

Postcolonial “Pre-conditioning”: Understanding the Academic Achievement Gap between White and Minority Students in the USA

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Abstract

Much research has been conducted to study the academic achievement gap between white and minority students in the United States. And while some of the conversation imply, or inadvertently point to this colonial history, none has investigated the issues through postcolonial lens. The purpose of this study therefore, was to examine how slavery and colonialism produced conditions that result in the current achievement gap. Three questions guided this study: (1) What school-related disparities exist between white and minority students that may explain the academic achievement gap? (2) How might these school-related disparities function as contributory factors to the academic achievement gap? (3) How are these factors vestiges of slavery and colonialism? Extant data were used to examine school-related disparities (or “pre-conditional” factors) that impact student achievement and experience. The findings indicate that hegemonic practices and features of slavery and colonialism produce institutionalized and internalized consequences that continue to affect educational outcomes.

Keyword: Postcolonial studies, achievement gap, minority students, equity in education, slavery and colonialism

1. Introduction

Many studies have been conducted to highlight, understand and remedy the academic achievement gap between White and Minority students in the United States of America. However, this researcher found no study that explored the problem through postcolonial lens. This research perspective is important since the US exerted colonial power through chattel slavery, the mistreatment of Native Americans, and the promotion of Eurocentric hegemony. This paper argues that the social, economic, and educational gaps observed between Whites and Minorities are enduring manifestations of the U.S. brand of colonialism. Since the U.S. participated in colonial oppression, a postcolonial perspective provides one plausible explanation for the academic achievement gap that persists between white and minority students. An understanding of how destructive colonial structures and attitudes continue in our society will provide valuable insights into how to address the problem of the achievement gap. The purpose of this study therefore, was to examine how legacies of slavery and colonialism may have produced conditions that result in the academic achievement gap in the United States. The study is guided by three questions:

1. What school-related disparities exist between white and minority students that may explain the academic achievement gap?
2. How might these school-related disparities (“pre-conditions”) function as contributory factors to the academic achievement gap?
3. How are these factors vestiges of slavery and colonialism?

2. Background to the Problem

Disparities in academic achievement in the U.S. have existed between white and minority students for decades. In recent times, policy initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTTT) Acts, under the Bush and Obama administrations respectively, have been implemented to address this obstinate problem. The hope is that the broad and strict implementation of these policies would redress the achievement gap.

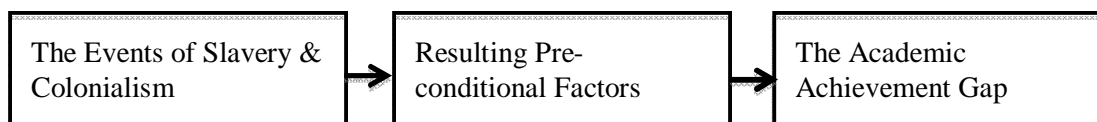
It is not clear what impact the aforementioned efforts have had on the problem, but while recent reports indicate increased scores for all groups (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011; Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman 2009), wide disparities between white and minority students still exist (Matthews, 2013, Lumina Foundation Report). According to the Foundation report, degree attainment rates among adults (ages 25-64) in the U.S. continue to be woefully unbalanced, with 59.1 percent of Asians having a degree versus 43.3 percent of Whites, 27.1 percent of Blacks, 23.0 of Native Americans and 19.3 of Hispanics (Lumina Foundation, 2013).

