The term "achievement gap" is regularly used to describe between-group differences in educational outcomes, often by race/ethnicity (Ladson-Billings, 2006). While the label is typically applied to address the need to "close the gap," some scholars have raised concerns about its use. This language is often associated with a deficit lens, whereby White achievement is assumed to be the norm, and racially minoritized students are evaluated primarily based on what they are perceived to lack compared to that norm (e.g., Love, 2004). Additionally, by focusing on student performance rather than on structures of racial inequality, the "achievement gap" framing may suggest that it is the students themselves who need "fixing." As such, the term arguably plays into racial stereotypes regarding intellect and work ethic. This may lead people to deprioritize the issue or may encourage short-term solutions that do not target the root of the problem (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The concern over potential unintended consequences of the "achievement gap" framing is supported by general research from psychology and political science showing that terminology can affect our views and policy preferences. For example, Republicans are more likely to support a policy described as a "carbon offset" than an identical policy described as a "carbon tax" (Hardisty, Johnson, & Weber, 2009). However, we lack empirical research on the effect of the dominant "achievement gap" discourse in education. Is the term itself counterproductive?

In the present study, we introduce empirical evidence to the rich theoretical literature on achievement gap framing. We tested whether the phrase "racial achievement gap," compared to the phrase "racial inequality in educational outcomes" affected the extent to which teachers prioritized closing gaps/ending inequality, or the explanations they gave for those gaps/inequalities. We were specifically interested in teachers given their frequent exposure to achievement gap discourses, their direct role in advancing educational equity, and the importance of having their buy-in for implementing equity-advancing policies. We hypothesized that the "inequality" rephrasing, while substantively synonymous to a "gap," would carry associations with racial justice and direct attention to structural causes. Thus, we expected this rephrasing would elicit higher priority levels for the issue and stronger endorsement for structural explanations.

Methods

We conducted this study in the context of a larger web-based survey of a national (though not nationally representative) sample of U.S. school teachers obtained through Qualtrics panels (N = 1,549; see Table 1 for sample descriptive statistics, randomization balance, and comparisons to nationally representative data). Teachers were randomly assigned to one of two versions of our survey items. One version used the term "racial achievement gap," while the other used "racial inequality in educational outcomes." The first item read:

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As you know, there is [a racial achievement gap/racial inequality in educational outcomes] between Black and White students in the US. Thinking about all of the important issues facing the country today, how much of a priority do you think it is to [close the racial achievement gap/end racial inequality in educational outcomes] between Black and White students?

Response options were “not a priority,” “low priority,” “medium priority,” “high priority,” and “essential” (converted to a 1–5 scale).

Next, respondents were asked, “To what extent do you believe each of these factors is responsible for [the racial achievement gap/racial inequality in educational outcomes] between Black and White students?” Respondents rated the following factors (with order randomized): school quality, student motivation, parenting, discrimination and racism, neighborhood environments, genetics, home environments, and income levels. Response options were “not at all,” “slightly,” “somewhat,” “quite,” and “extremely” (both items adapted from Valant & Newark [2016]).

Table 1 shows results from t tests of the causal effects of “gap” language on each outcome, along with descriptive statistics by condition (see online Appendices B–E, available on the journal website, for various robustness checks).
Teachers who received the "gap" version of the item did not prioritize closing gaps/ending inequality as highly as teachers who received the “inequality” version of the item (by −0.11 SD). Exploratory subgroup analyses suggest the effect was driven by White teachers, who showed an effect of −0.18 SD (robust to Sidak correction for multiple comparisons), while item phrasing had near-zero effects for Black and Latino/a teachers (though small sample sizes should be noted).

As seen in Table 2, the phrasing had no significant effect on teachers’ explanations for gaps/inequality. Regardless of item phrasing, teachers tended to believe that home environment, neighborhood environment, and parenting were more responsible for gaps/inequalities than school quality, discrimination, and income (differences are statistically significant).

**Discussion**

We find evidence that the language used to describe achievement inequality can, in principle, affect the priority teachers place on ending those inequalities. Teachers, education leaders, researchers, and journalists should therefore give thought to the messaging and language they use when discussing issues regarding race and education.

We should also recognize that teachers generally placed high priority on closing gaps/ending inequality regardless of item phrasing, and the magnitude of the language effect was modest. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that the framing of between-group differences as “gaps” versus “inequalities” may have a larger effect through cumulative exposure in the long term. Relatedly, although we found no significant effects on teachers’ explanations for outcome disparities, repeated exposure to gap discourses in the long term may lead teachers to focus on cultural or biological explanations. These remain important unanswered questions for further consideration.

As a study of teachers in particular, this work does not provide insight into how the general public may respond to the achievement gap term or its broader surrounding discourse. People outside the field of education may hold different connotations for these terms and may be affected differently when encountering them in policy debates or news stories. In addition to these questions, future research should examine the effects of terms such as “education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and “opportunity gap” (Milner, 2012). Beyond the use of specific terms, we must better understand how the framing of educational disparities affects people’s cognition and how those framings may interact with people’s background knowledge and personal experience. Such insight will help guide solutions-oriented conversations for advancing educational equity and excellence.
NOTES

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1For example, Love (2004) argues that when White students achieve higher than Black students, it is problematized as an “achievement gap” but not when Asian ethnic groups outperform Whites.

2We chose the term “inequality” as opposed to more established terms, such as “education debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) or “opportunity gap” (Milner, 2012), because the latter terms refer to differences in resource inputs or educational experiences, as opposed to differences in educational outcomes. In contrast, “racial inequality in educational outcomes” is essentially synonymous with “racial achievement gap.” Here, we conceive of “equity” as a state in which educational processes and resource distributions produce racial equality in educational outcomes.

3A potential concern is that these phrases may bring to mind different academic outcomes (e.g., test scores versus high school graduation rates). If this is the case and if respondents prioritize these outcomes differently, such distinctions may be driving our results. In a separate survey conducted with a new sample drawn from Amazon MTurk (N = 500), we did not find evidence that respondents interpreted the phrases “achievement gap” and “inequality in educational outcomes” as referring to different educational outcomes (see online Appendix A, available on the journal website, for detail). We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

4Note that while Table 2 shows results in the original item scales, raw and standardized differences are nearly identical for many items because the SDs are close to 1.

REFERENCES


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