Contesting the Myth of a 'Post Racial' Era

The Continued Significance of Race in U.S. Education

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The Resource and Opportunity Gap

The Continued Significance of Race for African American Student Outcomes

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The election of President Barack Obama in 2008 was hailed as a milestone in the march toward racial justice and equality. Some commentators suggested that his candidacy and election signaled a transition to a postracial politics in the United States (Schorr, 2008). The self-congratulatory tone of many commentators glossed over the stark racial inequality that continues to exist between African Americans and Whites in income, wealth, incarceration rates, health outcomes, and educational opportunity (Alexander, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2003; Blank, Dabady, & Citro, 2004; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Shapiro, 2004).

In education, the Black/White “achievement gap” has been a central focus in educational research, policy, and practice in recent decades (Ferguson, 2007; Jencks & Phillips, 1998). This work has focused on Black/White disparities in grades, test scores, college enrollment, and high school and college graduation rates, all of which show White advantages over Blacks. However, much of this work fails to carefully unpack how race matters for education, and how differences in educational opportunity drive differences in school outcomes. Instead, race often remains under-theorized in work on the racial “achievement gap” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995)—treated as an all-encompassing set of cultural characteristics, or as a variable in statistical analyses (O’Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007; Zuberi, 2001). To understand how race matters for school outcomes, “we need to have an understanding of what the nature of the task of achievement is for African Ameri-
cans as African Americans” (Perry, 2003, p. 4). That means carefully examining the relationship between race and educational opportunity.  

In what follows, I outline just a few of the myriad ways that race continues to matter for students’ educational outcomes, by focusing on how historic and contemporary patterns of inequality contribute to structural inequality outside schools, differences in educational resource allocation inside schools, and everyday school processes that help maintain racial inequality (Diamond, 2006). These inequalities often go unrecognized. For instance, in a recent nationally representative survey, nearly eighty percent of Whites believed that “minority children” and “white children” in their communities have equal educational opportunities (Rose & Gallup, 2004), even though Black students (and their families) must navigate a demonstrably unequal landscape as they pursue education.  

Contemporary racial inequality has transformed from overt racial policies and practices to covert patterns that are more difficult to identify (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2003; Coates, 2011; Payne, 1984). Scholars have discussed this contemporary racial context as the post-civil rights era (Bonilla-Silva, 2001), or the new civil rights era (Pollock, 2008), which is characterized by a dominant ideology of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2003; Collins, 2009; Forman & Lewis, 2006; Lewis, 2001). These scholars emphasize the shifting nature of the racial landscape, and highlight the ways in which racial stratification is reproduced through the normal functioning of ostensibly racially neutral institutions. As Bonilla-Silva (2001) wrote about this contemporary context, “whereas white privilege was achieved through overt and usually explicit racial practices, today . . . it is accomplished through institutional, subtle, and apparently nonracial means” (p. 12). Historically, for example, racial inequality was reinforced through legally sanctioned practices that helped maintain White supremacy. In education this meant de jure segregation of schools, and the allocation of vastly different resources across them. It also meant wholesale exclusion of African Americans from certain occupational categories, and even the most basic legal protections. In the contemporary context, racial inequality is maintained through more subtle processes, including de facto segregation and the normal functioning of educational institutions that maintain the unequal allocation of educational resources under the guise of an open, meritocratic system. In what follows, I build on this framing of contemporary racial inequality to discuss the resource and opportunity gap in education, and outline some of the ways that race continues to shape the educational outcomes of Black students.

