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A Cultural Analysis of the Achievement Gap Discourse: Challenging the Language and Labels Used in the Work of School Reform

Roderick L. Carey[1]

Abstract

In this article, I critique the labels and terms used to frame practices aimed at closing the achievement gap. I examine how an unacknowledged *achievement gap Discourse* has emerged from the language that informs practices and policies of contemporary school reform. I use Gee's uppercase "Discourse" and a cultural analytic framework to critique what I refer to as the achievement gap "Discourse." I challenge educational stakeholders to rethink (a) student comparisons, (b) teacher and student assessments, (c) labels, (d) community input and involvement, and (e) the collective commitment to public schooling as an institution.

Keywords

achievement gap, social, culture, subjects, school reform, urban education, Discourse, labels, race, identity, policy, popular culture, No Child Left Behind, programs

[1]University of Maryland, College Park, USA

Corresponding Author:
Roderick L. Carey, Department of Teaching and Learning, Policy and Leadership, 2311 Benjamin Building, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742-1175, USA.
Email: roderick.carey@gmail.com

It can be argued that the achievement gap has become the single most pervasive and widely discussed educational issue of current times. It is debated in public conferences across social disciplines, written about in news reports and blogs, discussed by correspondents on television news, and featured in many recent documentary films. In addition to being at the front of the minds of millions in the general public, the achievement gap is the most salient issue framing the practice of educators and educational researchers whose work centers on finding causes of and cures for the underperformance of so many schoolchildren. However, some of these educational stakeholders—especially those operating furthest away from schools—hold quite myopic perspectives about what schools should be doing to best educate children, while ignoring the messy social and cultural issues (Carter, 2012) underlying the work of public education reform.

Considering this, and with so many steeped in the work of educational reform, the language and labels tied to the achievement gap have become normalized in the minds and practices of individuals working in and out of education (Kumashiro, 2012) with far too few questioning the social and cultural underpinnings of how this language impacts the lives of children and those who teach them. What I refer to as the *achievement gap "Discourse"* has been popularized as a means to talk about and make meaning of student school successes and school failures of primarily low-income students of color. If enduring solutions to the achievement gap are in our future, it is essential to reframe not only how we act but also how we talk and think about large-scale and small-scale school reform aimed at augmenting the educational outcomes particularly for students of color in low-income urban schools.

In this article, I consider these main questions: (a) What is the *achievement gap Discourse*? (b) How have the terms and labels of the achievement gap situated unproductive blame for academic failure on individual students, teachers, and schools? and (c) How might closer attention to the cultural and symbolic underpinnings of these terms urge educational stakeholders to reshape the Discourse of public school reform?

To answer these, I utilize Gee's (1996) notion of uppercase "Discourse" (i.e., language through the lens of social context and broad cultural and ideological processes) to first discuss what I conceptualize as the achievement gap Discourse. I will then briefly review established understandings of the achievement gap that has informed research, policy and practices, and discussions, before I review work that has reframed and critiqued the most salient, yet misconstrued, issues underlying the gap. To accomplish this, I build upon other recent scholarship that has reframed and challenged achievement gap debates by conducting an analysis of the problematic language and the inherent symbolic meanings in school reform policies and practices. I argue that efforts aimed at narrowing the gap (e.g., curriculum and teacher

reform measures) must seriously consider how the assumption-laden language of school reform, found most readily in the achievement gap Discourse, might also contribute to the very problems they seek to solve.

To investigate the achievement gap Discourse, instead of using a standard discourse/Discourse analysis, I utilize a cultural analytic framework conceptualized by anthropologists Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne. This cultural analytic framework has been utilized to conceptualize issues of school failure and success (Varenne & McDermott, 1998), the label of learning disability (LD) (McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 2006), the stereotypes of at-risk Black Canadian males (James, 2012), the notion of genius (McDermott, 2006), illiteracy (McDermott, 2008), gender categories (McDermott & Varenne, 2006), and racial labels (McDermott, 2008; McDermott & Varenne, 2006).

McDermott and Varenne (2006) note that when using a cultural analysis, "culture" in and of itself must be the central unit of analysis. For the purposes of educational research, a cultural analysis encourages the move away from individual students, their teachers, or any other social actor as the central unit of analysis. Instead, the focus is on the culture surrounding and working through these individuals as they work and learn in community with each other. In this light, a cultural analytic framework for public education considers the administrators, teachers, students, and parents, who utilize what is culturally acceptable and normalized in our broader sociopolitical context to augment the learning opportunities for students in our schools. The achievement gap Discourse has lent to the creation and reification of a problematic culture pervading the workings of public schools and the hearts, minds, and practices of those who work within and outside of them. Thus, while a traditional sociolinguistic Discourse analysis might provide insight into language meanings, a cultural analysis of this Discourse offers an approach to a previously uninvestigated phenomenon that is broader and more culturally situated.

Utilizing a cultural analytic framework, I then analyze some of the most widely popular language, terminology, and phenomenon within the achievement gap Discourse. With a close eye toward how we can remove the blame from individuals and situate solutions on the culture we share, I conclude by offering considerations that reshape commonly understood issues of the achievement gap, especially as they pertain to issues of urban education.

What Is the Achievement Gap Discourse?

Discourse and discourse-in-use studies, deriving primarily from the early-20th-century literary and linguistic theorizing of Mikhail Bakhtin and Valentin Vološinov and from scholars conducting ethnographies of communication

and interactional sociolinguistics, all focus on the inseparability of language from the contexts of its usage (Bloome & Clark, 2006). Drawing from cultural and sociolinguistic studies, Gee (1996) suggests that there are distinctive types of discourses and indicates them as either a lowercase "discourse" or an uppercase "Discourse." The former pertains to the language-centered, face-to-face interactions between individuals on a micro and localized level. However, "Discourse" pertains to language and other semiotic tools utilized through multiple layers of social context and broad cultural and ideological processes (Bloome & Clark, 2006). Gee (1996) notes that a Discourse is a

> socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and "artifacts," of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network," or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful "role." (p. 131)

In this regard, Discourses frame how we perceive ourselves in relation to each other and our environment. Individuals acquire their primary Discourse from their families as it shapes the most pertinent sense of self. However, Gee argues that individuals are socialized with the language, symbols, meanings, and patterns of interaction from other secondary Discourses as well. These secondary Discourses can be found in local institutions like schools, and also through what is valued, normalized, discussed, and understood in a broader and more global social context.

