

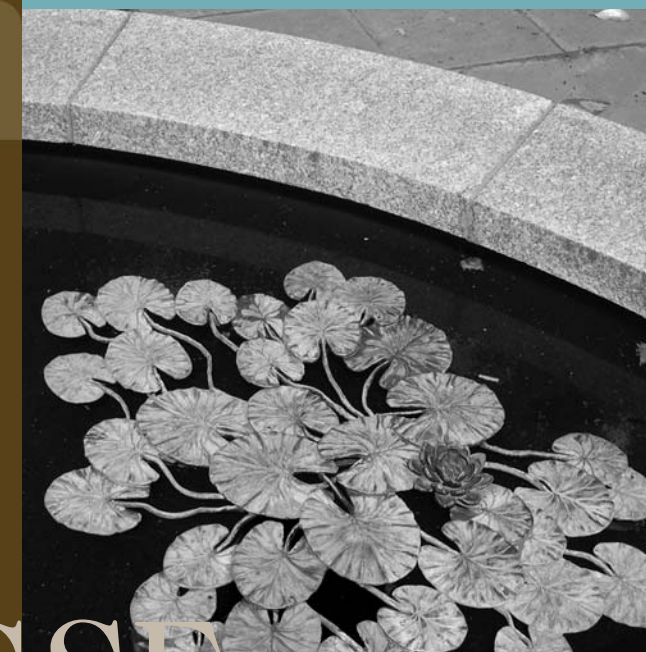


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A Review of Research

Rethinking the Achievement Gap

By Andy Porter

Back in the 1960s, the noted sociologist Christopher Jencks called for income-tax redistribution to address the issue of racial inequality. Today, he looks to education: “Reducing the test score gap is probably both necessary and sufficient for substantially reducing racial inequalities in education attainment and earnings.”

Jencks is not alone in this assessment. In the past 40 years, more has been written about the achievement gap than just about any other topic in education. But what exactly is the achievement gap? How important is it? What has been done, and what can be done, to address it?

MORE INSIDE...

Updates on Research and Publications from the Penn GSE faculty

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on the cover:
Lily Composition #3, Anne Froehling,
Steinhart Plaza, Bronze, 1993

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photo: Mark Willie

Rethinking the Achievement Gap

By Andy Porter

Continued from page 1

The achievement gap is the persistent disparity in academic achievement between minority and disadvantaged students and their white counterparts. To begin my discussion of the issue, I feel I must in some way account for the nature-nurture tension that sometimes underpins conversations about the gap: suffice it to say that I weigh in with Richard Nisbett, who stated that “[t]he most relevant studies provide no evidence of the genetic superiority of either race but strong evidence for substantial environmental contributions to the IQ gap between blacks and whites.”¹

In my view, it is not innate ability but rather the opportunity to learn—an artifact of environment—that underlies the achievement gap.

The best data available for looking at the achievement gap over time are the long-term trend data from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). A national probability sample, NAEP data are detailed by age group, not grade, and since the test itself has remained stable since the early 1970s, it paints a picture of how things have changed over time.

What do the data reveal? Consider just reading performance among nine-year-olds from the year 1971 to 1999. The achievement gap did not narrow over this period: into the 1980s, some progress was made, but from that point on, the gap stabilized. The situation is basically similar for mathematics and not so very different for science.²

In my view, it is not innate ability but rather the opportunity to learn—an artifact of environment—that underlies the achievement gap.

In short, we have made progress—with the substantive improvements occurring early on—but not as much as we would like. It is instructive to note, however, that there are significant

local variations: the gap reported in the state of Maine, for example, is much smaller (about one third of a standard deviation) than that in Wisconsin or Connecticut (both larger than one standard deviation).

Mind you, a gap that measures one standard deviation represents a serious disparity in achievement. Moving a child who lands at the middle of the distribution up by one standard deviation would move him roughly from the 50th percentile to the 84th percentile—a change that would delight any educator.

¹Jencks, C., & Phillips, M. (Eds.). (1998). *The Black-White Test Score Gap*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, p. 4.

²Nisbett, R.E. (1998). Race, genetics, and IQ. In C. Jencks & M. Phillips (Eds.), *The Black-White Test Score Gap*, p. 101.

³A cautionary note about these data: with participation rates declining over time in each subject, they may be slightly unreliable. For example, assuming that schools with the lowest achievement are participating at a lower rate and that these schools have a higher percentage of black students than white, then differential attrition would result in an underestimation of the size of the gap.