Racial History, Contemporary Discrimination, and Structural Inequality

One cannot understand contemporary racial stratification without an appreciation for how racial privileges and penalties shape the contemporary racial land-
scape. For example, in the contemporary United States, a racial income gap exists between African Americans and Whites. African American families earn about sixty-seven cents for every dollar earned by Whites (Shapiro, 2004). This actually represents an improvement of historic patterns of income inequality. However, when compared to White families, Black families have substantially less wealth. African Americans possess about 14% of White wealth (Shapiro, 2004). Moreover, the racial wealth gap has been increasing. Between 1984 and 2007, the Black/White wealth gap increased from $20,000 to $95,000 (Shapiro, Meschede, & Sullivan, 2010). To understand this wealth disparity, one needs to look to the historic and contemporary processes that helped to create this pattern. Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro (1995) referred to the cumulative impact of this history as the “sedimentation of racial inequality” (p. 5). They wrote that:

To argue that blacks form the sediment of the American stratification order is to recognize the extent to which they began at the bottom of the hierarchy during slavery, and the cumulative and reinforcing effects of Jim Crow and de facto segregation through the mid-twentieth century. Generation after generation of blacks remained anchored to the lowest economic status in American society. The effect of this inherited poverty and economic scarcity for the accumulation of wealth has been to sediment inequality into the social structure. (p. 5)

Suburbanization provides an example of one mechanism through which racial stratification was reinforced during the twentieth century. Between 1940 and 2000 the percentage of the United States population living in suburbs grew from 13.4% to 50% (Nicolaides & Wiese, 2006). Purchasing suburban homes was a major driving force behind wealth accumulation for those who moved to suburbs (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). As a result of discriminatory state policies (Katznelson, 2005), racial discrimination in the real estate industry, and restrictive covenants among White, suburban residents, African Americans were largely excluded from this suburban population growth. In contrast to many Whites, who benefited from government-subsidized suburbanization (through low-interest-rate Federal Housing Authority (FHA) loans, for example), many African American communities suffered because of redlining—the decision not to make home loans in communities where African Americans lived. These practices meant that home values appreciated much less rapidly in cities (or declined in value), directly impacting Black city residents (Anyon, 1997; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Shapiro, 2004). This is particularly important, because a large percentage of wealth—what a family owns minus its debts—in most U.S. families comes from home ownership and the value of homes.

These differences in wealth have real implications for Black versus White educational opportunities. Stark differences in wealth mean that Whites are better positioned to use their assets to purchase homes in school districts that demon-
strate better outcomes for their children. They do this by parlaying assets into advantages across domains such that additional residential options (rooted in historic discrimination and White racial privilege) lead to advantages in the educational domain (Johnson, 2006; Shapiro, 2004). Shapiro (2004) discussed these as transformative assets that allow Whites to gain important advantages in terms of the amount of inheritances, strategic infusions of money, the ability to pay for supplemental educational services, and the ability to buy educational materials for the home (e.g., books, computers, educational games, etc.). In other words, Whites are able to use transformative assets to accrue unearned educational advantages for their children (Shapiro, 2004).

These wealth disparities also mean that social class comparisons between African Americans and Whites must be made cautiously (Diamond, 2006; Gosa & Alexander, 2007; Pattillo, 2005; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999). Work that compares African Americans and Whites of the same social class, focusing on traditional measures such as income, college graduation, and employment status, overlook a critical component of racial inequality. As Shapiro wrote, “Black and White professionals in the same occupation earning the same salary typically move through life with significantly unequal housing, residential, and educational prospects, which means that their children are not really on the same playing field” (Shapiro, 2004, p. x).

Race continues to matter in the contemporary context across many other domains as well. For example, while a simplistic link between education and employment outcomes is often assumed, Blacks continue to face striking patterns of labor market discrimination (Pager, Bonikowski, & Western, 2009). In field tests conducted in New York, Black and Latino/a applicants were only half as likely to be called back for follow-up interviews or hired as White applicants with the same qualifications. Moreover, Black applicants with no criminal records were less likely to be hired than Whites who reported just being released from prison (Pager et al., 2009). While African Americans hold more pre-school attitudes than their White peers (Downey, 2008), even when they recognize discrimination in the labor market (Harris, 2008), such discrimination may lead some young African Americans to question the extent to which their educational credentials will be valued once they leave school. At the very least, it highlights some of the “extra social, emotional, cognitive, and political competencies required of African American youth, precisely because they are African American” (Perry, 2003, p. 4). Black students must commit to education while often recognizing that racial discrimination may impact the returns they receive for their commitment (Perry, 2003).

