

***Brown* and Black-White Achievement**

David J. Armor

Various social science or civil rights doomsayers have claimed that the May 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka et al.* has amounted to nothing, was a failure, a broken promise, or an unfulfilled dream. They reason that *Brown* failed because schools are still racially segregated (or resegregating), or that *Brown* failed because it did not fix the achievement gap between black and white children.

Critics have been advancing these arguments for decades, either because they misunderstand the *Brown* decision or because they give it meaning beyond the Court's intent. I would like to challenge both of these claims, explaining why *Brown* had little to do with the black-white achievement gap. We have some grasp of the real causes of the gap and they give rise to some ideas about how to close it.

What Desegregation Accomplished

The claim that *Brown* failed to desegregate schools is partly untrue and partly a distortion of the goals of *Brown*. The *Brown* decision aimed to end legally sanctioned segregation, sometimes called *de jure* segregation, and there is no question the ruling did that. It did not happen immediately, and there was substantial resistance, but it did happen. *Brown* was not directed at *de facto* segregation, which means segregation arising from such private actions as housing choices. Many civil rights advocates and some social scientists have refused to acknowledge the critical *de jure-de facto* distinction drawn by the Court.

Desegregation did not happen immediately because of ambiguity and disagreement about exactly what *de jure* segregated school systems had to do to comply with the Court's ruling. The debate was finally resolved by the 1970 *Swann* decision, when the Supreme Court approved a comprehensive racial balance and busing plan for Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina. After this, comprehensive school desegregation became widespread throughout the South and, after the 1974 *Keyes* decision for Denver, throughout most north-

David J. Armor is research professor in sociology and public policy at George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030. This article and the next by Carol Swain are updated and adapted from remarks delivered as part of a panel titled "Closing the Racial Gap in Education" at the NAS's eleventh national conference. Transaction Publishers released Professor Armor's *Maximizing Intelligence* in 2003.

ern cities. Regardless of how one measures school segregation, there is no question that it was reduced substantially during the 1970s and 1980s in all parts of the country.¹

There has been some increase in *de facto* segregation starting in the early 1990s, especially for school districts with substantial Hispanic populations, due mainly to demographic changes. But this is not a failure of *Brown*, because *de facto* school segregation is not unconstitutional. The growth of *de facto* segregation is not a return to the *de jure* segregation that existed before *Brown*.

***Brown* and the Achievement Gap**

The second alleged failure of *Brown* concerns the black-white achievement gap, which shrank very little even in school districts that were well-desegregated for long periods of time (e.g., Charlotte-Mecklenburg). *Brown* fails here only if the Supreme Court intended to improve black learning and close the achievement gap. There has been considerable debate over this issue as well, mainly because *Brown* said that segregation harmed black children's self-esteem and offered the famous Footnote 11 which summarized social science evidence about the psychological harm of segregation.

This part of the decision led some to believe that improving black achievement was a major goal of *Brown*.² However, most legal scholars do not believe the Court based its decision on what one called the "flimsy foundation" of social science evidence.³ Rather, *Brown* was a declaration that legal separation of the races, imposed by the dominant race, was "inherently unequal" and created a stigma that was "self-evident" and required no proof of harm.

Some of these legal scholars were prophetic, because within a decade of *Brown* new research seriously weakened the psychological harm thesis. As early as 1963—before any substantial school desegregation had taken place—social science studies were reporting that black self-esteem was actually higher than white self-esteem, and that black children in segregated schools had higher self-esteem than blacks in desegregated schools.⁴

To underscore the poor quality of social science evidence at the time of *Brown*, we now know that school desegregation did not in fact eliminate the achievement gap; the gap continues despite decades of desegregation plans and busing in hundreds of school districts. Desegregation may have improved black achievement to some degree, but the reasons have more to do with equalization of resources and more uniform standards of instruction than racial mixing *per se*. Of course, even these educational improvements have not been enough to eliminate the achievement gap.