How Important Is the Achievement Gap?

The typical contrast used to define the achievement gap is the black-white divide or, increasingly, the Hispanic-white. But the gap could be defined by socioeconomic status, and it could be criterion-referenced or norm-referenced. Because people talk about the achievement gap in these various ways, we need to be precise about what we mean.

When does the achievement gap begin? The gap between whites and blacks is present before children experience any schooling. By the time children are three or four, it is already a standard deviation.

Does the gap increase while students are in school? The surprising answer is no. Researchers have found that the rate of growth in achievement among blacks is equal to that among whites during the academic year. In the summertime, both groups show a decrease, but that decrease is larger for blacks than for whites. So while the achievement gap doesn't increase while students are in school, it doesn't decrease either.

Is the gap a function of test bias? No matter how hard they have looked, researchers have been unable to find any evidence of test bias. A number of people have hypothesized that administering performance assessments rather than multiple choice achievement tests would show a smaller gap, but this is not the case. In fact, an achievement gap of one standard deviation on multiple choice tests increases to 1.2 standard deviations with performance assessment. My hypothesis about this finding is that black children on average are not receiving the schooling they need to acquire the kind of knowledge needed to succeed in performance assessments. That is, there is differential distribution of opportunity to learn between black students and white students.

Are definitions of comparison groups changing discussions of the gap? I would venture that in ten or 15 years, we won't be talking about the black-white achievement gap. Since the current Census allows respondents to report multiple ethnicities, we will have a much harder time in defining ethnic groups in the future. The achievement gap will still be there, and we will still worry about it. But we will likely be worrying about it in terms of socio-economic status.

What Solutions Have Been Tried?

Since the 1960s, attempted solutions to this problem have generally fallen into four different categories: preschool reforms, teacher reforms, instructional reforms, and standards-based reforms.

Preschool Reforms. Almost all of the research on preschool programs shows early gains in achievement, and that the early gains are not sustained. Moreover, the academic advantages of preschool programs are less likely to be sustained for children of color than for white children. We don't know why, but the finding has been replicated many times.

But these programs vary tremendously in quality. The Perry Preschool evaluation famously found that particular program to be massively successful, with participating students half as likely to go into special ed, five times less likely to be incarcerated, four times more likely to earn \$2,000 or more monthly. But the sad truth is that not all programs are good programs and, to make matters worse, white students are more likely to participate in preschools than their black peers and the schools they attend are more likely to be of high quality.

Teacher Reforms. Education research has finally caught up with common sense in its understanding of teacher quality. For a long time, everybody knew that a good teacher was better than a bad teacher, but no one could actually document that teachers made any difference. Now, researchers have documented teacher effectiveness in raising student achievement.

Say a student—call him Johnny—has a good teacher every year, in the first grade, second grade, right up through the 12th grade. Let's say that the good teacher has the effect of improving Johnny's performance one tenth of a standard deviation. So that at the end of the first year, Johnny is a tenth of a standard deviation better off than he otherwise would have been. Now let's say that the shelf life of that effect is perfect (Johnny keeps that advantage when he goes to second grade). In second grade, he improves another tenth of a standard deviation. By the time Johnny

For an education reform to solve the achievement gap, it must produce bigger gains for black students than for white students.

graduates from high school, he's 1.2 standard deviations better than he would have been—a difference bigger than the achievement gap.

The assumption that the advantage from one year to the next does not deteriorate over the summer months is not certain. But even so, the impact of teacher quality is powerful, and virtually everyone in the education community is convinced that the best reform would be an effective teacher in every classroom.

Would it close the achievement gap? Probably not. For an education reform to solve the achievement gap, it must produce bigger gains for black students than for white students. But most education interventions actually exacerbate the gap, and the more effective they are in raising mean achievement, the more they widen the gap. So if every teacher in every American classroom were effective, then all students—black and white—would have an effective teacher, and student achievement across the board would rise. Closing the gap means instituting reforms that improve black students' achievement at a higher rate than that of white students.

The research also confirms the effectiveness of other teacher reforms. In terms of teachers' expectations of students, almost all the research shows that if teachers expect more of their students, their students will achieve more. Interventions designed to improve teachers' expectations have shown modest effects.

