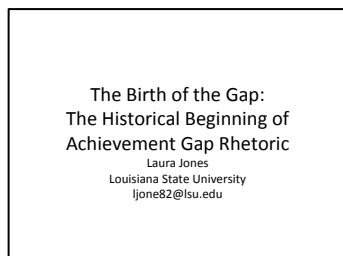
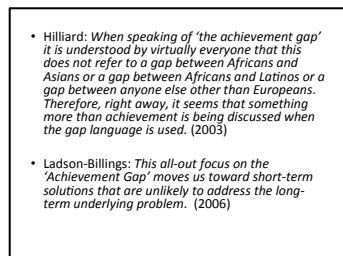


The Birth of the Gap: The Historical Beginning of Achievement Gap Rhetoric  
 Laura Jones  
 Presented at the American Education Research Association Annual Conference, 2013



Seven years ago, in her presidential address to this organization, Gloria Ladson-Billings noted that “achievement gap” had become something of “a crossover hit.” Indeed, in mainstream discourse, the term continues to represent a strikingly bipartisan consensus, an apparently unproblematic shared understanding about the most urgent problem facing educators today.



Ladson-Billings, following Asa Hilliard, was among the first to ask us to more critically consider whether that particular figure of speech was in fact the best way to understand persistent inequalities in American education (3-4). Others have since added to that call, including Beverly Cross, who asserted not only that “the crisis of the achievement gap hides what underlies it” but that, more instrumentally, “to focus on gap, paradoxically, likely sustains it” (253). These scholars, among others,<sup>1</sup> remind us that despite its sometime appearance as transparent statistical description of fact, labeling inequity an “achievement gap” is in fact a *rhetorical* choice.

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<sup>1</sup> Others who have importantly contributed to critical discussion about “achievement gap” include Amy Noelle Parks, David Gillborn and Camika Royal, as well as many participants in this conference: Cheryl Matias, Roland Mitchell, Sonya Douglass Hursford and Tanetha Grosland, to name just a few whose panels I’ve been lucky enough to attend.

research questions	theoretical framework
<p><i>What is the hidden rhetorical history, the etymology, of the gap?</i></p> <p><i>What role does the gap's etymology play in its paradoxical force?</i></p>	<p><i>Genealogy: tracing "the accidents, the minute deviations--or conversely, the complete reversals--the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us." (Foucault)</i></p>

Davis, James G. and Don S. Warren. "School Problems Told of Lag in Negro Learning." *Washington Evening Star* 27 Sept. 1956. Scan by the author.

My aim in this project was to consider it as precisely that, responding to Cross' observation by investigating the gap's rhetorical history, seeking insight into the paradoxical force she described.

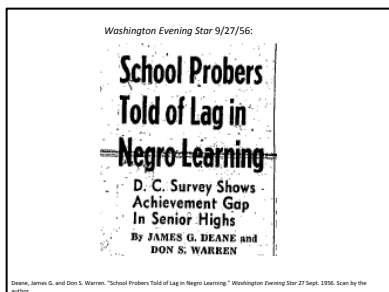
I sought, in other words, to begin a genealogy of the *idea* of the gap, seeking to at least partially reconstruct the "historical beginning" of gap discourse. Conducting archival research, I identified what I now believe to be the first printed use of the phrase. From there, I compiled the congressional transcripts, newspaper coverage, and pamphlets that in part constituted the discursive scene of that emergence. That scene, I've found, has been virtually erased from mainstream "gap talk."<sup>2</sup>

[TIME ALLOWING: I'm curious to hear from you about what you see as the "commonsense" about where the phrase and the idea came from, when and how it was originally used]

The common assumption about the etymology of the achievement gap is a seductively logical one: that the phrase emerged in in the wake of the 1964 Civil Rights act in reports such as Coleman's in 1966. In fact, however, the notion of the "achievement gap" preceded that report by one very important decade. Today, I'll focus on telling the story of a single, short text: the newspaper headline that coined the phrase

