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# Introduction

The history of the United States includes slavery, genocide, racial discrimination, war—in other words, it’s a country like all others. What is exceptional is that this country has created a vision of a new world and a new human being. Through its rhetoric, its poetry and prose, it has succeeded in investing the word “America” with enormous symbolic power. . . . Rhetoric can also shape reality.

—*Sacvan Bercovitch, September 2007*<sup>1</sup>

American rhetoric has changed the reality of race in the United States only very gradually over the past few hundred years, and only under the pressure of sustained struggle. Some among us are still treated as less “American” than others, and thus the struggle continues, albeit with more allies and less resistance. In the face of current conditions, we have a collective responsibility to carry on the work of previous generations to ensure that all are treated as being equally American—irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, or national origin—in both rhetoric and reality. We also have a responsibility to strive for excellence as a way of investing in continuing, long-term national vitality. Working to raise achievement levels for all segments of the population is a key to keeping America strong and vital. Striving to remove group identities as predictors of achievement—in other words, to close achievement gaps between groups—will help make the fruits of America’s vitality more equally available. These are the goals toward which this book is directed and that reflect the meaning of the title, *Toward Excellence with Equity*.

This book chronicles an intellectual journey that I began nearly two decades ago that initially focused on black-white inequality in earnings. At that time, I was among the many economists who were intrigued by a large and unexplained increase in earnings disparities from the middle 1970s

through the late 1980s. Earnings disparity had grown between racial groups, between workers of the same race with different amounts of schooling, and even between workers who had an equal number of years of schooling. Since 1990, rising earnings at the very top of the income distribution has been the most prominent form of growing inequality. However, from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, inequality grew throughout the income distribution and, as of the late 1980s, the reasons for this were poorly understood.

A major advance came around 1990, when economists and other social scientists began using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) to study the issue. The NLSY was a nationally representative, longitudinal data-collection project sponsored by the U.S. government. It surveyed participants annually, beginning in 1979 when they were teenagers. By the late 1980s, participants were young adults, and many had jobs. The NLSY data on employment, earnings, attitudes, and living conditions, combined with a great deal of information about family backgrounds and other variables collected from the same people in earlier years, shed light on one aspect of the inequality puzzle: the growing black-white gap in earnings.

The leading hypothesis was that growing inequality was due in part to technological changes that made workers who could use reading and math skills on the job more valuable to employers and, at the same time, made those who could not do so less valuable. What made the NLSY especially useful was that the data included reading and math test scores for survey participants. Most participants took the Armed Forces Qualifications Test (AFQT) in 1980. In previous research, AFQT scores from young black and white males tested between 1949 and 1953 had provided no explanation for the substantial black-white economic disparities that obtained during the early 1960s, when those men were adults with jobs in the regular workforce (Jencks & Phillips, 1998, p. 3, citing Cutright, 1972, 1974). Indeed, AFQT scores were not key predictors of earnings in the early 1960s. However, by the early 1990s, our analyses showed that AFQT scores were quite important predictors of hourly earnings for young adult males and females. Furthermore, scores raised by any given amount predicted about the same increase in earnings, irrespective of race. Analyses showed that black-white disparities in AFQT scores predicted at least 50 percent of the black-white hourly earnings gap among young adults in the NLSY data, even after controlling for years of schooling and key family background measures.

The pattern was clear, and I became hooked on the idea of raising test scores. Apparently, improving reading and math skills among black youths was a very promising strategy for reducing racial earnings inequality.

Chapter 1, “Shifting Challenges: Fifty Years of Economic Change toward Black-White Earnings Equality,” was first presented as a paper at a Morehouse College conference that commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of Gunnar Myrdal’s classic book, *An American Dilemma*. In this chapter I trace shifts in black-white earnings inequality from the 1940s to the 1990s and highlight the growing importance of reading and math skills as causes of earnings inequality. I suggest further that efforts to improve basic skills need to become central to our strategic understanding of how to achieve racial equality in the United States.

