

Closing the Achievement Gap: Making the Case for Racial Dexterity Trainings for
Teachers and School Leaders.

Based on my experience working in the Boston Public School district for the past six years, I've developed a life-long commitment to promoting change and educational equity for all students. This commitment is focused specifically on addressing the achievement gap, which continues to widen and dramatically affects students of color attending underperforming schools. Many of these students' educational outcomes are influenced by social constructs to which they have no influence or control over; socio-economic status, race, and gender. In quickly analyzing academic performance data based on these identifiers, it's evident that African-American and Latino students, specifically in a lower socio-economic class are performing at significantly lower levels than their White and (some) Asian peers. This gap will continue to grow if action isn't taken to address it.

While there has been a significant amount of research done to address this issue in schools through the use of interventions and school reform policies, many in my opinion lack incorporating and opportunity to learn the historical and foundational context of these social constructs that influence the divides we see. There's an elephant in the room that is briefly touched upon or completely ignored when discussing the achievement gap; the systemic racism that affects achievement outcomes for students of color. It's understandable why many may find it difficult to address issues of race or racism; it's uncomfortable and often easier to turn a blind eye to it. However, if the issue is not acknowledged or addressed, it will keep

schools from fulfilling their overall mission of promoting educational achievement, equity, and excellence for all (Coleman & Stevenson, 87).

Today there is a demographic shift in the student populations attending public schools, showing a dramatic increase in the number of students of color (Carpenter & Diem, 906). Even more so, with school reform policies more focused on high stakes testing that often influence teacher evaluations and school funding, teacher preparation and leadership programs are moving further away from pedagogy that addresses skills needed to teach diverse populations of students and neglecting a cultural disconnect seen between teacher and students that often prevents students of color from receiving the same opportunities as their White peers (907.) It is time to break the silence about the racial disparities in education and start the honest conversation about racial equity and inclusion. Through this research, my goal is to advocate for a change in educational practice that will promote social change for underserved communities and bring to the forefront real opportunities to address larger, systemic issues affecting education through dialogue. Implementing a new tool for educators known as racial dexterity training as part of their teacher and educational leadership training and on-going professional development is the way. The purpose of the trainings and dialogues is to deepen the systemic knowledge around social constructs (like race) that contribute to the achievement gap, and provide information for educators to be better equipped in addressing the complex needs of students of color.

Racial dexterity for the context of this paper is defined as the ability for one to build comfort and proficiency in conversations around race as it relates to education.

Although race isn't the only contributor to this issue in achievement, there is an interconnectedness to the other structures that influences the overall results we see.

Through sharing the influence of systemic racism and racial biases on education outcomes for students, I hope to make a case around the significance of incorporating this work as it relates to closing the achievement gap and initiate the process in reflecting on school practices, procedures and even biases in performance that implicitly or explicitly affect achievement outcomes for students of color.

So what is the achievement gap? The achievement gap refers to the prevalent disparity of academic performance in student groups based on race, socio-economic status or gender. This gap is most prevalent when looking at the academic performance of African American, Latino, Indigenous and some Asian students compared to White students (National Education Association, 1). There is an insurmountable amount of research that identifies socio-economic status as one of the many contributors to this gap. In fact, socio-economic status and race are frequently found to be interrelated when it comes to the academic performance of African American and Latino student populations that are often found in high poverty schools (Elias, White & Stepney, 15). Schools with higher populations of students of color, often have higher percentages of students receiving free or reduced lunch. This intersection of race and socio-economic status often portrays

the difficulty schools with these populations face in making substantial academic gains in the instances of education policy and high stakes testing (19).

However, deeper research tells a different story around the influencers on the achievement gap. Even with the intersectionality of race and socio-economic status, when comparing students of the same socio-economic status the gap in achievement by race still remains. Glenn Singleton author of *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*, argues that poverty itself does not contribute to the gap. He notes that when comparing students of the same economic levels, poor White students on average, outperform poor Black students and this achievement pattern is the same when comparing students within middle and upper income levels. Even more alarming is that his work also shows that poor White students may outperform middle-class Black and Brown students (Singleton, 20-21).