The following cases further highlight the academic achievement gap problem: Connecticut is reported to have the largest achievement gap in the country where results in national progress tests show African American and Latino students performing up to three grade levels below their white counterparts (Connecticut Commission on Educational Achievement, 2010). The state of Michigan reported stagnant achievement showing black students experiencing the largest gaps compared to their white peers in reading and math. The performance gaps between Whites and Blacks in Michigan public schools on the MAEP¹ in reading and math respectively are 29% and 30% (Tanner, 2013). In Florida 38% of black students currently read at grade level, compared to 53% of Hispanics, 69% Whites and 76% Asians (Alvarez, 2012). Even in Massachusetts, which is rated “America’s Best Educated State” (Sauter & Hess, 2012), and the top state scoring above the international average on the 2012 PISA² (Kelly, Xie, Nord, Jenkins, Chan, & Kastberg, 2013), there are a alarming disparities between Minorities and Whites. According to a recent report, “Massachusetts ranks in the bottom tier of states in progress toward closing the achievement gap for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students” (French, Guisbond, Jehlen & Shapiro, 2013, p.6). The white-minority achievement gap is so glaring and persistent that it has attracted much scrutiny. In addition to the plethora of studies drawing attention to the problem (See Hornstein & Murray, 1994; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Lubienski, 2002; Armor, 2006; Levine & Marcus, 2007), the federal government has (re)entered the fray to address the problem in a more direct way than the broad sweeps of the NCLB and the RTTT. The 2008 Legislature commissioned 5 studies to investigate the problem, and in 2009 created the Achievement Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee³ which is charged to synthesize the findings into policy-ready strategies to close the achievement gap (House Bill Report HB 1669, 2012).

As illustrated above, the academic achievement gap between minority and white students has (rightly) received considerable attention. The author however, is of the view that the spotlight on the achievement gap in itself, is merely focusing on the symptom, and ignoring the pre-conditional factors perpetuating the problem. These are antecedents or intervening factors that persistently undermine the academic achievement of minority students. This paper therefore shifts the focus to highlight these factors, which also reveal troubling gaps between whites and minorities.

The pre-conditional factors that are prominent in reports and the literature are: *school dropout, graduation, suspension, expulsion, family income, school poverty level, family structure, and parents’ education*. The author’s view is that in order to effectively respond to the problem of the academic achievement gap, these contributing factors must be addressed. Another important, but disregarded step in addressing the problem is to critically examine the historical roots and the insidious effects of these pre-conditional factors. In response to detractors who argue that she is splitting hairs with her semantic choice of “academic debt” over “achievement gap”, renowned education critic Gloria Ladson-Billings points out that “...what I believe have been central to my argument are the root causes of the disparities and the sense of social responsibility that accompanies those causes” (Ladson-Billings, 2013, p.105). The sentiments expressed by Ladson-Billings are consistent with those undergirding this paper. As illustrated in Figure 1, the process producing the achievement gap can be conceptualized as: Slavery and colonialism produce the pre-conditional factors which in turn result in the academic achievement gap.

Figure 1: Process Producing the Academic Achievement gap



¹ Michigan Educational Assessment Program

² Program for International Student Assessment

³ Later renamed “Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee”

3. Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial studies can be defined as the critical examination of the effects and responses to protracted ills from the colonial encounter (See Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998; Memmi 1965; Fanon 1967; & Said 1978 for a deeper commentary). The theory explicates how hegemonic practices including subordination, marginalization, discrimination, brutality, dehumanization and other malevolent features promote and maintain inequities in former colonial societies. Colonialism and slavery, practiced largely by the Europeans resulted in the marginalization and relegation of non-Whites to inferior positions in the existing global social order. Postcolonial discourse therefore, is a useful framework for exploring what I argue as colonially induced pre-conditional factors that explain the achievement gap.

Power is exerted through hegemonic⁴ control exercised by a dominant class over others in the society. The social order is organized and governed by the dominant group of a particular race or/and ethnicity. In order to maintain this power relationship, the dominant group has to suppress the ideas, language and culture of the less powerful group, and promote its own. This discrimination therefore marginalizes and dehumanizes the oppressed group overtime. The effect of this process, even after it is no longer explicitly or overtly enforced, is embedded in the institutional structures of the society as well as in the psyche of both the subordinate and dominant groups.

Colonialism, imposed largely by the British, Spanish, French, Portuguese and Dutch in particular, marginalized and relegated non-whites to inferior positions in the social order. Blacks and indigenous peoples for example, are located at the lowest levels in Western societies. The plight of non-Whites in these societies is often explained away through narratives that place blame at the feet of the victims, but postcolonial theory redirects attention to the history of aggression towards these groups, and the effects of centuries of slavery and colonialism.

