



## Reducing the Achievement Gap

by

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The National Task Force on Minority High Achievement's 1999 report, *Reaching the Top*, offers a set of recommendations to respond to the persistent achievement gap between white and underrepresented minority students in the nation's high schools and colleges.

The following review\* of the Task Force recommendations examines how research from the social sciences and educational psychology can be used to evaluate the feasibility of the report's recommendations and its implications for future social and educational policy, especially around the ideas of "affirmative development" and "affirmative action."

In recent years social scientists have significantly broadened their understanding of approaches that can enhance learning and motivation for all learners throughout their life span. New kinds of educational systems are emerging that produce not only higher achievement across student groups but also the development of new cultures of caring, community, and meaningful connections among the participants.

This shift from research focused on the teaching-learning process to a consideration of research that informs us about the broader needs of all people in any living system is shown in the American Psychological Association's 1993 report, *The Learner-Centered*

*Psychological Principles: A Framework for School Reform and Redesign*.

Its 14 research-validated principles outline what is needed to create positive learning environments at classroom and school levels throughout the K-16 system and increase educational success. These principles apply not only to school age students, but also to learners of every age. They have earned the support of varied groups of researchers as well as experienced teachers and other practitioners. This "learner-centered" knowledge base has allowed practitioners to make a difference in the lives and learning of their students from all social, ethnic, and racial groups. The principles help define individuals holistically—as people with minds, emotions, and a host of personal, developmental, social, cultural, and other individual differences and needs that must be addressed in educational contexts. For educational systems to serve the needs of all learners, it is essential to focus on the individual learner as well as to understand the learning process and the essential knowledge and skills to be learned.

A learner-centered perspective recognizes that schools must provide a maximally supportive learning context in which the teacher values and understands the rich array of individual differences and needs of a diverse student body. This requirement is as

important to learning as how well and what content is learned.

In most institutions of higher learning and increasingly within the PreK-12 system, teachers and disciplines are isolated from each other. When critical connections are not made, change is difficult and often resisted because of personal fears and insecurities.

Researchers working directly on multicultural issues also echo these concerns. James Banks has argued that new ways must be found to think about student and faculty diversity. The cultures of schools must change as well as the curriculum, such that the knowledge systems, ideologies, perspectives, and behaviors of diverse ethnic, racial, cultural, social class, and language groups are institutionalized and legitimized.

Educators concerned with equity are also calling for democratic schooling and instructional methods that build on each student's background, experiences of reality, and perspective. Teachers need to be willing to get to know students and to share power.

Even for those teachers who are open to change, there is uncertainty as to what kind of changes will be most effective, and how best to implement the changes. When change appears to be too complex and overwhelming, resignation and inertia can set in.

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Those working within a living systems framework contend that systems change is the result of personal change and critical connections. Personal change in attitudes and beliefs results from transformations of thinking, which themselves come about through personal relationships formed between the learner and others in the school, home, and community learning environments.

One example of such change in thinking is teachers learning to value student perceptions of practice and using negotiation strategies in which they work together with their students to define changes in practice and expectations. The development of a caring culture in schools requires a change in attitude, not just a restructuring of policies, curricula, and systems. The teacher/student relationship is often overlooked, but such relationships can offset students' feelings of frustration and alienation from school.

Research has shown that when youth have opportunities to care for others they have an increased sense of social responsibility, higher self-esteem, better school attendance, and decreases in depression. A caring learning community is built on a concept of *inclusion* that is based on true valuing and respect for multiple perspectives. The role of hope is also vital in fostering openness to new ways of thinking and acting.

Howard Gardner and others have highlighted the importance of broadening our view of abilities and educational achievement beyond the traditionally narrow one embedded in educational systems. When learners of any age are allowed to pursue their natural interests, their natural motivation follows, and levels of achievement in these areas of highest interest are beyond what we might prejudice to be possible. Similarly, Margaret Wang's research, embodied in her Community For Learning school reform model, provides empirically based strategies and practices for engaging even the most disenfranchised and alienated students in learning through adaptive instructional environments.

To make progress on the Task Force's recommendations, policies must:

- capture an individual and organizational purpose in PreK-16 systems directed at continuous change and learning;
- emphasize new leadership roles through the use of strategies that empower members of minority groups;
- balance efforts in school reform between a concern with high achievement standards and a concern with diverse students' individual learning and motivational needs;
- value diversity and pluralism at all levels of the educational system and emphasize change strategies focused on inclusive and respectful dialogue among all participants;
- ensure that technology narrows rather than broadens the achievement gap of minority students at all socioeconomic levels;
- value educational outcomes that go beyond academic achievement to motivational and social outcomes that include enhanced self and social identities, reduced prejudicial thinking, and increased personal and social responsibility.

### Research Suggestions

The research agenda proposed here follows from the above policy implications. The agenda is thus one of empowerment and shared responsibility to accomplish the goals expressed by the Task Force. Research efforts are needed:

- to further study principle-based learning and change in schools and districts and their impact on an expanded set of outcomes;
- to further identify, document, and disseminate results of those principles and practices

that work in different school settings and contexts;

- to better understand the processes that best support successful system change as well as personal change in attitudes that underlie the alienation and underachievement of individuals and groups in educational systems;
- to identify how best to scale up and expand the impact of what has been learned about the best practices and processes for educational transformation; and
- to study the processes, principles, models, and solutions that emerge as diverse people come together to define learner-centered educational systems.

The primary product of these research efforts will be cocreated stories that define a variety of learner-centered education models at all levels of the system that can in themselves be sources of hope and models for the future.

\*This spotlight is condensed from McCombs, B. L. (2000), Reducing the achievement gap. *Social Science and Modern Society*, 37(5), 29-36.

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