Another intervention widely championed is the idea of black teachers teaching black students. Most results show that when black teachers teach black students, black students achieve more than when taught by white teachers. The policy implications are not straightforward. For example, schooling has many different goals—social and emotional ones as well as achievement. Even if the achievement gap would decrease, is it wise to have black students learning only from black teachers?

Instructional Reforms. With a million *instructional interventions* out there, let's take one example—Success for All, a highly scripted intervention that can be implemented and replicated well. Rather than striving for excellence *per se*, Success for All focuses on raising the bottom level of achievement in classrooms. Many studies of this program find good effects—and greater effects, in fact, for black students than for white students. One could hypothesize that the intervention provides the opportunity to learn that black students tend to miss out on.

Another example of a popular instructional reform is *reduced class size*, but the results are mixed. The best study of class size—the Tennessee STAR study—demonstrated that reducing class size to 15 or below, a fairly major reduction, can have a good-sized effect on achievement in year one. In years two, three, and four, that first effect was maintained, but there was no *additional* advantage. I can't think of a more expensive education intervention than this one, and its effect size is disappointing. Moreover, as California's experience demonstrates, bringing reduced class size to scale can be a perilous task. When that state decided to reduce class size massively, they had to hire new teachers—many of them unqualified—and haul in trailers for classes. For one of the most expensive educational interventions out there, the impact of reducing class size leaves something to be desired.

Also by Andy Porter

Researchers have generally addressed the issue of alignment by looking at the alignment of achievement tests and standards. Andy Porter and colleagues have developed several tools that provide a far more nuanced picture—one that examines alignment between content standards, tests, textbooks, and even classroom instruction.

In “Alignment as a Teacher Variable,” Porter et al. discuss two of those tools—content maps and a quantitative index of the degree of alignment—and serve up a real-world example of their use. Using these tools, the researchers conducted a randomized trial to test the effects of a math/science professional development intervention on the instructional practices of middle-school teachers.

“Alignment as a Teacher Variable,” by Andrew Porter, John Smithson, Rolf Blank, and Timothy Zeidner, appears in *Applied Measurement in Education*, 20(1).

Research on *ability grouping and tracking* delivers the counterintuitive news that it is enriched classes that tend to have positive effects on student achievement. Remedial classes, on the other hand, don't have a negative impact but don't provide much benefit either.

Following the release of *A Nation At Risk* in 1983, states increased their requirements for high-school graduation and, in one way or another, have been continuing on that path ever since. Predictions were dire. First people foresaw a big decline in high-school graduation rates, which didn't materialize. Then, they were certain that enrollment in remedial courses would increase, and that didn't materialize when students signed up for more college-prep courses. Then, people predicted that teachers would dumb down those college-prep courses—which also didn't materialize: teachers continued to teach college-prep courses as they always had.

And the effect on student achievement was huge. In one study, we looked at three contrasting ninth-grade mathematics curricula: Basic Math; Transition Math, which upgraded the curriculum but not to the level of college prep; and College Prep. Controlling for initial differences between students, the value added for student achievement was biggest for College Prep, followed by Transition Math. Basic

Anything worth doing can be done poorly, and standards-based reform is no exception to the rule.

Math was by far the worst. These findings represented a big success story for the idea that students benefit from being given an opportunity to learn at a higher level.

As for *promotion and retention policies*, the reviews are mixed. Because these policies are administered in so many different ways, evaluations of their effectiveness vary widely. The big hole in this research is that studies only compare students who are retained versus those who are promoted—they do not consider the changes to the system over time. Advocates of these policies argue that retaining students will be so painful to the system that it will be forced to improve. We don't know whether that is happening, but we do know that conducting the research to find out will be expensive.

Standards-based Reforms. The standards movement can claim some exciting accomplishments—most notably, putting student achievement on the map. Today, if you go to a school board meeting, if you talk to a superintendent or a principal or a teacher, you'll hear people talking about improving achievement. Twenty years ago, those conversations had nowhere near the intensity they do now. Also on the plus side—at least for education researchers—is the focus on education research, on connecting research to practice.

But standards-based reform has been with us for ten or 15 years—first at the state level and now in the form of No Child Left Behind—and it does seem that by now, we would be seeing improvements that we're just not seeing. But remember, too, that anything worth doing can be done poorly, and standards-based reform is no exception to that rule.