As has been well documented, in the case of the U.S., Whites exerted colonial power through the enslavement of Blacks, the mistreatment of Native Americans, and the promotion of Eurocentric hegemony. The social, economic, and educational gaps observed today between Whites and Minorities are enduring manifestations of the US brand of colonialism. Through systematic means such as segregation, housing discrimination, and underfunded schools, the U.S. fostered race-based inequities. Because the US has used these established modes of colonial oppression, a postcolonial perspective therefore provides a plausible explanation for the academic achievement gap that persists between white and minority students.

4. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine how legacies of colonialism could create conditions that result in the academic achievement gap. The author proposes that the achievement gap is produced by other gaps or pre-conditional factors that have roots in US slavery and colonialism. Existing data were used to highlight disparities in these “pre-conditional” or intervening factors that influence and explain student achievement and experiences. The pre-conditional factors explored in this study are: *school dropout, graduation, suspension rate, expulsion rate, family income, school poverty level, family structure, and parents’ education.*

The data on the above factors were collected from the following sources: (1) The U.S. Department of Education; (2) The National Center for Education Statistics; (3) The Condition of Education report; (4) Statistic Brain; (5) Alliance for Excellence Education; (6) The Civil Rights Project; and (7) The Urban Institute. The U.S. Department of Education is the federal agency that establishes policy for, administers and coordinates most federal assistance to education. A primary objective of the department is collecting data on America's schools and disseminating research (US. Dept. of Education). The National Center for Education Statistics is the primary federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education in the U.S. and other nations. The Condition of Education, prepared by the NCES, is congressionally mandated report on education indicators provided to the house annually. Statistic Brain is a company that collects data on a number of sectors like demographics, crime, and education. According to their website they are “a group of passionate number people. We love numbers, their purity, and what they represent...Our goal is to bring you accurate and timely statistics” (Statistic Brain). The Alliance for Excellent Education is a national policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. The Civil Rights Project is a policy and research think tank focused on racial justice.

⁴ Term popularized by Antonio Gramsci to essentially mean the social, cultural ideological and/or economic influence exerted by one group over others.

This group "...has commissioned more than 400 studies, published 14 books and issued numerous reports from authors at universities and research centers across the country" (Civil Rights Project). Finally, The Urban Institute is a non-partisan think tank that conducts social and policy research. Their stated mission is to "gather data, conduct research, evaluate programs, offer technical assistance overseas, and educate Americans on social and economic issues..." (Urban Institute).

5. Results

The purpose of this study was to examine, through the three research questions, how legacies of slavery and colonialism may have produced conditions that result in the academic achievement gap in the U.S. The findings are discussed according to each research question in turn.

Question 1: What school-related disparities exist between white and minority students that may explain the academic achievement gap?

The purpose of this section is to present the data that demonstrate the school-related disparities between white and minority students. A deeper analysis is conducted later when connections are discussed relating to the subsequent research questions.

As stated before, the pre-conditional factors studied are: *school dropout, graduation, suspension, expulsion, family income, school poverty level, family structure, and parents' education*. The data show that except for Asians, there is a significant disparity between minority and white students on these factors. The gaps revealed in the data are significantly disproportionate considering the racial distribution in the school population: Whites (54%); Hispanics (23%); Blacks (15%); and other races (8%) (Aud et al., 2012).

Suspension and Expulsion

Table 1: Suspension and Expulsion Rates by Race

	Whites	Blacks	Hispanics	Other Non-Whites
<i>Suspension rate</i>	38.2	35.3	23.8	2.8
<i>Expulsion rate</i>	32.9	41.5	23.9	1.6

Source(s): Education Week <http://www.edweek.org/ew/qc/2013/ocrdata.html>

According to the data, Blacks are overrepresented among students who are suspended and expelled from school (Table 1). Although Blacks make up only 15% of the school population, they account for 35.3% and 41.5% of those suspended and expelled, respectively. These rates for Hispanics (23.6% & 23.9%) are more consistent with their composition (23%) in the population. The situation is reversed for Whites who constitute 54% of the school population, yet their suspension and expulsion rates are 38.2% and 32.9% respectively. The rates for other non-White students are less than their standing in the population.

