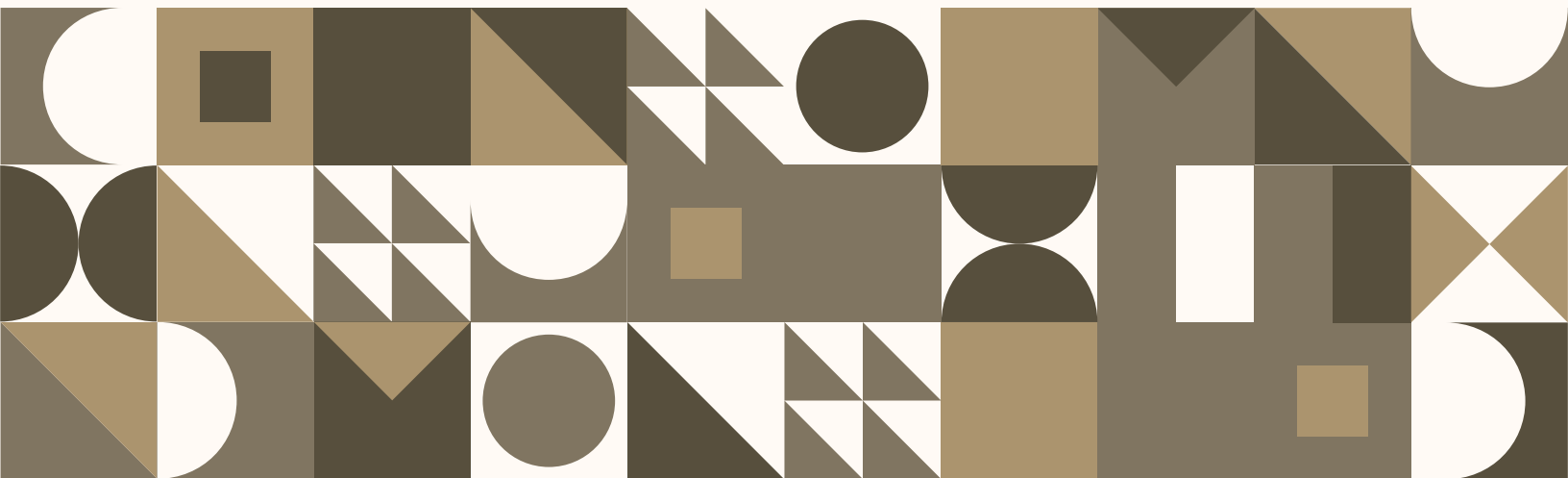




Institute on Race, Power
and Political Economy

The Color of Achievement:

NY Case Study Technical Report



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February 2024

Abstract

This research interrogates the disparities related to race, gender, and class within three critical components of New York City's public education used to establish core learning: the instructional framework, the curriculum content, and the standardized assessments. Focusing on the U.S. History high school course, this project maps the curriculum topics and the prioritization of learning embedded within the U.S. History Regents exam. It investigates education as a fundamental and civil right by highlighting the narratives and perspectives of priority that emerge within the state-wide standardized assessment. The research makes visible salient themes within the curriculum and testing used in New York, including enacted and espoused values, common law, racialized histories and hierarchies, and social capitalism.

The Color of Achievement data repository was developed to fill a void in existing practices and available data compilations. The coding scheme outlines how the data was aggregated, including the mechanisms used to identify and articulate the variables. The Color of Achievement Coding Scheme (COACS) compartmentalizes both gendered (e.g., male, female, non-binary) and racialized (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Latinx, Native Hawaiian, White) variables, paying particular attention to the iterations of time, sentiment, association, and prioritization existing within the contemporary curriculum. This type of data processing compilation allows for a more specific examination of variables and components of the teaching and learning process as it pertains to standardized assessments.

Preliminary descriptive findings from these data reveal major disparities within the prioritized narratives of the U.S. History course. The findings provide cause to explore widely accepted definitions of achievement and the curriculum content that sustains those definitions.

