Scientific Research Publishing

Creative Education, 2025, 16(3), 268-283
https://www.scirp.org/journal/ce
ISSN Online: 2151-4771
ISSN Print: 2151-4755

Addressing the Achievement Gap through Differentiation in the Arts

Eleanore Ave

Department of Graduate Studies, The Art of Education University, Osage, USA
Email: eleanoreave@gmail.com

How to cite this paper: Ave, E. (2025). Addressing the Achievement Gap through Differentiation in the Arts. *Creative Education, 16,* 268-283.
https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2025.163017

Received: January 29, 2025
Accepted: March 7, 2025
Published: March 10, 2025

Abstract

This literature review examines the impact of the perpetuated achievement gap in American schools, with a specific lens on high-poverty schools and the arts. It scrutinizes factors including racial bias, classroom instruction, and school culture as they relate to student achievement. Additionally, it looks closely at middle school student achievement and how apathy influences effort and engagement in the classroom. To address these challenges, the article highlights the value of differentiation and its ability to transform student performance and mindset toward education. A specific look is taken at student-centered arts classrooms that value student autonomy and curiosity.

Keywords

Content Differentiation, Differentiated Instruction, Engagement, Intrinsic Motivation, Student Autonomy, Student-Centered Learning

1. Introduction

On May 17, 1954, history was made. After decades of legal battles, the Supreme Court upheld that segregation was unconstitutional and therefore illegal and that "every child, regardless of race, deserved a first-class education" (Library of Congress, n.d.). Despite this victory, minority students have continued to suffer academically, consistently underperforming their white counterparts due to systemic factors, including racial bias, socioeconomic status, and educational quality (Fenzel & O'Brennan, 2007; García & Weiss, 2020; Moore et al., 2005; Morgan, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a, 2023b). Addressing the achievement gap is not just about educational equity but also social justice.

Black and brown students are disproportionately faced with factors that contribute to decreased engagement and investment in education. With growing chal-

lenges threatening to widen the gap, educators must think creatively to remedy this persistent issue and best serve all students (Renzulli, 2022). Past approaches to reform educational pedagogy have done little to diminish the gap, so it is time to try something radically different. Rather than look at methods that highlight learning similarities, it is time to celebrate differences. Innovative practices that address each student's interests are proven to increase engagement in learning (Barbara, 2010; Roth, 2016). Every student has unique needs, and academic practices must evolve to respond to them.

The literature discussed in this paper will explore specific factors contributing to academic achievement, including school climate and current events. It will also consider factors that improve and harm student engagement, such as apathy, curiosity, and autonomy. This chapter will conclude by discussing elements of differentiation, such as implementation for different student demographics, content differentiation, and student-centered learning in an art classroom.

2. Academic Achievement and the Achievement Gap

Test scores, grade point average, and graduation rate decide academic achievement. Despite the illusion that all students are afforded equal opportunities, the achievement gap in America has remained a persistent and evolving issue. Research has shown that social class is the most significant contributor to educational success (García & Weiss, 2020). Students with a lower socioeconomic status consistently underperform those with a high status. These performance gaps begin early in a student's education and rarely decrease as the student progresses through their schooling (García & Weiss, 2020). Many high-poverty schools are located in urban settings and educate a high population of Black and Brown (Hispanic, American Indian, Alaska Native) students (Assari et al., 2021). In 2021, the percentage of students attending high-poverty schools was highest among Hispanic students at 38%, followed by Black students at 37% (NCES, 2023b). According to The National Center for Education Statistics (2023a), Black and Brown students are consistently outperformed by White students in reading and math. While many factors contribute to this gap, the most significant is the lower quality of education found in high-poverty schools. High-poverty schools are often located in urban settings and struggle with insufficient funding, minimal resources, and inexperienced staff that struggle to establish a safe and supportive school environment. These challenges undermine the importance of academic achievement and hinder student progress.

2.1. School Climate

Students who perform well in school feel invested in their education. To become invested in learning, students must think that the school environment is welcoming and supportive (Assari et al., 2021). A supportive school has teachers who are invested in their students and make learning enjoyable. They get to know who their students are and create a sense of belonging in their classrooms. Research

has shown that students who perceive their school as enjoyable and fair had significantly higher GPAs than those who did not (Fenzel & O'Brennan, 2007). When students feel seen and valued by their teachers, they are more likely to engage in learning and participate in school activities.

One factor that has been linked to increased enjoyment in school is arts education. Students invested in the arts have higher graduation rates and test scores (Americans for the Arts, n.d.). Despite this advantage to arts education, Black and Brown students receive less access to quality art instruction. Underperforming schools do not prioritize extracurriculars because they focus on improving core academics. High-poverty schools consistently have lower reading and math scores, which puts opportunities for joyful learning through extracurriculars on the back burner (NCES, 2023a). Fine arts classes are among the first subjects replaced with math and English classes (Americans for the Arts, n.d.). This pattern suggests that students in low-income schools are afforded fewer extracurricular opportunities like the arts, making students more apathetic toward their learning, resulting in lower academic achievement overall.

