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# Achievement Gap

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## Achievement Gap

The achievement gap is a concept that has been prevalent in educational discourse in the United States since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, though the concept has its beginnings in the post-Civil War era, the Great Migration, and the growth in immigration in the early 20th century. The term refers to a difference between the academic achievement of linguistic and ethnic minority students, students with disabilities, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, and female students, and either the mainstream student population in general or the white student population more specifically.

The achievement gap concept has gained popularity and attention in recent decades in education, particularly because of the increase in focus on standardized testing. The notion of the achievement gap has now expanded beyond the social and cultural constraints of American public education to apply to a gap in academic achievement between countries, wealthy and poor regions, the core and the periphery,

the global south and the industrialized world, colonizing and colonized groups, and indigenous or traditional groups and mainstream or modern society.

After the American Civil War, the Jim Crow era began, spurred on by laws that created barriers for African Americans to fully participate in society. One major barrier for African Americans was education. Particularly in the southern United States, black and white students were segregated into race-based schools under the guise that these separate schools would be separate, but equal. Frustrations over the disparities between white and black schools in terms of resources, teacher training, facilities, and general quality led to the landmark court case *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954, which found separate but equal policies of school segregation unconstitutional.

This case led to several confrontations between federal and state governments, most notably the forced integration of Little Rock, Arkansas, public schools in which Arkansas governor Orval Faubus used Arkansas National Guard troops to prevent black students from entering a segregated high school. American president Dwight Eisenhower used army soldiers to guard these students and allow them entry to the school. Continued resistance to school integration led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which encouraged racial integration in American public schools, and gave the federal government more power in enforcing desegregation of public schools.

### Continuing Disparity

Despite racial desegregation of schools in the United States, there continues to be an academic achievement gap between white and black students, as well as other marginalized groups, including Native American and Hispanic students.

This achievement gap manifests in several ways, including significant differences between standardized testing scores in reading and math, and higher high school dropout rates for marginalized groups.

The achievement gap is often attributed to the difference in academic exposure of marginalized children, such as children from low socioeconomic families, to early literacy opportunities and educational experiences, called an opportunity gap. This lack of exposure experienced by many marginalized

children causes an early differential between the starting academic skills of white middle-class students and marginalized students, a discrepancy that has lingering long-term effects on academic achievement in subsequent years of students' schooling. The achievement gap for marginalized students is associated with a higher high school dropout rate for these students, lower college enrollment and completion, and a host of other issues.

In the United States, the achievement gap gained renewed interest in terms of intra-national and international education during the 1980s, after the Reagan administration's National Commission on Excellence in Education released a report titled "A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" in 1983. At the height of the Cold War, the United States' education system was criticized and labeled as a failure. The report noted a lack of competitiveness between the United States' educational rigor and that of the Soviet Union and much of Europe.

The report also drew public attention to discrepancies between the educational attainments of various groups of students in public schools. Along with the report's criticism of the quality of American education, the federal government called for an increase in the rigor of schools, the establishment of standards in curriculum nationwide, and an increase in funding for schools.

These changes had an impact on decreasing the achievement gap, particularly between black and white students, through the end of the decade. However, gaps between the academic achievement of middle- and upper-income children, and children living below the poverty line, have continued to grow. These gaps imply the importance of additional familial resources, beyond the public school's sphere of influence, which impact the academic achievement of children.

The achievement gap in American public schools is also an important aspect of the George W. Bush administration's No Child Left Behind reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001. The law required schools to increase student achievement and decrease the achievement gap, using a measure called Annual Yearly Progress (AYP).

Schools that did not meet AYP faced federal and state sanctions. The achievement gap impacted the rise in charter schools and the growth in the

school voucher debate in the United States. In many schools and school districts around the country not meeting AYP, families are granted access to charter schools, or are given school vouchers to be used for private school tuition.

### Worldwide Initiatives

Globally, initiatives such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Education For All drew worldwide attention to the issues associated with the achievement gap between the wealthy and the impoverished. The United Nation's Millennium Development Goals focus on education as a key component to global development and target the challenges that marginalized and impoverished children face regarding their education. These initiatives have focused on reducing financial obstacles for the poorest students, such as school fees, which act as barriers to educational participation, success, completion, and transition to further educational opportunities.

International tests such as the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) are evaluations that assess students in a large number of countries worldwide on math, science, and literacy. In addition to comparison data on global competitiveness of students from various nations, these tests have illuminated the achievement gap between students based on gender, ethnicity, and poverty level in the United States and worldwide.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), maker of the PISA test, has shown that socioeconomic disparity has varying impact on educational equity, equity of educational outcomes, and equity of access across the world.

The OECD found that economically disadvantaged students scored lower than their economically advantaged counterparts throughout the world. Schools with high numbers of economically disadvantaged students scored lower than schools with large numbers of economically advantaged students. These tests imply that the issues related to the achievement gap in the United States are also common in countries around the world.

**See Also:** Demographics; Dropout Rates; Childhood Education, Early; Education Equity; Millennium Development Goals.

### Further Readings

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