



Education Toolkit: Talking About the Achievement Gap

It's almost impossible to envision a public discussion of education in the United States that doesn't involve a mention of the "achievement gap" between students of different races and/or socioeconomic classes. FrameWorks' recent cognitive media analysis of the coverage of education issues and race found that "two frames were dominant in these articles [about education and race]. First was the idea that education was a competitive race between racial groups in which there are winners and losers. The second is that racial disparities in education are defined by the 'achievement gap,' a notion that highlights individual performance rather than systemic inequities. These frames shaped the media's construction of the problem of race in education, organized the types of explanatory frames employed, and finally limited the kinds of solutions that could be imagined."¹

To be certain, racial and economic disparities in academic achievement, test scores, and graduation rates are a persistent and enduring problem that must be addressed by any meaningful education reform. The question is how to frame a discussion of reform so that the public is willing to consider meaningful and effective programmatic and policy solutions to the problem, rather than understanding the problems—and solutions—as residing solely within the realm of individual behavior change.

Problems with Dominant Cultural Models About Race

Since 2003, FrameWorks has been investigating how Americans think about race. Several key findings from that work are relevant to framing education reform. Among them are the dominant cultural models people use to make sense of race—or the "pictures in their heads" based on life experiences, expectations and media coverage. The dominant cultural models regarding race can be categorized as follows: 1) Historical Progress and Personal Racism; 2) The Self-Making Person; and 3) Separate Fates.

Historical Progress and Personal Racism

Much of the public reasoning about race is related to the widespread belief that racial matters have improved dramatically in America in the last 50 years. The improvement, many people believe, is the direct result of changes in antidiscrimination laws and policies. The upshot is that, because racist attitudes are considered socially unacceptable and because discriminatory practices have been banned, the general public is not sure

what can be done to further eliminate racist attitudes or behaviors. What we are left with, then, is the notion that there are still some “bad” racist people, but there is no racism in the culture at large.

The Self-Making Person

The Self-Making Person narrative is the common belief that one’s success or failure in life is individually constructed. In other words, a person’s ultimate success depends, more than anything else, on those persons themselves—their character, their effort, etc. Racial inequality, then, is explained as a failure by minorities to apply themselves with sufficient effort.

Separate Fates

Finally, minority concerns are understood as being disconnected from the shared concerns and aspirations of the broader society. Whites and non-whites are perceived as having separate fates. Put differently, when the explanations for life chances between whites and non-whites are seen as determined by different forces (self-making-ness by whites; failure of self-making-ness by non-whites), the result is different paths, different lives.

Obviously, the three most prevalent types of reasoning described above have implications when the public is considering educational disparities. First, it may be difficult to convince them that disparities may be caused by structural and systemic forces. Second, differences in achievement are likely to be seen as the result of individual students and families lacking sufficient will, character and discipline to succeed. And, third, if the fates of minorities and whites are not connected, racial disparities are not going to seem very important as a collective concern. Moreover, the concerns of philanthropic and non-profit organizations over disparities in outcomes among racial groups are likely to be seen as charity for “other people’s children.”

Problems with “Gap” as a Metaphor and “Achievement” as a Goal

There are several problems with the metaphor of a “gap” between particular groups of students. FrameWorks’ research found that when people were asked to consider how to close a gap, they responded that one group moves down so that the other can move up. Combine this with people’s concerns about the limited financial resources available for education and concerns that any reform will harm their own children’s situation, and it triggers fear, rather than enthusiasm for change.

References to “achievement” are also problematic. Achievement is an individually-focused activity, with individual rewards, which reinforces people’s underlying cultural models about “success” as individual accomplishment in which hard work and “pluck” are the only elements in play. This leads people away from recognizing the larger societal

goals of the educational system and away from considering public solutions to problems in that system.

In general, it may help to remember that the “achievement gap” came into use as a way of shifting the emphasis from inputs, or the experiences and opportunities with which students are provided, to an emphasis on outputs, or whether students are succeeding. While a focus on outcomes is admittedly very important, this shift has often come at the expense of improving public understanding about all of the different kinds of structural and systemic supports that need to be in place for children to thrive in school and beyond.