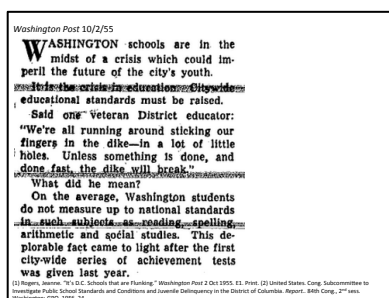
<sup>2</sup> A search of academic databases *Lexis-Nexis*, *Academic Search Complete*, *JStor* and *Google Scholar* reveals that, aside from several pages in Jackson's excellent book *Science for Segregation*, the Davis hearings have been cited in only four academic texts, all articles in law reviews that focus on issues other than test score disparities and the emergence of the "gap" (see Anders, Gregor, Wolters).

“achievement gap.” This headline, and the story behind it, points us to a kind of hidden history of the gap.



The story—from the September 27, 1956 *Washington Evening Star*, offers more questions than answers: who are “school probers,” and what, exactly, is the “D.C. survey”? Perhaps more striking is the fact, as you’ve

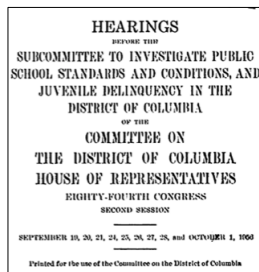
noticed, that “achievement gap” is also—in fact, is more prominently—referred to as a “lag in Negro learning.” Is that a revelatory word choice, or is it simply a vestige of midcentury habits of reference? Addressing those questions demands a bit of backstory. It’s a story that follows a familiar narrative arc in public discourse: from crisis to classification, and then on to fears of degradation that result in isolation of targeted groups.



The crisis began two years earlier. 1954 marked two milestones for District schools: it was the beginning of integration under *Brown v Board*, as well as the first year of district-wide standardized testing. On the Stanford and

Iowa tests, D.C. students scored below the national average,<sup>3</sup> leading the *Post* to announce that schools were “in the midst of a crisis which could imperil the future of the city’s youth” (Rogers).

1. Crisis



The “school probers” of the 1956 headline were congressmen who responded to this panic by forming a subcommittee to—in the words of their title—“investigate public school standards and conditions, and juvenile

delinquency, in the District of Columbia.”

Here’s the thing about that committee: of six members, four were Southern Democrats who had signed the so-called “Southern Manifesto” pledging to overturn *Brown v Board* and preserve racial segregation in schools.<sup>4</sup> The other two members did not attend the hearings-- one paper reported that they were in fact “boycotting” (*Afro-American*).<sup>5</sup> The hearings, in other words, were quite overtly a prong of the South’s “Massive Resistance” strategy.

The lead counsel, Memphis lawyer William Gerber, was on the same page as the rest of the committee (qtd in Bartley 176). Media coverage described his approach to

<sup>3</sup> On the Iowa test, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students averaged in the 45<sup>th</sup> percentile, while 9<sup>th</sup> grade students averaged in the 25<sup>th</sup>. On the Stanford, students in 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade scored roughly one grade level below the national average, and roughly .8 grade levels below their actual grade placement (*Report* 24).

<sup>4</sup> These members included Chairman James C Davis (D-GA), John Bell Williams (D-MS), Woodrow Jones (D-NC), and Joel Broyhill (D-VA).

<sup>5</sup> Dewitt Hyde (R-MD) unsuccessfully sought postponement (*Hearings*, 319), while A.L. Miller (R-NE) did not participate at all.

witnesses—all local teachers and school administrators—as a “statistical onslaught” in which the counselor “served as his own principal witness.”

1. Crisis  
2. Classification

**School Probers Told of Lag in Negro Learning**

D. C. Survey Shows Achievement Gap In Senior Highs  
By JAMES O. DEANE and DON S. WARREN

Did you know that in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades of the 1,200 tested in the predominantly white 8th were in that category and of the 2,000 in the predominantly colored schools for the seventh, eighth, and ninth grades, 510 achieved them? Now in the sixth grade, the results show that of 1,600 in the predominantly white, 63 achieved on the sixth grade level.

WILLIAM. Eighth grade students

Mr. Ozawa. You say this is an eighth grade test, all students in the eighth grade, junior high schools.

