Addressing Inequities in African American Student Achievement: Using Cultural Proficiency and a Dual Capacity Building Framework

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Race and disability produce a complex set of challenges for school leaders seeking to provide equitable opportunities for African American students and families. Culturally proficient school leaders and their influence in schools is second only to classroom instruction. Although concern is often focused on student achievement, little attention has been given to how schools have fallen into re-segregation practices that lead to gaps in opportunity and achievement for these students. Realizing that there are steps school leaders can take to address re-segregation practices and inequities, we offer recommendations and strategies for addressing schools' disproportional segments of special education, discipline, and Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) programs by using culturally proficient leadership and a dual capacity building framework.

Keywords: African American families, disproportionality, culturally proficient leadership, dual capacity and funds of knowledge, disabilities

INTRODUCTION

Culturally proficient school leaders and their influence in schools is second only to classroom instruction. They can make a difference in the lives of hundreds of students by following the data and providing culturally responsive evidenced-based strategies (Leithwood et al., 2010; Schmidt–Davis and Bottoms, 2011). Although concern is often focused on student achievement, little attention has been given to how schools have fallen into re-segregation practices that led to gaps in opportunity and achievement for these students. Realizing that there are steps school leaders can take to address re-segregation practices and inequities, we offer recommendations and strategies for addressing schools' disproportional segments of special education, discipline, and Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) programs in regards to African American students.

In this article, we clarify how culturally proficient leadership (Lindsey et al., 2018) and a dual capacity framework (Mapp and Kuttner, 2013) can be used to benefit African American students, their families, and the school communities. Culturally proficient school leaders are best equipped to increase Black student achievement, according to advocates of multicultural education. This approach is an "inside-out" approach which means that its focus is on the individual reflecting

on themselves, and assessing where they are in identifying, assessing, and responding to disproportionate data and inequitable practices and policies first before trying to "fix" someone else (Lindsey et al., 2018). A dual capacity framework helps school leaders build relationships within schools and communities that result in improved services for African American students and families). In order for today's school leaders to be successful with these students' communities, skills are needed that cultivate family, school, and community partnerships and have a clear vision of evidenced-based strategies to desegregate schools (Mapp and Kutner).

Using culturally appropriate practices and a dual capacity building framework, school leaders can help to create environments that support students in meeting rigorous standards. A discussion begins with conditions of re-segregation in schools, followed by an overview of cultural proficient leadership, and then recommendations using a dual capacity framework to lead the school and to partner with families and communities for African American students (Louque, 2002; Livingston and Nahimana, 2006; Nevarez and Wood, 2007; Thompson, 2007).

CONDITIONS OF RE-SEGREGATION IN SCHOOLS

Majority "Minority" Schools

More than one-third of African American and Latino students (36.5 and 36.6%, respectively) attend schools with a student of color enrollment of 90 and 100%. Such schools are considered majority "minority" or majority students of color schools. A study conducted by Orfield (2001) showed that the percentage of African American students attending schools with over 90% African American student body has increased in the last 15 years. A more recent study conducted by the U. S. Government Accountability Office (Toppo, 2016), reported that the percentage of mostly African American and Hispanic schools and high poverty schools grew from 7,009 to 15,089 schools, an increase of 9–16%. These majority students of color schools tend to segregate African American students into special education programs.

Not only are African American students segregated into special education, they are also segregated out of Advanced Placement (AP) courses and gifted and talented programs (GATE). Jonathan Kozol, the author of *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (1991), reported in an interview,

> "Black children are three times as likely as White children to be tracked into special-needs classes but only half as likely to be put in gifted programs. That's an intolerable statistic in a democracy. It's a shameful statistic. There's no possible way to explain it other than pure racism. It's one of the great, great scandals of American education" (Scherer, 2016, p. 57).

This has led to an overrepresentation of African American students in special education while having an underrepresentation in AP courses and GATE.

Many public schools with a majority of students of color don't have the same quality and access to resources as more racially diverse schools (Chemerinsky, 2003). Resources and opportunities are usually less than what is offered in suburban and schools with majority White students. Students of color who attend schools that serve predominantly students of color and poor populations offer fewer advanced courses, and more basic courses and vocational programs (Oakes, 2008). This is problematic because it is evident that public education has not addressed the historic need for Black students to succeed in this complex system (Clark-Louque et al., 2017). Disproportionalities continue to be a concern for school leaders who want to create and implement equitable policies and practices for African American students and families.