In many of the my readings about race in education, including works from Sonya Douglas Horsford, there suggests a long historical relationship between race and education in the United States and a history of discrimination toward students solely because of their race (Horsford, 126). In her work, *When Race Enters the Room*, Horsford notes examples of racial inequality in US schools throughout history: The American eugenics movement of the early 20th century that sought to improve humanity through immigration, segregation, and sterilization policy; the history, laws and practices of school segregation by race like the relocation camps for Japanese Americans or the separate but equal schools for Black, Chicano or other students of color; and the 21st century achievement gap that reinforces the high

achievement expectations for White and Asian students and lower expectations for their Black, Latino and Indigenous counterparts (126).

Many may ask why the focus on addressing the achievement gap is only on race? Why not address some of the other issues that are less jarring or overwhelming to tackle? My answer simply is this: historically and even today, most of the inequality we see is a direct result of both public policy and private actions that make privilege and success seemingly natural for some groups and oppression and failure the norm for others (126). Before the 1950s, segregation by cultural or racial groups was the norm. In the southern United States, Jim Crow laws and slavery were legalized forms of segregation that defined racial make-up for groups and mandated racial separation in public. More importantly, it outlined different ways of treating people based on their physical characteristics (Lindsay, Nuri & Robinson, 7). Even as the country shifted its response to cultures and races, starting with the court ruling on *Brown vs. Board of Education* that legally ended segregation, “de facto” segregation still remained throughout the country. White parents found opportunities to separate their student from those who were racially or culturally different, often creating feelings of inferiority and alienation from the dominant culture (11).

Although idealistic, it’s hard to say that in 60 years after desegregation, our country has become inclusive and culturally competent. What is necessary beyond using buzzwords like “multiculturalism” or “diversity” is a shift in perspective if we are to promote a more inclusive culture to influence equity for all in education. That shift must first come from a willingness to be disturbed and challenged in our current beliefs and understanding of race and people of color.

The beliefs of teachers have been researched to show the affects biases on student performance, the implications it has on the environment created in schools and the impact on achievement. While many teaching preparation programs have been identified to lack trainings needed to address behavioral styles and educational needs of non-white students, there also suggest that teachers may have been introduced to strong anecdotal evidence implying low academic skills, learning disabilities and behavioral issues especially in African American students (Codrington & Fairchild, 10). Additional research suggests that the lack of cultural competency translates “difference” in behavior and achievement into “deficiencies” for students of color. The identified deficiencies often result in the misdiagnosis of students into special education programs, where they are often introduced to restrictive environments with less academic rigor and limited academic achievement. The lowered expectations set by teachers yield low quality instruction for students, limiting their educational and social developments and contributing to lifelong challenges including higher rates of dropout or incarceration, lower employment statuses and wages and lower rates of independence (5). These factors most commonly seen as expected life outcomes for students of color, demonstrate the systemic racism present in today’s school and it’s influence on the achievement gap we continue to see amongst students.

School culture and climate have been identified as key influencers in a student’s feeling of connectedness to school, which impacts their overall academic success. These are developed through the set of beliefs and behaviors demonstrated by adults in the building. Racial biases can also play a role in the creation of school

culture and climate. Consider this personal anecdote from my experience working in a BPS school years ago as an example:

High School X, has a total population of 563 students in grades 9-12 with about 55% of the students being of Latino/Hispanic descent, 49% African American/African descent and 88% of the population receiving free or reduced lunch. 82% of the teaching staff is White and nearly 89% have 1-3 years teaching experience. Mr. Simms*, a white male 2nd year teacher has been struggling with his 5th period class, especially with Guillermo* a 16 year-old Dominican freshmen. As Mr. Simms is trying to calm the class to begin his lesson, he hears Guillermo having a conversation with his peers about driving his older friend's BMW over the weekend. Mr. Simms, who is easily annoyed by Guillermo's difficult behavior, circulates towards him and asks Guillermo to be seated and silently start his "Do Now" activity. Here is a transcript of their escalated exchange:

Mr. Simms: Guillermo, please be seated and start your Do Now.

