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Examining the Racial Academic Achievement Gap and Social Emotional Learning as a Solution

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Abstract: This article examines the role of race in the academic achievement gap in the United States. While previous literature has studied the impact of sociological theories, changes in education policy, and socioeconomic status in isolation, this article explores the relationship between each aforementioned element. By incorporating multiple factors, this research reduces the effect of confounding variables while highlighting the complexity of pinpointing why racial achievement gaps persist. As a potential solution, I explore how policies like the Every Student Succeeds Act indirectly encourage the widespread adoption of social-emotional learning (SEL). Through a meta-analysis of existing literature on the learning growth trends, racial biases, and SEL, I found that stereotypes surrounding work ethic and a culture drastically influence the quality of schooling. As a result, SEL is a valuable tool to foster positive academic habits and close the achievement gap. Building positive habits have a cascading effect on future outcomes like socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and closing the earnings gap.

Introduction

The United States has had a long and persistent history of racial and ethnic segregation. A continued mode of separation that drove, and continues to drive, racial and ethnic socioeconomic disparities is education. Ever since the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* and deemed racial segregation in education unconstitutional, many attempts have been made to reduce racial-ethnic disparities in educational achievement. An initial effort to reduce this gap is demonstrated by the *No Child Left Behind* act (NCLB) which sets nationwide standards for academic achievement measured by standardized test results and mathematics, reading, and writing scores. Later, the NCLB act was revised and updated into the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), which puts a greater degree of decision-making power at the state level.

While attempts like NCLB are made to address the academic achievement gap, these efforts have resulted in slow, ineffective, and most importantly, uneven progress. This uneven progress is exacerbated by inequitable school financing which disproportionately affects minority and low-income students. A longitudinal study tracking gaps in racial and ethnic academic achievement conducted by The Stanford Educational Opportunity Monitoring Project highlights the unstable nature of progress toward educational equity. For instance, while white-Black and

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white-Hispanic academic achievement gaps have shrunk by 30-40% since the 1970s, there is still an average of 0.5-0.9 standard deviations between the groups. More generally, while the overall gap has been shrinking, gaps in some states in the Upper Midwest have been increasing. (Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis, “Racial and Ethnic”) These findings demonstrate that the achievement gap remains mostly unaddressed.

Even institutions committed to culturally responsive teaching to close racial disparities face unique challenges. In Savannah Shange’s student-centered ethnographic study at Robeson Justice Academy in San Francisco, she examines a high school at the forefront of incorporating restorative justice and bridging racial-ethnic academic achievement gaps in their schooling. However, despite being tailored explicitly towards low-income, marginalized students, the school still implicitly perpetuates ideas of black punishment while reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline. *Progressive Dystopia* describes common (and often liberal) narratives of social justice and society’s desire to eliminate racial bias in stark contrast with the realities of increasing rates of exclusionary discipline, suspension, and expulsion of black students. (Shange, 26) The dichotomy between San Francisco’s perception as a liberal haven and the dystopian realities of displacement and anti-black behavior highlights the disjuncture between commitments to narrowing the racial achievement gap and the harsh reality.

The dialogue surrounding the racial achievement gap often implicates race, specifically cultural factors, as a cause. Widely held views in the 19th and 20th centuries were that Black, Native Americans, and Hispanic people were inherently less intelligent than White people; this view is consistent with slavery, manifest destiny, and Jim Crow segregation. These ingrained, racist notions of fundamental differences in intelligence continue to present themselves in discussions of the racial achievement gap. Popular sociological theories such as John McWhorter’s culture of anti-intellectualism, Shelby Steeler’s idea of victimology, and Orlando Patterson’s theory of the culture of “gangsta rap” reinforce outdated, racist ideas. (Noguera, 92) Rationalizing achievement gaps through cultural prejudice that attributes differences in upbringing and culture as key drivers of the achievement gap detracts from a crucial factor—the quality of schooling.