Low-income schools historically provide lower-quality instruction (Assari et al., 2021; Bradley, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Teachers with more experience and certifications positively impact student performance. According to research conducted by Assari et al. (2021), "Schools with a higher percentage of minority students are more likely to have lower qualified and experienced teachers with higher rates of teacher turnover" (p. 3). This turnover is caused by new teachers starting work in low-income schools to gain experience and leaving to work at higher-performing schools once they gain their footing. Because of this turnover, low-income schools hire underqualified applicants who are more likely to provide lower-quality instruction.

Moreover, there needs to be specific training to prepare teachers for the unique needs of low-income students (Bradley, 2022). This lack of training results in poverty and racial biases that impact instruction, which lowers the rigor for students. A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.) found that "when measured against a common test, "an 'A' student in a high-poverty school would be about a 'C' student in a low-poverty school". This grade difference demonstrates the drop in rigor that students in low-income schools face. Lower-quality instruction and poor school climate contribute to lower academic achievement among students of color.

2.2. Under and Over-Identifying Students of Color

The same biases and inferior training impact general education practices and special education. Research has shown that students of color are more likely to be identified for special education. The U.S. Department of Education (2015) found that Black students between the ages of 6 and 21 were twice as likely to be identified as having emotional and intellectual disabilities than any other racial demographic. Despite special education aiming to help students, special education

classroom environments are more likely to have behavioral concerns that can disrupt learning (Morgan, 2020). This environment is just one possible concern of overidentification that impacts students of color. Even so, research shows that students of color who need special education are less likely to receive it. A study done among 4th graders with reading disabilities found that 74% of white students were receiving specialized instruction while only 44% of black students were receiving services (Morgan & Farkas, 2018). This discrepancy suggests that there is a racial bias in disability identification that disproportionately targets students of color but does not provide adequate services to address them. Underidenification and lack of services harm students and establish distrust between educators and the families they serve.

On the opposite side of the spectrum is gifted education. Gifted students of color are more likely to progress through their education because cultural differences between students result in gifted traits manifesting in different ways (Moore et al., 2005). To accurately identify these students, educators must be culturally aware of what traits their students will exhibit, and often, educators lack the proper training to accurately identify gifted students of color (Moore et al., 2005). These cultural differences, which can cause a gifted student of color to exhibit different behaviors than a gifted white student, may be overlooked. Another contributing factor to underidentification is racial biases promoting deficit thinking (Ford et al., 2002). Gifted students of color who are underachievers are more likely to go unidentified because educators incorrectly assume they are performing to their full potential. This misconception comes down to racial biases educators hold in believing that students of color cannot achieve as much as white students.

Although they fall on opposite ends of the scale, students with disabilities and gifted students face similar barriers. In both cases, students are more likely to become misidentified. In low-income schools, teachers assigned to specialized education roles often need more experience and training to best service their students (Moore et al., 2005; Morgan, 2020). This inadequate service contributes to the continued achievement gap and distrust between families and educators. When students and families do not feel they can trust educators, student engagement and performance suffer.

2.3. Current Events and Their Impact on Achievement

In addition to the historical issues that have impacted academic achievement, it is essential to consider how current events have affected student performance. The increase in technology has negatively impacted student focus and mental health (Owoseje, 2023). Children have unlimited access to the internet through phones and computers. While this provides the opportunity for learning advancements, it also increases the risk of distraction. The temptation of technology has made it more difficult for students to focus on schoolwork (Owoseje, 2023). Besides technology being a distraction, social media has also changed the criteria for entertainment (Owoseje, 2023). Adolescents are addicted to the instant gratification for

joy that their phones provide. This addiction makes motivating students in the classroom more challenging than ever because they have endless content to stimulate them in the palms of their hands.

The recent global impact of COVID-19 and virtual learning has caused a decline in academic performance across the globe (Lee et al., 2021; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a). Students and educators have had to adapt to challenges during virtual learning that have impacted academic success. A study focused on a South Korean middle school found a significant decrease in academic achievement and student engagement due to implemented safety measures, including virtual learning and a delayed school year (Lee et al., 2021). This study focused on a school with a history of high academic achievement. The ramifications of virtual learning on underperforming schools are even more extreme. Reading and math scores have declined in the U.S. since the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, with students of color exhibiting steeper declines (NCES, 2023a). This decline means the achievement gap is increasing, with lower-performing students dropping more significantly than high-performers.

