

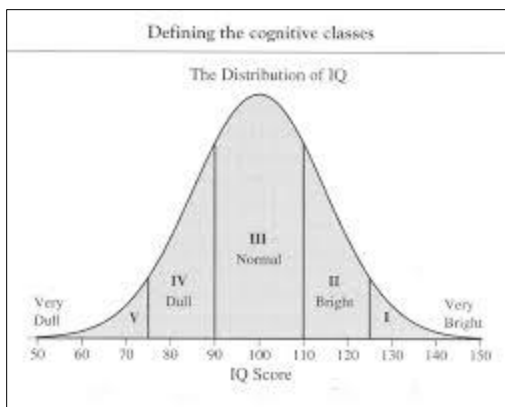
A Gap in Test Scores Becomes a Talking Point

By KATE ZERNIKE

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Once it was the great taboo. Now, most American schools and policy-makers are talking about it openly: the achievement gap between black and Hispanic students on the one hand and whites and Asians on the other, which persists even among the ranks of the most well off and well educated. Fourteen racially diverse suburbs in different parts of the country have joined to share what appear to be successful strategies for closing the gap. As a way of forcing school districts to deal with the disparity, some states are requiring them to break out their test score data by race.

The breaking of the silence still produces some uncomfortable confrontations. When a group of black and white parents in suburban Nyack, N.Y., decided to release the numbers broken down by race, many middle-class black parents wanted to suppress the scores and bitterly lashed out at the others for crusading on their behalf.



Minorities, especially blacks, are often the most reluctant to talk about the gap in test scores, because such discussions have been haunted by arguments about genetic inferiority. Unable to explain the gap, they worry that people will jump to the conclusion that blacks and Hispanics simply are not as smart.

And often, people have.

The genetic argument was repeated in a section of "The Bell Curve" (The Free Press, 1994) by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray. Other academics have offered a range of evidence to debunk their position, which caused an uproar. But Stephanie Robinson of the Education Trust, a nonprofit group in Washington that works with communities trying to raise test scores, says the book merely put into print notions hinted at elsewhere, from portrayals of blacks in film to banks' refusal to offer mortgages to those living in black neighborhoods.

"Look at the history you've got behind the notion that black people are inferior," said Robinson, who is black. "There's entertainment history, academic history, there's

conventional wisdom, there's economic history. All of those systems that consistently reinforce the negative message.

"It's got so much weight. If you have a scale, there's all this history over there, and the evidence over here hasn't been able to balance it out. We're bucking 200 years of history here."

Researchers say they really began to notice the gap in the 1980s as American schools experienced a rise in the number of Asian students, who tended to score very high, which made lower scores among blacks and Hispanics all the more striking. In the 1990s, the gap between white-Asian scores and black-Hispanic scores widened even more.

Any white who raised the issue risked being called a racist; any black who did was branded a sellout or worse.

"When I first started talking about this 15 years ago, a lot of folks didn't want to hear it," said Edmund W. Gordon, an emeritus professor of psychology at Yale, who helped conduct a recent College Board study on the achievement gap. Gordon is black. "They felt, 'We know we're not doing well; we want to know what to do about it.'"

"You tended to get some negative reaction from minority communities," Gordon said, "because they think, and I think rightly so, that there is often a very strong element of blaming the victim." He added that minorities often feel that test scores are used to call attention to alleged inferiority rather than to inform interventions.

Why talk about it now? Part of the reason may be timing. "We've had a few years since the last genetic inferiority attack," Gordon said. "And so that fear has quieted down a bit."

Some trace the reluctance to discuss the achievement gap back to the 1965 report on the black family by Assistant Labor Secretary Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who described a vicious circle of fatherlessness and poverty. The backlash from black leaders chilled intellectual debate.

For years that made it impossible for anyone to consider openly whether social factors might be behind the gap, said Abigail Thernstrom, whose widely debated book, "America in Black and White" (Simon & Schuster, 1997), written with her husband, Stephan, argued that affirmative action policies are misguided because they deflect attention from the real problem: that blacks are not well prepared in elementary and high schools.

"It was a big no-no," said Thernstrom, whose next book is on the achievement gap. "The fact that nobody is screaming when George W. Bush talks about the soft bigotry of low expectations, that shows how much the conversation has changed."

Today, though, many black academics are leading the discussion on the racial gap in scores, and they are pointing to social factors as the most likely causes. Claude M. Steele, a Stanford University psychologist who has studied the performance of black students, argues that racial stereotyping adversely influences many black students, who start to believe that they are limited by genetics and carry out a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Ronald F. Ferguson, a researcher at Harvard University, suggests that teachers' low expectations hinder black students. The results are often at odds with a history that, black educators say, has included a reverence for education, even during slavery when learning to read was punishable by death.

"The fact that some of us who are fairly well identified with the minority community, whose politics are not suspect, have insisted on talking about it has made it acceptable," Gordon said.

Black parents are helping to ease the conversation, and the growing middle class is demanding more from its schools.

"You have more and more minority folks in this country who not only aspire to but actually attain higher levels of education," said Michael Osnato, superintendent of schools in Montclair, N.J., one of the 14 communities involved in sharing information, including the use of study groups and advanced courses, to help close the gap. "It's created a momentum and awareness to the issue." Some of the other districts are Amherst, Mass.; Evanston, Ill.; Chapel Hill, N.C.; and Berkeley, Calif.

Talking about solutions has been the logical next step. Experts are trying to identify the places or cases that defy the trend and to replicate or learn from their success.

But even that search requires a certain fortitude and a willingness to keep talking through the difficult, if not painful, initial discussions. But the solutions are often elusive.

"For us," Gordon said of his work with the College Board, "the most discouraging thing is that after three years of work, we ended up being better able to describe the problem than to offer solutions."