Addressing the Gap in Terms of Opportunity

Schools are not the major cause of the achievement gap. Long before kids go to school, the gap is alive and well, and, during the academic year when kids are actually in the classroom, it tends not to increase. Any increases that do occur take place largely outside the context of schooling.

Still, it is the schools we turn to for a solution. But we do well to remember that we are asking schools to solve a problem not of their own making. For schools to solve the achievement gap, we will need much more aggressive interventions—interventions that address the critical issue of opportunities to learn—particularly the opportunities we do (or don't) provide to our most disadvantaged children.

The most promising reforms are alike in their attention to addressing the pervasive inequalities in opportunities to learn. Consider preschool. Done well, it shows some impressive effects, some lasting effects. But we need to make sure that the kids—all the kids—get this high-quality preschool. This is an opportunity-to-learn issue.

Consider teacher quality: the research shows that black students have less access to high-quality teachers than white students do and less access to good materials. This is an opportunity-to-learn issue.

Consider student course-taking patterns. The percentage of students taking college-prep high-school coursework is going way up for white students, for black students, and for Hispanic students. Over the last 20 years, the gap between black and white students in course-taking has dramatically reduced. This is an opportunity-to-learn issue—one where we have made real progress.

The achievement gap is unlikely to be totally eliminated by school reform. But that doesn't get education off the hook. Some education reforms, especially those that provide greater opportunities to learn, do narrow the gap. High-quality preschool, effective teachers in every classroom, a challenging curriculum of enriched classes—all have been shown to have demonstrable effects on students' academic performance and all have the potential to narrow the achievement gap.

Andy Porter is the dean of the Penn Graduate School of Education and the George and Diane Weiss Professor of Education. This article has been adapted from the 2007 Gordon S. Bodek Lecture of Distinguished Educators, presented by Andy Porter on April 19, 2007.

Research Notes

The following pages present a sampling of recent studies and findings from Penn GSE faculty and researchers.

Penn GSE explores the issues at the forefront of American education today—urban education, equity and diversity, educational opportunity and student achievement, and the management of complex organizations. We engage in high-impact research, innovation, and training in public education, as well as in literacy, psychology, social policy, and higher and adult education.

The Value of Playground Talk

For decades, bilingual educators have accepted the BICS/CALP framework developed by Jim Cummins in 1979. That model proposes an explanation of why young second-language learners who are adept in conversational English nonetheless may struggle in academic settings. But has Cummins's framework outlived its usefulness?

In addressing that question, Maren Aukerman argues for a different approach—one that makes room for children's existing frames of reference—and then concludes with practical suggestions teachers can use to help students learn English.

The distinction Cummins draws between BICS (basic interpersonal communication skills) and CALP (cognitive language proficiency) is the difference between informal, "playground" talk and formal, "classroom" discourse. He argues that children who lack CALP in either their native or new language will suffer a real academic disadvantage.

In her analysis, Aukerman points out a fundamental problem with Cummins's framework. His understanding of CALP is as *decontextualized language*—that is, language stripped of "social context that one can rely upon in figuring out what something means." To Aukerman, decontextualized language does not exist: "Finding language meaningful, making sense of it, always involves situating that language vis-à-vis other experiences and what others have said. No text, and no spoken word, ever exists without a context."

That being the case, she continues, teachers would serve students better by helping them recontextualize new material by drawing on "linguistic resources that they already know—even, *especially*, ones that are not 'academic.'" Indeed, she maintains that it is actively destructive to the act of learning to predicate success in the classroom on proficiency in decontextualized, academic language.

Concluding with a series of concrete suggestions of ways to foster recontextualization in the classroom, Aukerman writes, "we must value what children are doing. We must honor their frames of reference.... [I]f we fail to acknowledge how children are already making sense of the world around them, and fail to put that at the core of what we teach, we may fail [them] by overlooking the resources they bring, ... believing these to be nothing more relevant or useful than a 'mistake.'"

"A Culpable CALP: Rethinking the Conversational/Academic Language Proficiency Distinction in Early Literacy Instruction" appears in *The Reading Teacher*, 60(7). ●

The Persistence of Inequity

African Americans are more likely to attend college in one of the 19 Southern or Southern-border states than in the rest of the country, but faculty and administrators at those same institutions experience substantial inequities.

In a recent paper, Laura Perna and colleagues examine the status of equity for black faculty and administrators in public institutions in the South and conclude that 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, blacks continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions.