Finally, academic achievement is being challenged by a decline in public school funding. Nation-wide economic struggles have caused extreme educational impacts in urban school districts. In one of the most diverse school districts in the country, Boston public schools, enrollment has decreased by 12% since 2019 (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.). This decline has resulted in school closures and reduced resources in a school district with a significant achievement gap (Turken, 2024). The end of pandemic funding is even more detrimental to public schooling. Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) grants distributed due to the pandemic are set to end in September 2024, which will cause a massive hit to school budgets (Sullivan, 2024). While ESSAR funding can be used for a broad range of school applications, many schools have been using funding to hire additional staff to respond to the achievement gap caused by COVID-19. Budgets have a considerable impact on art classrooms as well due to the consumable nature of art supplies. With the funding ends, schools cannot afford these additional roles and supplies, which impacts academic performance.

3. Student Engagement

Educators must focus on new ways to respond to this perpetuated achievement gap. Arguably, the most significant way to improve student performance is to focus on student engagement (Renzulli, 2022). Engagement allows students to be an active participant in learning. Strong engagement has decreased dropout rates, improved academic performance, and increased graduation rates (Fredricks, 2011). Engagement is influenced by the students' motivation to do well and can be intrinsic or extrinsic. Extrinsic motivators, which rely upon rewards like grades and prizes, can benefit some students, but research shows that extrinsic motivators can hinder creativity (Jaquith, 2011). In an art classroom, students must feel

motivated to create art because they want to and are intrinsically motivated to do so. The following sections will discuss factors that harm and help students to become motivated to engage in their learning.

3.1. Apathy in Adolescents

When discussing motivation and engagement, it is valuable to consider their associated challenges. Demotivation refers to a "feeling of not caring or a lethargic attitude toward learning," which causes students to become disengaged and apathetic in school (Graves, 2018: p. 28). Apathy can be present in any student and negatively impacts a student's ability to participate and succeed in school. Middle school students are particularly susceptible to apathy, and those with lower economic status are still more susceptible (Graves, 2018; Marshall, 2008). Apathetic students can present many traits that negatively impact learning, such as anger, fatigue, distraction, and antisocial, to name a few (Marshall, 2008). Apathy causes a disconnect from education, leading to behavioral problems and poor academic performance. The higher likelihood of apathy among low-income middle school students suggests that an apathetic mindset contributes to the continued achievement gap.

Apathy tends to develop in adolescents because of the life changes that are happening to them. According to Smith, Cowie, and Blades (1998: p. 670), "Adolescence is often a stressful period during development because it involves a pivotal transition from childhood dependency to adulthood independence". This transitional phase significantly affects emotional and mental states, contributing to motivation. Children are often motivated to do well in school during childhood because they extrinsically want to do well for their parents (Graves, 2018). Once entering adolescence, children begin to isolate themselves and act more selfishly, risking the extrinsic motivation to perform well in school. Without the intrinsic motivation to learn, adolescents may perform poorly in school. Many students experience a drop in academic achievement when they begin adolescence, and this academic struggle causes apathy to set in (Graves, 2018). Students must develop proper motivation to maintain their engagement in school and rebound from their struggles.

Apathy, in conjunction with adolescence, also has a significant impact on self-esteem. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief that they can achieve something (Graves, 2018). As children experience academic struggles in early adolescence, they experience decreased self-esteem. They lose the confidence that they can do well in school, and as apathy sets in, they lose the motivation to try (Graves, 2018). This lack of motivation is especially true in art education. Looking at art education from a scientific view during early adolescence, developmentally, children are fixated on copying, observation, and details and believe that there is one correct standard for making art (College Board, 2012). If a child is not confident in their abilities, they risk abandoning art-making altogether. It is more enticing for an adolescent to pursue a field in which they already present natural abilities

rather than try to improve an area of interest such as drawing.

Additionally, children who begin art education later have even more significant challenges in overcoming apathy. Children are more willing to experiment and express creative whims during early childhood rather than judge artistic skills (College Board, 2012). This developmental window allows children to develop foundational skills without the expectation of perfection, allowing for significant motivation and growth in art skills during elementary school. Adolescents who begin their art education later in their schooling, such as middle school, are more likely to give up and develop a fixed mindset about their artistic abilities because they did not experience growth at a younger age. They have the mentality of a teenager, which demands perfection or frustration, but the skills of someone younger simply because they did not receive art education. This phenomenon, which causes people to insist art is a stagnant natural born ability incorrectly, is the same one that causes most people to abandon art and remain in the aptly named 'decision stage' of artistic development (Fussell, n.d.). While apathy causes problems across all educational content, it is especially damaging to artists who rely entirely on curiosity and motivation.

