UMSL study's findings aside, academic gaps are obvious

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After reading about a study linking poor classroom performance to violence in urban areas, I was less than overwhelmed.

"Gee, ya think?"

Did the University of Missouri-St. Louis really need a study to understand the impact violence has on the city's 28,000 public school students?

I figured that out about four years ago. One morning, after reading about fights at Vashon High School, I parked my car blocks away and walked to the school. Along the way, I passed liquor stores, nightclubs and a rent-by-the-hour motel. My steps quickened as I passed slum properties, abandoned buildings and vacant lots. I envisioned being mugged or even attacked by one of many stray dogs

I returned to my car feeling tense and on edge. It's a wonder any student can excel in such environments. The 25-minute walk was all I needed to come to the researchers' conclusion: Violence plays a part in academic achievement.

I realize that UMSL only released preliminary findings. I understand the researchers' attempt to underscore the fact that the city school district has no programs specifically addressing violence. Still, why study the obvious? Aren't there a variety of factors contributing to academic deficiencies?

I've been reviewing provocative data about the achievement gap lately with a couple of area educators.

Dr. Tom Hoerr, educational author and head of my daughters' school, New City, sent me an article discussing a phenomenon called "stereotype threat." The author, Joshua Aronson, is an associate professor of psychology and education at New York University. He explores how absorbed stereotypes affect intellectual inferiority. Aronson suggests that minority kids are "hyper-aware" of negative stereotypes. When placed in "evaluative situations," Aronson said, these kids tend to respond to negative expectations. Their feelings actually confirm the stereotypes.

The threat is not only a significant factor among black kids.

Aronson's team conducted a study with white male engineering students with well above average SAT math scores. After informing them that their test results would be used to better understand the "mathematical superiority" of Asian students, the students performed significantly worse. In other words, the white students succumbed to the stereotype that they were academically inferior to Asian students.

Almost 100 studies have been conducted on the theory, yet it doesn't seem widely regarded in academic circles. In all fairness, Hoerr told me, the stereotype topic "addresses a societal issue" many educators regard as outside their purview.

His comment resonated with William Tate, professor and chairman of Washington University's education department. Federal and state funding and academic priorities make it difficult to comprehensively deal with the "sociological and economic realities" that contribute to the achievement gap. So, Tate said, "Many educators turn to individualistic challenges like stereotype threat."

"The canonical question is, which factors are major and policy-relevant?" he said.

Tate shared another important area of research based on the concept that educational advancement is an intergenerational process. In other words, today's gap is a result of yesterday's reality. A large number of black grandparents and parents didn't have the educational resources, skills or study habits that encourage academic success. In a real sense, many urban students today start out with inherited deficiencies and don't have the home support or know how to reverse negative trends.

"Academic achievement and educational attainment are related to a number of important community factors including teen births, domestic violence and other criminal incidents. In addition, there are school factors that influence achievement. These links are complex yet critical to change and improvement," Tate told me.

Apparently, all the current research on the achievement gap, including the study on violence, has relevance. But the research seems unaligned. Theories seem to be forwarded haphazardly without little follow-up. Problems seem to be studied individually, not collectively.

Maybe this shotgun approach is the best way to pinpoint the vast array of problems. I'm no academic researcher, but a lot can be learned from a walk to an inner-city school.