Disproportionalities and Disabilities

For African American students with disabilities, the statistics indicate a disproportionate number identified for special education services. In 46 of the 50 states, they are over-identified. In some states and some schools, African American students comprise from 23 to 32% of students in special education classrooms although they account for only 15% of students enrolled in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016b). They are more likely to be educated in separate or more restrictive settings, receive the highest in-school suspensions, have the highest rate of total removal from school and have parents that are less likely to attend general school meetings, or school events (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This overrepresentation is a problem because it suggests that some students are mis-identified, mis-categorized, or mis-treated causing the students to suffer emotionally, socially, and academically as a result (National Education Association, 2007). Disproportionality points to African American students being (mis)placed for a variety of reasons, possibly because "educators either don't want to deal with them, don't know how to deal with them, or don't know how to be responsive to them" (Rebora, 2011, n.p.).

Disproportionalities and Discipline

At the same time the disproportionality of disabilities is occurring, African American students are faced with harsher disciplinary actions. It is well known that African American students are the recipients of more suspensions and expulsions than any other racial group. Although African American students have not been found to engage in more challenging behaviors than other students, they do experience harsher punishments, more suspensions, and expulsions at more than three times the rate of their peers who engage in similar behaviors (Skiba et al., 2014; Cyphert, 2015). Harsh discipline is positively related to poor academics. Students who are expelled, sent out of class, and shamed suffer academically. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016b), the group with the lowest percentage of students to earn a regular diploma is African American, and Black students with disabilities.

The combination of being an African American student with a disability, brings even more dire statistics. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016a), 20–40% of students with disabilities exhibited problem behaviors at school and a third of the incidences result in suspension, expulsion, or

referral to the office. African American students with disabilities who engage in challenging behaviors receive more out-of-school expulsions and make up 27% of students referred to law enforcement and 31% of students subjected to a school-related arrest (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2014). In the meantime, while the pendulum is at one of the spectrum for special education, it swings to the other end for GATE.

Disproportionalities and Gifted and Talented Education Programs (GATE)

Some literature suggests 2–7% of students with disabilities are twice exceptional; they are both gifted and learning disabled (Baum, 2004). Students who qualify for services under IDEA in one area but have been identified as gifted and talented in other areas are considered twice exceptional. Unfortunately, the disabilities may mask the giftedness, causing teachers to focus on remediation rather than acceleration.

> "Gifted and talented students and those with high abilities need gifted education programs that will challenge them in regular classroom settings and enrichment and accelerated programs to enable them to make continuous progress in school" [National Association for Gifted Children, (n.d) n.p.].

In 2013–2014, it was estimated that 3 million students attending public schools in the U.S. participated in Gifted and Talented Programs (GATE). Based on Civil Rights data (ed.gov) White students represented 58% of those served in GATE, while Black or African American students represented only 9% of those participating in high achieving programs. This represents an under identification. We would expect that, give or take 10%, student populations represented in schools are fairly close to the same percentage represented in GATE programs. States vary on how they identify and serve gifted students since they have flexibility in the processes used and the services offered. Twenty-three states have laws specific to gifted education. State definitions include multiple areas and most include intellectually gifted (34), specific academic areas (20), academically gifted (24), performing/visual arts (21), creativity (21), low SES (9), ESL/ELL (8), culturally/ethnically diverse (8), gifted with a disability (6), and geographically isolated (3) [National Association for Gifted Children, (n.d)].

According to the National Association for Gifted Children, gifted education is a purely local responsibility [National Association for Gifted Children, (n.d)]. Educational leaders can take it upon themselves to effectively train school personnel to be talent scouts. First though, they need to be aware of myths about GATE students. Some of the myths are that these students do not require explicit instruction or help, challenging gifted students is no different from the way other students need to be challenged, students can't be gifted if they receive poor grades or standardized test scores, or gifted students can just take advanced placement courses instead of being in programs for gifted students.

