

# Preface

In the very interesting essays that are collected here, one learns that the gap in academic achievement that has caused so much consternation among educators in the United States is not unique to North America. From these descriptions of exemplary efforts at making more efficient the teaching and learning of science, technology, engineering and mathematics we see, let alone what can and should be done pedagogically, we are reminded that the underproductivity of teaching and learning with some populations of students is an international problem that is bigger than education alone can solve.

In his brilliantly conceived book, *Paths Toward a Clearing*, Professor Michael Jackson problematizes the task of the anthropologists who seek to discern meaning from their observations of the lived experience of the other. Jackson interrogates the insufficiently addressed issue, “with what degree of certainty can I interpret the meaning to the other person of the experiences she, herself, has lived.”

The late distinguished anthropologist, Ogbu (1978), avoided this problem in much of his work by focusing not on interpreting meaning to the other, but on the correlates and apparent consequences of the life lived by the other. In Ogbu’s insightful studies of the lives of people in different parts of the world who experienced low caste and caste-like status, he concluded that the status of the experiencing person influenced the degree to which that person became socialized to the standards and values of the hegemonic culture. Low-status, marginalized and underresourced people all over the world tend to fair poorly in the educational institutions to which they are exposed. To the extent that the inferior status is perceived as immutable, as in low-caste or low-caste-like status, this association between status and achievement tends to be even more prominent. Thus, when one’s assigned status is identifiable by physiognomic characteristics, such as skin color (even in the absence of caste), the identification as low-class functions as caste. Thus, Ogbu describes Blacks in the United States as a caste-like group, and he describes academic achievement and life-outcome characteristics as consistent with the expectations associated with that caste-like status. Ogbu goes on to report similar relationships in caste or caste-like groups in Australia, India, Japan and the United States.

In the collection of essays assembled here at The Achievement Gap in International Perspective, we see Ogbu’s perspective reflected again. Concern with

the achievement gap may have first come to recent public notice in the United States in the contexts of Black/White comparisons of academic achievement. Clark (1954), Coleman (1966), Miller (1995), and National Task Force on Minority High Achievement (1999). However, the essayists included in this collection remind us that disparities in academic achievement are worldwide phenomena begging for a solution. Guidance toward a possible solution may be found in an interrogation of Jackson's and Ogbu's perspectives on this issue.

Much of the work underway on this problem in the United States and around the world is directed at helping underdeveloped persons to achieve what I have written about and labeled as intellectual competence. I have defined such competence as the universal currency of technologically developed societies. I generally refer to such attributes as the capacity to access and utilize information that is grounded in such disciplines as the humanities, mathematics and the sciences. The use of such information is reflected in the capacity to create and manage engineering and technology projects. In addition, I refer to the intentional command and control of one's affective, cognitive and situative mental capacities as essential in intellectual competence. This is the complex of human competencies that we recognize to be the by-products of one's having studied and mastered the so called STEM disciplines. But these indicators of intellectual competence are largely identified with the cultures of the social orders that have also used these competencies to subordinate their low-class or low-caste members. To close the achievement gap, these subordinated populations must embrace the standards, skills and values of the very people who have used these factors in the service of their own advancement and the suppression of the low-status members.

Following Jackson, we cannot be certain that we are accurately interpreting the meaning of the lived experiences associated with ones having been forced to learn the ways of the dominating other. But Ogbu's work with Black boys in Compton, California suggests that the low-status persons are very much aware of the absence of a sense of polity for themselves. As a result, according to Ogbu, they constrain their investment of effort in the mastery of the hegemonic cultural forms, information, techniques and values. Should this way of conceptualizing the problem prove to be correct, our domestic and international efforts at improving our strategies for improving the teaching and learning of STEM and other essential academic subjects may be limited until we also find a way to bring a greater sense of polity into the lives of low-class and low-caste members of the societies of the world.

In the collection of essays that follow, we see examples of exceptional pedagogical efforts directed at the more effective teaching and learning of STEM subjects, but our elevation of this work makes the task seem too easy. Solid curriculum, good and creative teaching, and engaged learners are important, but they may not provide an adequate solution to a problem that involves more than schooling. Even with excellent teaching and well-resourced schools, it may be necessary for attention to be given to the personal attributions that are assigned to the lived experiences of the persons who must do the learning. Jackson reminds us that such interpretations are one of the challenges to the anthropologist. I claim that understanding the lived experience of the learner, and appropriately adapting our teaching to it,

is one of the continuing challenges to those of us who teach. Yet we know that the personal attributions assigned to the actual experiences of one's life are only a part of the dynamic. Those actual lived experiences do influence the attributions that are assigned by the persons living the experience. Thus pedagogical efforts at closing the achievement gap in the United States and in other countries around the world must be viewed as more than problems of the goodness of the teaching and learning of STEM and other subject matter. To close the academic achievement gap in societies where people live lives of inequalitarian conditions and statuses, education may need to be thought of more comprehensively and thought of as inclusive of both the conditions of life for the learners and the meanings that they assign to their conditions of life. Education may have to begin with serious attention being given to the improvement of the quality of life for the learners. Obviously, education is not synonymous with schooling. These essays remind us that this admonition is true worldwide.

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<http://www.springer.com/978-94-007-4356-4>

Closing the Achievement Gap from an International  
Perspective

Transforming STEM for Effective Education

Clark, J.V. (Ed.)

2014, XVIII, 324 p. 49 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-94-007-4356-4