Considering this description, I posit that there is an achievement gap Discourse utilized among teachers, policy makers, parents, students, and general laypeople when discussing or enacting practices related to public school reform. This Discourse is based on a taken-for-granted assumption of why primarily poor students of color do not perform at levels on par to their White and certain Asian group counterparts; it gives us language for how we organize our schools more optimally and position ourselves as adults to help students and schools produce better outcomes. However, these assumptions inform a Discourse where what is valued, discussed, and labeled comes through commonly employed school reform language. The overly individualized and simplistic language found in achievement gap reform debates, coupled with its inherent meanings, misplaces blame on teachers (see Kumashiro, 2012), students, and schools for broader social and cultural issues. As a result, we rely on technical and quick-fix interventions as solutions to problems that require far more complex understandings than what is implied and discussed in the public education reform debates. This language—for example *underperforming, adequate yearly progress* (AYP), *highly qualified, below basic, proficient*—is used to demarcate, in value-laden terms,

what is good and bad about schools, their teachers, and their students. These terms maintain their value because of symbolic meanings they hold for not just educators but also students, their families, and the general public. Symbolic meanings are reified through these terms, shared among educators, and spread to the general public via media outlets and documentary films.

Given their symbolic meanings, these terms can serve as what sociologists refer to as "symbolic boundaries" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, as cited in Carter, 2012). Symbolic boundaries, according to Carter, serve as the cultural tools that individuals and groups struggle over to come to an agreed definition of reality. Carter (2012) notes that these "symbolic boundaries are reinforced when cultural gatekeepers use specific metrics or sociocultural indicators to denote an 'intelligent' versus an 'unintelligent' student, a 'respectful' versus a 'disrespectful' pupil, a 'worthy' versus an 'unworthy' learner" (p. 11). The "cultural gatekeepers" of education reform, like local and national policy makers, value specific norms to which all students, teachers, and schools are held in comparison. And these symbolic boundaries, affirmed in the widely utilized terminology of the achievement gap Discourse, work to create tangible barriers to what students can become. Labels for students, for instance, become "stuck in place" (McDermott et al., 2006), furthering inequities, and subsequently stifling their growth and their teachers' agency (Kumashiro, 2012) to create authentic and meaningful learning experiences for diverse student populations. While this language spreads throughout the circles of policy makers and politicians, it finds its way into the policies, practices, symbols, rituals, and inherent meanings operating in schools. This language then becomes normalized not only into the pedagogies of educators but also in the lives of students, their families, and even transmitted through media to become fodder for the layperson's understanding of public education.

Educational researchers, practitioners, and policy makers have been so enmeshed in the work to remedy the achievement gap, that not enough attention has been given to how the assumption-laden Discourse and subsequent practices of contemporary schooling have misplaced blame and left millions of students, teachers, and schools labeled, categorized, and scrutinized in recent years. Cultural psychologists (see Cole, 1996) and anthropologists (see Anderson-Levitt, 2006) remind us that those operating within cultures need analytical assistance pinpointing possible helpful or harmful facets of the culture, as these features are sunk deeply into a sometimes unacknowledged cultural Discourse. As many current policy initiatives, research agendas, and teaching reform measures are centered on efforts to close the achievement gap, it—the Discourse itself—has remained mostly uninterrogated as one possible contributing factor for continuing and reifying the

achievement gap. The constancy and apparent permanence of the achievement gap Discourse is problematic, as it appears to be the immovable and sole frame from which we seek solutions to common, yet complex, school-based problems.

Gee (1999) notes that a typical discourse analysis might consider issues ranging from how grammar is utilized for purposes of understanding language better to a more critical consideration of how language works to help or harm individuals. Discourse analysts most often actually observe language-centered interactions among individuals or investigate documents, and though this is important work, I do not attempt that type of analysis in this article. Rather, this article takes a macroperspective on the achievement gap to tease out the cultural nuances at play in schools and society with regard to school reform measures. To look at these culture-based issues, individual interactions are discussed in this article; however, the widely-used language and assumption-laden terminology shared among practitioners and others broadly is where I focus this analysis.

Understanding the Achievement Gap

There are two predominant lenses through which the achievement gap has been considered: race-based gaps and gaps along socioeconomic lines. The race-based achievement gap primarily refers to the disparity in educational outcomes existing between African Americans, Latinos, certain Asian subgroups, including Vietnamese, Filipino, Laotian, Cambodian, Thai, and Samoan (S. J. Lee, 2005; Pang, Kiang, & Pak, 2004, as cited in Howard, 2010), Native Americans and their White; and certain Asian, including Chinese, Japanese, and Korean (S. J. Lee, 2005; Pang et al., 2004, as cited in Howard, 2010) counterparts. Socioeconomic achievement gaps tied to race-based achievement gaps are also crucial to understand (see Reardon, 2011). The limited access to out-of-school experiences that build social and cultural capital, minimal access to health care, shaky housing security, and limited economic stability are all critical elements impacting why many students from lower income families underperform in schools in comparison with students from middle- and higher income families (Rothstein, 2004).

The gap has been cited through evidence found in K-12 standardized scores on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), otherwise known as the Nation's Report Card, and through dissimilar grades, college admission and completion rates, high school graduation and drop-out rates, and disparate performance on college admission tests (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Harris, 2011; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kozol, 2005; J. Lee, 2002; Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, Horwitz, & Casserly, 2010; Nettles, Millett, &

Ready, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). These disparate outcomes have been documented to have long-lasting harm on students' eventual college degree attainment, career placement, economic stability, and eventual life trajectories (Jencks, 1992; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Lewis et al., 2010).

Given the quality of life disparities related to the achievement gap, and the push for increased, standardized accountability in schools (Valli, Croninger, Chamblis, Graeber, & Buese, 2008), educational stakeholders at all levels have sought to understand the underlying causes and possible cures for the widespread underperformance of various students, primarily low-income student groups of color in U.S. schools. However, many have done so using the dichotomous language widely utilized in the achievement gap Discourse.