In 2015, the United States government updated the NCLB act to address concerns surrounding historically heavy reliance on standardized test scores as a measure of educational progress and academic achievement. Through this revision, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was created, uprooting NCLB's previously demanding and punitive "test and punish" approach to educational achievement. This radical policy shift changed the focus from continuous testing and evaluation to directing resources and funding into factors that contribute to a more equitable, culturally responsive approach to teaching. Factors like nurses, counselors, access to advanced placement courses, restorative discipline practices, or even providing free school lunches all contribute to a more well-rounded approach to equitable education. Through newfound decision-making powers granted by the ESSA, educators are more likely to lead and effect policies that suit their students' unique backgrounds instead of finding ways to circumvent testing averages and thus obscuring achievement gaps. This restructuring of the balance of power in educational policy decision-making from the federal level to states and districts grants individual schooling districts the ability to devise solutions to combat racial achievement gaps. Yet despite the substantial potential for change brought about by the ESSA, progress in closing the racial achievement gap persists. Hence, granting districts the ability to devise solutions is only a first step in building solutions that include the lens of the historically marginalized.

When considering the causes of the academic achievement gap, socioeconomic status naturally comes to mind. A study by Kuheld et al. notes that when looking at the causes of the academic achievement gap there are many confounding variables—notably socioeconomic status. Through data analysis of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (Kindergarten Cohort 1998-1999), the study by Kuheld et al. demonstrated that over 85% of academic achievement disparities were predicted by the socioeconomic status of the family. In doing so, this study highlighted the importance of closing the racial academic achievement gap in narrowing the earnings gap.

Therefore, I will conduct research to examine disparities in academic achievement through different regions, subjects, and races. To supplement this, I investigate the significance of racial-ethnic academic achievement gaps in predicting socioeconomic status. In particular, I delve into how race and racial prejudice affect perceptions of the racial achievement gap. As a

potential solution, I explore research surrounding the value of social-emotional learning and its impacts on early school success and later-life achievements.

Race in the Academic Achievement Gap

Ingrained, racist notions of fundamental differences in intelligence continue to present themselves in discussions of the racial achievement gap. Rationalizing achievement gaps through cultural prejudice that attributes differences in upbringing and culture as a key factor in the achievement gap detracts from ensuring equitable and high-quality schooling. Popular sociological theories that attribute race to cultural factors reinforce outdated, racist ideas. John McWhorter's *culture of anti-intellectualism* ascribes discrepancies in academic achievement to the combined effects of an inherited inferiority complex and a general acceptance of weakness and failure. Shelby Steeler's idea of victimology is where Black people irrationally blame white people for their struggles (in this context lesser academic achievement and socioeconomic success). Orlando Patterson and Juan Williams' theory of the culture of "gangsta rap" suggests Black people overvalue flashy jewelry and violence while fostering an opposition toward hard work—specifically in an academic context. (Noguera, 2008)

The aforementioned cultural and sociological theories are particularly damaging as they normalize failure and complacency in trends of racial-ethnic academic achievement. A study by Pedro A Noguera examining two suburban high school districts found that white students were disproportionately represented in advanced placement classes. Due to this lack of representation, students of color were indirectly discouraged from joining advanced classes. Although local policymakers made commitments to close the achievement gap (partially due to the *No Child Left Behind* act and *Every Student Succeeds Act*), this case study reminds us of the difficulty of implementing genuine and impactful policies to close the achievement gap. (Noguera, 2008) Policies aiming to address the achievement gap and commitments to progress do not necessitate progress. In the case of the surveyed school districts, despite the resources available dedicated to closing the achievement gap, a disconnect between the aims of district leadership and educators resulted in little progress in narrowing the gap. While policy revisions like ESSA help address misguided motivations—specifically empty efforts at addressing the achievement gap to quell political pressures— meaningful policy changes need to be enacted with historically

marginalized groups in mind. Challenges in policy-making are exacerbated by the continued reinforcement of the idea that inherent cultural and behavioral factors cause the achievement gap—which leads to a misguided sense of complacency among students, parents, and most importantly, schooling institutions. As a result, the lagging performance of students of color may be internalized by educators as an exogenous factor. This normalization of failure makes it even more difficult to bridge the achievement gap.

