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Proposals for The Next Step

**Perry, Theresa, Steele, Claude, and Hilliard, III, Asa Young, *Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*. Boston, Beacon Press: 2003.**

Educators, policymakers, students, and society at large are constantly bombarded with reports of an achievement gap. This gap refers to the difference between the average performance of African-Americans and that of Whites on standardized tests. Theresa Perry expands this definition defining it as the “gap between the academic performance of Black and Latino students on the one hand and white and Asian-American students on the other” (Perry 7). America is a democratic society; we pride ourselves on equal opportunity. Yet, this gap persists. The gap can even be found between White students and Black students who come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. The achievement gap serves as evidence that our society is systematically failing to serve minorities. It is not acceptable for certain groups to continually underachieve on all measures of performance. Society has tried to blame the underperformance of African-American and Latino students on the culture of these groups and their socioeconomic status. It is time that we reassess the situation. Perhaps the problem lies in the education that is offered to these students and the ideology of intellectual inferiority that infests our society.

*Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students* is a compilation of three essays by Theresa Perry, Claude Steele, and Asa Hilliard III. The three authors are experts in the field of education and have focused their careers on the experience and achievement of African-American students in schools. They each have developed their own theories regarding these experiences, why the achievement gap exists and what must be done to promote academic excellence for minority students, particularly African-Americans.

Perry, Steele, and Hilliard argue that the contemporary conversation about the achievement

gap does not address many of the key obstacles that African-American students face. The authors' intended purpose is to uncover these barriers that are unique to the African-American experience in schools and to develop the educational practices that can break down these barriers and promote academic excellence.

Theresa Perry focuses on the historic African-American philosophy of education and evaluates two theories regarding minority achievement in order to develop her own theory for promoting African-American achievement. Her essay comprises two-thirds of the book. Claude Steele examines the "stereotype threat" and explains how this can be counteracted in order to promote high achievement. Finally, Asa Hilliard presents case studies on schools and teachers that have high-achieving minority students. He explains that the solution lies in hiring high-quality teachers. In all three essays, they examine what makes the African-American experience unique, and they propose solutions that work to abate these differences.

Theresa Perry's explores the African-American experience from their perspective. She did this first by identifying the dilemmas that are unique to the African-American experience in schools. Then, in order to understand what promotes African-American achievement, she examines the history and philosophy of education in African and African-American culture by looking at narratives from the time of slavery through the mid-twentieth century. She assesses two different theories about the achievement of African-Americans and finally outlines a theory for achievement in post-Civil Rights America.

In her essay "Up From the Parched Earth: Toward a Theory of African-American Achievement," Theresa Perry outlines a theory for the academic achievement of African-American students in Post-Civil Rights America. In Part One, "Freedom for Literacy and Literacy for Freedom: The African-American Philosophy of Education," she reviews nine

narratives in which people, ranging from Frederick Douglass to Maya Angelou, emphasize the importance of education and literacy in their lives. These narratives show the high value African-Americans have placed on education throughout history, and the academic achievement that was made in spite of many societal constraints placed on them. There is a long-standing African-American philosophy of education. It is, as Theresa Perry coins it, “freedom for literacy and literacy for freedom, racial uplift, citizenship, and leadership” (Perry 6).

In the time of slavery, education and literacy affirmed African-Americans’ humanity (Perry 13). For example, Douglass’s master ordered his wife *not* to teach Douglass to read. “According to Mr. Auld, education would ‘spoil a nigger,’ make him unfit to be a slave, make him discontent, unhappy, and unmanageable” (Perry 14). Mr. Auld made Frederick desperate for literacy. Douglass knew that was how he would free himself (Perry 15). The narratives and philosophy of education must be passed on through the generations to aid the development of an identity of intellect and achievement.

In Part Two, “Competing Theories of Group Achievement,” Perry examines two theories that attempt to explain and predict the school performance of African-Americans. The two explanatory models are the cultural difference theory and the theory of social mobility. In short, “cultural difference theorists argue that the disproportionate school failure of African Americans and other racial minorities can be attributed at best to a mismatch and at worst to a conflict between a student’s home culture and the culture of the school (Perry 53).” This theory emphasizes the difference between African-American English, also known as Ebonics, and standard edited English and the problems this dichotomy creates for African-Americans in our society. Teachers often do not understand Ebonics, and, as a result, Blacks are seen as intellectually inferior. This issue creates a strong argument for the use of culturally responsive teaching practices in order to promote high achievement (Perry 58).

