From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools
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2006 Presidential Address

From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools

by Gloria Ladson-Billings

The *achievement gap* is one of the most talked-about issues in U.S. education. The term refers to the disparities in standardized test scores between Black and White, Latina/o and White, and recent immigrant and White students. This article argues that a focus on the gap is misplaced. Instead, we need to look at the "education debt" that has accumulated over time. This debt comprises historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral components. The author draws an analogy with the concept of national debt—which she contrasts with that of a national budget deficit—to argue the significance of the education debt.

I have spent a better part of this year reading the presidential addresses of a number of former AERA presidents. Most take the wise course of giving addresses about something they know well—their own research. Of course, I was not fully persuaded by their wisdom. Instead, I attempted to learn something new, and, unfortunately, the readers will have to determine whether I learned it well enough to share it with my professional colleagues.

The questions that plague me about education research are not new ones. I am concerned about the meaning of our work for the larger public—for real students, teachers, administrators, parents, policymakers, and communities in real school settings. I know these are not new concerns; they have been raised by others, people like the late Kenneth B. Clark, who, in the 1950s, was one of the first social scientists to bring research to the public in a meaningful way. His work with his wife and colleague Mamie formed the basis for the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case that reversed legal segregation in public schools and other public accommodations. However, in his classic volume *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power,* first published in 1965, Clark took social scientists to task for their failure to fully engage and understand the plight of the poor:

> To my knowledge, there is at present nothing in the vast literature of social science treatises and textbooks and nothing in the practical and field training of graduate students in social science to prepare them for the realities and complexities of this type of involvement in a real, dynamic, turbulent, and at times seemingly chaotic community. And what is more, nothing anywhere in the training of social scientists, teachers, or social workers now prepares them to understand, to cope with, or to change the normal chaos of ghetto communities. These are grave lacks which must be remedied soon if these disciplines are to become *relevant* [emphasis added] to the stability and survival of our society. (p. xxix)

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Clark's concern remains some 40 years later. However, the paradox is that education research has devoted a significant amount of its enterprise toward the investigation of poor, African American, Latina/o, American Indian, and Asian immigrant students, who represent an increasing number of the students in major metropolitan school districts. We seem to study them but rarely provide the kind of remedies that help them to solve their problems.

To be fair, education researchers must have the freedom to pursue basic research, just as their colleagues in other social sciences do. They must be able to ask questions and pursue inquiries "just because." However, because education is an applied field, a field that local states manage and declare must be available to the entire public, *most* of the questions that education researchers ask need to address the significant questions that challenge and confound the public: Why don't children learn to read? What accounts for the high levels of school dropout among urban students? How can we explain the declining performance in mathematics and science at the same time that science and mathematics knowledge is exploding? Why do factors like race and class continue to be strong predictors of achievement when gender disparities have shrunk?

The Prevalence of the Achievement Gap

One of the most common phrases in today's education literature is "the achievement gap." The term produces more than 11 million citations on Google. "Achievement gap," much like certain popular culture music stars, has become a crossover hit. It has made its way into common parlance and everyday usage. The term is invoked by people on both ends of the political spectrum, and few argue over its meaning or its import. According to the National Governors' Association, the achievement gap is "a matter of race and class. Across the U.S., a gap in academic achievement persists between minority and disadvantaged students and their white counterparts." It further states: "This is one of the most pressing education-policy challenges that states currently face" (2005). The story of the achievement gap is a familiar one. The

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numbers speak for themselves. In the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress results, the gap between Black and Latina/o fourth graders and their White counterparts in reading scaled scores was more than 26 points. In fourth-grade mathematics the gap was more than 20 points (Education Commission of the States, 2005). In eighth-grade reading, the gap was more than 23 points, and in eighth-grade mathematics the gap was more than 26 points. We can also see that these gaps persist over time (Education Commission of the States).

Even when we compare African Americans and Latina/os with incomes comparable to those of Whites, there is still an achievement gap as measured by standardized testing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). While I have focused primarily on showing this gap by means of standardized test scores, it also exists when we compare dropout rates and relative numbers of students who take advanced placement examinations; enroll in honors, advanced placement, and "gifted" classes; and are admitted to colleges and graduate and professional programs.