**Institutional Inequality Inside Schools**

Racial inequality outside schools is often compounded by unequal allocation of educational resources inside them. One example of this educational inequality
is access to quality teachers. The quality of teachers that students are exposed to is a critical driver of students’ educational outcomes (Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011). Unfortunately, in comparison to White students, Black students attend schools with teachers who are less well-qualified on a number of dimensions (Darling-Hammond, Wei, & Johnson, 2009; Uhlenberg & Brown, 2004). Presley, White, & Gong (2005) combined several measures of teacher quality into a composite index called the teacher quality index (TQI). They found that in Illinois, increases in percent low income and percent minority students led to decreases in teacher quality. In schools with 0–9% low-income students, only 5% of teachers were in the lowest teacher quality quartile. In schools with between 90 and 100% low-income students, 84% of teachers were in the lowest quartile. Likewise, when the percentage of minority students was below 50%, only 11% of teachers were in the lowest TQI quartile. In schools with 90–98% minority students 70% of teachers were in the lowest TQI quartile, and in schools between 99 and 100% minority, 88% of teachers were in the lowest quartile. This means that low-income students and students of color in Illinois are more likely to be taught by the least experienced and well-trained teachers. The pattern in Illinois is reflective of broader patterns. As Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) wrote,

On any measure of qualification—extent of preparation, level of experience, certification, content background in the field taught, advanced degrees, selectivity of educational institution, or test scores on college admissions and teacher licensure tests—studies show that students of color . . . are disproportionately taught by less qualified teachers. (p. 614)

Access to quality teachers is associated with two other troubling contemporary patterns—the resegregation of schools (Orfield, 1996; Orfield & Lee, 2005), and secondary generation segregation through tracking (Mickelson, 2001). Even as the percentage of Asian, Black, and Latino/a students in U.S. schools has increased over the past several decades, White students still tend to be isolated in mostly White schools, with greater educational resources and higher-income students. For example, in schools that are predominantly Black, the percentage of low-income students is much higher than in predominantly White schools. Fifty percent of Black students in city schools in the U.S. attend schools where 75% or more of their classmates are from low-income families (Planty et al., 2009). As we have seen, as the percentage of racial minority and low-income students increases, the quality of teachers decreases.

Access to high-quality learning opportunities remains a problem when Black and White students attend the same schools, because of educational tracking and the distribution of teachers across tracks. Black students are concentrated in lower educational tracks in integrated schools, even when prior school achievement is
taken into account (Clotfelter, 2004; Kelly, 2009; Lucas & Berends, 2007; Mickelson, 2001). Students in lower educational tracks experience a range of negative outcomes, from slower academic growth (Gamoran, 1987) to lower rates of college attendance (Lucas, 2001). Racialized tracking can also contribute to status hierarchies among students. This can further contribute to race-based conceptions of achievement, and the development of animosity between high- and low-performing students (Tyson, 2011).

These disadvantages in track placement are linked to the structural inequalities documented above. Affluent (and often White) parents use their social class backgrounds, social networks, and knowledge of educational contexts to secure these privileged positions for their children (Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Lucas, 2001; Lucas and Berends, 2002; Mickelson, 2003; Useem, 1991). Exacerbating this problem, particularly in racially mixed schools, is the pattern of teacher tracking—the matching of the most experienced teachers with the highest performing students (Kelly, 2004). In this way, educational resources are concentrated on students who arguably need them the least.

