

# **Mind the Gap: The Relationship Between Socioeconomic Status and Educational Outcomes**

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## *Introduction*

In The United States of America, higher education is seen as the beacon of social mobility. If one is born without access to wealth, power, or prestige, which are all increasingly interconnected, they are encouraged to change their circumstances by working hard in school and getting a degree, thus giving them higher earning power. This narrative is the one the middle and upper class public thinks is happening; the one lived by low-income people is drastically different. There are many contributing factors to differing outcomes in higher education for people from different socioeconomic backgrounds: biased standardized test questions, access to test prep programs, primary and secondary school quality, and even pre-natal conditions, to name a few. Students' socioeconomic backgrounds correlate with educational attainment and outcomes of students; these influence students' future earning power and socioeconomic status, which then directly and indirectly influences the outcomes of their children. Thus, the widening income gap is directly related to the post-secondary achievement gap and creates a self-perpetuating cycle of socioeconomic inequity. This paper addresses the inequality of the American education system, with a specific focus on higher education attainment.

## *Historical Background and Contributing Factors*

Higher education in America began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, primarily for the purposes of educating young white men into ministers and gentlemen aspiring to enter "law and public life" (Geiger, in Altbach, et al. 2011, p. 42). This tradition endured over time, and specializations and professional schools were also increasingly common. In the 1940s and 1950s, higher education became more accessible; women and people of color also started to appear in classrooms previously populated by only white males. That being said, higher education became its most accessible in the 1970s with the growth of junior and community colleges, as well as vocational schools, and the G.I. Bill making college affordable for veterans (Altbach, et al. 2011, p. 61). It was also at this time that higher education came to be seen as an agent of social mobility, wherein one can emerge from school with a degree that will get them a better job, higher income, and subsequently higher socioeconomic status (Haveman, et al., 2006, p. 126). Because American higher education was more affordable for more Americans than ever at this point in history, attaining a degree was a viable plan for heightening one's income, as the return on investment would be greater than the investment itself.

The post-World War II era also marks the beginning of major growth in the income gap between the wealthy and the poor in the United States. Dr. Sean Reardon, Stanford University's endowed Professor of Poverty and Inequality in Education, has researched the American income and education gaps extensively. The 90/10 income gap is representative of the ratio of the incomes of the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile to those of the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile, and it has grown steadily and steeply so that, in

2008, families in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile made more than double what families in the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile were making in terms of family income (Reardon, 2011, p. 44). Wealth inequality is noted to correlate with opportunity and subsequent achievement gaps of school students, noticeable as early as kindergarten (Berk, et al. 2012, p. 337; Reardon, 2011, p. 42-43). Rising income and opportunity gaps are leading to less access to higher education for low-income students; They lack the educational capital to gain admission to these institutions, or, if they are admitted, they cannot afford the tuition, books, room and board, meal plans, transportation and many other expenses that accompany higher education (Broton, et al., 2016, p. 18, 23; Haveman, et al., 2006, p. 137).

It is also important to note that class and race are inextricably linked in the United States, so this decreased access to higher education disproportionately affects students of color (American Psychological Association, 2016, p. 1-2). While the achievement gap between black and white students (the black-white gap) has steadily declined in the time that the income and income-achievement gaps have been growing, this can largely be attributed to “historically low levels of income inequality and high levels of racial inequality” in the 1950s and 1960s (Reardon, 2011, p. 25-26, 41). The income-achievement gap is much larger than the black-white achievement gap, but that is not to say that there is not a discrepancy between the opportunities offered to and the educational achievements of white and racial minority students.

### *Contemporary Implications*

An achievement gap is an educational disparity between different demographic groups. Demographic groups can be created using any number of factors of identity, including geographic region, race and ethnicity, religion, gender, ability, and, in this analysis, socioeconomic status. The income-achievement gap is defined as “the relationship between family socioeconomic characteristics and student achievement.” Students from high income families achieve high levels of academic attainment and success, which correlates with high levels of future income, and students from low income families generally do not reach high levels of academic attainment and face fewer opportunities for gainful employment after school, leading to a continuation of their low income status (Reardon, 2011, p. 3).