Problematizing Comparisons and Reframing the Gap

Traditional understandings of the achievement gap are based on comparative frameworks. Some scholars have noted that current research perspectives on the achievement gap focus singularly on achievement disparities evidenced between minorities and nonminorities, while ignoring numerous within-group differences that exist among various racial and ethnic groups (Carpenter, Ramirez, & Severn, 2006). As a result, Carpenter et al. note that because of the singular notion of the achievement gap, many policies and practices aimed at closing the gap are ineffective.

However, school policies are informed by educational research. And unfortunately educational researchers, whose hands have been tied by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) 2002) rhetoric (see Meier & Wood, 2004), have found themselves stifled in the type of research funded, supported, and utilized in policy making among educational stakeholders. NCLB mandates objective and quantitative "scientifically based" research, which leaves little room for qualitative research agendas that unpack contextual factors that add nuance to the understandings of how high-stakes accountability is felt and lived by students, teachers, and their families (Shealey, 2006). For instance, scholars working to study achievement gap era programs through the lens of multicultural principles, which place emphasis on the voices and lived experiences of participants most directly impacted by new school reform measures, find their scholarship undervalued and underutilized in the achievement gap research era, leaving wide holes in understandings about how and why interventions do not work to support achievement (see Shealey, 2006).

In addition, critical scholars assert that the talk and framing of the achievement gap has done little more than perpetuate and reaffirm a dichotomous and hegemonic relationship between Whites and non-Whites (Gutiérrez, 2008; Gutiérrez & Dixon-Román, 2011). It also privileges a Eurocentric

master/majoritarian narrative (Love, 2004; Martin, 2009; Perry, 2003) of school success that devalues knowledge bases of communities of color, ignores racialized historical implications, and overlooks societal forces gripping students of color in an effort to find quick solutions to why they cannot do as well as White and certain Asian students.

Evidence for these dichotomous and hegemonic notions can be seen in the constant comparative thread running through studies investigating issues that pertain to the success and failure primarily of low-income culturally and racially diverse students. These comparative notions fail to encompass the vast inequity of resources traditionally allocated to schools serving a majority of Blacks and Latinos (Anyon, 2005; Meier & Wood, 2004). These notions also de-emphasize the racialized ideologies and practices woven tightly into all levels of society that block access to equitable schooling for all children.

It is important to note that there was some movement centered primarily on this issue in the mid-1990s with Opportunity to Learn (OTL; see Porter, 1995; Starratt, 2003), which were standards that would have ensured students were provided with the materials, resources, practices, and conditions to meet national standards. However, this discussion has all but disappeared from contemporary policy debates. Policy makers, who hold high expectations for low-income students of color without offering high support, leave too much space for school failure. Thus, without discussions on OTL standards or something similar (see Boykin & Noguera, 2011), for instance, a comparative frame for understanding diverse student (i.e., economic, racial, and linguistic diversity) outcomes is thoroughly problematic.

However, these comparisons are so implicit in the research on and discussions about the achievement gap, that seeing them takes effort and scrutinizing and problematizing them is even more demanding. It is for these reasons that I fully acknowledge the difficulty in completely removing the comparative language and frames undergirding all achievement gap reform measures. But, what I do believe is possible is creating more space for a counternarrative within the theories of action influencing reform debates that actively critiques this language and its inherently harmful symbolic meaning. The usage of a cultural analysis of educational policies and practices helps begin this process. In the remainder of this section, I undergird this cultural analysis by unpacking this prevalent comparative notion with other influential and related approaches to reframing the gap.

Although the achievement gap references school-based outcomes for individual students, Irvine (2010) urges us to consider closing other underlying gaps that contribute to the perceived achievement gap present in contemporary education. Citing issues like the teacher quality and training gap, the challenging curriculum gap, the school funding gap, the wealth and income

gap, the health care gap, and the school integration gap, for instance, Irvine challenges us to grapple with the more pervasive inequitable systems contributing to unequal schooling outcomes.

In addition to the gaps outlined by Irvine (2010), some have posited a move to a discussion of the *opportunity gaps* plaguing marginalized student groups (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Hilliard, 2003; Milner, 2010). Opportunity gaps exist in areas like school funding, in neighborhood resources, and are perpetuated by inequality in two ways: inequalities related to students' racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, for instance, and through school practices that reinforce and exacerbate inequity (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Considering these societal inequities, Milner (2010) proposes that we should not focus on perceived gaps between students and situate the work of teachers within a framework that directly addresses the diversity and opportunity gaps at play in schools. In the *opportunity gap framework*, Milner proposes that teachers should reject the notion of color blindness, the myth of meritocracy, low expectations, and deficit mind-sets, and instead embrace cultural conflicts that may arise in classrooms between students and teacher as a source of learning. Finally, teachers should better consider the cultural contexts within which they are working, by more fully understanding the nuances and cultures of the communities from which students come (Milner, 2010). In this regard, teachers can significantly alter classroom discourses around the achievement gap by fully realizing the numerous opportunities existing to make connections with diverse student populations and thus augment their possibility for school success (Milner, 2010).

Ladson-Billings (2006) pushes us to consider how access and opportunity to better schooling outcomes continues to evade non-Whites, providing for what she refers to as the need to move from a discussion of the achievement gap to the *education debt*. From this lens, instead of trying to uncover why underserved students of color are not achieving to the level of their White counterparts, Ladson-Billings argues that economic, historical, sociopolitical, and moral debts have contributed to their lack of access to equitable schooling. Reframing the achievement gap discussion around the education debt provides a closer and more accurate insight into how more equitable educational outcomes fall outside of the grasp of lower income students of color, in spite of the supposed democratic and pluralistic principles governing U.S. society.

Love (2004) utilizes a critical race theory lens to consider that post *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), the achievement gap narrative ignores disparities in equitable educational access available to African American students. For Love (2004), the construction and portrayal of the achievement gap is "the latest incarnation of the white

intellectual superiority/African American inferiority notion that is the mainstay of majoritarian storytelling in U.S. culture" (p. 227). Love motivates us to challenge the "master narrative" of the achievement gap, which continually positions Blacks as inferior to Whites and urges for the consideration of the counternarratives of marginalized people when making policies and practices to stimulate school achievement.