Scholars have offered a variety of explanations for the existence of the gap. In the 1960s, scholars identified cultural deficit theories to suggest that children of color were victims of pathological lifestyles that hindered their ability to benefit from schooling (Hess & Shipman, 1965; Bereiter & Engleman, 1966; Deutsch, 1963). The 1966 Coleman Report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Coleman et al.), touted the importance of placing students in racially integrated classrooms. Some scholars took that report to further endorse the cultural deficit theories and to suggest that there was not much that could be done by schools to improve the achievement of African American children. But Coleman et al. were subtler than that. They argued that, more than material resources alone, a combination of factors was heavily correlated with academic achievement. Their work indicated that the composition of a school (who attends it), the students' sense of control of the environments and their futures, the teachers' verbal skills, and their students' family background all contribute to student achievement. Unfortunately, it was the last factor—family background—that became the primary point of interest for many school and social policies.

Social psychologist Claude Steele (1999) argues that a "stereotype threat" contributes to the gap. Sociolinguists such as Kathryn Au (1980), Lisa Delpit (1995), Michèle Foster (1996), and Shirley Brice Heath (1983), and education researchers such as Jacqueline Jordan Irvine (2003) and Carol Lee (2004), have focused on the culture mismatch that contributes to the gap. Multicultural education researchers such as James Banks (2004), Geneva Gay (2004), and Carl Grant (2003), and curriculum theorists such as Michael Apple (1990), Catherine Cornbleth (and Dexter Waugh; 1995), and Thomas Popkewitz (1998) have focused on the nature of the curriculum and the school as sources of the gap. And teacher educators such as Christine Sleeter (2001), Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2004), Kenneth Zeichner (2002), and I (1994) have focused on the pedagogical practices of teachers as contributing to either the exacerbation or the narrowing of the gap.

But I want to use this opportunity to call into question the wisdom of focusing on the achievement gap as a way of explaining and understanding the persistent inequality that exists (and has always existed) in our nation's schools. I want to argue that this all-out focus on the "Achievement Gap" moves us toward short-term solutions that are unlikely to address the long-term underlying problem.

Down the Rabbit-Hole

Let me begin the next section of this discussion with a strange transition from a familiar piece of children's literature:

> *Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and fortunately was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge. In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.*
>
> Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

The relevance of this passage is that I, like Alice, saw a rabbit with a watch and waistcoat-pocket when I came across a book by economist Robert Margo entitled *Race and Schooling in the American South, 1880–1950* (1990). And, like Alice, I chased the rabbit called "economics" down a rabbit-hole, where the world looked very different to me. Fortunately, I traveled with my trusty copy of Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) *Metaphors We Live By* as a way to make sense of my sojourn there. So, before making my way back to the challenge of school inequality, I must beg your indulgence as I give you a brief tour of my time down there.

National Debt Versus National Deficit

Most people hear or read news of the economy every day and rarely give it a second thought. We hear that the Federal Reserve Bank is raising interest rates, or that the unemployment numbers look good. Our ears may perk up when we hear the latest gasoline prices or that we can get a good rate on a mortgage refinance loan. But busy professionals rarely have time to delve deeply into all things economic. Two economic terms—"national deficit" and "national debt"—seem to befuddle us. A deficit is the amount by which a government's, company's, or individual's spending exceeds income over a particular period of time. Thus, for each budget cycle, the government must determine whether it has a balanced budget, a budget surplus, or a deficit. The debt, however is the sum of all previously incurred annual federal deficits. Since the deficits are financed by government borrowing, national debt is equal to all government debt.

Most fiscal conservatives warn against deficit budgets and urge the government to decrease spending to balance the budget. Fiscal liberals do not necessarily embrace deficits but would rather see the budget balanced by increasing tax revenues from those most able to pay. The debt is a sum that has been accumulating since 1791, when the U.S. Treasury recorded it as $75,463,476.52 (Gordon, 1998). Thomas Jefferson (1816) said, "I . . . place economy among the first and most important virtues, and public debt as the greatest of dangers to be feared. To preserve our independence, we must not let our rulers load us with perpetual debt."

But the debt has not merely been going up. Between 1823 and 1835 the debt steadily decreased, from a high of almost $91 million to a low of $33,733.05. The nation's debt hit the $1 billion mark in 1863 and the $1 trillion mark in 1981. Today, the national debt sits at more than $8 trillion. This level of debt means that the United States pays about $132,844,701,219.88 in interest each year. This makes our debt interest the third-largest expenditure in the federal budget after defense and combined entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare (Christensen, 2004).

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Even in those years when the United States has had a balanced budget, that is, no deficits, the national debt continued to grow. It may have grown at a slower rate, but it did continue to grow. President Clinton bragged about presenting a balanced budget—one without deficits—and not growing the debt (King, J., 2000). However, the debt was already at a frighteningly high level, and his budget policies failed to make a dent in the debt.