Their analyses relied on the Academic Equity Index, defining equity as the representation of black faculty and administrators relative to the representation of blacks who received bachelor's degrees in a given institution.

Among many specific findings, the statistics reveal that, although some progress has been made in some states, substantial inequities remain. The gaps are greater for black faculty than for black administrators and greater for higher-ranking faculty (full professors) than lower (assistant professors) and for tenured faculty than for tenure-track.

“Race continues to define higher education employment in many public colleges and universities in the 19 states,” the authors conclude. “This finding raises serious concerns about the extent to which public colleges and universities are achieving their public purpose.”

They also point to the several contributions their study makes to what is known about the status of blacks among faculty and administration—specifically, in pointing to the importance of disaggregating data by various criteria (i.e., faculty and staff employment, tenure status and academic rank, state); in providing evidence of the critical role of public four-year HBCUs; and in illustrating the benefits of using an equity index to examine trends over time.

“The Status of Equity for Black Faculty and Administrators in Public Higher Education in the South,” by Laura Perna, Danette Gerald, Evan Baum, and Jeffrey Milem, appears in *Research in Higher Education*, 48(2).

Also from Laura Perna

African Americans and Hispanics continue to lag behind whites in educational attainment, and decades of analysis haven't provided policymakers with a clear explanation for the differences across racial and ethnic groups in college enrollment.

Laura Perna has recently proposed a comprehensive model for examining the sources of these differences, one that integrates traditional quantitative analyses and those that make room for sociological notions of social and cultural capital.

“The Sources of Racial/Ethnic Group Differences in College Enrollment: A Critical Examination” appears in *New Directions for Institutional Research: Using Quantitative Research to Answer Critical Questions*, 133, edited by F.K. Stage.

A Good Teacher in Every Classroom

Despite general agreement that teacher quality is directly related to student achievement, the education community is less than unanimous about how to improve the quality of the teaching force.

In a recent issue of *CPRE Policy Briefs*, Richard Ingersoll argues that the three most commonly proposed sources of the problem—restrictive entry barriers, teacher shortages, and underqualified/underprepared teachers—are, in fact, misdiagnoses. He writes, “to fully understand issues of teacher quality requires examining the character of the teaching occupation and the nature of the organizations in which teachers work.”

Considering the issue of entry requirements, Ingersoll points out that many professions—law, medicine, the professoriate—have similar barriers. While conceding that the current certification requirements may indeed present problems, he concludes that increased regulation or deregulation *alone* will not succeed in ensuring a quality teacher in every classroom.

On the issue of teacher shortages, he cites his earlier research demonstrating that the problem is less one of recruitment than of retention. That is, the so-called teacher shortage arises from the substantial number of teachers who leave the field within the first five years on the job.

As for the charge that teachers are underqualified or underprepared, the data point to out-of-field assignments, rather than an inadequate workforce, as the main culprit. Following this line of reasoning, says Ingersoll, raises questions about the efficacy of human-resource management in schools.

“The lesson is clear,” he concludes. “If we want to ensure that all classrooms are staffed by qualified teachers, we will need to change the way that schools operate and that teachers are managed. In short, upgrading the quality of teaching will require upgrading the quality of the teaching job.”

“Misdiagnosing the Teacher Quality Problem” summarizes a chapter written by Richard Ingersoll for *The State of Education Research* (edited by S. Fuhrman, D. Cohen, and F. Mosher). ●

Teacher Qualifications: The Global View

Around the world, few educational issues receive more attention than the problem of teacher quality. In a recent policy brief, Richard Ingersoll describes the results of a comparative study of the qualifications of elementary and secondary teachers in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and the U.S. Overall, the study suggests three possible sources for the problem of underqualified teachers: the rigor, or lack thereof, of teacher training and preparation requirements; the failure of the teaching force to meet existing standards; and the problem of misassignment or out-of-field teaching.

“A Comparative Study of Teacher Preparation and Qualifications in Six Nations,” by Richard Ingersoll, is published by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education. ●

Random(ized) Thoughts

A randomized controlled trial (which randomly assigns subjects of an intervention to test or control conditions in an experiment) collects data on the effectiveness of social interventions and tests them against the null hypothesis (an assumption that the intervention will have no statistically significant effect).