The results show that in the predominantly colored schools out of 2,000 tested—mind you, 63 tested in the white schools in the sixth grade—in the sixth grade in the predominantly colored there were 531, on the sixth grade level—in the predominantly white schools of 1,600 tested, 63 achieved on the fifth grade level and in the predominantly colored schools where 2,000 were tested, 610 achieved on the fifth grade level. In the predominantly white schools out of 1,200 that were tested, 89 achieved on the fourth grade level and of the 2,000 who were tested in the predominantly colored schools, 610 achieved on the fourth grade level.

The record further shows that of the 1,200 tested in the predominantly white schools there were three who tested on the third grade level. In the predominantly colored schools out of 2,000, 110 achieved on the third grade level.

On the second grade level, we have none in the predominantly white and we have four in the predominantly colored. That is word meaning.

Mr. Sizoo, this record shows that for the sixth, fifth, fourth, third, and second grades in that category there were 194 in the predominantly white out of 1,600 for a percentage of 11.9. The record shows that out of 2,000 that were tested on the eighth grade level in those predominantly colored schools there were 1,273 who fell below the seventh grade and in the fifth, sixth, fourth, and third for a percentage of 64 percent—did I get that?

Mr. Sizoo. That is right.

Mr. Ozawa. I thought I would edify you.

Source: United States, Cong. Subcommittee to Investigate Public School Standards and Conditions and Juvenile Delinquency in the District of Columbia. Hearings, 84th Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess. Washington, GPO, 1956, 15.

I don't expect you to read this page from the transcript, but I share it to illustrate that “onslaught.” Highlighted is the only utterance by the witness, a school board member. The rest of the page—like many others in the transcript, is

filled with Gerber's recitation of statistics, and the occasional interjection from a committee member. So it was Gerber, not witnesses, who did most of the talking, giving lie to the headline's implication that the so-called probers were “told” of the achievement gap. It was, in fact, the “probers” who were doing the telling.

TABLE 11.—A brief summary of achievement standing on Iowa test

Grade.....	Iowa test				
	12	11	9	9	8
National average (percentile rank)....	50	50	50	9.5	8.2
District of Columbia average.....	45	45	25	7.8	7.2
White.....	95	95	90	10.6	9.4
Integrated.....	47	45	20	8.1	7.1
Negro.....	5	5	5	6.7	5.9

The Iowa tests of educational development (achievement) reveal the stand

The “D.C. survey” referred to the data that Gerber arrived at by separating schools into three categories—“predominantly white,”

“predominantly Black” and “predominantly integrated.” His findings were predictable: predominantly white schools outscored integrated ones, which in turn outscored Black schools. They were also selective, and misleading in many ways.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Superintendent Hobart Corning pointed out that the group of “white” schools Gerber considered were all in the most affluent neighborhoods in the city, while the reverse was true for the “Black” schools (*Hearings* 497). Moreover, he had no

Despite deep problems with the data itself, the committee's quantitative approach was a savvy and effective rhetorical choice. It might be considered, in part, a response to anxieties about the *Brown* ruling that were expressed even by those who agreed with it. The decision had relied heavily on social psychologists' testimony about the effects of segregation on students, leading some to worry about the way seemingly subjective *opinion*, rather than conventional scientific *fact*, had been used to overturn legal precedent (Jackson 73). Into that void of data stepped Geber and the committee, offering a quantitative and therefore putatively "scientific" answer to *Brown*.

"The statistics speak for themselves, and it is not a record of which anyone can be proud."

-Congressmen Miller and Hyde's dissenting report

"No one, white or Negro, should fear statistics any more than he would fear truth itself."