The Debt and Education Disparity

By now, readers might assume that I have made myself firmly at home at the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. What does a discussion about national deficits and national debt have to do with education, education research, and continued education disparities? It is here where I began to see some metaphorical concurrences between our national fiscal situation and our education situation. I am arguing that our focus on the achievement gap is akin to a focus on the budget deficit, but what is actually happening to African American and Latina/o students is really more like the national debt. We do not have an achievement gap; we have an education debt.

Now, to be perfectly candid, I must admit that when I consulted with a strict economist, Professor Emeritus Robert Haveman of the University of Wisconsin's Department of Economics, La Follette Institute of Public Affairs, and Institute for Research on Poverty, he stated:

> The education debt is the foregone schooling resources that we could have (should have) been investing in (primarily) low income kids, which deficit leads to a variety of social problems (e.g. crime, low productivity, low wages, low labor force participation) that require on-going public investment. This required investment sucks away resources that could go to reducing the achievement gap. Without the education debt we could narrow the achievement debt.
>
> . . . The message would be that you need to reduce one (the education debt, defined above) in order to close the other (the achievement gap). A parallel is trying to gain a growing and robust economy with a large national debt overhang. (February 6, 2006, e-mail)

In addition to this informal discussion with Haveman, I read a work by Wolfe and Haveman (2001) entitled *Accounting for the Social and Non-Market Benefits of Education,* which catalogues a series of what they term "non-market effects of schooling." The authors contend that "the literature on the intergenerational effects of education is generally neglected in assessing the full impact of education." Among the nonmarket effects that they include are the following:

- A positive link between one's own schooling and the schooling received by one's children
- A positive association between the schooling and health status of one's family members
- A positive relationship between one's own education and one's own health status
- A positive relationship between one's own education and the efficiency of choices made, such as consumer choices (which efficiency has positive effects on well-being similar to those of money income)
- A relationship between one's own schooling and fertility choices (in particular, decisions of one's female teenage children regarding nonmarital childbearing)
- A relationship between the schooling/social capital of one's neighborhood and decisions by young people regarding their level of schooling, nonmarital childbearing, and participation in criminal activities. (pp. 2–3)

While these economists have informed my thinking, I have taken a somewhat different tack on this notion of the education debt. The yearly fluctuations in the achievement gap give us a short-range picture of how students perform on a particular set of achievement measures. Looking at the gap from year to year is a misleading exercise. Lee's (2002) look at the trend lines shows us that there was a narrowing of the gap in the 1980s both between Black and White students and between the Latina/o and White students, and a subsequent expansion of those gaps in the 1990s. The expansion of the disparities occurred even though the income differences narrowed during the 1990s. We do not have good answers as to why the gap narrows or widens. Some research suggests that even the combination of socioeconomic and family conditions, youth culture and student behaviors, and schooling conditions and practices do not fully explain changes in the achievement gap (Lee).

However, when we begin looking at the construction and compilation of what I have termed the education debt, we can better understand why an achievement gap is a logical outcome. I am arguing that the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt. So, at this point, I want to briefly describe each of those aspects of the debt.

The Historical Debt

Scholars in the history of education, such as James Anderson (1989), Michael Fultz (1995), and David Tyack (2004), have documented the legacy of educational inequities in the Unites States. Those inequities initially were formed around race, class, and gender. Gradually, some of the inequities began to recede, but clearly they persist in the realm of race. In the case of African Americans, education was initially forbidden during the period of enslavement. After emancipation we saw the development of freedmen's schools whose purpose was the maintenance of a servant class. During the long period of legal apartheid, African Americans attended schools where they received cast-off textbooks and materials from White schools. In the South, the need for farm labor meant that the typical school year for rural Black students was about 4 months long. Indeed, Black students in the South did not experience universal secondary schooling until 1968 (Anderson, 2002). Why, then, would we not expect there to be an achievement gap?

The history of American Indian education is equally egregious. It began with mission schools to convert and use Indian labor to further the cause of the church. Later, boarding schools were developed as General George Pratt asserted the need "to kill the Indian in order to save the man." This strategy of deliberate and forced assimilation created a group of people, according to Pulitzer Prize writer N. Scott Momaday, who belonged nowhere (Lesiak, 1991). The assimilated Indian could not fit comfortably into reservation life or the stratified mainstream. No predominately White colleges welcomed the few Indians who successfully completed the early boarding schools. Only historically Black colleges, such as Hampton Institute, opened their doors to them. There, the Indians studied vocational and trade curricula.