In “The Null Hypothesis Is Not Called That for Nothing,” Bob Boruch summarizes thinking about null hypotheses in controlled trials, including critiques of conventional hypotheses and new ideas for research and development. He points out, for example, that there is a difference between *statistical* significance and *practical* significance: that is, a causative relationship between an intervention and a result is not necessarily important. He also explains how statistical significance, or its appearance, can be manipulated, depending on how researchers frame questions, select subjects, and measure and report their results.

Boruch also discusses common errors and weaknesses in statistical analysis. One of these is a lack of discussion of *why* interventions do not show statistical significance. Was the test well designed? Was the statistical power adequate? Was the theory wrong? “Absent such disciplined post-mortems...we won’t make much scientific progress,” he writes. Another common oversight is attention to tests with negative results: they are generally not published widely, but there is much to be learned from failed interventions.

Boruch recommends portraying trial results in ways that are more comprehensible for, and useful to, policymakers and the general public. In addition, finding new ways to frame the null hypothesis and focusing attention on replication results and the reasons behind these results will allow scientists to focus on questions from new statistical perspectives.

“The future for better criminological research lies in uncovering mistakes in analyzing evidence from randomized trials,” he concludes, “including errors found in testing formal null hypotheses.” Mistakes may not occur often, he adds, but “often enough to justify serious attention to the topic.”

This article appears in *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 3, pp. 1-20. ●

Johnny, Be Good

Most observers, casual or otherwise, agree that school discipline is failing. The cycle is familiar: unruly students disobey school rules, and schools respond by establishing more rules and sanctions, thereby inspiring more disobedience.

Comparing two different disciplinary situations, Joan Goodman examines the possible causes of failure and potential conditions for success. She starts from the premise that, if discipline is to succeed, students must believe in and identify with the goals it is designed to support. Goodman identifies a particular mix of goal attributes necessary for strong schools: lofty (transcending the classroom), embracing (pervasive throughout school life), and moral (emphasizing the social over the personal). She then proceeds to consider how a wide range of institutions (KIPP charter schools, the Hyde School, Hitler Youth, etc.) have applied these criteria, raising valuable questions about the implications of their various approaches.

From there, Goodman poses the thorny question of how purpose-driven public schools should be. Without specifying the ideal scope and content of an educational mission, she argues that a moral component is practical and proper. “The desire to believe in something more than narrow self-interest is ... both essential to the realization of personal growth and to social stability,” she writes.

“School Discipline: Buy-in and Belief,” by Joan Goodman, appears in *Ethics and Education*, 2(1). ●

NCLB’s Troubling Images of Teaching

While conceding that teachers should have a sound knowledge of teaching techniques, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) regards subject-matter knowledge as more critical to effective teaching than it does pedagogical knowledge. Few argue with the notion that a teacher must know the subject. But Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle argue that the NCLB’s line of reasoning is flawed, taking an all-too-narrow view of subject-matter knowledge as a static, easily transmitted entity.

Moreover, NCLB positions teachers as the critical players in improving student achievement while paying scant attention to other causes of educational inequity. This view of teachers as the answer to all the ills of education distracts attention from other systemic factors, such as under-funding, racism, and poverty.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle argue that teachers need a transformed and expanded view of practice. Teaching, and teacher learning, should be deliberative, inquiry-based, and interactive. Teaching is inherently contextual, and teachers need to make sense of the many contexts in which they teach and learn. In short, teachers, like their students, need to be encouraged to ask questions, connect ideas, and continue learning and integrating new knowledge with existing information.

“Troubling Images of Teaching in No Child Left Behind” appears in the *Harvard Educational Review*, 76(4).

Out-of-Home Care & School Performance

Interested in understanding the impact of out-of-home placement on children's academic performance, John Fantuzzo and Staci Perlman turned to the Kids Integrated Data System (KIDS), which enabled them to examine the entire cohort of second-graders in the Philadelphia public school system.

Specifically, their study looked at the unique impact of out-of-home placement and the mediating effects of child maltreatment and homelessness on academic achievement and school adjustment. Their analysis showed that three percent of the second-graders had a history of out-of-home placement and that the co-occurrence of those placements with child maltreatment and/or homelessness was high (35 percent and 70 percent, respectively).

Controlling for demographics and birth risks, children with a history of out-of-home placement were at increased risk for poor literacy and science achievement. They also evidenced greater classroom behavior problems and experienced more school suspensions than their peers. What is more, maltreatment and homelessness were shown to have significant mediating effects on the relationship between out-of-home placement and children's educational well-being.