Section Subheading One: “Implicit Biases in Schooling”

Beyond macro-level policy changes, prevailing narratives of *oppositional culture* pose a separate issue. This sociological theory is rooted in the belief that Black people inherently do not have the skills, motivation, or willpower to escape the poverty cycle. (Harris, 3 - 4) This view places blame on racial factors rather than an unfair education system. Bol and Berry demonstrate that race influences how school teachers perceive and justify racial achievement gaps; they found that school teachers and academicians— meaning university faculty or supervisors— had varying views on the racial achievement gap. School teachers were more likely to attribute the achievement gap to cultural backgrounds or characteristics of different racial groups. In contrast, university professors and lecturers tended to view the achievement gap as a product of inequity in the education system. (Harris, 2) *Oppositional culture* theory also presents itself in how teachers view the relationship between culture, socioeconomic status, and academic achievement. In Bol and Berry’s qualitative findings, teachers perceived poor families (and students) as individuals that did not treat education as a priority. This prejudice against underperforming students, many of whom are students of color, stresses the pervasiveness of beliefs grounded in *oppositional culture*.

Implicit bias by educators towards racial groups also dictates the quality of instruction and student-teacher relationships—both of which contribute to the racial-ethnic achievement gap. Social reproduction theorists contend that educational institutions perpetuate inequities through key factors such as the quality of teachers, access to quality classes, and educational objectives. Prominent theorists such as Bowles and Gintis argue that historically marginalized students attend schools that prioritize rote memorization, behavioral control, and strict obedience. In

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contrast, white students are given a greater degree of freedom to make decisions, access advanced or elective courses, and practice internalized modes of regulation. (Bowles, 1976) As a result, the disadvantaged students are conditioned to believe that they are predestined for low-wage low-skill jobs, thus perpetuating the poverty cycle. Simultaneously, white students can take advantage of educational opportunities, and train in social-emotional skills like self-regulation. This puts White students in an optimal position to continue into higher education and ultimately land specialized high-wage positions. Mckown similarly argues that accounting for socioeconomic status, on average Black students had teachers with less teaching experience than white students. (Mckown, 1123) This discrepancy in average teaching experience indicates that Black students on average receive a lower quality of instruction, exerting a direct influence on the racial achievement gap.

As an indirect consequence of less qualified school teachers, Black students also experience lower quality relationships with their teachers compared to White peers. In a study examining the effects of student-teacher relationships on perceived academic competence, Hughes argues that higher quality teacher-student relationships are correlated with mastery of social and emotional skills. In particular, positive student-teacher relationships help students develop a greater degree of peer acceptance, positive attitudes toward schooling, and ultimately achieve more academic success. (Hughes, 306) Conversely, negative teacher-student relationships are linked to an increased probability of school disciplinary problems, grade retention, and diminished academic motivation. On average, Black students experience more distant relationships with teachers compared to white students. Hence, Black students are not only disadvantaged by less experienced teachers, but also by teachers who have lower expectations of their academic prowess to begin with. Therefore the quality of education for black students is compromised by less experienced teachers and by lower academic expectations, which further diminishes the effectiveness of schooling.

Black-white differences in education and academic achievement are also impacted by the quality of the curriculum. Less experienced teachers and a lower quality of instruction are compounded by intra-school processes that separate Black and white students into different academic tracks. In turn, white students placed in higher tracks are exposed to interesting, challenging materials to promote higher-order thinking. As a result, white students absorb

learning habits that better prepare them for advanced placement courses and higher education. Simultaneously, Black students are exposed to a boring, repetitive curriculum that revolves around behavioral control and rote memorization. Through these unfair and inequitable processes, historically marginalized students are further disadvantaged and the racial achievement gap widens. (Mckown, 1124)

Section Subheading Two: “*Socioeconomic Status as an Predictor of Racial Achievement Gaps”

When examining the causes of the racial academic achievement gap there are many confounding variables—notably socioeconomic status. Data analysis of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (Kindergarten Cohort 1998 - 1999) by Kuhfeld et al. showed that over 85% of academic achievement disparities were predicted by the socioeconomic status of the family. Moreover, taking socioeconomic status (whether the student’s family lives in poverty) into account, White students consistently and almost always outperformed black and Hispanic students within the 5 - 15 years old age range. At the start of elementary school, the Black-white gap in math was 0.75 of a standard deviation while the Black-white gap in reading was 0.5 of a standard deviation. More importantly, income achievement gaps (defined as the average test score gap between children from families with income at the 90th percentile and 10th percentile) stood at 1.7 standard deviations in math and 1.06 in reading. (Kuhfeld, 63) Consequently, these findings highlight the importance of closing the earnings gap on creating an optimal learning climate for children to thrive. While most bodies of research focus on a single point in time, doing so does not illustrate larger trends relating to growth. An examination of how these academic disparities progressed over time indicated that advanced groups—made up of predominantly white children—learned at a faster rate than Black students. In addition, marginalized students not only academically progressed at a slower rate but also started with lesser academic abilities. Specifically, at ages 7 - 8, differences in abilities and academic skills began to diverge and become evident.