3.2. Curiosity

To combat apathy, educators must learn how to motivate their students to become engaged. Intrinsic motivation is "inherent curiosity that compels one to want to learn" (Graves, 2018: p. 27). Teachers bring enthusiasm back into the classroom by cultivating a sense of curiosity in their students. Two components of a curious classroom are tinkering and modeling (Brusic & Steinmacher, 2015). Tinkering allows students to play and interact with materials without rigid structures. Tinkering is essential because it creates a sense of play in learning, contributing to a positive learning environment and developing creative thinking. Modeling is a valuable tool for demonstrating thinking to students. It allows students to learn how to think creatively or scientifically by watching the instructor do it. Modeling and tinkering are often only discussed in a science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) setting. Still, there are so many benefits to employing these skills in all classrooms (Brusic & Steinmacher, 2015).

Encouraging play in an art classroom improves self-expression and engagement and can lead to students developing a genuine interest in the subjects they interact with (Balke, 1997; Jaquith, 2011). The teacher's role is to make space for play and encourage independent exploration (Balke, 1997; Jaquith, 2011). Tinkering and play make learning more enjoyable, which is essential to encouraging engagement.

The final component of curiosity is accepting failure (Brusic & Steinmacher, 2015). Exploring new materials and ideas inevitably leads to success. Teaching students to persevere through failure is a valuable skill that leads to lifelong learning. Children who develop a fear of failure experience life-long challenges, such as choosing a career path (Brusic & Steinmacher, 2015). Learning to accept and grow from failure nurtures curiosity because children learn that failure is a part of life.

Curiosity builds confidence and enthusiasm for learning.

Many art approaches are based on tinkering and play, such as play or process-based learning and teaching for artistic behavior (TAB) learning (VanDerMolen, 2023). These classrooms allow students to explore materials freely, substantially impacting student engagement. These approaches can have a significant impact on student motivation in the classroom. Still, they can be ineffective for students without the foundational skills to successfully create art independently. It is crucial, then, for the instructor to consider the needs of their students before deciding to implement an approach that primarily targets students' curiosity.

3.3. Autonomy

Curiosity is a valuable skill that increases engagement but differs from interest. Curiosity is a general trait that is the same in everyone, while interest is personal and relies on the individual (Pekrun, 2019). A painting class may pique a group's curiosity but only a few individuals' genuine interest. Personal interests are self-directed and produce the intrinsic motivation to learn more (Jaquith, 2011). This approach can be described in the classroom as autonomous learning, which allows students to choose what they want to learn based on their interests (Jaquith, 2011). Allowing for autonomous learning builds intrinsic motivation because students are in charge of their learning. This independence can be precious among adolescents transitioning into an independent mindset. In an art classroom, students are far more engaged when they choose the skill they are learning rather than one the teacher decides. Autonomy directly affects engagement and academic performance because the student wants to learn.

Autonomous learning also improves self-esteem and apathy (Assari et al., 2021; Graves, 2018; Tomlinson, 2008). Autonomy encourages student voice, which allows students to feel like active participants in their learning. When students can choose their content, they feel more connected to it and exhibit more enthusiasm (Graves, 2018). This phenomenon can be seen during extracurricular activities like athletics and the arts. Despite these activities often not having a grade or tangible reward, students thrive because they choose to do something that interests them. This intrinsic motivator can be powerful enough to extrinsically motivate students to perform well in other academic areas so they can continue to engage in preferred activities (Wretman, 2017). Allowing students to make choices and control their education is powerful and has effects that extend across their education.

Moreover, autonomous learning allows students to focus on personal goals rather than competing with their peers, positively affecting self-esteem (Assari et al., 2021). Students learn to customize their education by prioritizing personal ambition, leading to more extraordinary personal accomplishments. These students do not focus on comparing themselves to others because they are satisfied with their achievements. This satisfaction is incredibly impactful in an art classroom where students are more susceptible to fixed mindsets because of the misconception that

art is a talent rather than a learnable skill.

Underperforming schools may see autonomy as a hurdle, particularly if their school culture is poor (Assari et al., 2021). Inferior culture can strain student-teacher relationships, negatively impacting student voice. These schools must take the time to build productive relationships so they can serve their student body. Educators can give interest surveys, host joy events, and regularly engage in conversations with their students to build the trust and respect necessary for strong relationships. Autonomy is vital in encouraging student voice and improving engagement (Jaquith, 2011). Students who feel in control of their learning perform better academically, are more fulfilled in their educational careers, and are better prepared for life afterward.