The authors offer up two policy and practice suggestions. Given the frequent co-occurrence of out-of-home placement, child maltreatment, and homelessness and the attendant educational risks they pose, col-

laboration among social service agencies and school districts seems a wise move. For example, regular contact with case managers could inform school staff of changes in a child's placement that might affect academic performance and help explain changes in behavior.

Noting that more than 75 percent of these children had their first placement before the age of five, the authors also argue for the importance of providing better early care and educational experiences. "Research supports well the protective value of participation in quality early childhood programs," they write. "These programs have been found to promote early mastery of the cognitive and social/emotional competencies that are necessary for early school success."

"The Unique Impact of Out-of-Home Placement and the Mediating Effects of Child Maltreatment and Homelessness on Early School Success," by John Fantuzzo and Staci Perlman, appears in *Children and Youth Services Review*, 29(7).

It Takes a Neighborhood

Recently, researchers have been giving more consideration to the influence of neighborhood factors on child and youth outcomes. Low-income children and their families generally experience very different environments from children of families with higher incomes. Specific differences may include both physical (quality and condition of housing, number of abandoned or dangerous buildings) and social (levels of community violence, crime, and unemployment) factors. "Children growing up in affluent neighborhoods fare better...even after family-level differences are controlled," write Christine McWayne, Paul McDermott, John Fantuzzo, and Dennis Culhane.

Working in a large northeastern city, they wanted to determine if neighborhood factors influenced early childhood academic achievement. To conduct their research, they drew on aggregated data from many of the city's municipal agencies. Unlike recent similar research, the basic unit of analysis was not a census tract (about 8,000 people), but the census block group that ranged from about 600 to 3,000 people. This narrower definition of neighborhood "more closely represents actual neighborhoods within which children reside." And because municipal data are collected continually, rather than decennially, they offer a more up-to-date picture.

Overall, the researchers found a correlation between community factors and children's achievement on kindergarten reading and math assessments: child demographic and community variables accounted for 7.1 percent of variation in scores. Race did not seem to be a strong factor; neighborhood structure and stability were more important.

The authors raise a number of questions for future research. Their work so far has considered only public-school students; is type of school a factor? Individual families, which can have a very strong mediating influence, were also not considered. In addition, the authors point out that there may be important variables that were inadvertently omitted, and that alternative measures of "neighborhood" should be included in future research.

"Employing Community Data to Investigate Social and Structural Dimensions of Urban Neighborhoods: An Early Childhood Education Example" appears in *American Journal of Community Psychology* 39(1-2). ●

Better Treatment for Substance-Abusing Adolescents

For service providers evaluating adolescents with substance use disorders, one requirement to delivering appropriate, cost-effective treatment lies in accurate intake information that provides a comprehensive picture of patients' needs.

The Comprehensive Adolescent Severity Inventory (CASI) is designed to generate precisely the kind of data needed for making decisions about level of care and placement, treatment referral and planning, and outcomes evaluation.

Recently, Paul McDermott and colleagues conducted a psychometric analysis of the CASI with 205 in-treatment substance-abusing adolescents. In an article appearing in *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, they report on CASI's promise as an adolescent-specific assessment instrument.

Their analysis identified four dimensions of CASI assessment—chemical dependency, psychosocial functioning, delinquency, and risk behavior—each having high internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and concurrent validity.

These dimensions also forecasted substantial variance in adolescent functioning post-treatment, supporting predictive validity. Finally, the dimensional clinical structure was found to be generalizable over male and female adolescents, younger and older adolescents, and adolescents from different ethnic groups.

“Factor Structure of the Comprehensive Adolescent Severity Inventory (CASI): Results of Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability Analyses,” by Kathleen Meyers, Teresa Hagan, Paul McDermott, Alicia Webb, Mary Randall, and Jeanne Frantz, appears in *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, 32. ●

A Unique Visual and Literary Art Form

Picturebooks represent a unique visual and literary art form that engages readers at all ages and levels of learning. A picturebook is not simply a book that happens to have pictures; it is one in which the story depends on the interaction—and the tensions—between the written and the visual text. “It is this dissonance,” explain Larry Sipe and Carol Wolfenbarger, “that catches the reader’s attention.”

