

**The Academic Achievement Gap between
African American students and White students:
Comparing the educational systems of South Orange
Maplewood School District and Montclair Public School District**

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Academic Achievement Gap Lesson Plan

Unit Topic: There is a perpetual success gap between whites and minorities; institutionalized racist systems work to maintain and instill the culture of disenfranchising blacks at several social staples in the United States such as employment and education. This unit will focus in on the realm of education and the achievement gap that exists between black students and white students throughout their educational experience in the United States.

Lesson: What is the Academic Achievement Gap?- We are looking at the *academic achievement gap* between african american and white students by comparing two different educational systems (Montclair Public School District and South Orange Maplewood School District) that attempt to tackle the *academic achievement gap* but fail. Students will compare these two districts and their educational systems through group discussion and critical thinking.

Rationale for the Lesson: Students will gain an understanding of what the *academic achievement gap* is and what it looks like in different communities. Students will be able to critically think about *institutionalized racism* and about their own experience in an educational system. Finally, students will be able to explain that the gap exists due to institutionalized limitations to groups of students and not because of the abilities or personal efforts of these students.

Standards:

- Common Core Standards
 - Research and Analysis standards 6- 12
- National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies
 - Individuals, group and Institutions
 - Power, Authority and Governance

Essential Question/Guiding Questions:

How does the academic achievement gap persist? How do the consequences of these systems affect the students that participate in them?

1. What does the *academic achievement gap* look like in SOMSD/ MPSD?
2. Compare and contrast SOMSD and MPSD educational systems? Where do they differ? How are they the same? Do you agree or disagree with their methods? Why?
3. What is the *academic achievement gap* and how does it affect minority students today? How does it affect you, even if you are not a student of color?

Objectives:

- Students will be able to:
 - Recognize and critically think about and discuss SOMSD *leveling* and its effect on the students existing in the system.
 - Recognize and critically think about and discuss MPSD's history of a persistent *academic achievement gap* between whites and minorities.
 - Recognize and critically think about and discuss the *academic achievement gap*.
 - Recognize and critically think about their own/ their peers experiences in an education system.

Lesson Layout:

1. Define the Academic Achievement gap.
2. Describe educational systems of SOMSD and MPSD.
3. Small group discussion and class discussion.
 - a. In two small groups, students will read a piece (handout) on MPSD and/ or watch a clip from a documentary set in SOMSD. They will discuss and then bring into a larger group discussion where we compare the two different systems.

Lesson Closure:

- Reenforce that the *academic achievement gap* is not about ability but about how performance statistics show that there are existing institutionalized practices in education systems that prevent certain groups of students from succeeding at the same rate as their white counterparts.

Materials and Equipment Needed:

- Films/ YouTube media
- Articles
- Powerpoint

Assignment:

- Research other American education systems attempting to tackle to the gap. Imagine you were a starting a school. Discuss a hypothetical program that could promote success among minority students.

Assessment:

- Assess how well students are able to connect the lesson with their own and their peers' experience in the educational system that they currently exist in. Also, enforce that the academic achievement gap is due to institutionalized systems failing students and not about a student's intelligence or ability.

- Looking at:
 - Students' discussions and connotations of the academic achievement gap.
 - Students' abilities to relate the experience of the two schools to their own academic experience.
 - Students connotations of what the academic achievement gap looks like in their school/ district.

Timeline:

- **Introduction-** Describe the lesson: The Academic Achievement Gap- defined
- **Do Now- 10m**
 - Crossover activity
 - Students will stand and crossover to the other side of the room depending on their response to the questions being asked aloud. The activity shows that other students share common experiences, concerns or feelings that they may not have expected from their classmates. It allows the students to begin the lesson with a more open minded approach which is beneficial for a lesson discussing sensitive topics. Enforce the idea that students should try to remain silent and allow others to choose to cross by themselves.
 - Questions:

Middle School

- Cross over to the other side of the room if you have lived in Maplewood/ South Orange your whole life.
- Cross over to the other side of the room if you consider yourself a person of color or mixed race.
- Cross over to the other side of the room if you are in or know someone in an Honors class.
- Cross over to the other side of the room if you are happy with all your classes this year.
- Cross over to the other side of the room if you consider yourself white.
- Cross over to the other side of the room if you or someone you know struggles to get all their homework done every night.
- Cross over to the other side of the room if you or someone you know has to work after school.
- Cross over to the other side of the room if you or someone you know has to take care of kids or siblings after school.