The social mobility model suggests that domestic minorities are classified as either an “immigrant minority” or a “castelike minority.” These categories affect their performance in school. African-Americans are “castelike minorities” because they were brought here against their will and have been forced into a castelike position in American society. They believe that racial barriers will always keep them from getting ahead, regardless of education and ability. These two theories, despite their differences, explain the ideology of Black intellectual and cultural inferiority, which hinders achievement.

Theresa Perry outlines a theory for achievement in her final section, “Achieving in Post-Civil Rights America: The Outline of a Theory.” She provides very specific directions for actions for achievement in school. The underlying theme is that schools must create a strong culture of achievement. This culture must be able to counter the ideology of Black intellectual incompetence. Schools must hold all students to the same high standards (Perry 100). They should also create an environment that positively affirms Black students’ identities as African-Americans.

Perry argues that “African-American’s castelike status and the larger society’s ideology about their intellectual competence creates a distinctive set of dilemmas for African-American youth and even adults” (Perry 105). African-Americans have three social identities that they must overcome in order to achieve in school. These are their “identity as members of a castelike group, their identity as members of mainstream society, and their identity as members of a cultural group in opposition to which whiteness historically and contemporarily continues to be defined” (Perry 104). Perry argues that the traditional African-American philosophy of education must be passed on. It links literacy and education to the definition of what it means to be African-American (Perry 105). This is important in order to counter society’s concept of intellectual inferiority. It promotes achievement regardless of whether rewards are found in the job market.

African-Americans must also have a firm grounding in their identity as a member of a racial caste group. This will allow them to interpret the injustices society deals them without internalizing them (Perry 106). Again, Perry emphasizes that “African-American students will achieve in school environments that have a leveling culture, a culture of achievement that extends to all of its members and a strong sense of group membership, where the expectation that everyone achieve is explicit and is regularly communicated in public and group settings” (Perry 107).

Perry’s essay is refreshing. Society is quick to blame Black culture and socioeconomic standing for their students’ consistent underperformance in school. Few people recognize or remember the African-American philosophy of education. It seems that many of the more recent generations of African-Americans have lost touch with this philosophy, as well. Perry’s essay uses this philosophy as a key ingredient in her theory of achievement for African-American students, as she rightfully should. It is imperative that all members of society acknowledge the value Blacks place on education; this would greatly diminish the pervasive theory of intellectual inferiority.

Perry also mentioned that African-Americans must acknowledge and accept their identity as a member of a racial caste group. This will help them understand why society behaves the way it does. The problem is that it suggests, to African-Americans, that they are in a lower position in society. This could lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy for African-Americans. Perry did not discuss methods by which Blacks can change this ideology and identity. Perhaps it all begins with education.

In addition, it is easy to state the importance of creating cultures of achievement. Perry creates a strong, clear argument for the importance of these cultures and explains how they will help promote achievement. However, it is still not clear how you make teachers, administrators,

and students do this. Overall, it is a very strong, promising and inspiring essay.

Claude Steele's essay is entitled, "Stereotype Threat and African-American Student Achievement." In the discussion about the achievement gap there has been a recent focus on what happens to middle-class Black students. The disadvantages associated with being Black in American society are poverty and lack of social resources. However, it is assumed that middle class Blacks do not suffer a disadvantage due to their race (Steele 111). But despite this belief, middle class Black students consistently underperform in all measures of performance. Steele and his colleagues have developed the theory of the stereotype threat, "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype (Steele 111)." Numerous studies have shown that when the subjects take a test under the belief that they are being tested on their ability, those for whom there is a negative stereotype do worse than the other group. For example, on a verbal test, African-Americans scored significantly lower than Whites because they thought the test was diagnostic of their intellectual ability. However, when they were told the test was to assess problem-solving skills, there was no significant difference in the performance of the two groups (Steele 114). The stereotype threat extends to all groups, even those for whom there is no internalized feeling of inferiority. White and Asian-American males were given the same math test. Though there is no evidence of Whites being worse than Asian-Americans, when they were told that their group stereotypically does worse than Asian-Americans, the whites, indeed, received lower scores (Steele 117). Their studies found that it is the students with strong academic skills and identity who are most affected by the stereotype threat. They try too hard to disprove the stereotype and put a lot of pressure on themselves to do well. This hinders their ability to efficiently and effectively take the test. "Led into the [academic] domain by their strengths, they pay an extra tax

on their investment—vigilant worry that their future will be compromised by society’s perception and treatment of their group” (Steele 121).