This technical report is meant to provide a context of the phenomenon via the mandates that both communicate the curriculum topics to which students are exposed and the narratives of importance that surface in the mandatory annual assessment. Underscoring the need for this new dataset, the report begins with an introduction to the issue as it is contextualized in the greater narrative of teaching and learning. The documents used for analysis are reviewed in the materials section of this report, followed by the methodology utilized to generate the data set.

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Introduction

Contemporary discourse on educational achievement reveals inequalities predominantly among racial and socioeconomic lines. Racialized achievement disparities in the American public school system are pervasive (Cabral-Gouveia et al., 2023, 2023; Gillborn, 2008; Horsford & Grosland, 2013; Schissel & Hornberger, 2023; Taylor, 2006; Valencia, 2015). While concretely conceptualized with the publication of the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966), comparative achievement rankings were leveraged as mechanisms to stratify intelligence before the inception of this country (Reese, 2013).¹

Racialized achievement disparities have been linked to higher education access, employment opportunities, and wealth accumulation limitations. Scholarly research suggests that under-resourced school settings correlate to diminished student performance (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Jimenez-Castellanos, 2010). Such performance deficits directly affect the competitiveness of college admission applications, playing a pivotal role in access to higher education. Although higher education and vocational training have been promoted as avenues to elevate income for students of color, reliance on standardized test scores and vocational credentials as surrogates for professional skill and predictors of job success remains prevalent (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Giani et al., 2022). The overemphasis on these narrow evaluative metrics contributes to job market stratification, thereby intensifying the wage disparities that disproportionately impact minority communities. Occupational segregation aggravates these wage discrepancies even further (Biu, 2021).

Current policy initiatives aimed at mitigating racialized disparities have gravitated toward culturally responsive curricula as a strategy to improve academic outcomes amongst children of color. However, these efforts frequently overlook the underlying definitions and conceptual frameworks that forge the current understanding of achievement. The achievement gap is the result of a series of policy choices (Williams Peterson, 2023). The persistence of the disparities is a testament to a tangled legacy of policy decisions stretching back and connected to the founding of this country. During intervening decades, countless policy initiatives have been enculturated into school systems with the goal of improving outcomes for marginalized populations. Despite varied efforts, a pernicious gap remains (Armor et al., 2018; Baker et al., 2016; Hanushek et al., 2019a, 2019b; Rothstein, 2015; Welner & Carter, 2013).

The current attempts of modern policy cannot dismantle the knotted structural and institutional stratification that underlies the educational disparities because of their limited scope. This shortfall is not only attributable to a foundational flaw in the problem's definition, rendering the resultant interventions

“The Achievement Gap is the result of a series of policy choices.”

¹ Although colonists gauged student learning via oral performances, the written form of assessments became widely implemented in the mid-nineteenth century (Reese, 2013).

intrinsically inadequate, but also a failure to examine the teaching and learning cycle and the role assessments should play in determining student achievement. The comparative nature of our current definition of achievement fails to account for the historical legacy of resource deprivation, legalized illiteracy, and cultural bias.² This fallacy continues to impact millions of American children, setting them on a trajectory to become undervalued adults in the workforce.

Standardized assessments shape our definitions of intelligence. The limited structure first defines and then concretizes what it means to be intelligent, sometimes relying on narrow criteria such as memory recall, speed of processing, and the ability to write concise and cohesive statements. The established assessment tools determine the most important skills and knowledge that students should acquire. After students take part in evaluations, the results reveal the extent to which they have mastered essential knowledge, as determined by the curriculum standards. These outcomes reveal a combination of not only the students' ability to remember what they have been taught but also the key topics to which students were exposed during the course. As a form of accountability, standardized assessments for student learning skew the value of knowledge because they originate from a

limited definition, grounded in one form of performance-- the written assessment rather than practical demonstrations or portfolio assessments. In some instances, seemingly minor historical concepts, such as the "Do-Nothing presidents," are given undue prominence, demonstrating how standardized tests can influence the perceived importance of knowledge.³ The suitability for all students becomes an important issue because the composition of these assessments fails to accommodate students who are better suited to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in other modalities. Despite the longstanding and obvious repercussions, the United States has become a forerunner in implementing and practicing standardization to maintain accountability (Kornhaber, 2008; Linn, 2000; Volante, 2005; Wiliam, 2010). The United States has continued to influence Western countries such as Great Britain, New Zealand, and Canada (J. Anderson, 2007; S. Anderson et al., 2007; Gillborn, 2008; Henry et al., 2020; Horsford & Grosland, 2013; Welner & Carter, 2013).

