan, 8).

Since this model allows the specific breakdowns of political and economic factors to be understood in correlation to the impact it has on students and the achievement gap, the breakdowns have been studied by different groups. One of the political breakdowns can be seen with the Brown vs Board of Education decision.

The Brown vs Board of Education decision of 1954² was the first step towards creating equality for all students. However, the achievement gap is a direct result of public schools failing to provide this equal opportunity. It is a viscous loop of external factors in the community that affects these children's educations. Sometimes if the overall performance is so low in a school then the school shuts down all together (Flake), which only pushes the students to turn to their street culture even more. Furthermore, this cycle makes it unable for the community to expand. One of the first thing parent's typically look at when potentially buying a house is the area and the school community (Flake). Many of these urban inner-city areas almost stay segregated by low SES because of this. Not many people who are not also of a low SES would willingly move to one of these areas. That is why Flake, believes that a solution to this issue would be creating vouchers with some federal funding. "With a voucher in Washington, D.C. or New York City where the per pupil funding for public schools approaches \$10,000, new vistas of opportunity would confront poor parents. Not only would less expensive religious schools be viable options for children, but the more expensive elite schools would now be in range for poor families" (Flake). Vouchers have not been overly used and this may have to do with the fact that while it aids individual students in urban communities, it does not assist all of them. It, very similarly to the open choice program, leaves some students stuck in these urban inner-city communities and does not attempt to fix the real issue – understanding the subcultural norms created in Low SES communities. Another breakdown includes the distribution of funding and the direct impact that funding has on the achievement gap.

Title I funding was put in place in 1965. Title I funding is a federal entitlement program created to help schools that have large populations of low SES students. There is over \$12 billion dollars attached to this funding and distributed to schools with the individual needs. Some

benefits of the funding include free and reduced lunch prices, and funding for academic resources such as technology in the classroom (Brown, 132). This was supposed to be a solution or at least help lessen the achievement gap in urban inner-city schools. Had the funding continued to be distributed properly then it may have been able to assist and make an impact on closing the achievement gap. However, this is not the case and there has unfortunately been an uneven distribution of this funding from the beginning of the program's launch. When the uneven distribution of funding was finally questioned, in 1978, the government was claiming that the funds were indeed being distributed properly. In reality, sixty percent of eligible schools were not receiving the funding and this breakdown was not questioned for the first few years (Brown 132). To fix this issue the concentration of the funds was altered to:

“foster overall school improve-ment by requiring greater coordination between Title I and regular classroom instruction, increased focus on advanced rather than basic skills, greater parent involvement, new rules for school performance accountability, and increased funds and flexibility for Title I, particularly for high-poverty schools" (Puma, 1999)” (131).

By allowing a broader use of Title I funds around the same time that the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001¹ was passed, the money was distributed more evenly but still only seventy four percent of the eligible schools were receiving the funds. They also still did not divide schools into classifications of urban, suburban, and rural, but rather focused more on the race differentiation in schools. The issue also arose that the funding was being based on poor student per school and not the overall school poverty level. To fix this issue the General Accounting Office (GAO) in 2002 studied this downfall in funding distribution and the next step was to focus on equity between urban, suburban, and rural schools and not necessarily the per-pupil

funding that was being focused on before. Equity here refers to helping students and district based on what funding they need to be successful in closing the achievement gap. This means that there is not necessarily an equal distribution but more of a need-based distribution amongst districts. States now take on a “larger share of compensatory funding for poor children.” (132) What this means is that for some districts federal funding ends up accounting for at least eight percent of their budget.

The main issues still remain revolving Title I funding. Recently, as concentration of poverty, specifically in urban districts, has increased, Title I funds have not increased proportionately to them. Likewise, the concentration of Title I funding being placed so high on the importance of closing the achievement gap means that urban inner-city schools need to allocate their money and help students with low state testing performance do well on the tests. This does not necessarily mean that the students most in need are receiving use of the funds either. A student with better test taking skills might be focused on and aided with a tutor and other resources versus a child who could use the same resources but will not be able to score well on the state test. Studies were done again in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, to reach the conclusion of this distribution disparity (Brown 138). Again, these are factors outside of the students control and relate back to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system. The distribution of funding is one of the factors of a student’s macrosystem that they cannot control but will impact their education and their ability to succeed as a student. Another political factor in the macrosystem and exosystem of a student’s life that is impacted is the overall inability to provide equal opportunity for student’s in urban inner-city schools.