Steele’s presents several suggestions for promoting academic achievement among African-American students. “Research shows that solutions include strategies at the level of (1) pedagogy and relationships between individual teachers and students; (2) institutional and contextual changes; and (3) individual personal responses” (Steele 125). It is imperative that teachers hold all their students to high standards and that they make the students aware of the standards. This is the only way to bridge the racial divide. High standards are consistent for everyone. Secondly, he recommends that students have ample opportunities to talk and interact with students of other groups. It allows them to see that people of other races have the same concerns they do (Steele 129). Finally, African-Americans must see their intelligence as expandable. It counteracts the theory of intellectual inferiority because it suggests that through hard work and learning, they can overcome the stereotype (Steele 128).

Steele’s stereotype threat theory is extremely valuable to society. It provides a very logical explanation for why minority students consistently score lower on tests. The theory supports a new pedagogy that is relatively easy to implement—standards based education and evaluation. The solution also requires that students adopt the mentality that they are not being judged as a member of their race, regardless of the situation. Steele emphasizes that it will be difficult to change the ideology of the larger society, but creating small niches of racial trust will greatly help African-Americans’ performance (Steele 130). If a school opens the lines of communication between all the members of its community, this racial trust will be easy to achieve.

Asa Hilliard’s essay is entitled “No Mystery: Closing the Achievement Gap Between Africans and Excellence.” After presenting many case studies of successful schools, programs

and teachers, Hilliard argues that cultural differences, IQ scores, and socioeconomic status are not relevant to student performance. Instead, the solution for promoting academic achievement among all students lies in good service and quality teachers.

Hilliard discusses three “gaps” that society perceives with regard to African Americans. The first is a gap in intelligence. He refutes the supposed intelligence gap between African-American and White students. It does not exist because IQ tests are just another type of achievement test that is biased toward those who have been exposed to the material that is on these tests (Hilliard 135). As Steele suggested, students must adapt the belief that their intelligence is expandable. When they do this, students will embrace all opportunities to learn.

He also disagrees with the concept of the achievement gap. It sets White students as the norm (Hilliard 137). Instead, again like Steele, he demands that society set criterion goals and hold everyone to high standards. Like Perry, Hilliard believes that when you hold students to high academic goals they will achieve them. Society must change its expectations of students.

He also discusses the gap in the quality of instruction and programs that are offered to minority students. This is a result of the ideology of intellectual inferiority. He refers to Jonathon Kozol’s term “savage inequalities” to describe this gap (Steele 140). “Nothing is more peculiar than the continuing seeming inability of our leading educators to acknowledge these well-documented savage inequalities and to use them as the basis for explaining the academic, social, and cultural achievements of students” (Steele 140).

This essay is particularly inspiring. The solution to the achievement gap is relatively easy to achieve. Regardless of the dominant ideology of society, as long as the schools have good teachers who do not buy into the belief that African-American students are intellectually inferior, students will achieve academic success. The question now is how do we find and train teachers that will not buy into society’s dominant ideologies. Many schools have recently made the shift

to standards-based education. This should help achieve Hilliard's goals.

His argument, though, that the achievement gap is not valid, is interesting. Though the conversation about the gap sets white students as the norm, it is still a problem that African-Americans consistently perform worse than their White peers. "Reexamining the norm group's achievement would reveal that the typical discussion about "the norm" really may be a discussion about normative mediocrity" (Hilliard 137). Society must address both problems. It must raise the achievement of minority students while still raising the standard of excellence for everyone.

The compilation of these three essays sheds light on the unique experience African-American students face in public schools. The current debate about the achievement gap ignores the identity issues African-American children face and the assumptions that are associated with their race. Though all three authors have different arguments and theories regarding the below-average achievement of African-Americans, each theory is valid and they open the floor for debate. Each author outlines a theory for promoting achievement among African-Americans. The underlying theme is that we must create a culture of achievement. Teachers must actively show students that they are not being judged as a member of their race and that they believe the students can achieve at high levels. Schools must hold all students to high standards and judge students by those standards and not by the expectations for their race. The blame can no longer be placed on Black culture or poverty. There is a great deal that schools and teachers can do to encourage high achievement for all of their students.

Anyone who takes an interest in the achievement gap and the experience of African-American students should read this book. Each essay provides eye-opening insights into the current situation in our schools and the easy solutions that lay at our fingertips. It is no longer a question of whether or not the gap can be closed; it is now simply a matter of taking the actions

to close it. Perry, Steele, and Hilliard make invaluable contributions to this complex contemporary debate.

Reviewed by  
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