How We Talk About the Achievement Gap Could Worsen Public Racial Biases Against Black Students

By Sarah D. Sparks on June 3, 2020 5:56 PM

Quick quiz: What share of black students graduate high school?

By the most recent count, 4 out of 5 black students graduate in four years with a regular diploma, according to federal figures. But after watching coverage of test scores focused on racial achievement gaps between black and white students, people tend to think black students' graduation rates are much lower. The way the education media and policymakers frame education debates can have longer-term effects on how the public thinks about black students and the kinds of policies it will support to improve their learning.

"**'Achievement gap' is a terrible term**," said Jon Valant of the Brookings Institution, who was not involved with the study but who also researches the effects of education rhetoric. "It implies that white students' performance is the standard by which we should measure everyone else, which isn't great. And, it's pointing people in the direction of thinking that there is something that these groups of students are doing that is the cause and the root of the problem."

In a **forthcoming study in the journal Educational Researcher**, which is previewed in a working paper this week, David Quinn, an assistant professor at the University of Southern California, asked a demographically and politically representative group of Americans to watch one of three short videos. The first was a network news clip covering test results in Minnesota, which used what Quinn describes as a "deficit-based approach," focusing heavily on test-score gaps among students of different races and repeatedly usings the term "achievement gap." The

segment starts: "Disappointing numbers out today show the wide achievement gap in Minnesota between white and minority students is not getting any smaller. ..."

The second clip, taken from a descriptive video on the Harlem Children's Zone, portrayed black students of various ages engaged in their classes and discussing their academic goals and what they like about school. The third video, a lesson from the education platform Khan Academy, served as a control. After watching the videos, participants were told that "white students on average have a graduation rate of 86 percent" and were asked to estimate the graduation rate of black students. They were also asked to rate the influence of various factors on racial test-score gaps, such as school quality, student motivation, parenting, discrimination and racism, genetics, neighborhood environments, home environments, and income levels. Finally, they took a standardized test of implicit racial biases.

In a series of experiments, Quinn found participants who watched the "achievement gap" video underestimated black students' graduation rates by some 23 percentage points and showed a 30 percent increase in their average level of implicit bias against black people from before watching the video, though it did not change their explicitly stated stereotypes about black and white students. The increased implicit anti-black bias persisted for two weeks after a single viewing. By contrast, there was no change or improvement in bias for participants watching either of the other videos.

"The effect has to be read in the context of everybody in the sample on average showing some of these stereotypes to begin with," Quinn said. "It's not as if people do not hold these stereotypes, and they view a news story and now they have the stereotype, but then it goes away. ... People are seeing reports and stories like this all the time anyway; it's feeding into the stereotype that exists and exacerbating it."

This "deficit" framing, Quinn said, can worsen the stress students from traditionally disadvantaged racial backgrounds feel in academic settings and create stereotype threat, making it more difficult for them to perform at their best. But in a broader sense, deficit framing of educational debates may change how the public at large thinks about the root problems of education inequities and what support they will give for policies to solve them.

"I think that it matters in terms of the kinds of policies that people support. If the achievement gap framing is putting people's attention on individual students, placing the blame on students and their families, then the policy that people are going to propose and the response to that is going to be different from what it would be if they're focused on structural inequalities, funding, and access to health care, and all of the other more structural things that go into educational outcomes," Quinn said.

While Quinn did not find explicit changes in policy priorities among participants, Valant found in an earlier study that Americans are more likely to support **policies aimed at closing test-score gaps between high- and low-income students than among students of different races**, and attributed little to no part of racial test-score gaps to racial discrimination or injustice related to educational opportunities or resources.

"I think it is useful and important to keep paying attention to gaps and what helps to close them, and I also think it's helpful to have a term that is recognizable to the public as a problem for trying to motivate action and get people to see that there's a problem—right now that term is 'achievement gap,'" Valant said. "It's just that the particular term we have, I think, is not good at communicating what it ought to communicate. A term like 'opportunity gap,' is much better at communicating what the true roots of the problem are. ... or to refer to differences in test scores, that's a test-score gap, not an achievement gap. Because language really matters with these things."