Dropout and Graduation

Table 2: Dropout and Graduation Rates by Race

	Whites	Blacks	Hispanics	Asian	Native
<i>Dropout rate</i>	5.1	8	15.1	4.2	12.4
<i>Graduation rate (High School)</i>	78	57	58	83	54

Source(s): NCES 2012 <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012045.pdf>, Alliance for Excellence Education for graduation rate

Minority students are disproportionately affected by high school dropout and graduation rates. As shown in the data (Table 2)⁵, between 8% and 15% of these minority groups drop out of school, with Hispanics exiting at the highest rate and Blacks at the lowest. On the other hand, only approximately 5% and 4% of whites and Asians respectively, leave school prematurely. In terms of graduation, Asians (83%) and Whites (78%) are significantly more successful than Hispanics (58%), Blacks (57%) and Native Americans (54%) in achieving that goal.

⁵ There seems to be gaps in the data in Table 2, as the dropout and graduation rates do not total 100%. For example, 78 and 5.1 for whites do not equal 100.

These statistics suggest that there are factors at work preventing minority students from completing their high school education.

School Poverty Level

Table 3: High-Poverty and Low-Poverty School Rates by Race

	Whites	Blacks	Hispanics	Asian	Native
<i>High-Poverty School</i>	6	37	37	12	29
<i>Low-Poverty School</i>	34	8	12	37	12

Source(s): NCES <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012045.pdf>

The data also show that Blacks (37%), Hispanics (37%) and Native Americans (29%) are disproportionately segregated to high-poverty schools (Table 3). It is important to note that although Whites constitute the majority in the population, only 6% of them are in low poverty schools! A larger percentage of Whites (34%) and Asians (37%) attend low-poverty schools. These findings clearly mean that Whites and Asians are more likely than their counterparts to have access to greater and better educational resources. The situation also begs the question in a way that unmask the taken-for-granted understanding that this is how things are: Why are Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans the ones attending high-poverty schools?

Family Structure, Parents' Education and Income

Table 4: Family Structure, Parents' Education and Low-Income Family by Race

	Whites	Blacks	Hispanics	Asian	Native
<i>2-Parent family</i>	75	36	65	85	52
<i>Parent education</i>	3.4	10.8	30.3	7.3	10.7
<i>Low income household</i>	42	22	30	Other Non-Whites	
				6	

Source(s): <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012045.pdf>; The Urban Institute for low income <http://www.urban.org/>

Minority students are again at a distinct disadvantage in terms of family structure, parent education and income (Table 4). A significantly higher percentage of Whites (75%) and Asians (85%) live in 2-parent families. In the case of Blacks, only 36% live with both parents. Hispanics (65%) and Native Americans (52%) fare better than Blacks, but not as well as Whites and Asians. The data in Table 4 also show that a larger proportion of minority students have parents with less than a high school diploma. Hispanics are most affected, with over 30% of their parents attaining less than a high school education. For Whites and Asians, only 3.4% and 7.3% respectively, have parents with less than a high school education.

Finally, a disproportionately large percentage of Hispanics (30%) and Blacks (22%) represent students from low-income households. Again, this is significant since these groups constitute only 23% and 15% of the school population, respectively. Whites are 53% of the school population, but account for 43% of those from low-income families.

These data on the pre-conditional factors, strongly suggest that Black, Hispanic and Native American students are at a more significant academic disadvantage than their White and Asian counterparts. And the compelling recurring question is: What is it that produces this pattern of disparity between minority (excepting Asians) and White students in the U.S society? This question will be explored in the following discussion.

Question 2: How might these school-related disparities (“pre-conditions”) function as contributory factors to the academic achievement gap?

In order to explore how the pre-conditional factors contribute to the achievement gap, it is important to provide a definition for the condition. Based on the concern of this paper and indicators commonly reported for the achievement gap, the phenomenon can be defined as the difference between racial groups in terms of attainment of the primary goals of the education system: that is to say, performance on academic assessments and completion of a prescribed program of study.

School dropout and graduation rates are obvious contributory factors to academic achievement. Dropping out of school prematurely will not only minimize the academic achievement of the victims but that of their children as well, hence perpetuating the unfortunate cycle.