4. Differentiation

Autonomy focuses on the needs of the individual, challenging the one-size-fits-all approach in education. This approach falls within the realm of differentiation. Differentiation refers to various classroom strategies that modify and accommodate curriculum to reach all learners (Reis & Renzulli, 2018). Differentiation can be divided into five unique domains: content, instructional strategies, classroom, products, and teacher (Reis & Renzulli, 2018). Each bucket focuses on adjusting a particular aspect of education to help students access learning. For example, a classroom with differentiated learning strategies may encourage some students to work independently while others work in a group. This same classroom might present content in various ways to best suit student learning styles and meet their needs. A classroom that embraces differentiation sees student differences as assets rather than hindrances (Carolan & Guinn, 2007). Students are led to the same learning objective, but the path to get there is more flexible. A differentiated classroom celebrates individuality and allows students to develop learning strategies beyond the classroom.

In addition to in-class initiatives, schools can play a significant role in differentiation by providing enrichment opportunities beyond the expected scope of the classroom curriculum (Reis & Renzulli, 2018). Enrichment, a unique aspect of differentiation, is not confined to the classroom but extends to clubs and events that engage students outside of school. This opportunity to explore personal interests beyond the classroom is a powerful tool for reducing student apathy and improving engagement in school (Assari et al., 2021; Graves, 2018; Wretman, 2017). Enrichment can take shape in an after-school club that teaches advanced skills like sewing or provides additional support to elevate skills learned in the classroom, like a portraiture class. By offering these enrichment opportunities, schools can foster a love for learning and encourage students to take ownership of their education. Differentiation is not an easy way to teach. It is often highly complicated for instructors to develop and implement, but teaching has never been about the easy path. Differentiation is best if educators and schools reach all students and provide a comprehensive learning experience.

4.1. Differentiation for All Students

Historically, differentiation has only been widely discussed in special education. It is considered a way to respond to learning deficits in students with disabilities but never as an approach for all students (Strogilos et al., 2017). This history can be attributed to the American Disabilities Act, which legally requires modified policies and practices necessary for students with disabilities to make progress in their education as outlined in an individualized education plan (IEP) (Massachusetts Office on Disability, n.d.). Using differentiation as a purely remedial approach limits its impact on education. All students can benefit from personalized instruction. The purpose of differentiation is not to make sure a student master's information but rather to create lifelong learners (Tomlinson, 2008). Using differentiation as a reactive approach to students with disabilities rather than a responsive approach to the unique needs of students diminishes its value and reach.

Even in cases where differentiation is implemented with different demographics of students, it is generalized and less effective. In an expansive study on the use of differentiation for gifted students, it was found that while districts discussed various methods of differentiation, "only 3% of the districts described any curricular and instructional differentiation that took place on a personal level, group differentiation dominating the sample" (Olenchak, 2001: p. 189). As the name suggests, differentiation should consider each student's differences, not their similarities. A study conducted to find students' preferences regarding differentiation among gifted and general education students found "no single item or form of differentiation was unanimously adored," which suggests the error in group differentiation (Kanevsky, 2011: p. 286). Every student has different interests and needs and can benefit from personalized differentiation.

4.2. Content Differentiation

The need for differentiation that considers each student's interests and needs is evident (Kanevsky, 2011; Olenchak, 2001; Strogilos et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2008). In Kenevsky's study, which surveyed students on their preferred method of differentiation, most students preferred pursuing their interests (Kanevsky, 2011). This strategy falls under the category of content differentiation, which targets students' personal needs and interests. While a seemingly impossible task, educators can make the process more efficient by employing technology and student surveys (Reis & Renzulli, 2018; Renzulli, 2022). Using these tools will streamline differentiation and make it practical for every classroom.

The benefits of content differentiation are numerous. Research shows that when students are interested in what they are learning, they are more enthusiastic about learning and engaged in school (Fredricks, 2011; Graves, 2018; Jaquith, 2011; Renzulli, 2022). Pursuing personal interests directly challenges apathy and gives many students a personal investment in their education. These interests should not be limited to extracurricular activities but integrated into the school day through personalized instruction (Renzulli, 2022). In addition to developing

intrinsic motivation, content differentiation allows teachers to build trust with their students (Tomlinson, 2008). When teachers take the time to get to know their students as people, trust is built between them, contributing to a supportive learning environment.

Content differentiation in an art classroom is essential for meeting students where they are. Suppose the instructor, for example, wants to teach about portraiture. In that case, they can differentiate content by providing various levels of instruction depending on student ability and a choice of material. This can be taken further by considering individual needs. Perhaps a student is uncomfortable with drawing themselves. The instructor could allow the student to choose their subject and help them select a subject that interests them, such as an athlete or pet. While this example provides a more structured example of choice-based learning, it still demonstrates the value of differentiation in engaging all students.

Albert Einstein once said, "Education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think" (1921). Differentiated instruction allows students to prioritize thinking and show their ability as learners, thereby allowing for more accurate diagnoses of gifted students and students with disabilities. In this way, differentiation does so much more than provide students access to learning; it allows them to be seen as individuals. Differentiated instruction is powerful because it "helps students not only master content but also form their own identities as learners" (Tomlinson, 2008: para. 1). When students are viewed as individuals rather than data points, they develop their identities as people and learners. They make choices in their learning, which makes it more meaningful.