This research builds on the approach of *The Color of Wealth* publications (Aja et al., 2019; Biu et al., 2021; De La Cruz-Viesca et al., 2016; Kijakazi et al., 2016; Muñoz et al., 2015) in that it examines common, often taken for granted, conceptualizations of structural inequities and exposes intricacies at play that

2 Since 1966 when the term first appeared in a national report published by the U.S. Government, the "achievement gap" articulated a comparative lens and defined the way that we conceptualize success. The Equality of Educational Opportunity report, more frequently referred to as the Coleman Report, was mandated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and included data from an estimated 650,000 students and teachers in over 3000 schools. A landmark study, the Coleman Report was commissioned by Congress with the intent of forwarding President Johnson's civil rights legislation. The "achievement gap" was a term meant to describe the state of education outcomes for Black students who attended school during times of de facto segregation. In fact, the Coleman Report set out to explain "opportunities in the public schools for minority group Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans, Oriental-Americans and American Indians as compared with opportunities for majority group Whites" (Coleman et al., 1966).

3 For example, the topic of "Do-Nothing" Presidents surfaces as a multiple-choice question for students in a series of different exams. Out of nearly 850 topics, the do-nothing presidents have thus been prioritized as a concept that students should know and understand. Essentially, the exam created the level of importance of this part of history.

manifest in varying degrees of racialized stratification. Leveraging New York as its initial case study, this research focuses on the component of the teaching and learning cycle that works to quantify student achievement in U.S. History. These data are particularly timely and relevant as New York has engaged in updating the mandatory standardized assessments for this subject area, and New York City has embarked upon a pilot of a Black Studies curriculum.

Why focus on the content of the standardized assessments in history? The history standardized assessments both articulate a currency of knowledge and provide a longitudinal examination of prioritized narratives within the curriculum. The inextricable link between mandatory assessments and teaching practice has long been studied (Barnes et al., 2000; Bradford & Braaten, 2018; Segall, 2003). Within the last three years, the topic of American history has been a focal point of legislation and school curriculum reform. This research supports the longstanding practice of prioritizing specific information and narratives to the fore.

Materials

This data set was composed using three distinct documents: the New York State Grades 9-12 Social Studies Framework (revised February 2017), the New York City 9-12 Social Studies Scope and Sequence (2014-2015), and The University of the State of New York Regents High School Examination United States History and Government exams (2016-2023). These three documents serve as the foundation upon which the U.S. History course is taught statewide.

SOCIAL STUDIES FRAMEWORK

Published in 2014, the Social Studies Framework was authorized by the New York State Education Department with the intention of preparing “students for college, careers, and civic life with courses that are rigorous and aligned to the New York State Learning Standards for Social Studies.”⁴

The **Key Ideas** are the central organizing feature for each grade. Key Ideas represent the essential and enduring understandings that should be the focus of teaching and learning for each grade.

Content Specifications identify particular social studies content that helps to illuminate the conceptual understandings, providing examples within the context of “Student will...” statements in order to suggest broad instructional activities.

6.5 Comparative Classical Civilizations in the Eastern Hemisphere (ca. 600 B.C.E. - ca. 600 C.E.)

As complex societies and civilizations change over time, the political and economic structures evolve. A golden age may be indicated when there is an extended period of time that is peaceful, prosperous, and demonstrates great cultural achievements. (Standards: 2, 3, 5; Themes: ID, TCC, GEO, SOC, GOV, CIV)*

6.5a Geographic factors influenced the development of classical civilizations and their political structures.

- Students will locate the classical civilizations on a map and identify geographic factors that influenced the extent of their boundaries; locate their cities on a map and identify their political structures.
- Students will compare and contrast the similarities and differences of the Chinese (Qin, Han) and Greco-Roman classical civilizations by examining religion, jobs specialization, cities, government, language/record keeping system, technology, and social hierarchy.