Reports on schools notoriously characterized as “dropout factories” show that significantly higher proportions of black and Latino students attend such institutions (Balfanz, Bridge land, Bruce, Fox & Hornig, 2013). Many studies have explored and offered reasons for school dropout and non-graduation (Rumberger, 2011); this paper is primarily interested in explanations that point to root causes.

Suspensions and expulsions are also serious enemies of academic achievement. Multiple suspensions may impair the relationship between the student and the school environment, or ultimately lead to expulsion. Expulsions are likely to permanently halt formal education for an individual, hence little hope of academic achievement. Suspensions and expulsions are normally the result of students violating school regulations or carrying out egregious infractions. Studies show that students of color, especially Blacks are disproportionately deemed to commit acts warranting suspensions or expulsions (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Rosen (1997) found that defiance of school authority was one of the major reasons for suspension. Whether one considers this racial discrimination or not, the important question is: why is this a reality or such an entrenched feature of the school system in this society?

The extent to which family income affects child development is mixed (Mayer, 1997; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Haveman & Wolfe, 1995). However, there is ample evidence indicating a strong relationship between income and academic achievement (Dahl & Lochner, 2012; Buckingham, Wheldall & Beaman-Wheldall 2013; OECD, 2010; Entwistle, Alexander & Olson, 2005; Rowley & Right 2011; Sirin, 2005). According to a recent analysis by the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, while students with a family income between \$0 and \$20,000 scored 1326 out of 2400 in 2013, those with a family income higher than \$200,000 scored 1714 (Strauss, 2014). Researchers have also provided compelling explanations regarding how this factor might impact children. For example, poverty is associated with conditions that adversely affect parents’ ability to nurture and stimulate their children (McLoyd, 1990; Parker et al., 1999; Datcher, 1982; Voelkl, 1995; Finn & Rock, 1997; Johnson et al., 2001). Studies also show that low-income parents demonstrate low parental involvement in children’s education (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Epstein, 1995; Lareau, 2000; O’Connor, 2001). As highlighted in this paper, students of color are disproportionately from low-income families.

Another factor that adversely affects students of color is family structure. As noted in this paper a large percent of students of color are from single parent families. A sizeable body of research consistently shows that children from single-parent homes perform lower on tests, receive lower GPAs, and complete fewer years of school than their counterparts from two-parent families (Rowley & Wright 2011; Mandara & Murray 2006; South, Baumer and Lutz, 2003; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan 2004; Balcom 1998; Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, & Durlfur, 1998). Comprehensive findings of the OECD (2010) report indicate that children from single-parent families score 5 points below children from 2-parent families. The report further reveals that the figure is worse in the US – there is a 23-point difference between single and 2-parent families!

Parents’ level of education has been shown to predict children’s achievement (Corwyn & Bradley, 2003; Jimerson, Egeland, & Teo, 1999; Linver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen, 2002; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). Findings indicate that parents who succeed academically have more leverage to encourage and support their children’s success in school (Kim, 2004). For example, more educated parents influence child achievement through high expectations, exposure to educational opportunities, reading behaviors at home, English language usage, and positive parent-child relationship and interactions (Davis-Kean, 2005; Hoff, 2003; Furstenberg et al., 1999; Alexander et al., 1994)

Finally, the poverty level of schools impacts the achievement level of students. According to the OECD report (2010), “Regardless of their own socio-economic background, students attending schools with a socio-economically advantaged intake tend to perform better than those attending schools with more disadvantaged peers” (p.14). Test scores for both academic and non-academic subjects, students graduating with diplomas, and the percentage of students entering 4-year colleges were lower for high-poverty than low-poverty schools (Aud et al., 2010).

There are a number of key reasons students in high poverty schools are at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts in the opposite situation. One reason is as discussed earlier, is that the background of students in low poverty schools place them at an academic disadvantage. Another reason is that there is a lower proportion of highly trained full-time teachers in economically disadvantaged schools (OECD Report, 2010; Aud et al., 2010).

The OECD report also highlights the fact that the US is among the countries with socio-economically disadvantaged schools characterized by higher student-teacher ratios. A revealing fact of the OECD report is that on average, in other parts of the world, students in city schools perform better than those in other schools; however this does not hold true in this country.