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Latina/o students also experienced huge disparities in their education. In Ferg-Cadima's report *Black, White, and Brown: Latino School Desegregation Efforts in the Pre– and Post–*Brown v. Board of Education *Era* (2004), we discover the longstanding practice of denial experienced by Latina/os dating back to 1848. Historic desegregation cases such as *Mendez v. Westminster* (1946) and the Lemon Grove Incident detail the ways that Brown children were (and continue to be) excluded from equitable and high-quality education.

It is important to point out that the historical debt was not merely imposed by ignorant masses that were xenophobic and virulently racist. The major leaders of the nation endorsed ideas about the inferiority of Black, Latina/o, and Native peoples. Thomas Jefferson (1816), who advocated for the education of the American citizen, simultaneously decried the notion that Blacks were capable of education. George Washington, while deeply conflicted about slavery, maintained a substantial number of slaves on his Mount Vernon Plantation and gave no thought to educating enslaved children.

A brief perusal of some of the history of public schooling in the United States documents the way that we have accumulated an education debt over time. In 1827 Massachusetts passed a law making all grades of public school open to all pupils free of charge. At about the same time, most Southern states already had laws forbidding the teaching of enslaved Africans to read. By 1837, when Horace Mann had become head of the newly formed Massachusetts State Board of Education, Edmund Dwight, a wealthy Boston industrialist, felt that the state board was crucial to factory owners and offered to supplement the state salary with his own money. What is omitted from this history is that the major raw material of those textile factories, which drove the economy of the East, was cotton—the crop that depended primarily on the labor of enslaved Africans (Farrow, Lang, & Frank, 2005). Thus one of the ironies of the historical debt is that while African Americans were enslaved and prohibited from schooling, the product of their labor was used to profit Northern industrialists who already had the benefits of education. Consider the real source of New England's wealth (from Farrow, Lang, & Frank, p. 6):

- By 1860, New England was home to 472 cotton mills, built on rivers and streams throughout the region.
- Just between 1830 and 1840, Northern mills consumed more than 100 million pounds of Southern cotton. With shipping and manufacturing included, the economy of much of New England was connected to textiles.
- By the 1850s, the enormous profits of Massachusetts industrialists had been poured into a complex network of banks, insurance companies, and railroads. But their wealth remained anchored to dozens of mammoth textile mills in Massachusetts, southern Maine, and New Hampshire.

This pattern of debt affected other groups as well. In 1864 the U.S. Congress made it illegal for Native Americans to be taught in their native languages. After the Civil War, African Americans worked with Republicans to rewrite state constitutions to guarantee free public education for all students. Unfortunately, their efforts benefited White children more than Black children. The landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision meant that the segregation that the South had been practicing was officially recognized as legal by the federal government.

Although the historical debt is a heavy one, it is important not to overlook the ways that communities of color always have worked to educate themselves. Between 1865 and 1877, African Americans mobilized to bring public education to the South for the first time. Carter G. Woodson (1933/1972) was a primary critic of the kind of education that African Americans received, and he challenged African Americans to develop schools and curricula that met the unique needs of a population only a few generations out of chattel slavery.

The Economic Debt

As is often true in social research, the numbers present a startling picture of reality. The economics of the education debt are sobering. The funding disparities that currently exist between schools serving White students and those serving students of color are not recent phenomena. Separate schooling always allows for differential funding. In present-day dollars, the funding disparities between urban schools and their suburban counterparts present a telling story about the value we place on the education of different groups of students.

The Chicago public schools spend about $8,482 annually per pupil, while nearby Highland Park spends $17,291 per pupil. The Chicago public schools have an 87% Black and Latina/o population, while Highland Park has a 90% White population. Per pupil expenditures in Philadelphia are $9,299 per pupil for the city's 79% Black and Latina/o population, while across City Line Avenue in Lower Merion, the per pupil expenditure is $17,261 for a 91% White population. The New York City public schools spend $11,627 per pupil for a student population that is 72% Black and Latina/o, while suburban Manhasset spends $22,311 for a student population that is 91% White (figures from Kozol, 2005).

One of the earliest things one learns in statistics is that correlation does not prove causation, but we must ask ourselves why the funding inequities map so neatly and regularly onto the racial and ethnic realities of our schools. Even if we cannot prove that schools are poorly funded *because* Black and Latina/o students attend them, we can demonstrate that the amount of funding rises with the rise in White students. This pattern of inequitable funding has occurred over centuries. For many of these populations, schooling was nonexistent during the early history of the nation; and, clearly, Whites were not prepared to invest their fiscal resources in these strange "others."