In addition to these issues of teacher quality, teachers hold lower expectations for African American students than they do for White students, even when controlling for indicators of prior performance (Downey & Pribesh, 2004; Ferguson 2007; Roscigno, 2000). These lower expectations may lead teachers to engage in instructional practices that lower students’ academic performance by bringing it in line with teachers’ expectations. These expectations are tied to teachers’ social class and racial backgrounds. Teachers from middle-class backgrounds have lower expectations for low-income students than do teachers from working-class backgrounds (Alexander, Entwisle, & Thompson, 1987). The racial background of the teacher may also matter. One study using nationally representative data examined teachers’ perceptions of kindergarten and eighth-grade students’ academic engagement and behavior. They found that,

black students are consistently rated as poorer classroom citizens than are white students, but . . . this pattern does not persist when teacher’s race is taken into account . . . once black students and white students are both placed with same race teachers . . . black students’ behavior is rated more favorably than is white students. (Downey & Pribesh, 2004, p. 277)

Black students are often in classrooms with White teachers, making this finding particularly troubling. In the data set used by Downey and Pribesh (2004), Black students are paired with White teachers 64% of the time.

Moving beyond the individual level, the socioeconomic status (SES) of students is associated with teachers’ expectations of them, such that students in classrooms with a lower average SES have their cognitive abilities underestimated by teachers (Ready & Wright, 2011). This suggests important contextual influences
on teachers' expectations. Other work has also attended to these context-specific issues through examining teachers' individual and collective efficacy beliefs, and their sense of responsibility for student learning (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Lee & Smith, 2001). Research suggests that when teachers believe in their own capacity to improve students' outcomes, and the capacity of their colleagues to do the same, students' educational outcomes are more likely to improve (Lee & Smith, 2001). Higher teacher efficacy beliefs contribute to higher academic outcomes for students, more persistence in the face of challenges among teachers, and more positive teacher attitudes (Adams & Forsyth, 2006; Takahashi, 2011). Schools serving Black students (as well as low-income students) are characterized by lower individual and collective efficacy beliefs among teachers (Adams & Forsyth, 2006; Takahashi, 2011).

Likewise, work suggests that the related construct of teachers' sense of responsibility for student learning is also influenced by the race and social class composition of schools (Diamond et al., 2004; Lee & Smith, 2001). In schools where teachers possess a high sense of responsibility, teachers feel personally responsible for their students' academic success or failure. In contrast, in schools with low levels of collective responsibility, "most teachers see potential impediments between their own teaching and students' learning, namely, students' ability (or lack of it), students' family background, or their motivation" (Lee & Loeb, 2000, p. 8). Teachers' sense of responsibility seems to be lower in schools serving low-income students. Since Black students are more likely to attend schools that are predominantly low-income, this pattern of lower expectations and reduced sense of responsibility for student learning likely contributes to racial differences in school outcomes.

Finally, Black students experience inequality in terms of school discipline. Black students are more likely to be referred to the office by teachers, suspended from school, and expelled (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). These higher rates of disciplinary action reflect school practices, and cannot be explained by differences in students' behavior alone. As Gregory et al. (2010) wrote, "there appears to be a notable paucity of evidence that could support a hypothesis that the racial discipline gap can be explained through differential rates of misbehavior" (p. 62). Rather than differences in behavior, research suggests that Black students' behavior is interpreted as more problematic even when it is objectively similar to White students' behavior (Ferguson, 2000; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Some work suggests that this may result from Black students' cultural styles being interpreted as defiant, threatening, or antischool. Such disparities in disciplinary experiences are very likely associated with racial differences in educational outcomes, leading some to suggest that discipline and achievement gaps are really "two sides of the same coin" (Gregory et al., 2010, p. 59).
Everyday Racial Processes

Differences in educational resources, opportunities, and outcomes at the structural and institutional levels are relatively well-documented. Everyday processes of discrimination are less well-documented, and in some ways, more elusive. They are elusive in part because they often function on the symbolic level of taken-for-granted meaning and unconscious perceptions that often go unnoticed in daily interactions. They are no less important to examine, however, particularly because of their potentially powerful cumulative effects (Blank et al., 2004; Pollock, 2008). For example, there is a long history in the U.S. of equating Whiteness with intellectual superiority, and Blackness with intellectual inferiority (Gould, 1981; Perry, 2003; Zuberi, 2001), and recent research suggests that these ideas still shape Whites’ perceptions of intelligence (Bobo, 2004; Bobo & Charles, 2009). Such ideas have ripple effects in daily interactions, particularly in the education domain where issues of race and intelligence collide. We know from research on gender and status beliefs that broader stereotypes shape interpersonal interactions (Ridgeway & Correll, 2006). For instance, those with higher status (for our purposes here, Whites) are given more opportunities to participate in group interactions and have their contributions valued at higher levels than other group members (Ridgeway & Correll, 2006). Research has also demonstrated some key ways that ideas about race and intelligence shape students’ academic performance (Aronson & Steele, 2005; Steele, 2010).