Considered through a focus on mathematics education, Gutiérrez (2008) and Gutiérrez and Dixon-Román (2011) discuss how achievement "gap gazing" has left us with little more than stable pictures of inequities in schools, deficit-based narratives about students of color and working-class children, and myths that problems and solutions of achievement gaps are technical, not socially or historically problematic, in nature. According to these scholars, researchers overly concerned with "gap gazing" have done little to inform policies that might augment educational outcomes for students, as the best that we can do in the work of the achievement gap is to get students of color to perform on par with middle-class Whites (Gutiérrez & Dixon-Román, 2011).

These reframings of the achievement gap highlight how researchers, policy makers, and school practitioners who investigate solutions to the gap have done so through majoritarian lenses. The simplistic language and symbols in achievement gap debates short-change essential discussions of historical, social, and race-based inequities underlying the achievement outcomes primarily of students of color within urban schools.

Turning Away From the Individual: Considering a Cultural Analytical Framework

Inherent in a cultural analytic approach is a staunch attention to the manner in which individuals use *cultural materials* (i.e., race, gender, class, and other labels) and symbols while questioning how using these contribute to the outcomes and positioning of members of a particular culture (McDermott & Varenne, 2006). The goal of a cultural analysis, according to McDermott and Varenne (2006), is to "produce more inclusive questions and more comprehensive answers" (p. 13) by encouraging researchers to inquire more critically into the conditions that connect problems and apparent solutions together. Operating through this lens urges educational researchers, policy makers, practitioners, and even the general public to question our cultural biases, by closely looking at how our symbols of meaning evidenced in our terminology, and our intrinsic transmission of cultural values is inherently tied to our position as a member of the very culture we seek to alter.

A cultural analysis of the achievement gap Discourse is situated *on* and *through* the lives of students and teachers. It entails grappling with not only how language and symbols inform the interactions of the students and teachers but also how the broad (e.g., dominant, national, societal, policy, media) Discourse shapes these interactions. How educational stakeholders position student achievement in comparison with other students or student groups locally and nationally, the language utilized to frame and categorize students and schools, and the value placed upon norms and standards and benchmarks all work together in the Discourse framing the contexts and interactions in classrooms.

In one article utilizing a cultural analytic framework, for instance, McDermott et al. (2006) investigate the notion of LD. However, instead of positing new remedies to help children with LD, or illuminating new interventions for teachers working with students with LD—approaches that encompass traditional frames for research inquiries—McDermott and his colleagues explored how school workers and society at large create a cultural preoccupation with LD and work, sometimes unknowingly, to create the need for such a label. Similarly, interrogating assumptions of practice and language in the work of the achievement gap requires us to question the stifling Discourse involving the millions, readied with labels, tools, categories, and procedures crafted to shine a light on the signs and symptoms of presumable school failure for many low-income students of color even before they set foot in an elementary, middle, secondary, or collegiate classroom.

To adequately consider how so many schoolchildren underperform, McDermott and Varenne (2006) posit that perhaps we should *turn away* from the children themselves, and look to the institutions that foreground their problems and to the adults positioned to help them. Adults, and the social institutions they control, operate seemingly unchallenged, maintaining their authority without significant regard to how a different conception of the Discourse on school problems and solutions might prove fruitful for the lives of schoolchildren. The problem, in some ways, resides in the rigid acceptance of dichotomies (i.e., high achieving/low achieving, below basic/proficient, student of color/White, learning disabled/gifted) for understanding and ameliorating individual failures.

These troubling dichotomies contribute to the unproductive labeling utilized widely in the work of current achievement gap era educational policy and practice. Dichotomous thinking also pits student against student, student group against student group, teacher against teacher, and school against school, with seemingly little regard to the racial, historical, and cultural bases for why these various educational entities were deemed as normal/different,

standard/substandard, and underperforming/overperforming, initially. The achievement gap Discourse has catalyzed a turn toward labeling and categorizing *away* our problems, and has ultimately left us victimizing students and teachers. In sum, it appears that we have devoted far too many cultural resources to labeling children as failures, so much so that we have outstripped resources for finding out what is right about them (McDermott, 2008), their teachers, and their schools.

To grapple with the struggles of individual students, teachers, or teacher educators, for instance, we need to consider more fully how cultural contexts shape the meaning they make of their worlds and utilize these cultural understandings in how we describe and remedy schools. McDermott and Varenne (2006) note the following:

> Cultural analysis, like school reform, requires we take persons seriously while analytically looking through them—as much as possible in their own terms—to the world with which they are struggling. It is not easy, but it is the best way to see them in their full complexity; anything less delivers a thin portrait of their engagements and leaves them vulnerable to being labeled, classified, diagnosed, blamed, charged, and found lacking without any consideration of how they had been arranged, misheard, unappreciated, set up, and denied by others. (p. 7)

"Thin portraits" in the Discourse of the lives and school experiences of students and their teachers do little more than foster limited and essentialized notions of what they are capable of accomplishing given the cultural materials with which they are working. Achievement gap dialogues, debates, and Discourses must be highlighted by a closer critique of not just the *social* contexts but also the *cultural* contexts that envelop the lives of kids and the adults who work most closely with them. Beginning with a cultural analysis offers a start to a more comprehensive dialogue leading to hopefully more insightful questions and more impactful solutions.

The Three Versions of a Cultural Analysis

A cultural analysis conceptualizes a phenomenon through the lens of three related, yet distinct, *stages* (McDermott & Varenne, 2006) or *versions* (McDermott, 2008) of reference. For the purposes of this article, I utilize the term *version* instead of *stage* because its meaning does not imply a hierarchical relationship between ideas. In addition, the term *version* more fully encompasses how various frames to understand achievement gap reform measures could be considered as competing—and not hierarchically situated—policy frames of reference. These three versions potentially undergird educators' decisions regarding achievement gap policies or practices.