Another important part of the economic component of the education debt is the earning ratios related to years of schooling. The empirical data suggest that more schooling is associated with higher earnings; that is, high school graduates earn more money than high school dropouts, and college graduates earn more than high school graduates. Margo (1990) pointed out that in 1940 the average annual earnings of Black men were about 48% of those of White men, but by 1980 the earning ratio had risen to 61%. By 1993, the median Black male earned 74% as much as the median White male.

While earnings ratios show us how people are (or were) doing at particular points in time, they do not address the cumulative effect of such income disparities. According to economists Joseph Altonji and Ulrech Doraszelski (2005),

> The wealth gap between whites and blacks in the United States is much larger than the gap in earnings. The gap in wealth has impli-

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> cations for the social position of African Americans that go far beyond its obvious implications for consumption levels that households can sustain. This is because wealth is a source of political and social power, influences access to capital for new businesses, and provides insurance against fluctuations in labor market income. It affects the quality of housing, neighborhoods, and schools a family has access to as well as the ability to finance higher education. The fact that friendships and family ties tend to be within racial groups amplifies the effect of the wealth gap on the financial, social, and political resources available to blacks relative to whites. (p. 1)

This economic analysis maps well onto the notion of education debt—as opposed to achievement gap—that I am trying to advance. So, while the income gap more closely resembles the achievement gap, the wealth disparity better reflects the education debt that I am attempting to describe.

The Sociopolitical Debt

The sociopolitical debt reflects the degree to which communities of color are excluded from the civic process. Black, Latina/o, and Native communities had little or no access to the franchise, so they had no true legislative representation. According to the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, African Americans and other persons of color were substantially disenfranchised in many Southern states despite the enactment of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 (U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2006).

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is touted as the most successful piece of civil rights legislation ever adopted by the U.S. Congress (Grofman, Handley, & Niemi). This act represents a proactive attempt to eradicate the sociopolitical debt that had been accumulating since the founding of the nation.

Table 1 shows the sharp contrasts between voter registration rates before the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and after it. The dramatic changes in voter registration are a result of Congress's bold action. In upholding the constitutionality of the act, the Supreme Court ruled as follows:

> Congress has found that case-by-case litigation was inadequate to combat wide-spread and persistent discrimination in voting, because of the inordinate amount of time and energy required to overcome the obstructionist tactics invariably encountered in these lawsuits. After enduring nearly a century of systematic resistance to the Fifteenth Amendment, Congress might well decide to shift the advantage of time and inertia from the perpetrators of the evil to its victims. (*South Carolina v. Katzenbach,* 1966; U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, 2006)

It is hard to imagine such a similarly drastic action on behalf of African American, Latina/o, and Native American children in schools. For example, imagine that an examination of the achievement performance of children of color provoked an immediate reassignment of the nation's best teachers to the schools serving the most needy students. Imagine that those same students were guaranteed places in state and regional colleges and universities. Imagine that within one generation we lift those students out of poverty.

The closest example that we have of such a dramatic policy move is that of affirmative action. Rather than wait for students of color to meet predetermined standards, the society decided to recognize that historically denied groups should be given a preference in admission to schools and colleges. Ultimately, the major beneficiaries of this policy were White women. However, Bowen and Bok (1999) found that in the case of African Americans this proactive policy helped create what we now know as the Black middle class.

As a result of the sociopolitical component of the education debt, families of color have regularly been excluded from the decision-making mechanisms that should ensure that their children receive quality education. The parent–teacher organizations, school site councils, and other possibilities for democratic participation have not been available for many of these families. However, for a brief moment in 1968, Black parents in the Ocean Hill–Brownsville section of New York exercised community control over the public schools (Podair, 2003). African American, Latina/o, Native American, and Asian American parents have often advocated for improvements in schooling, but their advocacy often has been muted and marginalized. This quest for control of schools was powerfully captured in the voice of an African American mother during the fight for school desegregation in Boston. She declared: "When we fight about schools, we're fighting for our lives" (Hampton, 1986).

Indeed, a major aspect of the modern civil rights movement was the quest for quality schooling. From the activism of Benjamin Rushing in 1849 to the struggles of parents in rural South Carolina in 1999, families of color have been fighting for quality education for their children (Ladson-Billings, 2004). Their more

Table 1
Black and White Voter Registration Rates (%) in Selected U.S. States, 1965 and 1988

	March 1965			November 1988		
State	Black	White	Gap	Black	White	Gap
Alabama	19.3	69.2	49.9	68.4	75.0	6.6
Georgia	27.4	62.6	35.2	56.8	63.9	7.1
Louisiana	31.6	80.5	48.9	77.1	75.1	−2.0
Mississippi	6.7	69.9	63.2	74.2	80.5	6.3
North Carolina	46.8	96.8	50.0	58.2	65.6	7.4
South Carolina	37.3	75.7	38.4	56.7	61.8	5.1
Virginia	38.3	61.1	22.8	63.8	68.5	4.7

Note. From the website of the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Voting Rights Section *(http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting/intro/intro_c.htm),* "Introduction to Federal Voting Rights Laws."