My research also led me to investigate why test scores stopped rising for black and Hispanic teens at the end of the 1980s. In chapter 2, “Test-Score Trends along Racial Lines, 1971 to 1996: Popular Culture and Community Academic Standards,” I discuss ways that a shift in black and Hispanic youth culture might partially account for this plateau.<sup>2</sup> Youth culture profoundly affects what young people do with their time, how free they feel to be ambitious, and how inclined they are to do what they know is right without fear that their peers might disapprove. This chapter, which foreshadows my more recent work in the same area, focuses particularly on the role of rap music and the impact of peer expectations in shaping young black students’ attitudes toward achievement. In the Afterword to chapter 2, I describe some more recent findings from subsequent analyses of test-score trends.

The fact that reducing black-white test-score disparities has the potential to reduce other forms of racial inequality inspired Christopher Jencks to conceive the *Black-White Test Score Gap*, a landmark volume Jencks coedited with Meredith Phillips in 1998. In the introduction, Jencks wrote:

Reducing the test-score gap is probably both necessary and sufficient for substantially reducing racial inequality in educational attainment and earnings. Changes in education and earnings would in turn help reduce racial differences in crime, health, and family structure, although we do not know how large these effects would be. (p. 4)

This followed another passage from Jencks that has become a standard quotation in writings on the black-white test-score gap: “If racial equality is America’s goal, reducing the black-white test-score gap would probably do more to promote this goal than any other strategy that commands broad public support” (p. 3).

Jencks and Phillips invited me to contribute a chapter to their book that reviewed the best available research concerning the potential of school-related strategies to help close the black-white test-score gap. Preschool, group-

ing and tracking, class size, matching teacher and student race, teacher quality, and a few other topics were to be included. I also wanted to explore whether teachers' expectations were biased downward for black students, as compared to white students. In the course of my investigations, I learned that there are three distinct conceptions of bias in the literature on teacher expectations, and that the verdict on whether a teacher's expectations are biased along racial lines depends on which definition of bias is implicit in making the judgment. My investigation of teacher expectations became a separate chapter. Both chapters appear in this book: chapter 3, "Can Schools Narrow the Black-White Test Score Gap?" and chapter 4, "Teachers' Perceptions and Expectations and the Black-White Test Score Gap." Together they tell a nuanced but hopeful story about the ways that schools, teachers, and teaching affect achievement levels and gaps. They hold out promise that high-quality schooling, beginning with preschool, can indeed help close these gaps.

While I was working on these chapters, my friend Reuben Harris asked me to meet with Mark Freeman, the school superintendent in Shaker Heights, Ohio, to discuss ways that achievement gaps in the district could be reduced. Harris had become a parent leader at Shaker Heights High School and served on a committee of parents and school officials that had compiled student data in a report on achievement gaps within the school. The student newspaper at the high school got hold of the report and published grade-point averages and average standardized test-scores. Black students were embarrassed and upset by the results and also by the fact that they were released. Freeman asked me to present some of my research findings to his principals and to the community, so I met with the principals and some three hundred citizens on a summer Sunday afternoon.

This relationship with Shaker Heights eventually led to chapter 5 of this volume, "A Diagnostic Analysis of Black-White GPA Disparities in Shaker Heights, Ohio," which is based on findings from the Ed Excel survey of student culture developed by John Bishop of Cornell University. Bishop created the survey as a tool for studying achievement cultures in high schools. He invited me to help him find districts in which to administer it. Shaker Heights became one of the first. The findings I describe in chapter 5 indicate that black-white gaps in student skill levels had been developed before middle school, and that one key area of black-white differences in middle and high school was the sometimes rowdy behavioral expectations that black students often have for one another. The survey also highlighted some powerful challenges to the standard inferences teachers and other adults make

about student effort and commitment to academic success, based on group-level differences in homework completion rates and behavior patterns. Black students reported lower homework completion rates than white classmates but no less time devoted to homework. They self-reported worse behavior than whites but no less desire to do well academically. Teachers and school officials found both of the latter findings surprising, and it changed their understanding of black-white differences in homework completion rates and behavior.<sup>3</sup>

Shaker Heights joined the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) around 1999. Psychologist Edmund W. Gordon helped MSAN founder Alan Alson, then superintendent of the high school district in Evanston, Illinois, to convene a research advisory council. I joined that advisory council and began working with the MSAN Practitioner Research Council (PRC). The PRC, aware of the findings in Shaker Heights, decided in the spring of 2000 that they wanted to administer the Ed Excel survey to middle and high school students in all fifteen member districts. So, in November 2000, we administered the survey to roughly 40,000 middle and high school students. Slightly updated from the version that Shaker Heights students had taken, the survey touched on many issues of student motivation, peer relations, effort, aspirations, music preferences, family background supports, and use of time.