One everyday process that impacts students’ academic performance is stereotype threat (Steele, 2010). Research on stereotype threat originally arose in response to racial differences in students’ outcomes in higher education. Steele and colleagues were attempting to understand why equally capable Black college students were outperformed by their White colleagues in terms of grades. What he found was that Black students’ performance was depressed by stereotype threat—the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about one’s group. In repeated experimental studies, Steele and colleagues have found that when race is made salient, Black students perform less well on cognitive tasks. Research has also demonstrated that under stereotype threat conditions, students experience increases in blood pressure, heart rate variability, and other physiological symptoms, all of which can inhibit academic performance (Aronson & Steele, 2005). While most of this research has been conducted in experimental as opposed to naturalistic settings, and in higher education contexts, there is good reason to believe that stereotype threat impacts K–12 students as well.

A second, everyday racial process connects to students’ cultural expressions, and how they are interpreted and rewarded by school officials. Dominant cultural expectations are embedded in schools, and students who abide by them receive rewards, while those who do not receive sanctions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990;
Carter, 2005). The cultural styles that are rewarded in schools are often those associated with the White middle and upper classes. Thus, Black students often must navigate schools that devalue their cultural styles. For example, Carter (2005) showed that low-income Black and Latino/a students who are invested in education and see it as a route to social mobility, still must grapple with a balancing act between the behaviors and expressions that provide them with peer status, and those that are rewarded by the school. In the contemporary context, educators have come to associate popular cultural forms like hip-hop culture and rap music with African American youth culture and the perception of anti-intellectualism (Warikoo, 2011). Those students who embrace these cultural styles often pay a price in the school setting, even though students who embrace rap music are just as invested in education as other students (Warikoo, 2011).

A final everyday process that disadvantages Black students is what critical race theorists call racial microaggressions. Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) defined racial microaggressions as “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically and unconsciously” (p. 60). Tuitt and Carter (2008) wrote that these are “subtle but stunning verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual assaults” (p. 53) that, as Davis (1989) wrote, “stem from unconscious attitudes of White superiority and constitute a verification of Black inferiority.” (Davis, 1989, as cited in Tuitt & Carter, 2008, p. 53). Because schools reward middle-class, White cultural dispositions and devalue cultural styles identified with African American urban youth culture (P. Carter, 2005), and because race and intelligence are often perceived to be linked, Black students can experience school learning environments (particularly in integrated and predominantly White schools) as hostile (D. Carter, 2007). For example, Black students experience low performance expectations on the part of their teachers and peers in racially mixed schools (Diamond, Lewis, & Gordon, 2007), are forced to become spokespersons for all African Americans in class discussions (Carter, 2005; hooks, 1994; Tuitt & Carter, 2008), are overpraised for what they perceive as average displays of intelligence (Diamond et al., 2007), have their race spotlighted or ignored in the classroom (Carter, 2005, 2008), and are subject to hyper-surveillance on university campuses (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007).

**Conclusion**

Racial differences in school outcomes are often discussed as differences in achievement, rather than as differences in educational resources and opportunities. In this chapter, I have argued that in order to understand racial differences in student outcomes, issues of race, resources, and educational opportunities need to be taken seriously. The historic and contemporary realities of racial inequality exist in the structural, institutional, and interpersonal domains, and have important im-
lications for students’ educational outcomes. Discussions of the so-called racial “achievement gap” that do not attend to these issues run the risk of misrepresented the problem, and failing to reach adequate solutions. This chapter represents an effort to highlight how educational resources and opportunities shape the terrain that students navigate, even in an era that has mistakenly been identified as postracial.