Coming from a low income family affects a student in every aspect of their development and subsequent academic achievement. Before the child is even born, their parent’s access (or, more likely, lack thereof) to prenatal care and greater likelihood of teratogen exposure can lead to the infant being born with a low birth weight among other problems; This has a profound effect on the development of the child’s brain, which in turn affects their cognitive development, and especially their language acquisition (Berk, et al., 2012, p. 161-169, 221, 228; Berliner, 2009, p. 9-10). The cognitive and language development of infants and toddlers is also influenced by their environment and the quality of care they receive from birth to age six (Berk, et al., 2012, p. 228-229). Warm, responsive care and frequent exposure to pre-math and pre-literacy skills, which are more common in higher socioeconomic status homes, have been found to correlate with increased achievement in school (Berk, et al., 2012, p. 229, 239-241). Having a poor grasp of language when entering the school years can then lead to poor test performance, which then leads to the child’s placement in lower track classes and a self-fulfilling prophecy of learned helplessness, as they expect to fail at school related tasks (Berk, et al., 2012, p. 229, 336-341, 451-452, 462; Macaulay, 2006, p. 70-72). Furthermore, low socioeconomic status children are often in environments which increase the

likeliness of illness and are less likely to receive timely, affordable care; This means that low-income children more often miss more days of school than their healthy, middle and high income peers. Missing more school creates a knowledge deficit which further hinders academic achievement (Berliner, 2009, p. 12-13). Overall, low socioeconomic status children are already at an educational disadvantage from the moment they are conceived, and this disadvantage only intensifies as a child grows older and other factors, such as public policy and parental investment intersect with and reinforce the outcomes of a child's socioeconomic status (Reardon, 2011, p. 13).

Furthermore, as a child spends their years at school from kindergarten to twelfth grade, the quality of their education is affected by their socioeconomic status. In the United States of America, public schools are funded primarily through property taxes, and there has been increasing geographic segregation by income in recent years (Reardon, 2011, p. 24). Schools that have more economic resources are able to invest in greater numbers of better quality teachers (and will have subsequently smaller classes, which has been proven to facilitate learning), more current textbooks and technology, more rigorous curricula, and more safety measures so that students are not missing school because they do not feel safe going (Berk, et al., 2012, p. 459-464; Barton, 2003, p. 8-19; Willingham, 2012, p. 34-35). Educational resources and opportunities vary because of local-level economics.

As students near the end of their high school careers, standardized tests become increasingly important for acceptance to institutes of higher education; Many college applications require SAT and ACT scores for acceptance and merit scholarship considerations. Lower socioeconomic status students typically have little to no test preparation for these exams because they do not have the economic resources nor the time to participate in such classes, as many work part time jobs to help their families (Reardon, 2011, p. 18-19; Belasco, et al., 2015, p. 207-208, 218; Haveman, et al., 2006, p. 136). Additionally, low-income students may be at a further disadvantage on SAT and ACT tests as their deficits in language development can represent them as lacking in knowledge, when really they are lacking the communication skills needed to express what they know (Macaulay, 2006, p. 70-72). With a greater likelihood of performing poorly on tests that hold so much weight in the admissions process, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have a lower chance of gaining access to the elite institutes of higher education that are proven to be agents of social mobility.

Furthermore, students who come from low-income families are less likely to have the social capital needed to aid access elite higher education. Parents, siblings, and school teachers and administrators can act as agents of social capital when they affirm students' abilities and encourage them to continue their education at the postsecondary level and assist them in the application process (Plank, et al., 2001, p. 951-954). Gaining knowledge from a role model who has already engaged in the higher education system is an invaluable resource to a high school student considering college, and advice offered often makes the process less daunting.

### *Solutions*

Providing solutions to all of the factors from socioeconomic status that influence a child's achievement is a near impossible task. Despite this, there are measures that can be taken to lessen the income-achievement gap. Solutions range from early intervention programs that target prenatal care and infant and toddlerhood, to the few programs that exist at the higher education level to serve as supports for low-income students who are already in college.

In the realm of early intervention solutions, there are many state and government subsidized programs that are meant to aid single mothers and families living below the poverty line. Some aim to provide prenatal care, others to encourage warm, responsive caregiving and pre-educational skills such as literacy and math, or good nutrition for proper cognitive development and better physical health, or subsidized preschool (Berk, et al., 2012, p. 222). Project Head Start, a universal preschool program subsidized by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is a successful example. These programs aim to stop the creation of the achievement gap before it begins, as it is present at the start of kindergarten and increases at a slow rate from there (Reardon, 2011, p. 3-4). The interventions described do indeed make a difference in the lives of the children who receive them, but the need for these types of supports often outsizes the number of children and families who can be served (Berk, et al., 2012, p. 243).