As FrameWorks explains in *Strategies for Framing Racial Disparities: A FrameWorks Institute MessageBrief*, “The assumption evidenced in practice, for advocates across a variety of issue areas – from early childhood, to education to public health – is that disparities in outcomes should be explained with specific reference to disparities in access to opportunity, quality of programs and services, etc.”ⁱⁱⁱ FrameWorks Institute investigated the validity of this assumption in research that examined the effects of disparities-explicit and disparities-neutral frames on support for policies that seek to redress differential outcomes and found, in fact, that disparities-explicit frames were trumped by the negative consequences of the dominant race discourse, noted above.

We recommend advocates consult the Talking About Disparities toolkit to familiarize themselves with the communications traps related to talking about disparities in outcomes (<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/race/>). The toolkit is designed to help those who wish to engage the public in a more constructive dialogue about preventing and ameliorating disparities to do so more effectively.

Reframing the Discussion

Several strategies can be employed to help reframe a discussion about race and class-based educational disparities:

Begin with a Value

It is important to carefully order your communications to avoid triggering the dominant cultural models discussed above that will be difficult to dispel later on. A good way to do this is to begin with a value that answers the questions, “Why should we care?” and “What’s at stake?” Values can direct thinking so that the public’s stake is more apparent or a big idea that helps people understand how this issue connects to something that all Americans consider important.

In testing different values for education, the one that was most successful in increasing support for policy and programmatic change is what we’ve labeled “Future Preparation.” Here is how the value can be expressed in a narrative:

It is important for us to prepare our population for the challenges of the 21st century by ensuring that students are being exposed not only to the “basics” that have been the hallmark of the traditional American curriculum, but also to the new skills that will enable them to thrive in a world that is growing in complexity. For young people to create the kinds of innovations that will be required to keep our nation strong, they must learn in conditions that promote such skills as problem-solving, synthesis and analysis, mastery of technology, and working in teams with diverse groups of people.

FrameWorks’ education research found that the value of Future Preparation was helpful in understanding education as a collective concern and in underlining why change is necessary.

Explain the System with a Simplifying Model

A simplifying model is an explanatory metaphor that helps make expert knowledge and processes more concrete to a lay audience. In the case of educational disparities in particular, the simplifying model of Orchestra can define the education system, make clear why we need a strong educational system in every community—whether urban, rural, or suburban.

Here is how the simplifying model for discussing disparities can be expressed in a narrative:

If the whole orchestra needs to play well together, but some parts of the orchestra have old or malfunctioning instruments, are not getting quality instruction, or are not playing the newest music, then the whole orchestra will be unable to reach its full musical potential.

Talk About Fairness in a Different Way

Experts and advocates understand that disparities in educational outcomes are tied closely to the resources available to poor communities. If this is not carefully explained, however, the public can be reminded of the intractability of poverty, negative assessments of minority and ethnic groups, and a system that doesn’t seem to be able to meet the overwhelming needs of its students. However, talking about a “gap” raises the fear that educational resources will be taken away from those who have them. This causes people to turn away from the issue because it is about other people “over there.” What’s missing is the link between resources and outcomes. Communicators can fill this hole by talking about “fairness between places,” rather than fairness between people or groups. They can demonstrate that there are problems in the distribution of goods that support education, due to the fact that education is supported largely by local taxes, and this in turn puts schools in some areas at a disadvantage. Here is one expression of the value of Fairness Between Places:

As we go about the work of reforming education, it is important that we recognize that programs and services are not equally distributed across all communities in our country. Some communities are struggling because they are not given a fair chance to do well. When some communities are denied the resources they need, they are unable to overcome problems like a poor educational system. We need to level the playing field so that every community has access to quality schools and colleges. Effective education reforms would allocate societal assets more fairly among communities, whether they are rural or poor, or not.

The following are questions that are likely to be asked by reporters and others in public settings about disparities and the achievement gap. Each question is followed by two responses: a “False Start,” which offers a somewhat conventional response to the question, and a “Reframed Response,” which is in alignment with the framing recommendations on how to talk about education and race.