Somewhat contrastingly, a study by Henry et al. on the impacts of socioeconomic status on Black-white achievement gaps found that baseline gaps in academic achievement were the determining predictor. Accounting for income levels, Henry concluded that baseline gaps in achievement play a more significant role in academic achievement impacting long-term

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academic growth rates and trajectories among Black and white families. Among high-income black families, the initial early childhood academic achievement gap virtually disappeared. This indicates that leveling the income gap is key to addressing the racial achievement gap. However, when considering Black and white parental educational attainment, incremental increases widened disparities in reading, math, and science achievement—meaning parental educational attainment had a negative moderating effect on closing Black-white achievement gaps. (Henry, 1482) Taking cognitive skills into account, Black people obtain higher levels of education compared to white people as a signaling strategy to counteract racial bias in the hiring process. (Henry, 1483) Thus, this over-compensation in educational attainment indicates that equivalent levels of education may not necessarily translate to similar amounts of social capital.

Based on longitudinal data, achievement gaps between low-income Black and white students increased while high-income white students gained ground over high-income black students. Overall racial disparities in achievement progressively diminished as income increased, and in the highest income group, Black students outperformed white students. However, racial achievement gaps still existed at every point in the income distribution. While these gaps shrank at higher income levels, the magnitude of the baseline differences in academic abilities compounded by the negative moderating effects of parental educational attainment indicates that educational institutions must take a more equitable approach to narrow initial academic disparities. When discussing the economic consequences of the racial achievement gap, Olneck similarly argues that while academic achievement is not the sole determinant of economic success, it contributes significantly to future income. Over $\frac{2}{3}$ of the discrepancy in hourly wages was attributed to differences in cognitive skills; however, implicit bias in the hiring process still contributed to wage differences. (Olneck, 98) Assuming no discrimination, equalizing cognitive skills across racial groups would cut the wage gap by $\frac{1}{3}$. These racial disparities in academic achievement are linked with differences in future educational attainment—which is directly related to job opportunities and future earnings.

The relationship between ESSA and SEL

ESSA is a symbol of progress and a commitment to eliminating achievement gaps, particularly among historically marginalized populations. At the foundation of ESSA is the explicit

recognition of racial-ethnic achievement gaps; this acknowledgment combined with the increased autonomy at the state level has a twofold effect. Firstly, teachers are more aware of differences in culture and upbringing and through this can implement a more culturally responsive mode of teaching. More broadly, states are pushed to direct more funding to disadvantaged and minority students to help combat the achievement gap. With the increased flexibility at district and local levels, each district can determine how and when to administer standardized testing based on each students' strengths, weaknesses, and needs. School districts can even wholly redefine measures of academic achievement to include intangible soft skills such as creativity, emotional awareness, and self-regulation. Through these measures, schools could help to nurture a more well-rounded form of education that includes social-emotional skills. In turn, this diversification of accountability indicators (in the form of measures of achievement) could help promote educational equity. By incorporating multi-perspectivity through different modes of achievement, schools and educators are encouraged to find creative solutions and bold interventions to improve student outcomes and achievement. In this process of finding solutions in education for the historically marginalized, schools inadvertently cast a bright spotlight on clearly delineated subgroups of students (that were previously grouped as underachieving students). (Egalite, 2017) This is because measures of academic achievement must be disaggregated by ethnicity, socioeconomic background, migrant status, disabilities, and English proficiency to find a unique solution for each group of underachieving students.