That brings me to the logical follow-up question: if desegregation and substantial parity of school resources have not fixed the black-white achievement gap, what can be done about it? While we have much more knowledge about this problem now than we did in 1954 or even 1994, it is still a very challenging problem for education policy. First, I will discuss the causes of the academic

achievement gap, about which there is growing consensus. Second, I have some closing comments about the problem of how to reduce the achievement gap, which has become much more urgent because of President Bush's No Child Left Behind policy.

Causes of the Gap

We are just about certain that the causes of the achievement gap lie within the family. There is a lot of evidence on this, but the most compelling evidence comes from the simple fact that the black-white gap in cognitive skills is large as early as we can measure it, which is about age 3.⁵ Using conventional achievement tests, we know that a large gap exists at the very beginning of kindergarten, before schools have any chance to influence achievement.

Up to the age of five or so, a child's world is dominated by parents, the home environment, and siblings (if any). Family friends and neighborhood experiences, such as the playground, may exert some influence, but clearly infants and toddlers spend the vast majority of their time with parents, especially Mom.

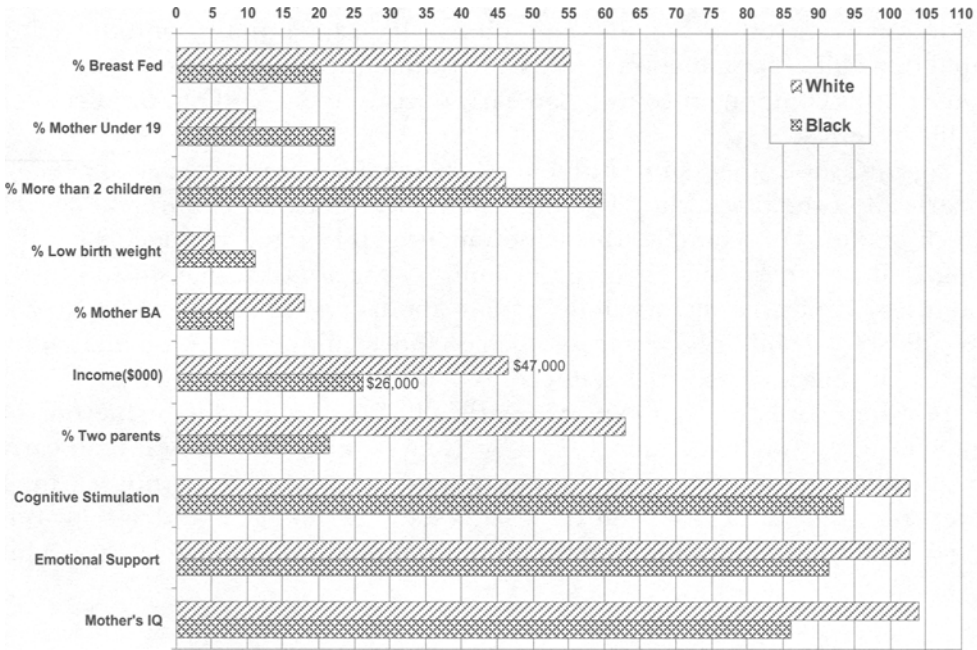
What kinds of family characteristics or experiences explain a child's cognitive achievement? This chart shows a list of ten of the most important family risk factors for a child's early cognitive skills or achievement level. They are listed in order of the size of their correlation with a child's cognitive skills at age 5:⁶

1. Parents' IQ
2. Cognitive stimulation/instruction (usually by parents but could be others)
3. Emotional support/nurturance
4. Parents' educational attainment
5. Family income and poverty status
6. Family structure: marital status, number of parents
7. Mother's age when child born
8. Number of siblings
9. Child's nutrition (including breast feeding)
10. Child's birth weight

Of course, these factors are all highly interrelated, so it is hard to isolate the independent effect of each one. But each of these family risk factors has a significant correlation with a child's verbal IQ at age 5. Clearly, most of these characteristics are environmental in nature, and hence could be subject to change.

By identifying parent IQ as the single most important predictor of a child's achievement, I am not implying that it is a genetic factor. It may represent a genetic influence in part, but it could also reflect an environmental influence, since smarter parents can directly influence their child's cognitive development by using a larger vocabulary, discussing more complex ideas, establishing higher standards, and so forth.