The first version could be seen as the most conceptually and idealistically "American" (McDermott & Varenne, 2006), as it focuses attention and positions blame for success or failure on the individual. Through this more individualized lens, problems belong to the individual and little regard is given to the world within which this individual has been forced to cope, which is an issue that harkens to Ryan's (1971) notion of "blaming the victim." Thus, this approach to problems oftentimes presents solutions focused on remedying the individual. Through the lens of the first version, failing students are to be blamed for their own problems and "someone should help them" (McDermott & Varenne, 2006, p. 14).

The second version responds directly to this simplistic individualism by situating blame for an individual's problems on the social forces that influence and even determine particular human behavior. Here, the individual/victim is blamed less, and social and cultural considerations are given a closer gaze as possible causes for their difficulty. Here, the brunt of the blame is moved off the individual. However, the problem itself still stays intact, harmful social forces remain, the individual continues to suffer, and proposed solutions flounder or never get off the ground because it is "too bad we can't help them directly" (McDermott & Varenne, 2006, p. 14).

The third version moves away from the individual and their social influences as places worthy of blame, to consider the activities and interactions of all individuals working together using the materials, systems, and assumptions afforded them by their culture. From this vantage, it takes an entire culture of individuals to construct a school-based problem, even though the evidence for the problem is mostly seen in and through the individuals operating in schools. And while an individual person is still a unit of *focus*, the individual is not the unit of *analysis*. The individual does not assume the blame for their difficulties, because "it takes others to set the stage for a problem, to recognize it, document it, worry about it, explain it, remediate it, and still more people to observe, interpret, and comment on the whole process" (McDermott & Varenne, 2006, p. 14). This third version calls us to realize our own role in creating and replicating problems, and pushes us to change the world enough "so that these problems do not come up anymore" (p. 14).

Considering policy and practice outside of the first and second versions is no easy task, but situating the achievement gap Discourse within the third version of analysis poses a unique and refreshed approach to the problems, while offering new possibilities to secure the most thoughtful and comprehensive solutions. The third version draws us all in together, takes everyone into account, and, while admittedly complex, it offers a point of view that metamorphoses the problems and solutions with which we might engage (McDermott, 2008).

A Cultural Analysis of the Achievement Gap Discourse

In the following analysis, I problematize the cultural logic, symbols, and meaning of underlying terms used to widely categorize and label schools followed by a particularly problematic label—*safe harbor* schools. I then analyze terms used for students in the achievement gap Discourse. Educators used labels and terminology to help make sense of school reform prior to 2002. However, NCLB (2002) ushered in increased accountability and standardized testing, and with it came a new era of labels and accompanying categories (e.g., "successful" and "failing" schools, "highly effective" and "ineffective" teachers, and "advanced," "proficient," "basic," and "below basic" students). These labels have become etched into the achievement gap Discourse as the essential language of school reformers, principals, and teachers. In addition, they have evolved into buzzwords in the larger social dialogue surrounding public school reform. In this light, the everyday talk of U.S. citizens has become imbued with these terms, as media outlets inform the public conscious and continue to open up our nation's schools to wider, yet mostly misinformed, critique. However, these terms have simultaneously worked to catalyze trends toward overly simplistic understandings of the problems and solutions inherent in remedying the achievement gap. Here, I use three versions of the cultural analytic framework to analyze terminology that is central to the achievement gap Discourse.

School Labels: AYP, Underperforming, and Safe Harbor

In the era of high-stakes accountability, schools are categorized based on the performance of their students on standardized tests. The labels ascribed to schools represent their successes or failures at meeting locally and nationally established benchmarks. There are numerous labels for schools referenced in the achievement gap debate, with "underperforming," "AYP," and "safe harbor" being some of the most widely utilized. In this first analysis, I take a closer look at these through the lens of the three versions.

Version I. There will always be some schools doing better than others; however, we need to help *underperforming* schools support higher academic achievement. But the schools themselves cause student underperformance. In building his argument for an increased federal role in schools, President George W. Bush noted that the initial priorities of NCLB (2002) were "based on the fundamental notion that an enterprise works best when responsibility is placed closest to the most important activity of the enterprise . . . and when

those responsible are held accountable for producing results" (p. 2). Because schools are sites most responsible for stimulating high achievement in students, holding teachers and school practitioners accountable for achieving higher outcomes is a reasonable expectation.

Given this logic, schools that do not meet AYP are run by ineffective leaders and employ teachers who either cannot or do not create meaningful learning environments for their children. And the test scores, truancy and graduation rates, and faculty retention patterns prove this. These schools are not meeting the needs of the children, and to stimulate growth, we need increased teacher and student accountability. The adults in these schools need to work harder and think smarter about how and why their students do not learn to the level of other students in schools across the nation and then enact immediate interventions to secure better results.

Version II. However, the schools that traditionally fail to meet AYP are actually those same schools more likely to be underresourced and populated by lower income students who are not as well prepared for an academically rigorous curriculum (see Anyon, 2005). Because these students need so much more additional help, their teachers can become overworked and burn out more readily than those working in higher performing schools. Urban schools in particular are not on an equal plane fiscally with suburban schools, given that limited tax bases make it difficult for some urban districts to put adequate money into the infrastructure of schools (see Anyon, 2005). In spite of efforts at school finance reform, there are still stark disparities with what is actually done with the funds. In particular, the money spent in underresourced urban schools is utilized differently than that spent in suburban areas. Because of the prevalence of school violence, urban schools have to utilize significant capital on nonacademic resources like security systems and policing (see Devine, 1996), instead of on curriculum, programs, or interventions to augment the physical, intellectual, and emotional well-being of students.

In addition, much of the curricular funds that are spent are utilized getting students caught up to grade level, let alone getting them to perform adequately in comparison with students in wealthier district schools. Poverty, resegregation, and White flight out of urban districts (see Kelly & Majerus, 2011; Massey & Denton, 1993; Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012) have led to devastating consequences for the optimal learning of urban Black and Latino schoolchildren and make it increasingly difficult to amass success for the teachers who serve them. And the number of students requiring free and reduced meals (FARMs), teen pregnancy rates, gang membership, and level of parental education all conflate to provide evidence to why this school is underperforming. The blame rests on social forces, which have created

insurmountable obstacles for the families of those attending underperforming schools to excel on par with other schools, let alone *overperform*.