Acknowledgments

Some passages in this chapter also appear in Diamond & Huguley (2011) and in Diamond (2012).

Notes

1. I use the terms, African American and Black interchangeably throughout this chapter. I view them as having essentially the same meaning in contemporary usage.

2. In this chapter, I focus on Black/White disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes. Other work focuses on racial and ethnic disparities that exist among other groups. For instance, for a discussion of the educational outcomes of Latino/a students in the U.S., see Gándara & Contreras (2009), and Schneider, Martínez, & Owens (2006).

3. The discussion of the “achievement gap” has been wide and varied. Many, however, have suggested that the focus on the achievement gap should shift to a focus on an opportunity gap (Milner, 2010; da Silva, Huguley, Kakli, & Rao, 2007) or the accumulated education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) that is owed to students who have never received equal educational opportunities.

4. Given that there is more genetic diversity within racial groups than between them, social scientists generally agree that race is a socially constructed category. Therefore, race is meaningful not because of any biological reality, but because people attach meaning to these categories and allocated, valued resources (including educational resources) differently across racial categories (Massey, 2007; Zuberi, 2001).

5. The flip side of this, of course, is that White students navigate contexts in which their racial category is privileged in comparison to other groups. Clearly, racial groups are not monolithic. There are social class and gender differences, for example, within racial groups. Here, I highlight race while recognizing that class and gender are also important categories around which stratification is organized, and that these categories interact with and reinforce each other in important ways.


7. This is one reason why comparisons across racial groups based solely on income or employment status fail to capture the full implications of race. Comparing African American and White social class groups based on conventional measures of employment, education, and income misses the complex ways in which social classes across racial groups are not equivalent (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Pattillo, 2005). While some work suggests that race-based educational disparities persist even when controlling for social class, other work suggests that once wealth is controlled, Black/White differences in educational outcomes disappear.

8. For a further discussion of social mobility that compares African Americans and Whites, please see Hertz (2005).

9. In recent decades, suburban population growth has been fueled by African Americans, Latinos/as and Asians. For example, Reardon and Yun (2001) showed that in the 1980s the White suburban population grew by 8% while the Asian, African American, Latino/a populations
combined to grow 60% during the same period. Therefore, historic trends in suburban population growth have shifted over the past 30 years.

10. “The TQI is composed of six different school-level measures that have been shown in previous research to make a difference for students’ performance . . . teachers’ average ACT composite score, teachers’ average ACT English score, percent of teachers failing the Basic Skills Test on their first attempt, percent of teachers with emergency or provisional certification, teachers’ average undergraduate college competitiveness ranking, and percent of teachers with three or fewer years of experience” (Presley et al., 2005, p. 5).

11. The authors used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study and the National Educational Longitudinal Study. For more on these sources, see the National Center for Education Statistics’ website, http://nces.ed.gov/

12. In fact, Black students report pro-school attitudes across a wide range of indicators on nationally representative surveys with the exception of their perceptions of the fairness of discipline practices in schools (Downey, 2008).

13. Such misinterpretations can lead teachers to assume that investment in hip-hop culture or rap music reflects antischool orientations. However, research shows that students who embrace such cultural styles are just as invested in education as other students (Warikoo, 2011).

14. Much of the work on microaggressions has focused on African American college-level students. For example, Smith and his colleagues conducted focus groups with African American male college students across five universities. These students reported experiencing racial microaggression across campus academic, social, and public spaces. Several authors have discussed racial microaggressions as critical to understanding contemporary racism. While expressions of overt racial antipathy have traditionally dominated the discussion of racial discrimination historically, in what has been referred to as the post-civil rights era, much of the work on contemporary racism has focused on more subtle and implicit manifestations of racism (Pierce, 1974; Smith et al., 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000).

References