- Cross over to the other side of the room if you feel that you are receiving an education that is preparing you really well for high school/ college.

High School

- Cross over to the other side of the room if you have lived in Montclair your whole life.
 - Cross over to the other side of the room if you consider yourself a person of color or mixed race.
 - Cross over to the other side of the room if you are in or know someone in an AP class.
 - Cross over to the other side of the room if you are happy with all your classes this year.
 - Cross over to the other side of the room if you consider yourself white.
 - Cross over to the other side of the room if you or someone you know struggles to get all their homework done every night.
 - Cross over to the other side of the room if you or someone you know has to work after school.
 - Cross over to the other side of the room if you or someone you know has to take care of kids or siblings after school.
 - Cross over to the other side of the room if you feel that you are receiving an education that is preparing you really well for college.
- **Group discussion**
 - **Separate and read- 10m**
 - Group 1- clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnhWRtMqORM&t=351s> (1:00- 5:50)
 - Group 2- MPSD Report of the Achievement Gap Advisory Panel
 - **Small group discussion- 5m**
 - **Larger group discussion- 7m**
 - **Closing and Questions- 5m**

Total time- 45m

Annotated Bibliography:

This list of resources was developed to be utilized as research, reference and background knowledge to support the teaching of this lesson/ unit.

1. **The Montclair, NJ Achievement Gap Advisory Panel. (2015). *Report of the Achievement Gap Advisory Panel. Montclair Public School District. Montclair, NJ.***
 - a. This report serves to dissect the existing academic system in Montclair Public schools and introduce resources and developments to tackle the still existing *achievement gap*. It lays out details (statistics) between white and minority student achievement from kindergarten to twelfth grade (pg.2). It also presents statistics of student counterproductive behavior and their corresponding punishments to *academic failure (suspension, detention, graduation rates, college retention)* The document provides detailed plans to combat the *achievement gap* (pg. 32) Many of these excerpts and statistics can be utilized in group discussions to start the lesson and during the lecture portion.
2. **Gettleman, J. (2007). *The Segregated Classrooms of a Proudly Diverse School. Race, Class, and Gender in the United States, 299- 301.***
 - a. Gettleman explains issue of *academic achievement* and *the leveling system* specifically at Columbia High School in Maplewood, NJ. This applies to the whole district and can be paralleled and compared to MPSD. He also uses real life student quotes which students can relate to. He uses the anecdote of the 2005 walk- out to further show the student experience. Discussion of the sides that the students were separated by can be a healthy conversation starter about how students can respond to *institutionalized racism* and other issues.
3. **New Jersey Department of Education. (2015). *Performance Report of (NJ Schools).***

[Data File]. Retrieved from:

 - a. <http://www.state.nj.us/education/pr/1415/13/134900030.pdf> (Columbia High School)
 - b. <http://www.state.nj.us/education/pr/1415/13/133310050.pdf> (Montclair High School)
 - i. This is the 2014- 15 school year report developed to represent school statistics by the Department of Education in New Jersey. Demographics of the MPSD and the SOMSD are shown along with their corresponding *academic success* rates. It shows rates of economic disparity and suspension rates in the districts. This would

be helpful for the lecture portion of the lesson to show recent statistics of minority students in each district. It also helps to paint a numerical comparison of the two districts.