Teacher nominations continue to be one of the first steps in the identification of gifted students. Teachers hold very traditional ideas of what it means to be gifted and those expectations tend to be limited to high performance on achievement, and aptitude test, or high grades. Two key factors found in who is identified for gifted programs were cultural differences and teacher expertise (Siegle and Powell, 2004). The Fordham Institute found that 58% of teachers have not received any professional development focused on teaching gifted or advanced students (Forkas et al., 2008). Less is known about professional development on the identification of culturally diverse students.

Given the possible linkages between culturally proficient leadership, fair and equitable discipline practices, and positive student outcomes (Griffith, 2004), there is a need to know more about the practices of difference-making principals and school leaders, particularly of those who have been effective with African American families. These three aforementioned re-segregation and disproportionate areas regarding African American students are on-going problems and inequities that are unlikely to disappear without culturally proficient leaders and a dual capacity framework in which to promote equitable and intentional local, state, and federal actions.

CULTURALLY PROFICIENT LEADERSHIP

According to Lindsey et al. (2005) "schools begin to change when their leaders recognize the disparities that exist in our schools and then intentionally raise issues of bias, preference, legitimization, privilege, and equity. Choosing to face these issues and grapple with them directly is to understand their effects on student learning" (p. xviii.) In Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders, the authors define "cultural proficiency" and explain how educational leaders can become culturally proficient to improve organizational climates, disproportionality rates, and provide more equitable opportunities for African American students with disabilities.

Cultural proficiency is a concept that posits that differences in the school organization are dealt with from the standpoint of the leader (Lindsey et al., 2005, p. vii). The leader learns to recognize the disparities in schools, such as re-segregation, and makes a commitment to "leverage their leadership to create and manage schools at high levels of cultural and social interaction among diverse groups" (p. xviii).

The four Tools of Cultural Proficiency are: The Guiding Principles, Essential Elements of Cultural Competence, The Cultural Proficiency Continuum, and Barriers to Cultural Proficiency. For the brevity of this paper, the authors will focus on the Continuum to demonstrate this moral framework to assess one's own behaviors while simultaneously assessing the practices and policies of a school or district. The Continuum has six points that range from the lowest point, cultural destructiveness, to the highest point, cultural proficiency.

The continuum's lowest point begins with "cultural destructiveness," which consists of practices and policies that are detrimental to individuals from marginalized groups. The second level, "cultural incapacity," occurs when individuals' interactions with marginalized groups result in subordination to the dominant culture. The third point on the continuum,

"*cultural blindness*" is when individuals who believe that race and culture make no difference and all people are the same. Fourth, "*cultural pre-competence*" occurs when individuals become aware of the limitations that are often present when people from different cultures try to communicate and interact with each other. Fifth, "*cultural competence*" results when individuals accept and respect cultural differences, continually assess their own cultural knowledge and beliefs, and make various adaptations of their own belief systems, policies, and practices. Finally, "*cultural proficiency*" is reached when individuals within organizations master the essential elements of cultural competence and are able to use them appropriately in a variety of cultural settings (Lindsey et al., 2018).

This model encourages school leaders to assess their own beliefs and cultural values first and practice an "inside-out" approach. This means that they are reflective and equip themselves with equity driven decision making, collaborative, and effective communication skills to work with African American students and their families. Once a school leader better understands where they are on the continuum, they can better serve the students and the school's constituencies and community.

DUAL CAPACITY-BUILDING FRAMEWORK

To diminish some of the miscommunication, mis-identification, and misguided practices in schools, school leaders are encouraged to not only work on themselves toward cultural proficiency, but they are also encouraged to reach out in other ways for assistance. Creating dual capacity opportunities within the schools using professional development with their staff, as well as creating opportunities outside the schools with families, churches, and the community, builds trust and engaging opportunities for every constituent of the school environment.

Research on promising practices for home-school partnerships that improve student outcomes and sustain positive relationships suggests a dual capacity-building framework (Weiss et al., 2010; Mapp and Kuttner, 2013). School leaders can apply a dual capacity building framework to provide teachers and parents with goals and principles to follow as they execute partnerships. The goals of the framework are to increase the capabilities, connections, cognition, and confidence of all parties involved—in the present case, those responsible for the education of African American students and families.

Professional Development—Identification

School leaders have a responsibility to make decisions about in service and professional development based on data that specifies the needs of the teachers and students. Providing professional development for personnel on the impacts of culture and race on teaching and learning, as well as GATE and special education is beneficial to the de-segregation process. In addition to basic training, school leaders can provide teachers with training on pre-referral processes, interventions, challenging behaviors, referrals and proper identification strategies for special education.