On paper, ESSA helps sway decision-making power regarding education policy into the hands of states and local school districts; this, in theory, should improve the state of schooling and educational equity. However, this newfound power granted to states by ESSA is a double-edged sword, especially when considering that every state will have different goals, priorities, and degrees of motivation. On one hand, states committed to the goal of equity can enact change that uplifts historically marginally disadvantaged students. However, conservative states—once freed from the tyranny of continuous federally mandated standardized testing—would have no pressure to improve conditions of low-achieving students. This could result in further marginalization of disadvantaged groups who are historically students of color. Hence, this recognition of racial-ethnic achievement gaps does not imply that *every state* will address them. The deciding factor is proactivity; states and districts with schools committed to

bridging the gap will do so while others will use ESSA to downplay underperforming students. By all means, ESSA is not perfect—it does not fully account for all factors that cause educational inequity such as systemic racism, ableism, and Christian normativity, among other factors (Egalite, 773) Moreover, it does not internalize the racial-ethnic, linguistic, and cultural complexities of school communities.

Section Subheading One: “How ESSA implicitly supports social emotional learning”

When states reevaluate their measures of academic achievement, social-emotional learning (SEL) is a powerful non-academic indicator of school and student success. While ESSA does not explicitly support funding for developing SEL skills, it provides avenues for states and districts to promote SEL initiatives. In particular, the mandate that states must record at least one indicator of “school quality or student success” creates a pathway for the widespread integration of SEL. As a result of this mandate and a broader definition of student success, state leaders are encouraged to incorporate elements of SEL to support social and emotional development. (Richerme, 152) In a work on how ESSA opens the door to SEL, Ferguson similarly argues that ESSA incentivizes educators to recognize the importance of SEL skills and incorporate them into their teaching. However, it is important to recognize that the difficulty in quantifying SEL competency is a double-edged sword: it promotes the development of intangible, practical life skills (like self-regulation) but also generates skepticism due to its lack of a standardized unit of measurement. At best, it is difficult to discern the association between non-academic indicators of success. (Ferguson, 74) Therefore, ESSA indirectly promotes the general adoption of non-academic indicators, but it is up to state leaders to determine whether an SEL-based approach is the best solution.

Section Subheading Two: “Narrowing the gap through social emotional learning”

With changes brought about by the ESSA, indicators of accountability by schools involving student success are quantified in various ways. Social-emotional learning (SEL) plays a crucial role in developing skills that contribute to school success; for instance, classroom adjustment. While social-emotional learning is an important skill all-around, it is even more important during a child’s early years. In a study by Denham et al. examining the relationship between

social-emotional skills and early school achievement, researchers found that SEL had specific impacts that translate to academic outcomes. In particular, SEL had a measured impact on classroom adjustment which includes intangible factors like motivation to learn, social skills, active participation, collaboration with others, and enjoying school. (Denham, 429) These intangible skills were also extended to self-regulation, which was equally important for class adjustment and academic achievement. In terms of academic readiness, SEL helped children develop mastery of basic skills like math, literacy, and general knowledge. By improving children's abilities to regulate emotion, attention, and behavior, SEL creates an optimal learning foundation for future progress. In contrast, children struggling to process and deal with negative emotions inhibit their ability to focus on learning and maintain a positive attitude towards schooling. Hence, SEL is an important tool to develop self-regulation skills which have compounding effects that enhance school success.

Apart from self-regulation, social awareness—specifically being able to comprehend and deal with emotions—is a key part of interpersonal communication and thriving in a classroom environment. As seen in Figure 1 below, SEL and cognitive skills are deeply intertwined. In particular, being able to comprehend emotions in complex social situations requires decision-making and problem-solving skills; these social problem-solving skills not only contribute to responsible decision-making but also relationship-building capabilities. In line with this reasoning, in a separate study conducted by Izard et al., researchers discovered that emotional knowledge in 5-year-olds predicted academic readiness 4 years later. Hence social problem-solving skills taught by SEL-based curriculums are found to be indicators of later academic readiness.

SEL needs to be implemented during early childhood (pre-grade school) to fully benefit from its cascading effects on academic achievements. Childhood development theories predict that children experience the most significant growth in work habits between late childhood and early adolescence. Work habits encapsulate skills such as self-regulation, interpersonal skills, and a sense of motivation. SEL serves as a cornerstone of such habits because managing emotions and regulating behavior are core components of building positive work habits. Interestingly, early work habits are a stronger predictor of academic success compared to strictly academic behaviors like absenteeism. These evolving work habits are often accompanied by increased

situational demand brought about by schoolwork and increased social interactions. In conjunction with support from family and scaffolding from educators, SEL results in positive effects on work habits.