-Letter to the editor of the *Washington Star*

The statistics were treated as unassailable fact; even the protesting members of the subcommittee assented to Gerber's data, saying that "the statistics speak for themselves" (*Report* 48). When Gerber "threw statistic after statistic at witnesses," as the *Post*

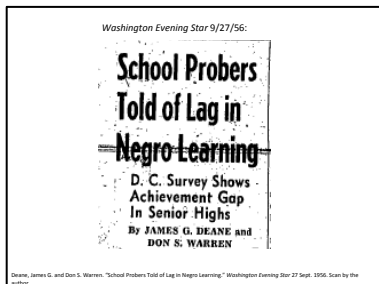
reported, he had aligned himself with the ethos of science, adopting the mantle of dispassionate inquiry to conceal an anti-integration agenda. That apparently objective reflection of reality, however, was in fact it was a carefully constructed narrative designed to uphold, and simultaneously conceal that agenda. Page after page of statistics added up to a single, clear picture that was not lost on journalists: the *Post* described Gerber "hammering away in an attempt to get the witness to admit that Negro pupils

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breakdown of scores by student or subgroup, merely school average and enrollment numbers by race, the latter of which were in significant flux throughout the first year of integration—which was reported by principals throughout the hearings (see, for example, *Hearings* 87, 151).

were inferior to White ones in native intelligence and ability to learn” (Rogers, “Segregation”).<sup>7</sup>

That Gerber’s statistical methods were spurious and that they were adamantly challenged by a number of scholars, witnesses, community leaders and journalists, hardly mattered in terms of their ultimate impact.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, although the hearings were widely discredited, their central assertion of a Black/white “achievement gap” was just as widely accepted. In fact, as we now know, it would become *the* dominant frame for educational inequity.



A partial explanation for this ironic phenomenon lies in the headline with which I began. For while the editorial pages criticized the hearings, front-page stories in the *Post* and the *Star* adopted a different tone. Uncritical reports

like this of Gerber’s data appeared daily, dominating coverage of the hearings and

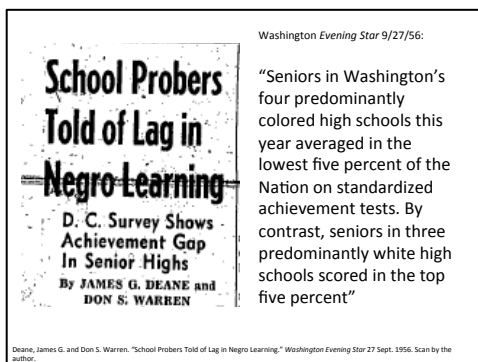
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<sup>7</sup> Consider a sample of Gerber’s “questioning,” where he reviews the grade-level equivalent scores on the Stanford Reading subtest for District eighth graders:

Mr. Sharpe, this record shows that for the sixth, fifth, fourth, third and second grades in that category there were 194 in the predominantly white out of 1,630 for a percentage of 11.9. The record shows that out of 2,995 that were tested on the eighth grade level in these predominantly colored schools there were 1,973 who fell below the seventh grade and in the fifth, sixth, fourth and third for a percentage of 65.8 percent. (“Hearings” 15)

<sup>8</sup> Challengers included Horace Mann Bond, then president of Lincoln University, who wrote a parodic pamphlet in which he applied Gerber’s own methods to Army I.Q. tests to “prove” that the Southern Congressmen themselves were intellectually inferior to their northern colleagues. Spokesmen for the American Council of Human Rights called them “phony statistics” (Blue). They were similarly characterized groups and individuals including the Washington Committee on Public Schools, the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance, Americans for Democratic Action, the NAACP, the American Jewish Congress, and the president of Howard University (“Ministers Call”).

arguably overshadowing critiques. The statistics themselves became the stars of the emergent narrative about integrated schools. Both daily newspapers ran multiple stories during each day of the hearings, rarely failing to enumerate Gerber's data, treating them as they were offered: as a purely objective reflection of reality in the schools. Indeed, Gerber offered a narrative that could easily be packaged in a single, pithy phrase, ideal for the genre of newspaper headlines.<sup>9</sup> What had once been called a "statistical *onslaught*," capturing the aggression and one-sided nature of the interrogation, here became the neutral-sounding "achievement gap." Reports like this concealed the dissent at the root of the gap, presenting a *contested* ideological notion as if it represented an unproblematic *consensus*. Adding to its appeal, the idea of an "achievement gap" also promised a simple answer to nagging questions about D.C. schools.