4.3. Student-Centered Learning in the Art Room

Differentiation is incredibly impactful in an art classroom. Arts classrooms educate students with various ability levels and experiences because art is traditionally an elective subject. Some students may not have any experience, whereas others may have been making art their entire lives, not to mention students with special needs (Varian, 2016). This variety of experiences makes differentiation even more necessary to reach all students. When differentiation is embraced, it leads to a student-centered classroom. In a student or learner-centered classroom, "the teachers' role shifts from instructor to facilitator, living resource, and guide" (Jaquith, 2011: p. 17). This approach emphasizes the importance of the individual student and encourages students to think creatively and independently. Despite the fluid nature of student-centered learning, it does involve structure. In a student-centered art classroom, students are presented with big ideas to inspire learning and inform practice (McElhany, 2016; Roth, 2016). These themes allow students to make personal connections in their art that reflect their individuality. The key to connecting artmaking in a student-centered art room is to give students the same purpose (Jaquith, 2011). This purpose could be a real-world problem or a broad theme. Students think more creatively when they explore their ideas (Bush, 2007). Flipping the classroom structure allows students to think critically because

they are trying to find the answer to their personal questions, not the teacher's.

Another component of student-centered art rooms is choice. Choice-based art education (CBAE) allows students to build creative confidence and critical thinking skills (Varian, 2016). Rather than giving all students the same content, CBAE will enable students to be challenged at their level. Diverse students are embraced, and their voices are celebrated. Additionally, Choice is important because it gives students control, or autonomy, over their actions (Bush, 2007; Jaquith, 2011; McElhany, 2016; Roth, 2016). This control gives students confidence and builds intrinsic learning motivation because their wants and needs are prioritized. If differentiation adjusts teaching practices, student-centered learning brings students into the discussion. Students are encouraged to choose methods and materials that inspire them, which increases class engagement and performance. This approach helps service apathetic students by giving them a choice rather than an open-ended one. The option of choice eliminates the issue of students being unable to generate ideas independently. Students have scaffolds to help them find something they are interested in learning about so that class time can be used productively.

Student-centered classrooms are also conducive to learning because students can build artistic confidence by not comparing themselves to others (McElhany, 2016; Varian, 2016). In the learning-centered classroom, students may create something completely different from the person next to them. Comparing work can negatively impact self-esteem and cause beginner artists to abandon art entirely (Fenzel & O'Brennan, 2007; McElhany, 2016). Confident students are more enthusiastic and motivated to perform well, which leads to more robust student work.

Student-centered art rooms allow students to create goals focusing on their interests and personal growth. This student-centered thinking aligns with the instructional framework Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which believes "each area of the curriculum should provide multiple, varied, and flexible options for representation, expression, and engagement" (Ralabate, 2011: para. 12). This notion builds on the concepts of differentiation by taking the buckets of differentiation and providing a process to implement them in general education classrooms. UDL proposes that classrooms start by reaching as many students as possible with the given curriculum, then differentiating to meet individual needs from general to specific so that every student can thrive. This approach provides a manageable framework for instructional practices that seek to provide differentiation.

Differentiating content at the individual level is not easy, and there are many hurdles to overcome, including access to materials and insufficient planning time (McMahon, 2019). Despite this, every school and educator has the potential to implement differentiation successfully as long as they are committed to their students. Differentiation can be developed over time. Educators can start with interventions that target small groups before moving to the individual level, which will allow educators of all levels to tailor their curriculum to student needs over time

rather than accepting the status quo.

Allowing students to choose their path increases engagement and creates a sense of belonging in school. When students feel like valued school community members, they are more likely to feel motivated to engage in academics. Engagement is the most valuable factor in academic success, so by creating personalized instruction, educators can bridge the achievement gap that continues to impact black and brown students.

5. Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter discussed the multifaceted challenges contributing to the persistent achievement gap in the American education system, specifically those affecting Black and Brown students in high-poverty schools. Systemic factors and biases have provided inequitable educational opportunities and damaged the academic outcomes of minority students for decades.

This chapter also highlighted traits in high-achieving students, such as curiosity, engagement, and autonomy. It considered methods for cultivating these traits and encouraging them in the classroom. This chapter emphasized the profound need to reform educational practices to address the achievement gap and serve all students. It examined innovative pedagogy focusing on each student's needs and tailoring practices to meet them, including differentiation and student-directed learning. Educator Lilian Katz provides the following:

> When a teacher tries to teach something to the entire class at the same time, chances are, one-third of the kids already know it; one-third will get it; and the remaining third won't. So two-thirds of the children are wasting their time. (IRIS Center, n.d.)