Version III. An entire culture of individuals making meaning of schooling outcomes is involved in the creation and recreation of labels and categories assigned to schools. Instead of labeling schools as *progressing adequately*, we should consider how and why we feel compelled to arrange schools so that they are constantly measured against externally defined norms and positioned in comparison and competition with each other. How can we measure and compare schools, when they all serve such vastly different student populations and do so with unequal funding bases? How does society benefit from deeming a school a failure? Do we not realize that labels can be deterministic or lead to self-fulfilling outcomes, limiting schools and students from being what they were meant to be or what they could become?

Schools operate within culturally specific, local contexts. They serve students from specific communities, and those within these communities have particular needs, especially as it relates to securing the essential resources to provide for the best learning outcomes for their children. Closing or consolidating urban schools is a final solution used by policy makers to punish academic failure. However, when policy makers close schools, they simultaneously deal a deathblow to not just an academic learning environment for children but also to a center of community, shared history, and social advocacy. Schools remain a critical site of community for families living in vulnerable neighborhoods already dealing with issues like the threat of economic disarray and residential displacement caused by burgeoning gentrification (Johnson, 2013). Given that schools are more than just academic centers, but also community resources, especially for Black and Latino families, we must realize that all schools have strengths, just like they all need improvement in certain areas. Thus, it is important to consider that while some schools may underperform in one area (e.g., test scores), they may certainly overperform in another (e.g., local or national essay contests, musical ensembles, gang intervention programs, athletic teams, art programs). With so much sanctioning leveled at schools who fail on one shaky measure of what make schools "good," our job is to alter value systems so that these same "failing" schools that achieve in areas other than standardized assessments are acknowledged and rewarded for their successes.

In addition, why do we assume that teachers are not working as diligently as they can with what they have to meet the needs of their students? And why do many interventions show no results, or raise achievement only temporarily? When we urge all schools, no matter their circumstances, to meet externally established benchmarks of achievement, and assign them labels and

categories depending on their output, we not only harm the individual school culture itself but also unintentionally demonize the teachers who work there, and the children who attend. Increasingly, this demonization has come at the hands of media outlets.

Media-driven sensationalist accounts of U.S. school reform efforts have contributed to how the local and national public becomes misinformed about schooling. It has become increasingly evident that "bashing public education has become something of a national pastime" (Winfield, 2007, p. 163). With quick sound bites and inaccurate accounts of school happenings, media has utilized the achievement gap Discourse to confuse the public about the successes and struggles of the education system. Popular media outlets that share snapshot and thus, misleading accounts of what is truly going on in schools, leave countless demoralized and humiliated teachers, vulnerable students, defenseless schools, and confused parents wondering what to do. For instance, Kelly and Majerus (2011) note that media-proliferated school reform labels caused an increase in sensitivity among parents about the school-to-school differences on the lines of instructional quality. Primarily middle-class parents purchase homes within highly successful school districts, while families with lower incomes can send their children to charter schools within urban centers. While school-to-school variability with regard to instructional quality is not as drastic as most would assume, erroneous beliefs by parents about public schools may lead to negative outcomes for communities beginning with an increase in school and residential segregation and leave little funding for urban schools (Kelly & Majerus, 2011).

The film industry contributes to this sensationalist misinforming, further portraying public education in a dim light. Davis Guggenheim's (2010) widely popular film *Waiting for "Superman"* blamed school and student failure on teachers and their unions. Similarly, lesser known films like *The Cartel* (Bowdon, 2010) and *The Lottery* (Sackler, 2010) painted alarming portraits of public schools in which hope for children lies solely upon whether they win admission into charter schools or secure vouchers that allow them to attend private schools.

These films work to sensationalize schools and teachers without acknowledging the historic race- and class-based oppression residing at the core of school underperformance. In effect, these films portray public education as the *cause* of societal ills rather than locations *affected by* systematic oppression. Thus, audiences leave theaters misinformed, yet convinced of one thing: the only option available for saving our public schools is to dismantle them, abolish teacher unions, and hand over control of public education to charter schools and for-profit educational consulting firms.

In addition, films like *Waiting for "Superman"* portray urban public schools, in particular, as ragged and outdated in comparison with their bright and colorful charter and private school counterparts. Collins (2009) writes that a growing unwillingness to fund repairs for deteriorating schools and collapsing infrastructure—or justify reforms to inaccessible health care services and worn-out public transportation—speaks to a devaluation of anything deemed "public" in U.S. society. Furthermore, poor-quality public parks, housing, transportation, and schools only increase the value of private institutions and services. This increasing desire for privatization becomes evident in an ever-growing development of gated residential communities and private schools, leaving public spaces devalued and viewed as second-rate establishments frequented only by poor people, racial/ethnic minorities, and undocumented immigrants. Collins (2009) continues by arguing the following:

> If we persist in seeing public spaces as populated by dangerous Black American, Latina/o, and Middle Eastern criminals and terrorists who have made the public streets unsafe; by "public children" from racial/ethnic groups and new immigrant populations who consume educational and social welfare service far exceeding their perceived value to society . . . we fail to nurture democratic processes. (p. 25)

These sensationalist messages coupled with the increased value of privatization speak to a growing trend to disregard our public schools and the urban neighborhoods within which they are situated. In this light, the achievement gap Discourse also dilutes notions of public education as a democratic institution.

Safe Harbor: Schools in Harbor Are Safe, but Is That What Schools Are Built for?

Of the labels utilized for schools, safe harbor is unique in its problematic metaphorical underpinnings. Schools that fall short of securing the percentage points for AYP might qualify for a status referred to as "safe harbor" for decreasing the number of students not deemed proficient and improving the performance of a specific subgroup of students (Linn, 2003). When a school is in safe harbor, teachers can breathe a little easier knowing that they have in some ways avoided the high-stakes penalties that come with not making AYP.