As demonstrated above, the pre-conditional factors identified in this study do not favor minority students. Except for Asians, there is a disproportionate disparity between Whites and minority students on all these indices. Because of the disparities on these measures, minority students perform worse than their white and Asian counterparts on academic assessments and completion of their studies. An argument for the prevalence of these factors is elucidated in the ensuing response to the final research question. To avoid repetition, the response to the final research question also constitutes the discussion section of this paper.

6. Discussion

Question 3: How are the pre-conditional factors vestiges of slavery and colonialism?

As established in this article, there is a clear correlation between the disparities in the school-related or pre-conditional factors observed in this study and the existing academic achievement gap. Except in the case of Asians, there are significant gaps between minority and white students on all the factors, as there is between both groups on the achievement gap. This paper posits that the academic achievement gap vis-a-vis the disparities in the pre-conditional factors, is an enduring effect of slavery and colonialism in the US. This central argument expands the position that the academic underachievement of Blacks and other Minorities is attributed to 4 key features of slavery and colonialism identified earlier in this paper: subordination, cultural and racial hegemony, marginalization and dehumanization.

Subordination. A key feature of slavery and colonialism was the subjugation of people to inferior statuses. One way in which Whites enforced this form of discrimination in the US was by denying education to Blacks and Native Americans. During slavery, Blacks were severely punished if they ventured to learn to read or write (Haley, 1976). As Genovese (1976) states in his study of slave narratives, "among the bitterest recollections of ex-slaves were those of whippings and name calling insults for trying to learn to read. Few things so outraged their sense of justice" (p.565).

Keeping Blacks and Native people ignorant effectively retarded their ability to learn the rules governing the social, political and economic order established by Whites. The centuries of this deprivation may have created a deficit in their knowledge base, which set in motion a cycle of generational academic under-achievement. This is indicated by the wide disparity between Whites and Minorities in parents' level of education, and partly explains the significant disparity in school dropout and graduation rates among minority students.

Cultural & racial hegemony resulted in the erasure and degradation of the culture and identity of Blacks and Native Americans, as Whites foisted their culture and ideologies on the colonized and enslaved. Because education was a vehicle through which Whites later exercised cultural and racial hegemony, when Blacks were finally permitted to be formally educated, they were served an education that was Eurocentric in method and content. Rooted in Eurocentric approaches, current education practices lack cultural relevance for Minorities (Ladson-Billings, 2009), which is likely to engender in students a feeling of disconnectedness from the school experience.

This author therefore argues that the disparity in school dropout and graduation rates between white and minority students is also a function of the level of subconscious acceptance or resistance to white institutions. Whites are more likely to accept and engage in the rules of school since it was conceptualized by and for them. On the other hand, Minorities do not connect with the formal education system and consciously or subconsciously resist the system. Because the school is one of the institutions created and controlled by Whites, a mentality in the black community considers acquiring an education – particularly learning English – becoming the oppressor (Holt, 1972). This is a condition that Ogbu (2004) reiterates as "the burden of acting white". It must be reemphasized however, that the argument is not that students reject performing well in school. What students reject, and which hurt their academic performance, is what they perceive as "White" attitudes and behaviors conducive to making good grades (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). This rejection may be the result of a disconnection set in motion by historical associations between education and European subjugation. And may be reinforced by methods and materials that discount, instead of privilege the experiences of Minorities.

Marginalization The racial disparity observed in high-poverty versus low-poverty schools can be linked to the history of segregation and the relegation of non-whites to economically depressed conditions. Marginalization is an oppressive feature of slavery and colonialism, and in the form of racial segregation that existed in the United States, was to keep the oppressed in their places and outside white mainstream society. Racial segregation has operated as *De jure* segregation, which was enforced by law, and *De facto* segregation, which persists today without the force of law. Segregation in the US is underscored by discriminatory laws and practices during the Jim Crow era, separatism in the Armed Forces, the landmark case of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights movement, and other such events.