4. **DuVerna, A. Barish, H. Averick, S. (Producers), & DuVerna, A. (Director). (2016). *13th* [Documentary]. United States: Netflix.**
 - a. This is a new and popular film on the corruption in *privatized prisons* and in the United States Penal/ Justice system overall. It gives a healthy background to *the War on Drugs* and the legislation behind it's development. This can be used as a guiding film into a unit on the overall *success gap* between white and minority youth; how minority youth are cycled into this *success gap* against their white counterparts that only increases over time. It helps to parallel minority struggles in one level (education) to another (justice). Access through Netflix can make this also easy to access for teachers and students.
5. **McCarthy, S. Block, J. (Producers), & Block, J (Director). (2015). *The One that Got Away* [Documentary]. United States: PBS.**
 - a. This documentary follows a young African American male in his path to conviction. It tells his story of being a charismatic, overachieving youth until familial setbacks set him astray to join a gang and eventually commit armed robbery and homicide. It discusses the struggle for teachers to reach at- risk students through their parents. It shows the outside factors that many minority students deal with in an affluent community where most would go unnoticed. It is set in Montclair and connects this lesson on the *achievement gap* with a unit on the success gap between white and minority youth. The film does a good job of introducing the issue of gang life and the effect of a lack of education with interesting accounts from MPSD educators and administrators.
6. **Thorne, C. [Producer/ Director]. (2012). *Deleveling the System: Community Speaks*. [Documentary]. Retrieved from: <https://vimeo.com/36917982>**
 - a. Thorne's documentary uses personal accounts from the SOMSD community to shine light on the deeply discriminatory system of *leveling* in the school district. The film is set during the time of the decision to delevel SOMSD. It is another local anecdote that students can relate to and learn from. You can use this film or parts of it to discuss institutionalized racist systems that further affect the achievement gap.
7. **Coates, T. (2015). *Between the World and Me*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau.**

- a. A very important part of the success gap that often goes unnoticed is the psychological and emotional distress that minority youth experience as a result of living in racist systems. Coates uses his own personal accounts and secondary sources to discuss *the black experience*. In African American studies, this is a crucial part in understanding the Afro-American psyche and the efforts for the black individual to identify with their “blackness”. The piece is written as a letter (like James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*), to his son (and all young black boys and men), passing down his discovery of self and urges his son to pursue his own. At the most basic level, this book can help educators empathize with their minority students at a deeper level as it displays a healthy account of an individual’s journey to view himself in reference to the world.

Coates attempts to make sense of blatant racial injustice and comes to recognize his own place in the world. He must first accept that the world he lives in will refuse to guarantee for him the freedoms that so many others take for granted. Early on, he explains that living as a black person in America is a unique experience. He truly wants his son and readers to understand the world beyond the hiding of injustice in God’s work to be seen for what it truly is; it exposes *white supremacy* by expressing America’s bias of preferring white men. The system was not built for minorities. There are dangers in believing in the American Dream. He believes black will suffer if they do not stop aiming for the dream that wasn’t built to make them successful. Not only is it not set- up for blacks but it destroys us, physically, emotionally and psychologically; that is the true American effort. No one (with true power) is aiming to make blacks’ lives easier in America. He uses current events to discuss this further due to his experience growing up in Baltimore. Riots around the country and prevalent *police brutality* in all our cities show the frustration of the community but lack of momentum to make a true impact. There are not enough people willing to take a stand for change and make true sacrifice. One should stop wanting to join for a fight for a fantastical perfect world and instead fight for their own blackness and self-fulfillment. Attempts at dreaming about this perfect, equal world will only hold you back. Whites and blacks in America will always struggle to live amongst each other, Coates says, because they do not live in and do not experience the same America.

The lack of parallel points of view makes the education experience different for white versus minority students. Understanding this disconnection can help to add another level of why the gap is so exponential. In important forming years the gap increases

dramatically partially due to this separate identifying experience between students. This book would be helpful in discussing psychological aspects affecting the increase of the *academic achievement gap*.