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limited access to lawyers and legislators has kept them from accumulating the kinds of political capital that their White, middle-class counterparts have.

The Moral Debt

A final component of the education debt is what I term the "moral debt." I find this concept difficult to explain because social science rarely talks in these terms. What I did find in the literature was the concept of "moral panics" (Cohen, 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994a, 1994b; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978) that was popularized in British sociology. People in moral panics attempt to describe other people, groups of individuals, or events that become defined as threats throughout a society. However, in such a panic the magnitude of the supposed threat overshadows the real threat posed. Stanley Cohen (1972), author of the classic sociological treatment of the subject, entitled *Folk Devils and Moral Panics,* defines such a moral panic as a kind of reaction to

> A condition, episode, person or group of persons [that] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or . . . resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the subject of the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. (p. 9)

In contrast, a moral debt reflects the disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do. Saint Thomas Aquinas saw the moral debt as what human beings owe to each other in the giving of, or failure to give, honor to another when honor is due. This honor comes as a result of people's excellence or because of what they have done for another. We have no trouble recognizing that we have a moral debt to Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, Elie Wiesel, or Mahatma Gandhi. But how do we recognize the moral debt that we owe to entire groups of people? How do we calculate such a debt?

Typically, we think of moral debt as relational between nation-states. For example, at the end of World War II, Israel charged Germany not only with a fiscal or monetary debt but also with a moral debt. On the individual level, Fred Korematsu battled the U.S. government for 40 years to prove that Japanese Americans were owed a moral debt. In another 40-year span, the U.S. government ran a study of syphilis patients—withholding treatment after a known cure was discovered—and was forced to acknowledge its ethical breaches. In his 1997 apology to the survivors and their families, President Bill Clinton said, "The United States government did something that was wrong—deeply, profoundly, morally wrong. It was an outrage to our commitment to integrity and equality for all our citizens . . . clearly racist" (Hunter-Gault, 1997). Today, all human subject protocols reflect the moral debt we owe to the victims of that study.

David Gill (2000) asserts, in his book *Being Good,* that "we are living today in an ethical wilderness—a wild, untamed, unpredictable landscape" (p. 11). We bemoan the loss of civil discourse and rational debate, but the real danger of our discussions about morality is that they reside solely in the realm of the individual. We want people to take *personal* responsibility for their behavior, *personal* responsibility for their health care, *personal* responsibility for their welfare, and *personal* responsibility for their education. However, in democratic nations, that personal responsibility must be coupled with social responsibility.

What is it that we might owe to citizens who historically have been excluded from social benefits and opportunities? Randall Robinson (2000) states:

> No nation can enslave a race of people for hundreds of years, set them free bedraggled and penniless, pit them, without assistance in a hostile environment, against privileged victimizers, and then reasonably expect the gap between the heirs of the two groups to narrow. Lines, begun parallel and left alone, can never touch. (p. 74)

Robinson's sentiments were not unlike those of President Lyndon B. Johnson, who stated in a 1965 address at Howard University: "You cannot take a man who has been in chains for 300 years, remove the chains, take him to the starting line and tell him to run the race, and think that you are being fair" (Miller, 2005).

Despite those parallel lines of which Robinson speaks, in the midst of the Civil War Abraham Lincoln noted that without the 200,000 Black men who enlisted in the Union Army, "we would be compelled to abandon the war in 3 weeks" (cited in Takaki, 1998). Thus, according to historian Ron Takaki (1998), "Black men in blue made the difference in determining that this 'government of the people, by the people, for the people' did 'not perish from the earth' " (p. 21). What moral debt do we owe their heirs?

Think of another example of the ways that the labor and efforts of people of color have sustained the nation. When we hear the word "plantation," our minds almost automatically reflect back to the antebellum South. However, the same word evokes the Palolo Valley on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, where there were camps named "Young Hee," "Ah Fong," "Spanish A," "Spanish B," and "Alabama" (Takaki, 1998). This last camp—"Alabama"—was a Hawaiian plantation worked by Black laborers. Each of the groups that labored in the Hawaiian plantations—the Native Hawaiians, the Chinese, the Japanese, the Filipinos, the Koreans, the Portuguese, the Puerto Ricans, and the Blacks—drove a sugar economy that sated a worldwide sweet tooth (Wilcox, 1998). What do we owe their descendants?

