

Gleanings #2: Fresh Writings on the Achievement Gap

September 2007

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Fresh Writings on the Achievement Gap

By Alfie Kohn

Almost as much as one yearns for a solution to the achievement gap, one searches for a fresh way of thinking about this problem. Most of what's published seems awfully familiar by now, so it's worth celebrating the exceptions. In this installment of the occasional feature called Gleanings, we mention some recent books and articles of interest.

*Jonathan Kozol has a way of speaking in a calm, measured tone even as he grabs us by the collar. In his latest book, *Letters to a Young Teacher*, he emphasizes the extent to which we are still a segregated nation. If a photo were taken today in a school in almost any black or Hispanic neighborhood, he remarks, "it would be indistinguishable from photos taken of the children in the all-black schools in Mississippi back in 1925 or 1930 – precisely the same photos that are reproduced in textbooks now in order to convince our children of the moral progress that our nation has made since." Moreover, the kind of education that these children usually receive – particularly with ghastly programs like*

KIPP, Success for All, and Open Court – drives home the truth that segregation is indeed inherently unequal. “Children of the suburbs learn to think and to interrogate reality,” says Kozol, while “inner-city kids are trained for nonreflective acquiescence.” (“Work hard, be nice.”)

Part of the reason that education for children of color has become an endless ritual of test preparation has to do with NCLB and state variants thereof. But part of the blame can be laid at the feet of colleges, a new study suggests. Writing in the August 2007 issue of the American Sociological Review, Sigal Alon and Marta Tienda cite data showing that “over time [colleges and universities] have relied more heavily on standardized test scores to screen applicants . . . despite the mounting evidence that test scores have low predictive validity for future academic success.” This is partly because colleges are classified as “selective” not on the basis of the quality of their teaching but purely on the basis of the SAT scores of their incoming students. (Thanks to U.S. News & World Report for reminding us once again that competitiveness and excellence are two entirely different things.) The more tests matter, the less diverse colleges will be; in fact, “if selective institutions based their admissions decisions entirely on test scores, fewer than 2 percent of their students would be black.” But here’s the punch line: The widely discussed trade-off between merit and diversity – or between quality and equality – “exists only when merit is narrowly defined by SAT scores.” When you throw out the scores, which aren’t contributing much information of value in any case, “the need for affirmative action diminishes,” Alon and Tienda conclude.

*In 2005, Mano Singham, a physicist who directs the Center for Innovation in Teaching and Education at Case Western University, published a book called *The Achievement Gap in U.S. Education* that should have received a lot more attention than it did. His contention is that the solution to the gap*

isn't remediation (particularly in the form of skill-based instruction that's liable to destroy kids' interest in learning); it's better teaching for everyone. "We are not doing a good job of teaching in general," he says, "and the size of the achievement gap should be viewed as a measure of our failure to teach all students. . . . White students underachieve, and black students underachieve even more." He cites some impressive research showing that when the quality of instruction improves – when it's about deep understanding rather than memorizing facts and practicing skills, when students play a more active role in designing the curriculum, and so on – all students benefit, but minority students benefit the most. Taken seriously, this simple insight has the potential to revolutionize what we're doing to help those who are being left behind.

If Singham invites us to rethink the reasons for (and solutions to) the gap, Jim Crawford, an activist on bilingual education, asks us to rethink the tendency to talk about an "achievement gap" in the first place. In his June 6, 2007 commentary in *Education Week*, Crawford wonders how any civil rights groups could possibly support a policy like NCLB, which is disproportionately destructive to the education of minority students. His answer: The whole idea of educational equity has been shifted (by the Bush administration, among others, for political reasons) from talk of equal educational opportunity to talk of "achievement gaps." The latter is "all about measurable 'outputs' – standardized-test scores – and not about equalizing resources, addressing poverty, combating segregation, or guaranteeing children an opportunity to learn," Crawford suggests. "Dropping equal educational opportunity shifts the entire burden of reform from legislators and policymakers to teachers and kids and schools. . . . In other words, despite its stated goals, NCLB represents a diminished vision of civil rights. Educational equity is reduced to equalizing test scores. The effect has been to impoverish the educational experience of minority

students.”

Once the problem has been framed as closing a gap in achievement (i.e., reducing disparities in test results), therefore, the solutions are bound to be unsatisfying, if not counterproductive. It’s roughly analogous to a point that Joan Goodman made years ago about special education: Once teachers are required to use Individual Educational Programs (IEPs) that spell out discrete, narrow, measurable goals for children, the worst sort of instruction – focused on skills, mired in behaviorism, driven by extrinsic motivators, uninformed by children’s choices (or, for that matter, their needs) – is virtually mandated.

What matter isn’t just what we’re doing; it’s the earlier decisions about what we should be aiming for that quietly determine what we’re doing.

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