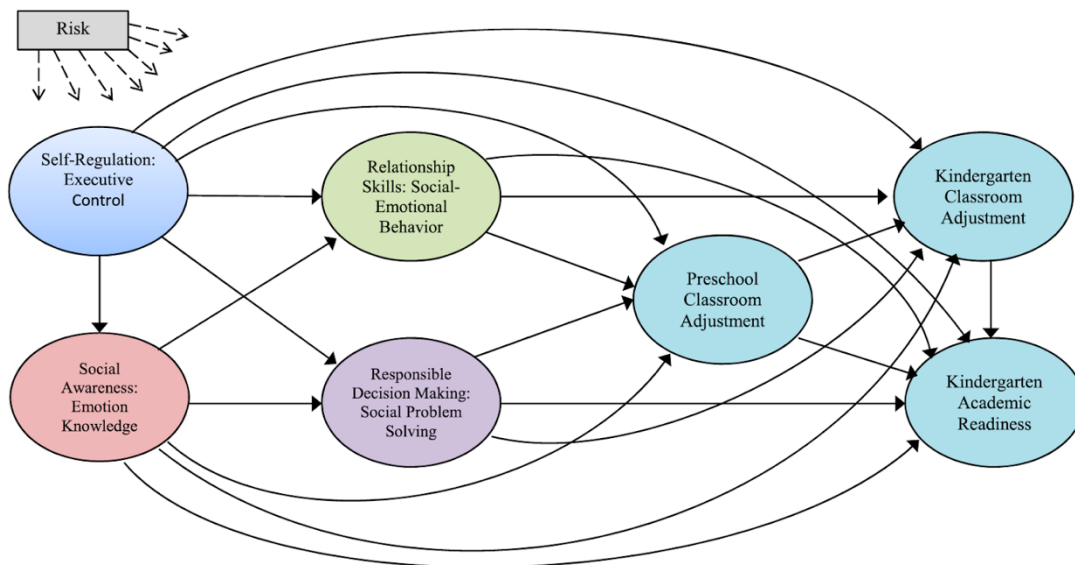


Figure 1: Correlations Between SEL and Academic Success

Source: Denham, 2014

Simpkins et al. researched how SEL impacted the development of work habits in 1st to 6th-grade students. The researchers concluded that notably, the growth and development of work habits in 1st to 6th-grade directly predicted academic outcomes through high school while indirectly predicting educational attainment up until the age of 26. Overall, children with more advanced positive work habits in 1st grade experienced substantially higher academic achievement through high school. This increased achievement creates an indirect relationship between work habits and taking more advanced classes, having on average higher grades, and finally being admitted into selective colleges and universities. In the regression analysis Simpkins et al. used to come to their conclusions, they found developing positive work habits had a measured impact on attaining higher grades ($\beta = 0.42$), taking advanced classes ($\beta = 0.33$),

and ultimately matriculating into selective colleges ($\beta = 0.28$). These findings demonstrate a significant positive relationship between positive work habits and the aforementioned outcomes. However, compared to older children who demonstrated advanced progress in work habits in later grades, work habits were a less significant predictor of higher grades ($\beta = 0.36$), advanced classes ($\beta = 0.24$), and entering selective colleges ($\beta = 0.25$). Therefore, these varying results indicate that although positive progression in work habits facilitates later academic success, baseline levels of positive work habits beginning in the first grade are stronger predictors of academic success. However, these work habits established in the first grade still had cascading effects on academic outcomes which indirectly predicted adult educational attainment by the age of 26. (Simkins, 2288)

The benefits of developing early work habits are emphasized by how children tend to develop the most academically during early childhood. In a longitudinal study conducted by Ding and Davison, data on cohorts spanning grades 3 - 9 were collected over 4 years; participants were then separated into grade 3 and grade 5 Cohorts who had their development observed for 4 years. For both grade 3 and grade 5 cohorts, the greatest rate of growth (measured by achievement in math) occurred in the first time interval, then decreased at an increasing rate in the following 3 years. Students in Cohort 1 experienced 53% growth from 3rd to 4th grade while students in Cohort 2 experienced 58% of growth from 5th to 6th-grade. However, in their statistical analysis, Ding and Davison found that individual differences in growth rate between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students were small (almost negligible). This reinforces the importance of initial achievement levels in determining future learning outcomes. (Ding & Davison, 89—90) In this way, while all students examined had similar rates of growth, the achievement gap persisted in later years. This inability to catch up to initially better-performing peers was magnified during the early years, creating exponentially larger separation in later years. These findings in conjunction with the cascading effects of early positive work habits reiterate the importance of SEL as a tool in early childhood education.