Conceptual Understandings are more specific statements that support each Key Idea. Conceptual Understandings scaffold toward robust understanding of the key idea.

Framework, page 13.

⁴ This quotation was obtained from the NYSED website on February 18, 2024.
<https://www.nysed.gov/curriculum-instruction/k-12-social-studies-framework>

The Social Studies Framework purports a mission to foster civically engaged citizens. The framework describes the content of the course by articulating specific focal points, including people, places, and ideas, that should be emphasized. In New York State, students typically take United States History and Government during their third year (Grade 11). The year-long course yields two of the forty-four required credits for graduation and is one of two social studies exam options to obtain a Regents diploma.

The framework details eleven chronological key ideas that teachers are expected to cover in class. Those eleven topics each have multiple conceptual understandings and content specifications that provide detailed suggestions for student tasks related to learning. Ambitious in scope, the framework provides literary works, court cases, people, doctrines, and ideologies that teachers are expected to cover. Plainly stated, this document provides the state standards that students are expected to master.

NEW YORK CITY 9-12 SOCIAL STUDIES SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

Developed specifically for New York City, the Social Studies Scope and Sequence acts as a pacing guide. It first compartmentalizes the conceptual understandings into units and then provides a suggested schedule for instruction. Drawing from the framework, the scope and sequence pose essential questions for each unit and inquiries that can drive the instruction.

“The primary purpose of Social Studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world (adapted from the National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS] definition of Social Studies).”

By unit, the scope and sequence detail topics of discovery in concise statements, with no indication of specific curriculum materials to use. Teachers work at the discretion of their governing entities to acquire and use instructional materials. Topics such as, “European disease decimate Native Americans” and “Jackie Robinson” are provided as sources to guide daily instruction. There are nearly 850 topics to cover during the course of the class. The Social Studies Scope and Sequence is the curriculum outline, revealing all matters of relevance that should be taught for this class and could potentially appear on the final standardized assessment.

REGENTS HIGH SCHOOL EXAMINATION: UNITED STATES HISTORY AND GOVERNMENT

Most students participate in Regents exams to obtain graduation eligibility.

While other pathways include alternative assessments or portfolio compilation, the Regents exams are the most frequently leveraged path toward commencement. In history, high school students are given two options for a Regents diploma: the U.S. History and Government assessment or the Global History and Geography. Assessments are typically offered three times per year: January, June, and August.

The U.S. History and Government assessment is composed of three main parts. Part one consists of a set of multiple-choice questions. The number of questions remained consistent for the majority of the data set. Students were required to answer 50 questions. In 2023, the number of test items decreased to twenty-eight. Part two requires students to respond to short essay questions after reviewing historical documents, focusing primarily on the student's ability to decipher relationships and synthesize their claims in a historical context. Part three, the civic literacy essay, requires document analysis and a written response. This section gauges a student's ability to analyze historical documents from multiple sources and develop a concise essay.

Methods

An overarching goal of this data set is to create the opportunity for a comprehensive analysis that leverages the expansive variety of intersecting sources. The frameworks and guidelines that drive instruction are placed in conversation with one another to deeply investigate the interrelated dynamics of the teaching and learning process. Information, or variables, from each of the three documents are combined in one comprehensive data set that allows for a mixed-method analysis.

VARIABLES FROM THE SOCIAL STUDIES FRAMEWORK

The key idea designations function as variables within the dataset. These concepts surface similarly in the Scope and Sequence. Of paramount importance, these ideas embody the core standards that guide educators' instruction. Essentially, these statements communicate the broad knowledge students are expected to gain. In addition, the data set includes the terminology for conceptual understandings, such as the standard numbers, which are linked to each topic encountered by students. These designations are invaluable when cross-referencing the subject and topic matters as they appear within the multiple-choice questions.

VARIABLES FROM THE SOCIAL STUDIES SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

The Social Studies Scope and Sequence document outlines a structured timetable, offering recommended durations of instructional time for each subject

addressed in the curriculum. These time allocations are quantified within the dataset as the 'instructional time' variable for each entry. The specific educational subjects derived from the Scope and Sequence are recorded as individual observations. Thus, each entry corresponds to a particular subject that students are expected to master over the academic year. Structuring the data in this manner enables a detailed analysis of each study topic in relation to various educational variables.