The results of this second survey are discussed in chapter 6, “What Doesn’t Meet the Eye: Understanding and Addressing Racial Disparities in High-Achieving Suburban Schools.” Patterns in the data for all fifteen districts were strikingly similar to those for Shaker Heights. The findings in this chapter pertain to racial differences and similarities in student effort and motivation, and to variations in the achievement gap by family socioeconomic status.

Chapter 6 also introduces the Tripod Project for School Improvement, which I conceived in collaboration with educators in Shaker Heights, partly in response to the MSAN Ed Excel survey findings. (The three legs of the “tripod” are teachers’ content knowledge, pedagogy, and teacher-student relationships.) The project surveys students and teachers in participating schools to document attitudes, perceptions, experiences, and practices. The resulting data are returned to each school in forms suitable to inform and influence deliberations about ways to improve the school, raise achievement, and narrow gaps. The Tripod Project spread from Shaker Heights to other MSAN districts and now operates in both suburban and inner-city schools in several states. A central focus of the project is to provide classroom-level data for whole schools, which allows school leaders to discern how differ-

ent classrooms are from one another in the quality of instruction and of student engagement in learning. The data inform school-level strategic efforts to improve instruction and school climate, raise achievement levels, and close achievement gaps. In the Afterword to chapter 6, I discuss additional data derived from Tripod Project surveys concerning youth culture, academic achievement, and the “acting white” hypothesis.

An all-too-constant concern among Tripod Project leaders in schools has been the resistance that they experience when trying to involve teachers deeply in school-level change. While it has been relatively easy to engage small, enthusiastic groups of teachers in change efforts—let us call them “the choir”—engaging the vast “congregation” of teachers in any school requires stronger leadership than many schools have developed. The failure of many schools to fully engage their “congregation” in implementing professional development programs, including but not limited to our “teaching the hard stuff” and other Tripod Project programs, led me to develop a special section on the Tripod Project survey for teachers. A key finding from this section indicated that professional development programs had not worked *because teachers had not implemented them*. In chapter 7, “Five Challenges to Effective Teacher Professional Development,” I describe these and other conclusions based on the survey. I highlight the importance of introducing professional development in ways specifically designed to inspire teacher buy-in, of having in place specific monitoring and accountability procedures, of providing sufficient follow-up training and support, and of making space and time for the new activities within the context of a coherent professional development strategy.

While I began this journey focused on schools and still believe that schools are extremely important, I have slowly come to view parenting as a very important strategic emphasis for raising achievement and closing gaps. Therefore, I made parenting the major focus of chapter 8, “Toward Excellence with Equity: The Role of Parenting and Transformative School Reform.” In this chapter, I draw on evidence from many sources that parenting practices, beginning at infancy, are important determinants of school achievement and that racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups differ in the degree to which practices most correlated with high achievement are the norm. Some of these differences seem related to resources, some to parenting beliefs, and some to the simple transmission of parenting norms and practices from generation to generation. Inducing people to raise their children differently is not easy, but if we can successfully influence parents to do so within the context of a national movement for excellence with equity, I believe the impact on

improving achievement levels and closing achievement gaps could be quite significant.

In the concluding chapter of this volume I discuss where we go from here. In it I outline basic ideas for framing our thinking about a social and cultural movement for excellence with equity—a movement that goes beyond the boundaries of the schoolyard to include families, communities, out-of-school supports, youth culture, and civic engagement. The key conception of equity is that group-level identities should be worthless as predictors of achievement. While all groups should rise toward excellence, those farthest behind should rise most rapidly until our society has reached a state of “group-proportional equality.” In chapter 8 and the conclusion, I call on all Americans to provide high-quality developmental supports and experiences to children from all racial, ethnic, and social-class origins until excellence is a normal outcome and membership in a particular group no longer predicts anything of consequence in our society. American rhetoric will then have become our American reality.