SOLUTIONS

Understanding the reasons for the gap and the frameworks that explain the gap are half of the battle. Finding a more productive solution to ending this gap is the more difficult half. In fact, there is not one solution that could end the achievement gap and create equal opportunity for students in urban and suburban schools, but there are ideas. For example, understanding can lead to change. Instead, of focusing on a finding a way out for students who find themselves in urban school districts, the schools in those districts should be focusing on creating a mission that practices diversity in a beneficial way. For example, grading is a big factor to consider. If a school continuously punishes a student for their grades failing and ends up holding them back year after year this just leads to more frustration and lack of motivation. While there does need to be a certain standard of grading so that students know their expectation when going to college, they should be assisted and provided the resources needed to succeed especially in elementary and middle school. The way the grading system works currently is practically pushing those failing students into the streets. School is one thing that keeps them off the streets and from participating in the street culture during the day. So, this should become one of the main priorities in inner city schools. Another priority should be sending teachers to teach who understand the culture. People who grew up in those communities have a much better understanding of the support their students would need compared to someone who has never been exposed to the home life and community before.

An example of measures being taken to achieve this goal can be seen through programs like “Urban Teachers”. This program specifically works towards preparing, certifying, and supporting new educators that work in Urban areas. They are coached, and mentored, and work together to gain the skills and the resources needed to provide adequate support to these students that other students in suburban areas probably would not need. They currently have locations in

Baltimore, Texas, and Washington DC (urbanteachers.org). Other ideas that have been discussed is colleges acting on these programs and taking high school students from an urban inner-city school and sending them to their college. They would be on a grant-based program to finish their four years of an education degree and then sent back into their hometown community to teach (Oswego.edu). This would not only help the students who are becoming teachers but also the students whom they teach. There is a different understanding when teachers have experienced similar events to the students in their classroom. This provides for a more accepting and inclusive classroom.

A failed attempt of closing the achievement gap was the use of technology in the classroom. Some schools with Title I funding have more access to certain technologies if their budget allow for it. However, these technologies are meaningless when so much weight is placed on the use of it to reach specific goals. In fact, “among teachers in poor, urban school districts, these barriers can seem insurmountable and contribute to lower levels of technology integration” (O’Neal, 193). A student with a chrome book and a smart board in the classroom is not going to be more successful just because they have access to technology. However, a student struggling with issues at home and who has access to a social worker in school and a support group that teaches emotional coping skills, as many elementary schools in urban inner-city schools are trying to incorporate nowadays, will benefit more from those resources.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the achievement gap is not just about understanding the statistical disparities that represent the gap between urban and suburban schools. To understand the achievement gap, one must understand the roots that cause it, and the community differences that make it so hard to bridge this gap. Sociology offers various frameworks including the Anomie/

Strain theory, the Frustration/Aggression Hypothesis, the Subcultural Theory, and The Ecological theory, that explain how these norms and differences developed in those areas. With understanding, comes the responsibility in taking part to make a change. The ideal way to make a change and bridge the gap is by making a change in the struggling communities. This would not just require education reform in those areas but the creation of jobs and alternate ways to keep parents out of strain and students in school. So far, the efforts are limited to do this but hopefully as more people begin to understand that the issue stems beyond distribution of federal funding, more programs can be set in place to eventually bridge the existing education gap.

Notes

1. The NCLB Act of 2001 was built off Lyndon B Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 (ESEA). It was part of the movement to assure that students at a disadvantage because of where they live and external factors outside of their control would receive helpful aid to help them succeed (Brown, 131).
2. Board vs. Brown decision of 1954 was a decision made in the Supreme Court that declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional (Flake). Up to this point segregation within the schools was allowed and many schools operated under a "separate but equal" basis.

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