The trajectory and effects of segregation in the US are quite clear. During the slavery and colonial periods, Blacks were segregated to barracks, and later, Native Americans to reservations. The trend continues today in the form of hyper segregation (Massey & Denton, 1989) where Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans are disproportionately segregated in poverty-stricken residential neighborhoods and poor urban schools. Minority groups also experience economic marginalization resulting in low family incomes, and because schools are funded by property taxes, their children attend high-poverty schools.

Blacks no longer work without pay as they did under slavery, but they and other Minorities remain at the bottom of the economic ladder in US society. Although Blacks and Native Americans are no longer denied education by law, they and other Minorities are segregated to substandard and underfunded schools (Harlan, 1968; Cecelski, 1994). The disproportionate concentration of Blacks, Hispanic and Native Americans in high-poverty and failing urban schools, continues to maintain the unequal separatist status quo set in motion since slavery and colonialism.

Dehumanization Finally, this paper argues that suspension and expulsion rates among minority students may have roots in the very brutal and dehumanizing nature of slavery and colonialism. In order to exert domination and control, Whites were very punitive towards Blacks and the Native people, and treated them in brutal and inhumane ways. As well documented in history, people were mercilessly beaten, had limbs amputated, and even murdered through lynching. As one author reminds us, punishment was mostly dispensed in response to disobedience or perceived infractions, but sometimes, simply to re-assert the dominance of the master or overseer over the slave (Moore, 1971). Whites also perceived their victims, particularly Blacks, as threatening (Shapiro, et al., 2009) and responded decisively to behaviors they considered as such.

This paper purports therefore, that the current disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates represent both an attitude towards Minorities as well as their response to white authority structures. In the former case, it is arguably a continuation of the violence towards Minorities in order to re-assert Eurocentric dominance and control. School response to minority students' behavior might also be the result of white response motivated by the colonially-originated perception of Blacks in particular, as threatening. In the latter case, student behaviors resulting in suspension and expulsion can be viewed as minority students' resistance to white domination. And maybe the white school system responded heavy-handedly to reassert its dominance and keep Minorities "in their place." Students therefore consciously or sub-consciously perceive school disciplinary practices and teacher behavior towards them as racist, hence resist in ways that result in suspensions and expulsions.

The fractured family pattern that exists in minority communities is also a vestige of the violence and aggression during formal colonialism. The deliberate and sustained disruption of black and Native American families during the colonial period effectively destabilized families. Families were constantly ripped apart when members were sold to different slave owners in case of Blacks, and children forcibly removed from their parents in the case of Native Americans. Furthermore, the black male was cast in the role of a stud, and was isolated from his family. As is quite evident, the pattern continues today in the high incidence of black men having children with multiple women and abandoning their parental obligations. This behavior results in single parent households and unstable family structures that research repeatedly shows, impede learning and contribute to the achievement gap.

7. Conclusion & Recommendations

The goal of this paper was to examine the academic achievement gap through the lens of postcolonial studies. Based on existing data, related scholarship, and ideas from postcolonial discourse, this study concludes that a strong case can be made that vestiges of slavery and colonialism continue to play a significant role in formal education in the U.S. This phenomenon functions through a tripartite process: the events of slavery and colonialism, which create pre-conditional factors, which in turn produce the existing achievement gap. Based on the insights gleaned from this study, the author wishes to make the following recommendations:

- There needs to be rigorous ongoing evaluation and implementation of education policies and practices that demonstrate cognizance of the enduring effects of colonialism and which genuinely eliminate obstacles for minority students.
- Emphasis should be diverted from the achievement gap to focusing more on eliminating the pre-conditional factors that produce the achievement gap. An honest acknowledgement of the colonial roots of these pre-conditions can engender more appropriate mediatory efforts.
- Political and education leaders should develop greater appreciation and understanding of the internalized and institutionalized effects of slavery and colonialism.
- For survival and psychological wellbeing, minority groups should consciously embrace the “double conscious” existence that W. E. B. Dubois talks about: one set of behavior when interacting with their community; and another when interacting with the dominant culture. This would be a strategic approach by minority students to play a role in addressing for example, the rate of school suspensions and expulsions.
- Although this paper attempted to subsume Hispanics in the conversation about the impact of the vestiges of the colonial past on their current predicament, further study should be conducted to explicate a more precise connection between this group and the history of this US.

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