Interventions throughout the school years can take many different shapes. In a study at the University of Texas at Austin, minority and low income children showed improvement in academic achievement when they completed exercises in which they wrote affirmations about themselves and learned about academic achievement being a flexible skill that can improve with effort (Hanselman, 2016). Another approach to childhood intervention is diversifying schools in terms of income and race, which is done by the creation of charter and magnet schools. While charter schools come with their own merits and faults, there is evidence that students from minority and low-income groups experience academic improvements when in class with higher socioeconomic status peers, and that high-income students' academics do not suffer (Berk, et al., 2012, p. 234). Lastly, enriching, properly executed extended school day and summer enrollment programs have been shown to decrease the amount of knowledge that is lost during out of school time (Reardon, 2013, p. 15-16). Extended school time can also aid low-income parents as they would have to pay less for childcare and, thus, would be able to keep more of their earnings.

In higher education, possible solutions include policies such as test-optional admissions, replacement of affirmative action policies with poverty-preference admissions, and support centers for underprepared students. Because there is so much inequity in the school system prior to students' entrances to higher education, admissions reforms are the primary targets of efforts at the postsecondary education level. These adjustments take into account students' socioeconomic statuses and how their academic achievements may have suffered.

Another strategy involves supporting these students when they enroll. Once students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are enrolled in institutions of higher education, they usually are not as prepared as their mid- and high-income peers as their education was more likely to be of a lower quality (Reardon, 2013, p. 12; Gaertner, 2011, p. 10). Providing support centers, such as Temple University's Academic Resource Center, allows students to receive the help they need if their academic skills are not yet on par with what is expected at the collegiate level.

In terms of admissions policies, most aim to mitigate the great inequities that low-income applicants have faced in their school careers thus far. "Test-optional" policies do not require ACT or SAT scores as part of an application, in hopes of eliminating the possible advantages given to higher socioeconomic students. While this solution seems like it would help the equalize access to higher education, it does not. Individual students may benefit; However, the overall system of test-optionality mostly serves to increase an institution's perceived selectivity and status, and does little to increase the socioeconomic and racial diversity of the campus (Belasco, et al., 2015, p. 208-209, 218). Although the admissions intervention of going test-optional does not yield the desired results

of helping low socioeconomic status students gain access to higher education, “poverty preference” admissions is another option that could be a promising solution.

The focus of much research and debate today is the replacement of affirmative action programs— which consider race as a factor in the admissions process, as an attempt at increasing institutional racial diversity— with policies that favor low-income students to promote both racial and economic diversity. Because race and socioeconomic status are linked, admissions programs that give weight to an applicant’s economic background will foster diversity in both racial and socioeconomic arenas (Rosario, 2014, p. 3). In experiments done at the University of Colorado at Boulder, results indicated that low-income and racial minority students are more likely be admitted under these criteria, but would also need academic support services (Gaertner, 2011, p. 1, 23-24). Furthermore, admitted low-income students usually need considerable help with tuition, fees, and other college-associated costs, such as housing, books, and food. Solving the problems of housing and food insecurity for low-income students could take the shape of public policy changes, extensions of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and institutions partnering with local food banks (Broton, et al., 2016, p. 16-25). Income-based admissions procedures are a promising partial solution to inequality in higher education, however it is important to note that promoting low-income admissions may cause a conflict for the school, which will most likely not be able yield as much profit from students who receive significant federal, state, and institutional aid. This is especially true for smaller, private institutes of higher education that rely more on tuition dollars to fund operations.

### *Conclusion*

The literature about income and educational attainment in the United States overwhelmingly indicates that there is a bidirectional self-perpetuating cycle between the two. Higher socioeconomic status creates a cascade that leads to better resources beginning prior to birth, and lasting all the way through higher education, giving advantages at each step along the way. The opposite happens to low income individuals, as they are disadvantaged from before birth and continually face obstacles to academic success and higher education, which has come to be seen as a key agent of social mobility in the world today.

I believe the most promising solutions to ending this cycle begin with early interventions targeted at pre-natal, infant, and toddler aged children and their families. Because the income-achievement gap is already large at the entrance to kindergarten, interventions such as Project Head Start can help to narrow this gap before it is recognizable. For students already past the critical ages of infant, toddler, and early childhood, school based interventions can help, as well as admissions interventions for students currently applying to and enrolled in institutes of higher education. I am unsure if a true solution will ever be reached or is even possible, but that does not mean that the issue of inequality in education should be left alone. It is important to continue striving for equality in all realms, particularly education, to create a more equal society.

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