This statement resonates deeply within the context of the academic achievement gap. Education urgently needs innovation to address this problem. Simply put, educators cannot afford to reach only one-third of students.

In short, this review stressed the importance of embracing diversity and its effects on confidence, motivation, and achievement. It underscored the significance of celebrating student strengths and interests in empowering students, engaging them, and ensuring their academic success. Closing the achievement gap is imperative to the future of our country and a moral obligation for educators. Individualizing and targeting instruction is the only path toward an equitable future.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

Americans for the Arts (n.d.). *10 Arts Education Fast Facts*. Americans for the Arts. https://www.americansforthearts.org/by-topic/arts-education/10-arts-education-fast-facts

Assari, S., Mardani, A., Maleki, M., Boyce, S., & Bazargan, M. (2021). Black-White Achieve-

ment Gap: Role of Race, School Urbanity, and Parental Education. *Pediatric Health, Medicine and Therapeutics, 12,* 1-11. https://doi.org/10.2147/phmt.s238877

Balke, E. (1997). Play and the Arts: The Importance of the "Unimportant". *Childhood Education, 73,* 355-360. https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.1997.10521139

Barbara, H. A. (2010). Student Ownership: Learning in a Student-Centered Art Room. *Art Education, 63,* 40-46. https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2010.11519078

Bradley, K. (2022). *The Socioeconomic Achievement Gap in the Us Public Schools*. Ballard Brief. https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/the-socioeconomic-achievement-gap-in-the-us-public-schools#:~:text=achievement%20gap-,The%20groups%20may%20be%20classified%20by%20race,%2C%20gender%2C%20or%20socioeconomic%20class.&text=2-,Occasionally%2C%20the%20achievement%20gap%20will%20be%20referred%20to%20as%20an,documented%20since%20the%20late%201930s

Brusic, S. A., & Steinmacher, J. G. (2015). Creating the Curious Classroom. *Children's Technology & Engineering, 19,* 24-28.

Bush, M. A. (2007). *Differentiated Educational Strategies in the Elementary Art Classroom*. Virginia Commonwealth University.

Carolan, J., & Guinn, A. (2007). Differentiation: Lessons. *Educational Leadership, 64,* 44-47.

College Board (2012). *Child Development and Arts Education: A Review of Current Research and Best Practices*. Prepared for the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards.

Fenzel, L. M., & O'Brennan, L. M. (2007). Educating At-Risk Urban African American Children: The Effects of School Climate on Motivation and Academic Achievement. In *The Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*.

Ford, D. Y., Harris, J. J., Tyson, C. A., & Trotman, M. F. (2002). Beyond Deficit Thinking: Providing Access for Gifted African American Students. *Roeper Review, 24,* 52-58. https://doi.org/10.1080/02783190209554129

Fredricks, J. A. (2011). Engagement in School and Out-of-School Contexts: A Multidimensional View of Engagement. *Theory Into Practice, 50,* 327-335. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2011.607401

Fussell, M. (n.d.). *The Stages of Artistic Development*. The Virtual Instructor. https://thevirtualinstructor.com/blog/the-stages-of-artistic-development

García, E., & Weiss, E. (2020, September 27). *Education Inequalities at the School Starting Gate*. Economic Policy Institute. https://www.epi.org/publication/education-inequalities-at-the-school-starting-gate/

Graves, D. (2018). *Middle School Apathy: A Phenomenological Study from Students' Perspective*. Liberty University.

IRIS Center (n.d.). *Defining Differentiated Instruction*. IRIS Center. https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/di/cresource/q1/p01/#:~:text=When%20a%20teacher%20tries%20to,children%20are%20wasting%20their%20time.%E2%80%9D&text=A%20fluid%20or%20dynamic%20method%20of%20grouping%20students

Jaquith, D. B. (2011). When Is Creativity? Intrinsic Motivation and Autonomy in Children's Artmaking. *Art Education, 64,* 14-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2011.11519106

Kanevsky, L. (2011). Deferential Differentiation: What Types of Differentiation Do Stu-

dents Want? *Gifted Child Quarterly, 55,* 279-299. https://doi.org/10.1177/0016986211422098

Lee, J., Lim, H., Allen, J., & Choi, G. (2021). Effects of Learning Attitudes and COVID-19 Risk Perception on Poor Academic Performance among Middle School Students. *Sustainability, 13,* Article No. 5541. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13105541

Library of Congress (n.d.). *School Segregation and Integration*. Civil Rights History Project. https://www.loc.gov/collections/civil-rights-history-project/articles-and-essays/school-segregation-and-integration/

Marshall, J. C. (2008). *Overcoming Student Apathy: Motivating Students for Academic Success*. NSTA Press.

