

Research project focuses on narrowing nation's achievement gap

October 5 2015, by Diana Lachance



Associate professor Dr. Monica Dillihunt and student Claudia Mesnil are researching how faith-based organizations can help narrow the achievement gap. Credit: Michael Mercier | UAH

Since the late 1960s, Americans have been aware of a growing achievement gap between low-income minority students and their middle-class white counterparts. Yet despite the implementation of education reform initiatives to address this gap over the ensuing four

decades, it remains just as pervasive today.

"The gap for African American and Latino males is huge and has been over time," says Dr. Monica Dillihunt, an associate professor in the College of Education at The University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH). "And while their scores are improving, so are the scores of their white counterparts. So the gap is still the same."

Reasoning that a new approach was warranted, she decided to direct her research toward whether or not faith-based organizations could provide needed supplementary support and services not otherwise covered by the state. "Many already offer help - one might have a good food program, another a good tutoring program," she says. "But there's no one specific program in place that deals with everything that's needed. So I wanted to look at the skill sets out there and see how to bring them all together."

To help her with the task, Dr. Dillihunt submitted a proposal to UAH's Research & Creative Experiences for Undergraduates (RCEU) Program, which provides funding to hire student research assistants. The project drew the attention of UAH senior elementary education major Claudia Mesnil, and soon after applying, she was selected for the position. "I had been wanting to do research for a long time and I am very passionate about the education field so it seemed perfect," says Mesnil, who is a bilingual native of Puerto Rico. "Being a Latina has also sparked in me a desire to help other minorities."

Research and Creative Experience for Undergraduates Program (RCEU) Summer 2015

It Takes a Village: Can Faith Based Organizations Help in Closing the Educational Achievement Gap?

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Introduction

The educational achievement gap reports, The Schott Report (2015) and the State of Black America (2015) Reports show that the opportunity and achievement gaps continue to be the greatest for Black males of all racial/ethnic and gender groups, [with Latino males following closely behind]; the gap between graduation outcomes for Black males compared to their White male counterparts continues to widen.

Therefore, finding an avenue to provide the supports needed to help young minority (African American and Latino) males is essential to their success. This research proposes to determine what those individual needs are and if faith-based organizations contain a relevant avenue to address those needs during the grades of transition; 4th through 8th.

Theoretical Framework

The existing research contained some gaps. The following summary provides an overview of which theories have been studied and were applied when evaluating "causes" for the achievement gap.

The burden of acting white theoretical implications	
Cultural-ecological theory	Minorities struggle with associating achievement with white culture and where their own culture fits in. Minority status + assimilation.
Personal sabotage theory	A group of minorities sabotage their own academic achievement by prohibiting members of their group to do well academically. Minority achievement – own group protection = negative reinforcement.
Oppositional culture theory	Dislike towards dominating culture = conscious opposite behavior to mainstream

- **The Social Equity Theory** explains how the lack of equal distribution of resources among families and youth affects the educational achievement of students.
- **Critical Race Theory** implies that racism is embedded into American culture; therefore, the achievement gap is merely a long-term effect of American racism.



References

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Acknowledgements

Carola Hernandez-Cappas - UAH College of Education
 Dr. Monica Dillihunt - UAH Office of the Provost
 David Cook - UAH Office of the Vice President for Research and Economic Development
 Dr. Bernhard Vogler

Results

Findings relied on a review of the literature and an emergence of themes in order to identify significant variables within those themes. Taking into account theoretical frameworks, the research found that significant variables to the achievement gap included:

- Psychological distress
- Family and peer relationships
- The racial "discipline" gap.
- ❖ For the purpose of this research, *psychological distress* is defined as mental stress, emotional instability, anxiety and other impairments to the mental well being of an individual.
- ❖ Elements that were identified as affecting psychological distress and ultimately student achievement included:
 - Family involvement
 - Peer pressure
 - Living arrangements
 - Classroom expectations
 - Middle school transition
 - Family and school relationships

community context

socioeconomic status/poverty
services that provide social support
violence and gang activity
services that provide academic reinforcement

- ❖ The literature review also included studies on faith based programs that addressed academic needs of students and also community needs.
- ❖ This chart provides categories that were found to affect and influence psychological distress within communities. These are the areas that can be addressed by faith based programs to ameliorate psychological distress.



These images were taken during a focus group at UAH.

High achieving high school graduates expressed their experiences and opinions on educational inequalities and the needs of their communities.



Conclusions

Church programs and school programs that address the necessary needs of minority students and partner with a wider community create a support network. Once organizational relationships are established, under-resourced schools and community organizations, like churches, can work together to garner the political effort necessary to address the systemic economic issues involved in this educational gap. When paired with schools and instructional goals, these programs should enhance academic performance, and contribute to a positive feedback loop that assists in addressing students' basic needs and the key factors that have perpetuated the achievement gap.

The pair began with a review of the literature, hoping to gain a better understanding of the theoretical framework underlying the achievement gap. What they found was a wide spectrum of influencing factors, from unequal access to resources to minority students sabotaging their own success in their struggle to assimilate into the dominant culture. These challenges would then often result in psychological distress, leading to poor academic performance and an increased likelihood that the student will drop out all together.

"Schools have limited resources, and teachers aren't trained to deal with the emotional or psychological aspects; they're trained to deal with the educational aspects," says Dr. Dillihunt. "But we know from research that men are typically the breadwinners, so if they don't have the education and skills to advance, then everything breaks down from there."

But while some states have government-funded programs in place to address these issues, most do not. And that, says Mesnil, is exactly where faith-based organizations can step in and provide solutions. "If these organizations can come together with schools to address students' social, physical, and academic needs, there is a higher chance that students can overcome the gap in opportunity and achievement that exists."

The challenge, however, is ensuring that any partnership upholds the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state. "Public schools are hesitant to accept help from help from faith-based organizations because of that strict separation, so it's about making sure the goal of the

program is specifically outlined so that there's no suggestion of influencing the students' religious beliefs," says Dr. Dillihunt. "That's where policy change comes in."

With their research now complete, the women are planning to present their findings at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in addition to publishing them later this year. The ultimate goal, of course, would be for those findings to be put into practice - something that Dr. Dillihunt hopes to one day see. "We're looking at how to implement them," she says. But for now, just increasing awareness is a critical first step.

"It is important for all Americans to be aware of how deeply this [achievement gap](#) can affect society; if we do not educate the future's youth, negative consequences can follow," says Mesnil. "If people can become contributing citizens, they can also help better society in many aspects. Being aware of this situation helps in order to become part of a movement of change."

Provided by University of Alabama in Huntsville

Citation: Research project focuses on narrowing nation's achievement gap (2015, October 5) retrieved 18 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-10-focuses-narrowing-nation-gap.html>

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