

Research addresses the racial divide in classroom performance

June 12 2015, by Courtney Orning

The achievement gap between white children and those of color in our nation's schools has profound repercussions for families and communities. But consider as well what it means to us collectively:

According to a 2009 McKinsey & Company report titled "The Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools," if the performance gap of black and Latino students as measured by test scores had caught up with that of white students by 1998, the gross domestic product in 2008 would have been between \$310 billion and \$525 billion higher, an improvement of roughly 2 to 4 percent.

"The magnitude of this impact will rise in the years ahead," the reports states, "as demographic shifts result in blacks and Latinos becoming a larger proportion of the population and workforce."

Angel Harris is well steeped in both the social and economic implications of this disparity. Harris is a Duke professor of sociology and African and African American Studies, and author of *Kids Don't Want to Fail: Oppositional Culture and the Black-White Achievement Gap*.

A passion for closing this gap is the impetus for his launch of a program housed within the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI) called Research on the Education and Development of Youth, or REDY.

According to the authors of the McKinsey report, "The wide variation in performance among schools serving similar students suggests that these

gaps can be closed." Harris trusts this to be the case. "Race and poverty are not destiny," they avow. Harris knows this to be true.

Raised by his grandparents in the Brooklyn projects, Harris was not much of an achiever in the classroom. He was persuaded by family friends to apply to Grambling University in Louisiana, and somewhat reluctantly left home. It was his first ride down an interstate highway.

"It was the first time I ever left New York," Harris told the Princeton Weekly Bulletin in 2008. "Once I got there, I realized what an opportunity I had. At Grambling, I experienced firsthand how education can really change people's lives, particularly if they're coming from a lower socioeconomic background. I wanted to know why some people are able to succeed while others are not."

That pursuit continues to drive him. He earned a bachelor's in psychology from Grambling, a master's in sociology from Kansas State University, a Ph.D. in public policy and sociology from the University of Michigan. He then taught at the University of Texas at Austin and Princeton before arriving at Duke last year.

Research into practice

Test scores, Harris believes, matter a lot. He writes:

"Elite colleges and professional schools are relying more heavily on test scores despite the fact that standardized tests are weaker predictors of college performance for some groups. Considering that affirmative action programs tend to be concentrated among the most selective four-year institutions, and that graduates from elite universities receive greater returns to education than those from non-elite institutions, achievement gaps can be expected to exacerbate inequality."

Intervening early is critical, Harris believes, and that's what REDY aims to do.

The program's objective, he says, is to "provide teachers with the tools to reach students who have different learning styles," thereby better preparing them for life beyond the classroom.

REDY has three components: research, training and public engagement.

The research component allows Duke social science graduate and undergraduate students to see their work applied in the real world. REDY received a \$1.3 million grant from the federal Department of Education to implement the program in North Carolina's Wake County, with kindergarteners being instructed in the curricula through the second grade. There will be 16 experimental schools and 16 control schools; ultimately, roughly 7,000 Wake County students will be involved.

The REDY program is built on the premise that the most effective learning environment is one in which students are encouraged to learn not only in the manner to which they're most inclined, but through alternative approaches. Some have a visual preference, some auditory, others tactile and still others kinesthetic. Teachers will be trained to make adjustments to their curricula to tailor it to these different styles of learning, exposing students to all four.

At the end of the five-year grant period, the results will be assessed to determine whether a greater share of the kids in the experimental group have been identified as gifted and talented relative to their counterparts in the control group and if the achievement gap has been narrowed.

Simplifying life

SSRI has played a key role in getting REDY launched.

Of that partnership, Harris says, "It's been fantastic." The institute has provided REDY with computing and website support, and, he adds, "the grant staff is truly amazing. They've made the grant process so much smoother."

"When I'm writing a grant, I can just focus on the science portion. I can then turn it over to them and they put it into the proper form to go through the [Office of Research Support]."

"SSRI is able to do all that behind-the-scenes work, beyond the science," Harris says. "These are resources that make a faculty member's life much, much simpler."

Redefining destinies

Harris believes the REDY program can be an effective tool in reshaping what may have seemed preordained destinies.

"I'd like to see a large wave of research coming from REDY," he says. "I'd like for REDY to become a resource for educators from around the country, where they can exchange information on issues related to education and the development of youth."

Education plays such an important role in defining futures, "and not everyone in this country is accessing the benefits of education equally," Harris says. "We have substantial [achievement gaps](#) by social class and by race, and even by gender.

"We're not maximizing the potential of a substantial portion of our population, and that makes it harder to compete on a global scale."

Harris says that, on average, black and Hispanic 12th-graders are graduating with an eight-grade skill set. And, as the McKinsey report

points out, people of color comprise an ever-larger percentage of our population.

Harris offers context:

"Imagine this: In 15 years, 2030, at least 40 percent of the U.S. population will be black or brown. You can't have nearly half of the population walking around with an eight-grade skill set; there's no way it doesn't affect everyone."

He knows, first hand, that outcome can be altered.

Provided by Duke University

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