And perhaps our largest moral debt is to the indigenous peoples whose presence was all but eradicated from the nation. In its 2004–2005 Report Card, the Bureau of Indian Affairs indicates that its high school graduation rate is 57%, with only 3.14% of its students performing at the advanced level in reading and 3.96% performing at the advanced level in mathematics. One hundred and twenty-two of the 185 elementary and secondary schools under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs failed to meet Average Yearly Progress requirements in the 2004–2005 school year (Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Indian Education Programs, 2006).

The National Center for Education Statistics report *Status and Trends in the Education of American Indians and Alaska Natives* (Freeman & Fox, 2005) indicates that the dropout rate among this population is about 15%, which is higher than that of Whites, Blacks, or Asian/Pacific Islanders. Only 26% of American Indi-

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ans and Alaska Natives completed a core academic track in 2000, while 57% of Asian/Pacific islanders, 38% of Latina/os, 44% of African Americans, and 48% of Whites completed core academic tracks during the same year (Freeman & Fox).

Taken together, the historic, economic, sociopolitical, and moral debt that we have amassed toward Black, Brown, Yellow, and Red children seems insurmountable, and attempts at addressing it seem futile. Indeed, it appears like a task for Sisyphus. But as legal scholar Derrick Bell (1994) indicated, just because something is impossible does not mean it is not worth doing.

Why We Must Address the Debt

In the final section of this discussion I want to attend to why we must address the education debt. On the face of it, we must address it because it is the equitable and just thing to do. As Americans we pride ourselves on maintaining those ideal qualities as hallmarks of our democracy. That represents the highest motivation for paying this debt. But we do not always work from our highest motivations.

Most of us live in the world of the pragmatic and practical. So we must address the education debt because it has implications for the kinds of lives we can live and the kind of education the society can expect for most of its children. I want to suggest that there are three primary reasons for addressing the debt—(a) the impact the debt has on present education progress, (b) the value of understanding the debt in relation to past education research findings, and (c) the potential for forging a better educational future.

The Impact of the Debt on Present Education Progress

In a recent news article in the business section of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer,* I read that affluent investors are more likely to be educated, married men (Torres, 2006). The article continued by talking about how Whites make up 88% of wealthy investor households, while Blacks and Latina/os make up only 3%. Asian Americans, who are 3.7% of the adult population, make up 5% of wealthy investors. But more salient than wealthy investor status to me was a quote in the article from former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan: "My biggest fear for this country's future, competitively speaking, is that we're doing a poor job in education. If we can resolve our educational problems, I think we will maintain the very extraordinary position the United States holds in the world at large" (Torres, p. G6).

As I was attempting to make sense of the deficit/debt metaphor, educational economist Doug Harris (personal communication, November 19, 2005) reminded me that when nations operate with a large debt, some part of their current budget goes to service that debt. I mentioned earlier that interest payments on our national debt represent the third largest expenditure of our national budget. In the case of education, each effort we make toward improving education is counterbalanced by the ongoing and mounting debt that we have accumulated. That debt service manifests itself in the distrust and suspicion about what schools can and will do in communities serving the poor and children of color. Bryk and Schneider (2002) identified "relational trust" as a key component in school reform. I argue that the magnitude of the education debt erodes that trust and represents a portion of the debt service that teachers and administrators pay each year against what they might rightfully invest in helping students advance academically.

The Value of Understanding the Debt in Relation to Past Research Findings

The second reason that we must address the debt is somewhat selfish from an education research perspective. Much of our scholarly effort has gone into looking at educational inequality and how we might mitigate it. Despite how hard we try, there are two interventions that have never received full and sustained hypothesis testing—school desegregation and funding equity. Orfield and Lee (2006) point out that not only has school segregation persisted, but it has been transformed by the changing demographics of the nation. They also point out that "there has not been a serious discussion of the costs of segregation or the advantages of integration for our most segregated population, white students" (p. 5). So, although we may have recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of the *Brown* decision, we can point to little evidence that we really gave *Brown* a chance. According to Frankenberg, Lee, and Orfield (2003) and Orfield and Lee (2004), America's public schools are more than a decade into a process of resegregation. Almost three-fourths of Black and Latina/o students attend schools that are predominately non-White. More than 2 million Black and Latina/o students—a quarter of the Black students in the Northeast and Midwest—attend what the researchers call apartheid schools. The four most segregated states for Black students are New York, Michigan, Illinois, and California.