When behaviors occur in the classroom, a teacher decides whether that behavior should be ignored, requires a warning, re-direction, in class discipline, or warrants more investigation. It is common practice for students to be referred for a special education evaluation or GATE based on recommendations of teachers. Sometimes behaviors of African American students are mis-identified as needing special education services instead of needing clear and consistent expectations, differentiated instruction, structure and support (Delpit, 2012). Strategies that work well with African American students and families for example are "active participation, teamwork, community building, and hands-on projects" (Dill, 2016, p. 112), however, these may not always be common classroom practices. School leaders can provide both teachers and parents of African American students with development and resources that address myths about challenging behaviors, the special education identification processes, giftedness, differentiated instruction, emotional supports, and cultural identity.

Teachers-Prevention Training

School leaders can help to desegregate schools by taking a leadership role in prevention and responding appropriately to the challenging behaviors of African American students with exceptional needs (Skiba et al., 2014). A dual capacity building partnerships may target this need by training teachers and others working with African American students with exceptional needs in prevention, collaboration, and tiered interventions. Prevention training may include topics such as skills for building relationships, pre-referral interventions, events setting, applied behavior analysis, self-regulation, implicit bias, and cultural capital. Training on tiered interventions could offer strategies for involving families and community organizations at various stages of challenging behaviors.

Engaging Parents and Families

Classic research on parental involvement suggest that mothers and fathers are more likely to be highly involved when schools welcome their involvement and make it easy to be involved. Many public schools struggle with effectively and appropriately involving parents, and parents struggle with feeling valued by schools. Families and schools may have very differing understandings of their roles in parental involvement and their conceptualization of what parental involvement should be may differ from school personnel as well, making implementation of programs and initiatives difficult (Latunde, 2017). The methods schools often employ to engage families fails to individualize, consider race, and often focus on policies and procedures while neglecting some of the processes and interactions that make diverse families feel welcome, embraced, valued, and included (Aceves, 2014; Louque and Latunde, 2014). School leaders are strongly encouraged to have conversations with parents, families, and community members that reflect bi-directional communication and a respect for cultural capital (Louque and Latunde, 2015).

For families, goals include supporting, encouraging, monitoring, and advocating for their children as well as attaining and building upon skills needed to effectively participate in

the educational process (Weiss et al., 2010). Churches are appropriate settings for this dual capacity building to take place given the literature that says the process should be systematic, should be integrated into trainings for parents and staff, and should leverage community collaboration (Mapp and Kuttner, 2013). School leaders may articulate the importance of these types of community-based partnerships to their teams and model leadership by taking the first step to develop the relationships necessary to realize effective partnerships. The exclusion and isolation frequently experienced by diverse families in U.S. schools, particularly African American families, may act as barriers to optimal parental involvement in education and contribute to student issues of equity.

Schools leaders are encouraged to be open to learning about African American students with exceptional needs and working to advance them as a group. Families' funds of knowledge consist of the skills and abilities that individuals use to navigate their daily lives inside and outside of formal settings (González et al., 2005). African American families have accumulated and developed funds of knowledge that have enabled them to survive and thrive in their homes, workplaces, and communities.

Professionals who work with African American families should understand the strengths of African American communities, including their funds of knowledge. They should also understand the challenges these students face, such as overrepresentation in special education, harsh punishment, and under identification for advanced placement and gifted and talented programs. A goal or outcome of a dual capacity-building partnership can be to mutually problem solve and together advocate for better policy and practice related to addressing the challenges facing African American students with special and exceptional needs.

Many families of children with disabilities feel disenfranchised from resources and isolated from larger society (Aceves, 2014). At times this disconnection thwarts their involvement with schools. School leaders can partner with community organizations to bring relevant resources to one location so parents can access them and use them. Many churches have children's, youth, women's, and men's ministries, all of which are pathways for sharing information with families on parent centers, mentoring programs, advocates, mental health resources, early intervention programs, parent involvement strategies and activities, leadership programs, respite providers, and support groups. Increased exposure and access to these resources may decrease family stress and increase families' ability to problem solve, advocate, and cope (Weiss et al., 2010). The more families utilize positive coping strategies and respite, the better the family adjustment. The better the family adjustment, the better the student outcomes. It's a win-win situation.