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (n.d.). *Student Profile*. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=00350000&orgtypecode=5&fycode=2019

Massachusetts Office on Disability (n.d.). *Learn about Education Rights*. https://www.mass.gov/info-details/learn-about-education-rights

McElhany, J. S. (2016). Awakening Student Ownership: Transitioning to a Student-Centered Environment. *Art Education, 70,* 29-35. https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2017.1247567

McMahon, W. (2019, September 3). *Differentiation Is Hard, but Necessary. Don't Worry, There's Help.* EdSurge. https://www.edsurge.com/news/2019-09-03-differentiation-is-hard-but-necessary-don-t-worry-there-s-help

Moore, J. L. III, Ford, D. Y., & Milner, H. R. (2005). Underachievement among Gifted Students of Color: Implications for Educators. *Theory into Practice, 44,* 167-177. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4402_11

Morgan, H. (2020). Misunderstood and Mistreated: Students of Color in Special Education. *Voices of Reform, 3,* 71-81. https://doi.org/10.32623/3.10005

Morgan, P., & Farkas, G. (2018, May 4). Are Too Many Minority Students Identified as Disabled? Or Are Some Who Need Services Overlooked? *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2018/05/04/are-too-many-minority-studentsidentified-as-disabled-or-are-some-who-need-services-overlooked/

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2023a). *NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment Results: Reading and Mathematics*. The Nation's Report Card. https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltt/2023/

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2023b). *Concentration of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch. Preprimary, Elementary, and Secondary Education*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/clb/free-or-reduced-price-lunch#:~:text=In%20fall%202021%2C%20the%20percentage,Islander%20students%20(23%20percent)

Oleschuk, F. R. (2001). Lessons Learned from Gifted Children about Differentiation. *The Teacher Educator, 36,* 185-198. https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730109555263

Owoseje, F. (2023). Impact of Technology on Education; Analysis, Implications, Solutions. *Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences (JHSS), 6,* 214-220.

Pekrun, R. (2019). The Murky Distinction between Curiosity and Interest: State of the Art and Future Prospects. *Educational Psychology Review, 31,* 905-914.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-019-09512-1

Ralabate, P. K. (2011). Universal Design for Learning: Meeting the Needs of All Students. *The ASHA Leader, 16,* 14-17. https://doi.org/10.1044/leader.ftr2.16102011.14

Reis, S. M., & Renzulli, J. S. (2018). The Five Dimensions of Differentiation. *International Journal for Talent Development and Creativity, 6,* 87-94.

Renzulli, J. (2022). *The Achievement Gap: It's All about Engagement*! University of Connecticut.

Roth, N. E. (2016). Stories of Exploration in a Student-Centered Learning Environment. *Art Education, 70,* 8-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2017.1247559

Smith, P. K., Cowie, H., & Blades, M. (1998). *Understanding Children's Development* (3rd ed.). Blackwell Publishers.

Strogilos, V., Tragoulia, E., Avramidis, E., Voulagka, A., & Papanikolaou, V. (2017). Understanding the Development of Differentiated Instruction for Students with and without Disabilities in Co-Taught Classrooms. *Disability & Society, 32,* 1216-1238. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1352488

Sullivan, K. (2024, May 23). *Schools Fear Job Cuts as Emergency Pandemic Funding Runs out*. The Hill. https://thehill.com/homenews/education/4705923-schools-jobs-emergency-coronavirus-pandemic-funding/#:~:text=Elementary%20and%20Secondary%20School%20Emergency,from%20counselors%20to%20reading%20specialists

Tomlinson, C. A. (2008). The Goals of Differentiation. *Educational Leadership, 66,* 26-30.

Turken, S. (2024, January 3). *Boston Public Schools Could Close as Many as Half of Its Buildings under New Plan*. WGBH. https://www.wgbh.org/news/education-news/2024-01-03/boston-public-schools-could-close-as-many-as-half-of-its-buildings-under-new-plan

U.S. Department of Education (2015). *37th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2015*. U.S. Department of Education. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED572022.pdf

U.S. Department of Education (n.d.). *Promising Results, Continuing Challenges: Final Report of the National Assessment of Title I*. U.S. Department of Education. https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/disadv/promisingresults/edlite-exsum.html

VanDerMolen, M. (2023, September 11). *Determine the Teaching Approach Mix That Fits Your Art Room Best*. The Art of Education University. https://theartofeducation.edu/2023/09/determine-the-teaching-approach-mix-that-fits-your-art-room-best/

Varian, S. (2016). *Choosing Creativity: Choice-Based Art Education in an Inclusive Classroom*. Moore College of Art & Design.

Wretman, C. J. (2017). School Sports Participation and Academic Achievement in Middle and High School. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research, 8,* 399-420. https://doi.org/10.1086/693117