Figure 1
Racial Differences in Family Risk Factors (Source: 1996 CNLSY)



Before we can assess the extent to which these risk factors explain the achievement gap, we need one more piece of information, which is whether there are black and white differences on each of these risk factors. The answer is yes, there are substantial black-white differences on all of them, as illustrated in Figure 1.

For income and all but one of the factors measured by percentages, blacks are disadvantaged by a 2 to 1 ratio compared to whites (the exception is number of siblings). For the last three characteristics, which are measured on scales ranging from 50 to 150, the differences are on the order of one standard deviation, which would be considered very large (in fact, similar in magnitude to the black-white difference for children’s achievement scores).

To what extent do these risk factors explain the gap? Most researchers in this field agree that family risk factors have a critical influence on the achievement gap, but some point out that the risk factors do not explain the entire gap. Depending on how many risk factors have been measured, they may explain anywhere from about 35 to 50 percent of the achievement gap. This leaves a lot of room, so the argument goes, for other types of influence, particularly special school programs or interventions of various types.

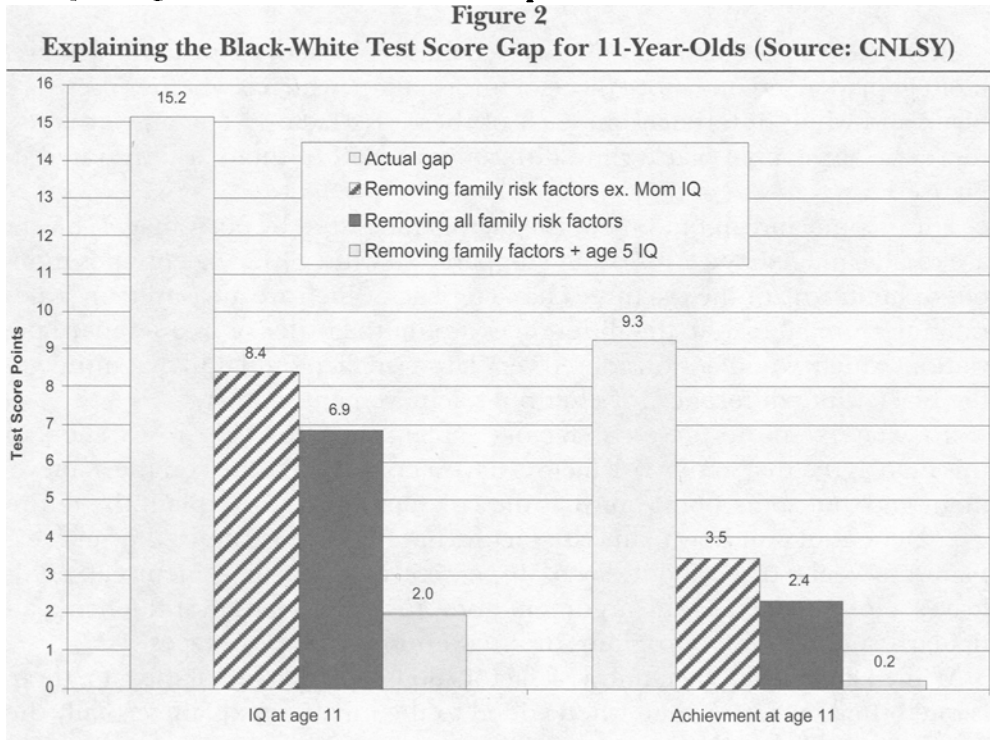
While I agree that the family risk factors do not explain all of the gap, there is one other key factor that, when added to the mix, can explain virtually the

entire gap. It is now understood that there is a great deal of variation in individual IQ or achievement that cannot be explained by either genes or family environment. Some researchers refer to this as the influence of nontransmitted or idiosyncratic environmental conditions—basically unique conditions created by a child in interaction with its environment. We can measure the influence of this component by using an early measurement of IQ to predict later achievement scores.