Version I. Safe harbor schools are a little better off than schools labeled underperforming. The safe harbor label is helpful, as it signals that a school is

making strides to increase student achievement. But this does not mean that they are adequate. These schools still have far to go in maintaining consistent academic success for their students.

Version II. Safe harbor schools prove that all schools serving underprivileged students can make meaningful progress at closing the achievement gap. "Safe harbor" signals that a school's student achievement levels are increasing, which is a great thing. Even though safe harbor schools have the same demographics of students seen in underperforming schools, the teachers have shown through their efforts that *something* is working in spite of the social forces pushing against the students. These schools are still far from being adequate, as making safe harbor one year does not protect the school from the threat of sanctions that accompany future underperformance. These students still struggle with societal issues, but for now they are safe—a little safe—from danger, whatever that looks like, for one more year.

Version III. How does the term *safe harbor* help us better understand the status of schools? It assumes that the school is now free from the harm, danger, or assault that comes from being unsafe, or positioned in a place of heightened vulnerability. However, why would a school ever need to be in a position of danger? This label is problematic, as it implies that underperforming schools are under threat, but from what? In 1928, John A. Shedd, quoting his ancestor William, famously wrote the familiar, "A ship in harbor is safe—but that is not what ships are built for." Should schools be places where progressive academic, structural, pedagogical, or curricular risks are avoided for the sake of being in safe harbors? What do schools have to sacrifice to adhere to the culturally established norms for student achievement?

Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, or Advanced: What Is the Discourse Around Students?

With the increased measuring of schools, student labeling and categorizing has become the practice de jure for sorting and slotting students based on standardized assessment results. Based on their score, some districts refer to students as falling within the spectrum of being *below basic* all the way up to *advanced* or 1 to 4, or below standards, approaching standards, meeting standards, and exceeding standards. Although the federal government mandates that all students be proficient, exceptions are made. In addition, while the local mandate varies by state, schools need roughly 75% of their student body to be proficient, or whatever the equivalent, for the given policy.

Version I. According to the logic undergirding this version, there will always be students who can read, compute, and take tests better than others. However, it is important to know who the struggling students are. We need to figure out, document, and categorize the *high achievers*, the *underachievers*, and those who fall in the middle. Terms like *below basic, basic, proficient*, and *advanced*, which are based on performance standards adopted by some states from NAEP (see Linn, 2003), help do this work. Labeling students as below basic, for instance, signals to their teacher, that they need a tremendous amount of help to get them on grade level. Furthermore, labeling students as advanced indicates that they need no additional academic enrichment. But to the below basic students, their new label signals that they need to work harder to meet the standards set before them, and teachers need to work as hard as they can to empower students and their families to work produce better outcomes.

Version II. However, many of the below basic and basic students, especially in urban centers, are exposed to significant societal ills and might adopt behaviors that run counter to what is desired in schools. It is not their fault that they cannot learn and achieve at high levels, as the oppressive societal structures make it nearly impossible to break out of a cycle of crime, violence, and academic under achievement. Their parents might not have had the resources to better advocate for their children or provide supplemental learning experiences to round out their education (see Lareau, 1989). Their parents may not be fully engaged in schooling, because they themselves had such a tough time in school. Because below basic children are limited by their environment and various social forces, they struggle to achieve the cognitive ranks labeled as proficient and advanced. There is only so much we can do for these kids, though. But students who fall into the lower categories just cannot do as well as those in the upper echelon. And this is okay, because even if they know the material and just "do not test well," what might society look like if all citizens were scoring at the proficient and advanced levels? However, though there is little we can do to impact the social forces that contribute to keeping some students donning the below basic label, we still should try to help them to move up the scale with added help.

Version III. It takes an entire culture of individuals to create the symbols and meanings attached to labels like below basic and advanced. These labels are problematic because many times we already know what a below basic or what an advanced student looks like, how they learn, and what their potential is before they even enter the classroom. An example of this is that far too

often terms like below basic overlap with other labels like Black, Latina/o, poor, English Language Learner (ELL), and immigrant. The term *below basic* overlaps with all of these other cultural labels and always signifies failure.

Determining a child is below basic should alarm teachers for the need to create better learning activities and environments to best support students' cognitive development, and sometimes this happens. However, many times the contrary occurs. Students labeled below basic might also receive limited or no attention, as the hopes for bringing them on grade level in a year is nearly impossible. Schools need as many proficient students as possible to make AYP. But the incentive is not there to help these below basic students, because the goal is to get as many kids as possible into the proficient category (i.e., focus instruction to the middle of the class), not to get as many kids as possible out of the ranks of below basic (Brown & Clift, 2010). The terms *proficient* and *advanced* are equally problematic, in this regard, because they catalyze a troubling school dichotomy, highlighted by what is desirable or "good" about student behavior and outcomes, and what is "bad" and subsequently punished, sanctioned, or remedied. Kumashiro (2012) writes the following about "good" and "bad" students:

> We can understand "good" only if we already defined other things as bad. So, when we create a definition of the good student, consisting of such attributes as high achieving and compliant, we also define entire categories of students as bad, such as the underachieving, the culturally unassimilable, the misbehaving, the impaired, the out-of-box thinker, the unique and nonconforming, and so on, and we even try to fix or punish them, as with medication, separation, or signs on their records, in order to uphold a narrow definition of what it means to be good that only few can attain. (p. 21)

When we think of students in "either/or" mind-sets and give them labels to symbolize their meaning (i.e., good/bad, proficient/below basic), we foreclose upon their identities, and commodify their value as students and as humans in the school community. Proficient students, like good kids, are valued and rewarded by school practitioners. Conversely, below basic students, like bad kids, are not only undervalued but also *devalued* and viewed by even well-meaning practitioners as a liability when considering that funds get cut, teachers get fired, and schools get closed due to their underperformance. Thus, this label does not help students. Rather, labels help adults to position themselves in a more strategic way to pinpoint who is *helpable*, and who is beyond help for the purposes of securing AYP.