A Focus on Grandparents and Resources

The literature on the preparation of teachers to engage grandparents in the education of children is limited. Teachers may feel unprepared to engage grandparents, and this hesitation is an opportunity for school leaders to provide in-service trainings for teachers on working with extended family members and to advocate for the needs that grandparents raising children with disabilities may have.

School partnerships with families should pay special attention to situations in which grandparents are raising children with disabilities (Janicki et al., 2000). More than 90% of grandparents raising grandchildren with disabilities are African American and Latino (Neely-Barnes and Dia, 2008). These grandparents tend to be female and in their 50s and 60s. The types of support from which grandparents benefit most are specialized training on the educational system, social services, learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder, speech and hearing problems, and developmental delays (Janicki et al.). Grandparents raising children with disabilities may also need information about and access to support groups for social and emotional support. Partnerships should aim to connect grandparents with services that do not require them to have legal guardianship. On average, grandchildren are placed with grandparents for 7 years and may have only informal agreements regarding guardianship; thus, access to some services may be difficult for the grandparents (Neely-Barnes and Dia).

Engaging Churches and Communities

The conditions of the dual capacity-building framework are that the goals and activities be linked to learning and be relational, developmental, collective, and interactive (Weiss et al., 2010). The role of churches in the physical, emotional, social, and academic development of youth has been well documented. The church is especially influential for African American youth and disadvantaged youth. The impact of churches on student success was demonstrated in a longitudinal study of approximately 25,000 eighth graders from 1,052 schools. Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (1988–1992), Jeynes (1999) compared the academic achievement of religiously devout Black and Hispanic students to the achievement of Black and Hispanic students who were less religious. The results indicated a positive relationship between religious commitment and academic achievement regardless of whether the student attended a religious school. Despite this and similar research findings, school partnerships that incorporate faith-based agencies remain underutilized in addressing the needs of African American students with mild and moderate exceptional needs (Jeynes, 1999; Regnerus, 2001; Fagan, 2006).

Fagan (2006) and Fulgham (2013) asserted that African American families trust their churches and rely on them for a plethora of services and supports. Among the key areas of opportunities for faith-based partnerships to use dual capacity building to support African American students with exceptional needs are training, resources, education, and advocacy. Partnerships can focus on the specific challenges of African American students with exceptional needs, including harsh discipline, isolation, gaps in opportunities and access, and the need for advocacy. Evidence suggests that when schools partner with faith-based organizations and families in meaningful ways, the impact is greater than any effort undertaken by one party alone (Fulgham).

CONCLUSION

When we reflect upon the various factors in schools and what conditions our students face, we can easily see that race and disability have an impact on the resources and opportunities offered in schools. After over 60 years of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, the integration of schools did not address issues of separate and unequal. African Americans were granted access to public schools, but the segregation of African American students continues to occur in schools, particularly in the areas of special education, discipline, and GATE, and particularly in schools with high poverty students and high enrollments of African American and Latinx students.

In this time of reflection on segregation, desegregation, and now re-segregation, school leaders continue to strive to close the achievement gap, and provide equitable opportunities for students (Skiba et al., 2011). The educational school systems have yet to respond positively to African American families, particularly those with students with disabilities and exceptional needs. In order to provide consistent and fair practices for implementation, school leaders must be responsive to trends by providing and valuing culturally appropriate professional development to help decrease and eliminate overrepresentation in special education, underrepresentation in GATE, and disproportionality of disciplinary actions. This means offering an cultural proficiency and dual capacity building training that focuses on leaders' and teams' values, beliefs, and assumptions.

Culturally proficient leaders first review their own beliefs and assumptions. This inside-out approach is a continuous, reflective process that ensures equitable policies and practices to underserved students. Using a dual-capacity framework allows culturally proficient leaders to integrate and partner schools with families, particularly those families of students with disabilities. Increasing inclusive policies and practices means there's a constant evaluation of pre-referral, identification recommendation and placement practices of students with disabilities with teachers and family input. Including students, families, and community members in learning strategies that promote access, equity, and inclusion is beneficial to the capacity building of all engaged. Effective home-school partnerships can lead to better services, opportunities, and experiences for African American students with special and exceptional needs and their families.

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