Some findings, such as research by Davis et al., explicitly use social-emotional competency indicators to predict future academic success. Davis et al. defined SEL indicators in 5 ways: academic self-efficacy, motivation, peer relations, perceived importance of school, and their

ability to manage stress. By using the SEL subscales, researchers were able to discriminate between future high school graduates and failing students or dropouts. However, the perceived importance of higher education was the most significant predictor of GPA; this underscores the indirect impact of SEL in fostering quality teacher-student relationships and a motivation to learn. (Davis, 179) In conclusion, SEL helps to develop self-regulation and quality learning habits that promote good academic habits like time management and interpersonal skills. In turn, these skills help students recognize the value of education in relation to achieving their goals.

Invaluable research in developmental psychology reaffirms the widespread benefits of developing SEL skills in young children. This development of cognitive practices through teaching SEL skills has the potential to translate to taking more initiative in work, being more focused in the classroom, and working more neatly. Simultaneously, positive teacher-child interactions also work to build self-regulation skills—further demonstrating the importance of culturally responsive teaching in building positive work habits. Yet, providing academically stimulating home environments is equally as important and often a product of parental educational attainment; this emphasizes the cyclical and persistent nature of the achievement gap.

Potential Points for Future Quantitative Analysis

Section Subheading One: “Utilizing More Ethnographic Research”

In current literature surrounding the achievement gap, many researchers take a very specific approach to exploring factors throughout childhood that affect academic achievement, personal development, and ultimately socioeconomic outcomes. While Savannah Shange’s ethnographic-based work is an advancement in the field of educational equity, a majority of research is still lacking in this regard. In particular, many studies on racial disparities in schooling rely on relatively outdated longitudinal data—for instance, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of the 1998-1999 Kindergarten Cohort. In the rapidly changing political climate of the United States, it is easy to lose sight of the voice of historically marginalized groups while pushing for changes in educational policy. As a result, a future point of consideration is to utilize more ethnographic type studies to derive current, specific results.

While this approach may take a considerable amount of data cleaning and conversion, it is important to hear from the new generation of students and particularly how the wake of increased advocacy— such as the Black Lives Matter movement— and the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their schooling experience.

Section Subheading Two: “Incorporate Supervised and Unsupervised Machine Learning into Traditional Research Methods ”

From a purely statistical perspective, attempting to model the different factors that contribute to the racial achievement gap might result in intriguing findings. While many of the scholars mentioned above have formal training in statistics and developmental psychology, adopting a data science approach to understanding the racial achievement gap could yield interesting results. A majority of the more quantitative articles that I reviewed utilized simple linear regressions. Although they are relatively easy to train and interpret, they are also especially prone to noise and overfitting. For example, this suggests that while a linear regression model might predict which SEL components most significantly predict future academic attainment with relatively high accuracy, the same model might not apply to new data. With the advent of big data and data mining, researchers could draw on census data to create machine learning models that become more accurate with time.

Conclusion

By taking a more holistic approach to understanding the racial achievement gap, we gain a deeper understanding of its origins and complexities. While advancements in education policy — such as the development of ESSA from NCLB — equip states and schooling districts with the tools to push for equitable education, this in and of itself does not necessitate change. The United States education system has a long path ahead in reducing implicit biases in schooling, implementing more culturally responsive modes of teaching, and ultimately reducing academic achievement gaps. A concrete potential solution is through implementing social-emotional learning on a nationwide scale. By doing so, educators better equip students with positive learning habits, improved interpersonal skills, and increased self-regulation — all of which translate to improved academic success and socioeconomic outcomes. Understandably, measures of academic success vary by state and schooling district. However, a first step is to recognize the

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value of SEL, and attempt to equalize academic outcomes by boosting social-emotional skills and work onwards from there.

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