As Mr. Simms continues circulating, Guillermo ignores redirection and continues talking with peers. After circulating entire class, Mr. Simms returns to Guillermo.

Mr. Simms (with irritation in his voice): Ay man, can you please take your seat and start your "Do Now?"

Showing signs of irritation, Guillermo takes his seat while mumbling under his breath

Mr. Simms: What was that Guillermo?

Guillermo: Nothing man. Damn.....relax!

Mr. Simms (visibly annoyed): Watch your language and don't tell me to relax. Get started on your Do Now. No one cares about the car you were driving. It probably wasn't yours anyway.

Guillermo: Yeah it's not, but it's better than those two feet I see you driving to work everyday.

Faint snickering is heard from the class who is now watching this exchange

Mr. Simms: Well I could buy my own car if I wanted to. Don't worry about me.

Guillermo: Oh really! (laughing) Me too!

Mr. Simms: (still visibly annoyed) At least I'm not a 16 year-old freshmen.

Class falls completely silent and Guillermo publicly embarrassed, leaves the room. Mr. Simms calls for a Dean of Discipline to track down Guillermo who is later written up for leaving class without permission.

This example, though it seems far-fetched is one of numerous examples of student-teacher interactions experienced in High School X during my first year. At least 60% of the students had been suspended or received discipline action, with about 95% of those students being students of color. I never saw much of Guillermo after that exchange and often couldn't blame him in his choice to not return. The school was far from welcoming, the expectations and beliefs in achievement were minimal or non-existent for students, and an overwhelming number of students didn't feel safe. Needless to say, the positive school culture and climate was abysmal and non-existent. How can students want to learn in a place where they are publicly

ridiculed and demoralized? Many of the words I overheard from teachers when describing students included “lazy,” “difficult,” “low-skilled,” and “failure.” It was clear many of the adults in the building believed in the cycle of oppression we see so often for students of color; many were believed to be on the road to not receive their high school diploma, continue to be at a lower socio-economic status and more likely to be incarcerated.

After my first year at High School X, there was a huge transition of staff and the appointment of a new leadership team. The climate and culture since then has done a complete 180, with students feeling safer, and increased number of positive interactions between students and staff but more importantly an increase in academic achievement for those students. While High School X was able to change the school culture and climate for the better, there were still instances of racial inequality demonstrated and a need to address issues of race. The silence around these issues influence the cultural gap seen between teachers and students and contributes to the achievement and discipline gaps for students of color. For many of these students, school environments are perceived to be less safe and many self-report lower levels of achievement motivations than their White peers (Elias, White, & Stepney, 20). Furthermore, when students feel devalued or inferior in their school environments, there’s an internalized oppression that happens which perpetuates a mindset of academic defeat as opposed to one of resilience and tenacity (Blackwell, Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007). With personal beliefs and biases influencing the achievement outcomes for so many students of color, the inability of schools to address privilege, power or issues of race only prevent the creation of an

inclusive and diverse school community and perpetuate the cycle of inequality in schools. (Coleman and Stevenson, 88).

To address the achievement gap in education, there must be a holistic approach, which includes recognizing economic realities, acknowledging institutional practices and challenging ideological beliefs. Most importantly the inferiority belief of non-white students compared to whites needs to be challenged and disproven (Codrington & Fairchild, 21). That process can begin with the incorporation of cultural competency and racial dexterity trainings for educators. The silence in discussing this topic which is generated by the dominate culture undermines the experiences of people of color and also perpetuates the policies and programs that make advancements extremely difficult, if not impossible (Coleman & Stevenson, 88). Through it's history, race has continued to create a divide amongst people in this country, influence so many aspects of living and determine outcomes for people including education. Until we are able to confront the realities and address it head on, we will continue to see the systemic inequality and limit access to an equitable education that should be a right for all.

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