Implications and Conclusions

The labels and categories we use to understand and remedy the achievement gap serve only to fuel the flames that contribute to further drawing attention to the gap as understood (i.e., problems and solutions), and away from the cultural norms within which it operates. The seemingly unchallenged modes of race- and class-based comparison, the fanatic use of labels and categories (see Brantlinger, 2006), the feverish accountability married to standardized tests, and the media-driven rhetoric that has brought it all to the attention of the public (see Kelly & Majerus, 2011; Kumashiro, 2012) have created and furthered a disturbing achievement gap Discourse of contemporary schooling. Many have become so fluent in the language of the achievement gap Discourse that it has become difficult to see not only why the inherent meanings and symbols can be problematic but also how alternatives, which might lead to more comprehensive solutions, fall out of our reach.

Scholars, policy makers, and practitioners should more readily consider that students, who have been most widely and historically oppressed because of their race, gender, socioeconomic status, geographic origin, language, and immigration status, are the same students who are most frequently labeled as below basic and basic in the achievement gap Discourse. When the below basic label is disproportionately correlated with labels like Black, Latina/o, ELL, and immigrant, we have a flawed system at best, and a racially and linguistically oppressive one at worst. Drawing from a cultural perspective, I pose the following considerations as a means to begin reshaping how we think about public school reform.

First, while low-income students are constantly pitted against middle-class students, and ELLs pitted against native speakers, the language of the achievement gap mostly centers on inherent comparison of non-Whites with Whites. These comparisons thrive primarily on the results of standardized assessments, which provide only "one-dimension of a much more complex and nuanced reality of what students know" (Milner, 2013, p. 5). I argue that these lines of comparison are dehumanizing and unproductive. When we overly compare children without a close enough attention to the categories and labels that work to essentialize their identities, and to the inequity-laden cultural materials of race, class, and gender (see McDermott & Varenne, 2006) that they have been forced to utilize, we reaffirm a majoritarian narrative that privileges White students as the ideal to which all students should aspire (Love, 2004). This privileging also works to diminish the importance of the cultural funds of knowledge (see Moll & Gonzalez, 2004), academic and social prowess, and epistemologies of those who do not primarily embody Eurocentric notions and ideals. Broad policies and implementation plans will

continue to miss the mark until they better consider the nuances at play in the experiences of racial-group members based on socioeconomic status, geographic origin, nationality, and language.

Second, there needs to be a cultural shift away from polarizing labels and categories as a means of making sense of what students do and can do on high-stakes exams, and a pedagogical move toward authentic, equitable, and more holistic accounts of teacher and student performance (see Kim & Sunderman, 2005). Furthermore, educators must continually question how we assess what students know, in addition to questioning what we do with this information. It is essential that educators consistently critique taken-for-granted notions of what counts as knowledge and how we respond to students. Why is it okay to label a student "below basic," and how does this label help anyone? Who created the instruments that do this work of labeling, and why do we feel compelled to categorize, diagnose, punish, and reward students and promote, demote, hire, and fire their teachers and principals based on the outcomes of some hours long reading and math test (see Au, 2009)? While the results of standardized testing reflect such narrow understandings of what students know (Milner, 2013), what we do with students, teachers, and schools as a result of the outcomes of these assessments is where even graver harm resides.

Third, and in a similar light, we need to constantly analyze the words and labels we use to describe children, their schools, and those who teach them for manners in which these may further penalize already marginalized children. I acknowledge that undoing these terms will not undo achievement gaps necessarily, but what I am urging for is a larger place at the table for a policy narrative that works to consistently critique and pose alternatives to how we talk about schools, students, and teachers. A policy narrative that utilizes a cultural analytic approach could assuredly do this work. This move is essential, as these words have significant cultural meanings, determining not only present status but also future trajectories. One way to achieve this is to alter school, district, and state testing arrangements to focus on successes in schools instead of finding new and more accurate rubrics and statistical means to chart their failures. We must reassess our use of categories for schools and students, and rethink the deterministic labels we heap upon vulnerable schools, their teachers, and the students who learn in these spaces.

Fourth, we need to consider better means of involving the local, national, and even global community in the affairs of U.S. public school reform. Many media outlets have painted public education in broad strokes, which ignore the nuances and complexities in schools. News outlets promote "blue ribbon" schools and raise concerns about "failing schools" (Kelly & Majerus, 2011). Kumashiro (2012) writes,

> The media inundate the American public with stories of failing schools and a crisis of public schools that is both widespread and incredibly complex. This can lead to a sense of being overwhelmed with the size and scope of the problem, and of being helpless to change it. (p. 19)

Thus, if the problems of schools are cultural, and not solely technical in nature, we have to be more thoughtful about how the public access information about schools and seek solutions that involve more than just teachers and students. To help with this, we have to be more mindful about what news reports and politically slanted documentaries like *Waiting for "Superman"* do not only for schools, teachers, and schoolchildren but also what messages it sends to those outside of the field who might be positioned to help. Actively involving journalists, filmmakers, and artists generally in the dealings of schools, educational research conferences, and policy decision making at all levels will help them support a more accurate and comprehensive depiction of public education in the United States.

Fifth, there needs to be a reaffirmed commitment to schooling as a "public" institution. Our public schools serve as key sites that help make good on our promise for the present and future democratic plurality for all citizens. They are not perfect, but offer opportunities for students to practice citizenry and democratic ideals. However, far too many have distanced themselves from public education, which is shown in how seriously parents take the labels assigned to schools in their decision making about where to send their child (Kelly & Majerus, 2011). The achievement gap Discourse furthers critiques of public institutions that reify a systematic and discursive devaluing of anything *not* private. If public schools belong to society, then the responsibility for their success and failure rests on the shoulders of everyone. Altering how we discuss, portray in media and films, and understand schools best considers this realization.

We need to reclaim the images of our schools, reevaluate and assert their worth, and alter how we think about their role in stimulating the minds of those who will go on to create a society we cannot even yet imagine. McDermott and Varenne (2006) note, "Culture is not a past cause to a current self. Culture is the current challenge to possible future selves" (p. 8). The labels, terminology, and the inherent symbols of the achievement gap Discourse are not past challenges to what we do now with schoolchildren, but rather they are current challenges to the possible futures these children will create for us.

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Author Biography

Roderick L. Carey is a teacher educator, researcher, and doctoral candidate in the Minority and Urban Education program at the University of Maryland College Park.