The funding equity problem, as I illustrated earlier in this discussion, also has been intractable. In its report entitled *The Funding Gap 2005,* the Education Trust tells us that "in 27 of the 49 states studied, the highest-poverty school districts receive fewer resources than the lowest-poverty districts. . . . Even more states shortchange their highest minority districts. In 30 states, high minority districts receive less money for each child than low minority districts" (p. 2). If we are unwilling to desegregate our schools *and* unwilling to fund them equitably, we find ourselves not only backing away from the promise of the *Brown* decision but literally refusing even to take *Plessy* seriously. At least a serious consideration of *Plessy* would make us look at funding inequities.

In one of the most graphic examples of funding inequity, new teacher Sara Sentilles (2005) described the southern California school where she was teaching:

> At Garvey Elementary School, I taught over thirty second graders in a so-called temporary building. Most of these "temporary" buildings have been on campuses in Compton for years. The one I taught in was old. Because the wooden beams across the ceiling were being eaten by termites, a fine layer of wood dust covered the students' desks every morning. Maggots crawled in a cracked and collapsing area of the floor near my desk. One day after school I went to sit in my chair, and it was completely covered in maggots. I was nearly sick. Mice raced behind cupboards and bookcases. I trapped six in terrible traps called "glue lounges" given to me by the custodians. The blue metal window coverings on the outsides of the windows were shut permanently, blocking all sunlight. Someone had lost the tool needed to open them, and no one could find another. . . . (p. 72)

Rothstein and Wilder (2005) move beyond the documentation of the inequalities and inadequacies to their *consequences.* In the language that I am using in this discussion, they move from focusing on the gap to tallying the debt. Although they focus on Black–White disparities, they are clear that similar disparities

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exist between Latina/os and Whites and Native Americans and Whites. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Rothstein and Wilder argue that addressing the achievement gap is not the most important inequality to attend to. Rather, they contend that inequalities in health, early childhood experiences, out-of-school experiences, and economic security are also contributory and cumulative and make it near-impossible for us to reify the achievement gap as *the* source and cause of social inequality.

The Potential for Forging a Better Educational Future

Finally, we need to address what implications this mounting debt has for our future. In one scenario, we might determine that our debt is so high that the only thing we can do is declare bankruptcy. Perhaps, like our airline industry, we could use the protection of the bankruptcy laws to reorganize and design more streamlined, more efficient schooling options. Or perhaps we could be like developing nations that owe huge sums to the IMF and apply for 100% debt relief. But what would such a catastrophic collapse of our education system look like? Where could we go to begin from the ground up to build the kind of education system that would aggressively address the debt? Might we find a setting where a catastrophic occurrence, perhaps a natural disaster—a hurricane—has completely obliterated the schools? Of course, it would need to be a place where the schools weren't very good to begin with. It would have to be a place where our Institutional Review Board and human subject concerns would not keep us from proposing aggressive and cutting-edge research. It would have to be a place where people were so desperate for the expertise of education researchers that we could conduct multiple projects using multiple approaches. It would be a place so hungry for solutions that it would not matter if some projects were quantitative and others were qualitative. It would not matter if some were large-scale and some were small-scale. It would not matter if some paradigms were psychological, some were social, some were economic, and some were cultural. The only thing that would matter in an environment like this would be that education researchers were bringing their expertise to bear on education problems that spoke to pressing concerns of the public. I wonder where we might find such a place?

Although I have tried to explain this notion of education debt, I know that my words are a limited way to fully represent it. How can I illustrate the magnitude of this concept? In his 1993 AERA Presidential Address, "Forms of Understanding and the Future of Educational Research," Elliot Eisner spoke of representation—not the mental representations discussed in cognitive science, but "the process of transforming the consciousness into a public form so that they can be stabilized, inspected, edited, and shared with others" (p. 6). So we must use our imaginations to construct a set of images that illustrate the debt. The images should remind us that the cumulative effect of poor education, poor housing, poor health care, and poor government services create a bifurcated society that leaves more than its children behind. The images should compel us to deploy our knowledge, skills, and expertise to alleviate the suffering of the least of these. They are the images that compelled our attention during Hurricane Katrina. Here, for the first time in a very long time, the nation—indeed the world—was confronted with the magnitude of poverty that exists in America.

In a recent book, Michael Apple and Kristen Buras (2006) suggest that the subaltern can and do speak. In this country they speak from the barrios of Los Angeles and the ghettos of New York. They speak from the reservations of New Mexico and the Chinatown of San Francisco. They speak from the levee breaks of New Orleans where they remind us, as education researchers, that we do not merely have an achievement gap—we have an education debt.

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