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Literature Review

Essential Question: *How do schools with limited resources interrupt the achievement gap between students?*

The history of race *is* the history of America. How we categorize each other based on outward appearance began with Columbus interacting and exploiting indigenous people and continues today with our struggle to properly place “mixed” race citizens. What is more tragic is how the role of race impacts the students in American schools. While students of European or Asian decent excel and are admitted to the college of their choice, Latino and African-American struggle to graduate high school. Although some progress is being made, the racialized achievement gap is the most serious problem facing our schools today.

Many Americans desire race to be a non-issue. Many Americans would like to think that when it comes to our institutions of learning, race does not and should not matter. However, as Michael Yates, an African-American journalist, explains in his essay in the Monthly Review, “I have always lived in the long shadow of race” (54). Racism in modern America is now much more subtle; the days of burning crosses and public lynchings are thankfully in the past. Contemporary racism may not include hatred, but is still destructive. People fail to understand the meaning of diversity, assuming it means different kinds of restaurants (Yates 54). Other Americans – usually White – decry the affirmative action programs that some historically exploited minority groups get in school and workplace settings, while ignoring their own skin based privilege (Yates 54).

As scholars, teachers and researchers focus more and more on the divide that separates Black and Latino students from their White and Asian counterparts we are able to paint a more complete picture as to why students of color disproportionately fail. Is the lack of meaningful opportunities? Or is the achievement gap systematic of something that begins prior to grade school? The answers, as is true in the social sciences, is multifaceted.

Recent research in merely providing African-American students with advanced placement classes shows us that there is something deeper going on (Anonymous 85). With AP classes the gatekeeper to college, the importance of these classes cannot be understated. However, what is very clear is that a student unprepared for the volume of work who is then required to pay for a high stakes exam is often a setup. As was explained in the in the Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, African-Americans are taking more AP classes (85). Unfortunately, these dedicated students are failing to pass the exam, which would give them an advantage with their high school GPA, while earning them college credit.

Further work on the literacy of students of color asks the question: would students be more interested in their school work if they read and wrote about people that looked like them (Simon 146)? English classes for generations have taught the “canon” – a long list of dead, white men. For a student who is turned off by learning from an early age, it is not surprising that reading and analyzing “MacBeth” is doomed to failure. But what about our shared culture? Is it important for *all* students to have read Shakespeare? Or is it more important for students to master literacy skills? As one researcher explains, “literacy does not occur in isolation nor is it neutral” (Simon 146).

Obviously the work to close the racialized achievement is far from over. What is hopeful is that there are teacher researchers out there who care enough not to put their collective heads in the sand, acting like race does not matter. Because it clearly does matter. And it will continue to matter until AP classes and our elite universities and colleges accurately look like the rest of the United States.

Works Cited

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Simon, Lisa. "Expanding Literacies: Teachers' Inquiry Research and Multi-genre Texts." English Education 39 (Jan. 2007): 146-152.

Yates, Michael. "The Long Shadow of Race." Monthly Review 58 (March 2007): 54-58.