Figure 2 shows that family influences, plus a child’s IQ at age 5, can explain nearly all of the black-white IQ and achievement gaps for children at age 11 (fifth grade). For example, the achievement gap for children aged 11 is 9.3 points. If we remove the effect of the family risk factors, the gap shrinks to 2.4 points, so family risk factors alone explain about two-thirds of the gap. Now, if we adjust for a child’s IQ at age 5, which includes unique environmental influences, the black-white gap is reduced to nearly 0.

In other words, we can explain nearly all of the black-white achievement gap at the end of elementary school by using family risk factors and an early measure of a child’s IQ. This does not mean that children are not learning over this time, in fact all children learn a lot between age 5 and age 11. But their relative ranking in standardized test scores remains relatively constant over time.

Figure 2
Explaining the Black-White Test Score Gap for 11-Year-Olds (Source: CNLSY)
Figure 2



Some writers speak of “black culture” as a cause of the achievement gap.⁷ I don’t think it is something unique to black culture at all—I think it is an American culture which has come to devalue the family and the types of values and behaviors that are required to produce good decisions and good parents when it comes to having and raising children. It just so happens that this American culture has impacted black families more than white families, particularly when it comes to teen pregnancy, dropping out of high school, never-married moms, divorce, and dads who do not participate in raising their children.

How to Close the Achievement Gap

The fact that the achievement gap is not caused by schools *per se*, but rather by family influences before school even starts, leads to two conclusions. First, it relieves *Brown* from the burden of having to solve the very difficult problem of achievement gaps which, we now know, were not caused by school segregation in the first place. It is more than sufficient that *Brown* accomplished the critical task of terminating state-enforced apartheid, leaving problems beyond its reach to be solved by other policies at later times.

Second, it leaves schools with a heavy burden of trying to solve a problem that is not of its own making. So far, the achievement gap has resisted any number of attempts to resolve the problem by compensatory education, Head Start preschools, increased expenditures, and any number of other initiatives. Now we have a federal policy, the No Child Left Behind Act, which mandates that all schools produce equal proficiencies for their black and white students by 2014 or face sanctions. Although the mere existence of state-enforced accountability systems (curriculum standards, mandatory testing, publication of results, etc.) has produced some improvement in test scores, it is too early to tell if this federal requirement will do the trick.

The major problem with NCLB is that we do not have a proven education technology that tells schools how to eliminate the achievement gap. There are a variety of strategies that seem promising for raising achievement, but unfortunately many of them raise achievement for everyone and thus do not close achievement gaps. It would take us too far afield to describe these strategies here, but let me close by saying there is an urgent need to conduct research and demonstration projects to develop programs focused on closing gaps rather than simply raising achievement. Even when the best approaches are developed, using our full knowledge of best practices, it is still a concern of mine that we might not close the gaps completely until we also close the huge gaps in the family characteristics that cause the gaps in the first place.

Notes

1. For a review of this progress, see Christine Rossell, “The Effectiveness of School Desegregation,” in C.R. Rossell, David J. Armor, and H.J. Walberg, *School Desegregation in the 21st Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).
2. The psychological harm theory holds that segregation harms black children’s self-esteem

and gives them a sense of inferiority which in turn interferes with their ability to learn. The implication was that desegregated schools would eliminate this judgment of inferiority, improve black self-esteem and motivation, and improve black school performance. Footnote 11 also included an opinion poll of 32 social scientists who agreed with this premise.

3. See Frank I. Goodman, "De Facto School Segregation," *California Law Review* 60: 275–438 for a discussion of legal scholars' interpretation of the psychological harm theory.
4. See David J. Armor, *Forced Justice: School Desegregation and the Law*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 99–101 for a review of these self-esteem studies.
5. I use "academic achievement" and "cognitive skills" interchangeably in this paper.
6. See David J. Armor, *Maximizing Intelligence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), for a more detailed discussion.
7. For example, see the works by John McWorter, *Losing the Race: Black Self-Sabotage in Black America* (New York: Free Press, 2000), and John Ogbu, *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb* (Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum Assoc, 2003).