Sometimes, though, talking about picturebooks poses a challenge. Recently there has been an increase in the number of picturebooks that depart from traditional “story grammar.” Dubbed “postmodern picturebooks,” these books may be nonlinear, self-referential, sarcastic, or anti-authoritarian. Postmodern picturebooks, write the authors, “have the potential to elicit intriguing and novel responses from children.”

Although still underused in the classroom, nonfiction picturebooks are also growing in importance. Visual features of picturebooks can help students build a sense of scale and texture and can also help them imagine habitats or situations not local to their community. In science instruction, for example, “the genre, content, and visual features encourage young readers’ interest in science-related topics.”

Teachers can encourage students to make connections to existing information or to their own lives or emotions, allowing them to become active constructors of meaning, rather than passive spectators. While students will almost certainly not like every book, teachers can use student reactions—whatever form they take—to a book to help children become more thoughtful and critical readers.

Many picturebooks can provoke thoughtful conversation among younger and older readers; however, most upper-elementary and secondary students reject the genre as too juvenile. Teachers of older students who actively incorporate picturebooks into their classrooms can help overcome this barrier and allow older students to appreciate the stories themselves as well as their presentation (visual and peritextual elements). “Contemporary picturebooks...should be central to the future work of teaching, learning, and research.”

“A Unique Visual and Literary Art Form: Recent Research on Picturebooks” appears in *Language Arts*, 83(3).

Aggression and the Classroom

Mounting evidence suggests that school environment can contribute to children's overall levels of aggressive behavior. However, less research has been done to probe the relationship between the school context (size, economic disadvantage, location) and student aggression. The long-term effects of exposure to aggressive behaviors also have not been thoroughly studied.

Duane Thomas, Karen Bierman, and the Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group followed a longitudinal sample of 4,907 students and examined demographic factors associated with exposure to high-aggression classrooms—including school context factors such as school size, school location, student poverty levels, and student ethnicity. They also compared the impacts of *primacy* (early exposure to aggressive behaviors), *recency* (recent exposure to aggressive behaviors), and *chronicity* (continual exposure to aggressive behaviors) effects.

Overall, the study found that children's exposure to aggressive classroom contexts in their first three years of formal schooling is an important factor in their behavioral development. Consistent with previous studies, a greater percentage of classrooms showed high rates of aggressive behavior in large urban schools serving many economically disadvantaged children. Children living in high-poverty areas with high rates of crime and violence are more likely to show elevated aggression levels at school than children living in safer neighborhoods. African-American children were more likely to attend schools with higher rates of aggression.

After controlling for other factors, child ethnicity still contributed small but significant variance to the prediction of aggressive classroom exposure. African-American students were one percent more likely to be exposed to aggressive classroom environments.

Findings from this study have implications for preventive measures. Interventions for school aggression need to assess and target classroom environments directly; policies also need to promote the development of supportive school environments with lower rates of student aggression.

"The Impact of Classroom Aggression on the Development of Aggressive Behavior Problems in Children" appears in *Development and Psychopathology* 18, 471-487 (2006). ●

On the Bookshelf

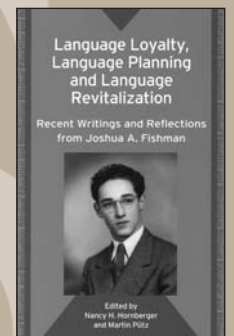


Marybeth Gasman **Envisioning Black Colleges: A History of the United Negro College Fund** The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007

Founded after World War II as a successor to white philanthropic efforts, the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) was restrained during its early years in its critique of segregation and racism. Drawing on written and oral histories, archival documents, and the group's outreach and advertising campaigns, Gasman examines the UNCF's struggle to create an identity apart from white benefactors and to evolve into a vehicle for black empowerment.

Marybeth Gasman and Alice Ginsberg (Eds.) **Gender and Educational Philanthropy: New Perspectives on Funding, Collaboration, and Assessment** Palgrave Macmillan, 2007

Complex questions face funders as they grapple to understand gender equity in education. This book examines that issue as well as problems of limited resources and relationships that will make schools more equitable and engaging.



Nancy H. Hornberger and Martin Putz (Eds.) **Language Loyalty, Language Planning and Language Revitalization: Recent Writings and Reflections from Joshua A. Fishman** Multilingual Matters, 2006

Bringing together a selection of Joshua Fishman's writings, this volume includes essays on language loyalty, reversing language shift, and sociolinguistics, and an interview with Fishman and the editors.