Q: Many people say the achievement gap is the civil rights issue of our time and that it is simply unacceptable that schools are failing so many minority students. What are your thoughts about how to close this gap?

False Start:

There is a powerful association between social and economic disadvantage and low student achievement that creates the achievement gap. Weakening that association is the fundamental challenge facing America’s education policy makers. Education policy in this nation has typically been crafted around the expectation that schools alone can offset the full impact of low socioeconomic status on learning. However, the achievement gap begins before children even start school. Despite the impressive academic gains registered by some schools serving disadvantaged students, there is no evidence that school improvement strategies by themselves can close these gaps. Nevertheless, there is solid evidence that policies aimed directly at education-related social and economic disadvantages can improve school performance and student achievement. We also believe that attention should be paid not only to basic academic skills, but also to development of the whole person. There’s a powerful impact on student achievement from numerous contextual and environmental factors such as early learning; parenting; health; poverty; and the cognitive, cultural, and character development that occurs outside schools.

Analysis:

- Lists policy solutions, rather than demonstrating how those solutions will impact achievement.
- Focuses on student achievement, without reference to the societal benefits of programs and policies.

- Reinforces a disparities argument, reminding people of “other people’s children,” instead of addressing the opportunities that all young people need in order for our society to prosper.
- Foregrounds individual characteristics such as parenting, culture, and character.

Reframed Response:

We know we need a nation where all students are prepared for the future and can contribute to our country’s success. Our nation’s educational system, like an orchestra, has many groups of players with specialized jobs, such as teachers, principals and administrators, taxpayers, students, families, and school boards. The orchestra sounds best when each musician is skilled, the instruments are well-tuned, and the sections work together toward the common goal of playing the best music they can. But a changing America and world have handed the orchestra new music to play, and we have some sections in the orchestra using old, worn-out instruments and broken stands. We can use this orchestra theory when we consider how to create students prepared for future success. When the orchestra is made up of musicians who have all the resources they need, and an orchestra conductor who can create harmony among all the parts, we will start to see progress.

Analysis:

- Begins with the value of “Future Preparation,” which signals to the reader or listener that this is a societal issue.
- Uses the orchestra simplifying model to broaden the actors needed to be successful.
- Foregrounds solutions to the problem.

Q. Respected members of the African-American community have said that low achievement is due to the fact that people of color are making poor choices and not taking responsibility for their own problems. How can schools help reverse this reality?

False Start:

It is true there has been a lot of discussion about what some in the African-American community call a “values gap” between middle- and lower-income blacks. But this isn’t a new argument – it’s an old story that we’ve heard throughout the years in this country: “If blacks would step up, social inequalities would disappear.” Of course it’s true that some behaviors are due to personal choices, but there is still a critical fissure in the system that we believe to be the foundation for success in our country. And there are certain groups who simply do not have equal access to opportunity when it comes to education.

Analysis:

- Instead of bridging to a more productive value, it stays in the questioner's frame of individual responsibility.
- Reinforces the dominant cultural models of Separate Fates and Self-Makingness.
- Needs to place the solution higher in the paragraph, without re-emphasizing individual responsibility.

Reframed Response:

When it comes to preparing our students for the new challenges and new skills they will need, we have to then make the resources available in all communities to provide excellent schools and quality educational experiences for our young people. Right now, some communities do not have the resources they need to prepare students and improve educational outcomes. We need to level the playing field between communities so that every one has a quality educational system. We can take a first step by expanding funding for school-based initiatives in all communities that have been shown to improve minority student graduation rates.

Analysis:

- Primes with the values of Fairness Between Places.
- Bridges away from the question about disparities by group and reinforces that our nation's success depends on equal access to critical resources for all.
- Ends with a clear solution.

ⁱMoira O'Neil (2009). *Invisible Structures of Opportunity: How Media Depictions of Race Trivialize Issues of Diversity and Disparity*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
(http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF_race/cognitive_media_analysis_race.pdf)

ⁱⁱL. Davey (2009). *Strategies for Framing Racial Disparities: A FrameWorks Institute MessageBrief*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.
(http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF_race/disparitiesmessagebrief.pdf)