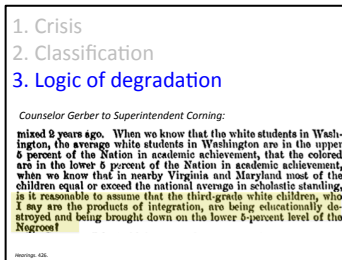


The story's opening paragraph reveals this explanatory power. It reports that, "Seniors in Washington's four predominantly colored high schools this year averaged in the lowest five percent of the Nation on standardized

achievement tests. By contrast, seniors in three predominantly white high schools scored in the top five percent." (Dean and Warren, "School Probers")

<sup>9</sup> Jeanne Fahnestock has commented on the way journalists often "accommodate" scientific findings to fit the newspaper or magazine genre, necessarily simplifying and unintentionally distorting them. When the *Star* named Gerber's statistics "the achievement gap," it effected just such a simplification and distortion, not so much of "scientific fact" but rather of what we might call Gerber's quasi-scientific hypothesis ("Accommodating Science").

In light of the panic over low test scores, the subtext of this story becomes clear: the “mystery” of D.C. students’ disappointing scores had been solved. *White* students had done very well: top five percent in the nation. The district’s average had in fact been *pulled down*, according to Gerber’s figures, by the newly integrated Black students.



From this conclusion, it was a short—even imperceptible—leap to assert that Black students were also “dragging down” other students and the district itself.

Asserting that school standards had fallen since 1954, the committee pointed to integration’s *degrading* influence. Counselor Gerber makes the assertion plainly in his exchange with the superintendent of D.C. schools. He asks,

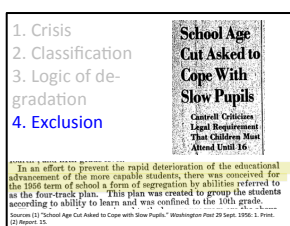
**is it reasonable to assume that the third-grade white children, who I say are the products of integration, are being educationally destroyed and being brought down on the lower 5-percent level of the Negroes?**

Figure 1. Gerber’s logic of degradation. Source: *Hearings 426*.

The rhetorical roots of such statements reach back and forward in important ways. Gerber’s contention is based on the old eugenic logic of *degradation*—the belief, based in animal husbandry, that combining a “superior” group with an “inferior” group will inevitably degrade the former. This logic remains common sense for many—arguments against full inclusion of students with disabilities, for example, are often premised on similar fears.

What’s particularly striking, here, is the fact that this logic is *activated* by the achievement gap. The gap, in this discourse, was treated as evidence that integrated

schools were precisely this kind of combination of *superior* and *inferior*. White students represented the top five percent; Black students, the bottom five. [Predictably, Southern White Citizens' Councils picked up on this use of the gap, publishing pamphlets with titles such as "Integration means Degeneration." But] even mainstream D.C. papers, which favored integration, subtly and perhaps unintentionally reproduced this logic.<sup>10</sup> Speaking of students in terms of their *achievement* seemed to be race-neutral; however, Gerber's "onslaught" had ensured that "low achieving" was effectively a *synonym* for "Black." Thus the committee could argue for separating students by *ability* as the only alternative to district-wide decline. In doing so, they set up a logic in which racial segregation appeared natural and inevitable.



This renewed demand for exclusion was not limited to the segregationist Congressmen. To be sure, they were the only ones who explicitly advocated re-segregation. However, even school

personnel who identified as pro-integration conceded that it would be necessary to exclude so-called "inferior" students by *some* criteria. One assistant superintendent argued that schools should not be required to admit students classified as "slow," arguing for an exception to compulsory attendance laws. Others recommended opening separate "social-adjustment schools" for students labelled emotionally "unfit" or otherwise disruptive or out of step.

<sup>10</sup> For in-depth development of this phenomena, see *Minding the Gap*, p. 51-61 (Jones).