VARIABLES FROM THE U.S. HISTORY AND GOVERNMENT REGENTS HIGH SCHOOL EXAM

A longitudinal set of variables was derived from the U.S. History and Government Regents examinations. The dataset utilizes multiple-choice questions and their respective answers from these exams, spanning from 2010 to 2023, to analyze the specific conceptual understandings being evaluated and the particular topics addressed in each test. This information was encoded using a deductive approach, given that the categorization framework was pre-defined and applied to the analysis.

ADDITIONAL VARIABLES

The data was methodically categorized to reflect dimensions such as race, gender, societal role, and the tone of historical narratives, thereby examining how U.S. History topics are framed and taught. For instance, at the beginning of the academic year, there is an emphasis on enriching students' comprehension of conflict and resistance, illustrated by

events like the Powhatan rebellions and the French and Indian War (Powhatan rebellions, Pequot War, Mystic Massacre, King Philip's War, French and Indian War). The COACS dataset identifies variables that encapsulate the individuals' power dynamics, race, and gender within these historical events.

By quantifying the occurrence of these topics in Regents examinations, the dataset provides insights into the representation of these narratives and their interplay within standardized assessments. This approach, which is not widely adopted in current academic discourse, is instrumental for thoroughly evaluating the educational cycle from instruction to student learning outcomes.

Some topics covered in the U.S. History course can neither be racialized nor gendered. For example, students are expected to understand the geography and the development of the American colonies. Topics such as these are classified without racial or gendered classifications.

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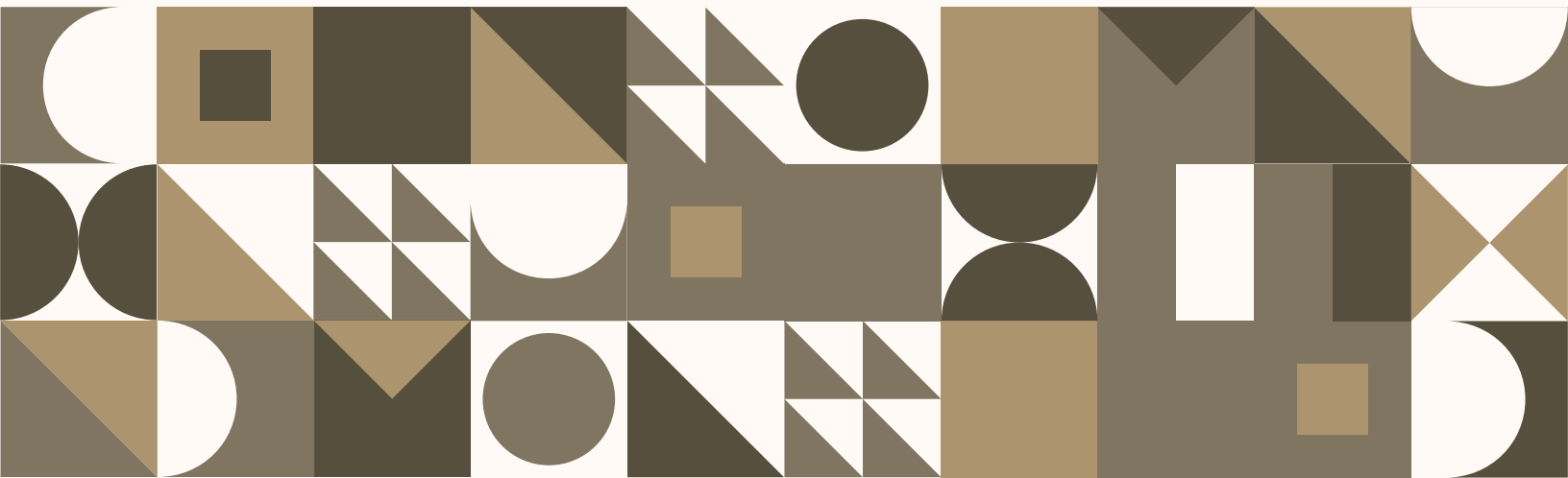
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