CLICK. A third method of re-segregation had already been enacted the previous year in high schools: the district's "four-track" plan separated students based on "I.Q. and absorption" ("Four Track School Plan" 21). The re-segregation of schools under the rubric of ability tracking is a familiar story, no doubt. What these hearings provide us is a glimpse into the foundational role of achievement-gap thinking in that story. For although it had been in the works for years prior to *Brown v Board*, tracking was often characterized as a direct response to what one *Post* story called the "heavy influx of Negro pupils in certain schools" that "brought grade levels down" (Edstrom and Bassett, "School Age" 23). As the committee's report described it, it was

"...an effort to prevent the rapid deterioration of the educational advancement of the more capable students" by way of "a form of segregation by abilities."

Based on the Gerber's classification of students by test scores, Black students were *pre-identified* as the targets of such segregation by ability. This carefully crafted assumption, enforced by the discourse of the gap, guaranteed that ability tracking would effectively replicate racial segregation. Indeed, figures offered by administrators showed white students populating the "honors" and "college prep" tracks, while the majority of Black students were relegated to "basic" or "remedial" tracks, if not special education.<sup>11</sup>

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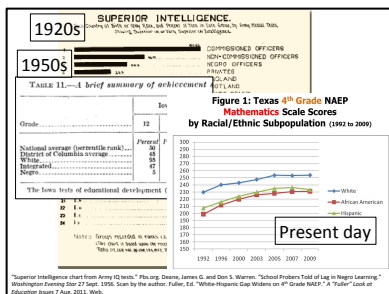
<sup>11</sup> A representative instance was reported by the *Star*: "James N. Saunders, principal of almost all-Negro Cardozo High School testified that none of the school's 500 tenth-graders qualified for a new 'honors' course being instituted in the city's high schools this fall. About 30 are in a college-prep course and 192 are in a general course. The rest are in a basic program for slow learners, he said." (Deane and Warren "Pupil Problems"). The trend was reversed in predominantly White schools, and similar reports of the racial breakdown of each track indicate that this was consistent across the district.

[In short, the logic of degradation facilitated re-segregation, and the central premise on which that logic was based—its foundation—was the classifying force of “achievement gap.” In other words, the idea of the gap emerged as the logical justification, the underlying premise, for re-segregation after *Brown*.]

This history offers a partial explanation for the the paradoxical operation of the gap observed by Cross: the inequitable structures that we seek to dismantle by speaking about the “achievement gap” are, in part, built upon that very notion. [If we subscribe to a performative view of language, we might even say that each time we utter the phrase, we reenact the logic by which Black students are targeted for exclusion from the best that schools have to offer.]

In this sense, at its scene of emergence, “achievement gap” was a kind of Trojan horse: it smuggled eugenic racial theories of white supremacy into the discourse of desegregation. The phrase had the trappings of race-neutrality, which was both disingenuous and central to its persuasive power. Perhaps most importantly, the narrative arc by which “achievement gap” facilitated re-segregation is far from unique. On the contrary, such stories constitute a veritable tradition in this nation’s public discourse.





I'd like to submit to you, today, the question of how current, well-intentioned gap-based discourse *replicates* this pattern, and to what effect. Has “achievement gap” undergone enough of a reversal since 1956 to have shed

the white supremacist assumptions that direct its force? The work of Cross, Hilliard, and Ladson-Billings would suggest that it has not. To be sure, chart after chart of disaggregated test scores *rhetorically* isolates students of color, students living in poverty, and students with disabilities, [separating them from unmarked—white, middle-class, non-disabled—students in the public imagination.] Clearly, our gap discourse enacts both “crisis” and “classification.” Some might dismiss this as mere semantics; indeed, I agree that it’s the *material* effects of such rhetorical isolation—the way it impacts the lived experience of students—that really matters.

In the 1920s, such rhetoric prevented many Eastern Europeans from escaping the holocaust. In 1956 Washington D.C., it denied Black students access to college-preparatory classes. How does our current invocation of achievement gaps, so often used as a rallying cry for equity, paradoxically isolate the students it scrutinizes? As we move forward, amidst many instrumental questions about how to better teach students, we must also consider an ethical question about the *language* we use in doing so. We must ask not only what the gap *means*, but also what it *does* to our students.