

Mary Blanton

Professor Christopher Dunbar

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It Does Take a Village

In this current time of economic uncertainty, when school district budgets are being slashed, it is important now, more than ever, to make sure that what limited resources there are, are being used as efficiently, effectively, and equitably as possible. Schools cannot control the demographic of students coming in, but they can certainly work to ensure that each student has access to quality educators and programs in order to ensure their students' success. Striving for academic achievement, especially with students who are underachieving and struggling, does not rest solely on the shoulders of parents, or students, or teachers, or administrators. It is the responsibility of all invested parties to work together to implement successful programs and promote the engagement and education of these students. In essence, it takes an entire community commitment with everyone working toward the common goal in order to produce the desired outcome of eliminating the racial achievement gap.

A common complaint that many teachers give for students who are unsuccessful is that their parents are not as involved in their child's education as white and Asian parents. While this may be true for some, and parent involvement is definitely a key to student success, teachers need to offer parents more ways to get involved in their child's education. It is hard to believe that any parent does not want success for their children. In fact, John Ogbu points out in *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb* that black parents have extremely high academic expectations for their children. The problem, Ogbu asserts, is that, "there was a discrepancy

between parents' expectations, such as telling them that they should make good grades, and actually showing them how they should make good grades" (248). Even though there are a plethora of reasons for a lack of parent involvement, there are also a number of ways teachers and schools can preempt this issue. While many parents do not attend Back to School nights or parent-teacher conferences, teachers could easily send home a list of class expectations and ways for parents to help their children. This might include a letter home with each report card stating what is happening in each class and giving parents tips on what questions to ask their children about these classes.

There are also ways in which schools can include parents and get their input on the development of programs or ideas parents may have about issues they see in the school. In *Unfinished Business*, Noguera and Wing highlight the Parent Resource Center that was developed to provide, "assistance to parents who were dealing with immediate school-related problems and crises" (216). This center was successful because there were a variety of forums, workshops (for parents *and* teachers), and programs to encourage and promote parent involvement in schools. This center also gave a voice to parents of minority students. Ultimately, all parents need to feel welcome and not intimidated when they set foot in their child's school. For this reason alone, giving parents resources in any way possible will help to combat one of the factors of the racial achievement gap.

In addition to getting parents more involved in the education process, teachers also play a major role, maybe the largest role, in working to eliminate the achievement gap. It is no secret that teachers have the most contact with students throughout the day – more so even than parents sometimes, and the relationships that teachers build with their students is crucial to academic success. Many experts agree that students are more successful and engaged in school when they

feel as though their presence and their voice is valued, and that comes from an emphasis that should be placed on relationships – especially when some students have had negative relationships with past authority figures. From the Diversity Project at Berkeley High School, came the Student Outreach Committee in an effort to give underrepresented students opportunities to have their voices heard. While the committee had their struggles, one student, Nabila Lee Lester reflected that, “Having a center for such groups is also very important so that the student leaders feel connected to something, someone, and somewhere larger than themselves” (258). If students feel they can be part of the change of the institution, they are more likely to take ownership over their education and understand how and why certain decisions are made.

While creating positive relationships is critical, teachers also need to look within themselves and reflect and self-assess their own teaching practices in order to get an idea of how they contribute to the achievement gap. Tamara Friedman, one of the teachers who participated in the Diversity Project at Berkeley High School, commented in her reflection after teaching a Spanish 1 class for students who had previously failed that even though she was cognizant of the challenges, that many students still did not pass her class. She writes, “I feel that I have an impact on student achievement by continuing always to question and adapt my own teaching practices, in addition to questioning and attempting to change the practices of our larger institution” (182). As Friedman also implies, it is difficult for one teacher to change an entire system, however, we have control over what happens in our own classrooms, and we can also learn from our colleagues and our students. Teachers need to take time out of their day to really think about the job they are doing and how effectively they deliver the material to their students.

In order to prevent some of the feelings that Tamara Friedman had, teachers should meet with one another on a consistent basis to discuss their teaching practices and collaborate with the focus on eliminating the disparity of achievement for groups of students. Teaching can be such an isolating occupation, and it is important for educators to work together and evaluate their practice from different perspectives. One idea would be that teachers work together to develop unbiased assessments and different types of assessments for students, and once these assessments are given, teachers should come back together to evaluate, calibrate, and moderate the results of the assessments. Also, as Dr. Donna Ford of Vanderbilt University and others point out, teachers should be using more multicultural content. Included in John Ogbu's research is a piece of information from Prince George's County Public Schools which asserts that, "Multicultural education, or curriculum infusion (inclusion of minority experiences and perspectives), is required to prevent Black students from equating school success with acting White and to enhance their self-esteem, increase self-awareness, and interracial understanding; make learning more relevant to their lives, and increase their academic performance" (278). Therefore, something as simple as changing content can have a large impact on a student's perspective of education.

Not only are assessment practices and diverse content important, but challenging and rigorous curriculum is essential for student success. In high schools, especially, there are many classes for students who are credit deficient. These classes are largely populated with black and Latino students, and oftentimes teachers lower their expectations and do not offer challenging content. The rigor may not be present because these teachers feel as though the students cannot handle challenging material, when, in fact, they are doing a disservice to the students. In an interview, Dr. Donna Ford suggests that when teachers have low quality curriculum to offer

students, the teachers, “deliver low quality instruction.” Students tend to be less engaged in a class when they are not challenged because, like any person, they are bored with simple lessons and projects. Another reason teachers lessen the rigor of a course is because the teachers who are delivering instruction in lower level classes tend to be lower quality or inexperienced teachers.

Dr. Ronald Ferguson from Harvard University explained that some teachers may need help learning better ways to teach. In certain instances, teacher leaders have the responsibility to hold their colleagues accountable for the work that needs to be done. If it is not being done, as Ferguson points out, teachers should approach one another with the simple question: “How can I help you?” It is imperative that all teachers are held to a higher level of instruction in order to engage students from any background, whether cultural or socio-economic.

Teachers and administrators also need to work together to develop and implement programs focused on the achievement gap. Like any other problem in the world, once it is recognized, people cannot ignore the issue. Administrators need to look to schools like Brockton High School in Massachusetts as a model of successful program implementation. We all know that writing and literacy skills are important in any classroom, and it cannot be contained solely in English classrooms. As Dr. Ronald Ferguson explained in his lecture at Michigan State, Brockton decided to create writing across all subject areas. Not only did teachers take on the task in every classroom, but there was teacher accountability. All teachers were expected to have their students write, and they had also developed a school-wide rubric in order to assess students. When students are receiving similar instruction and being scored on a consistent level, they are more apt to learn better because they are getting more practice in a variety of different areas. While Ferguson only points out Brockton’s writing program, it can be used as an example for other types of cross-curricular program development.

Interventions are also important for schools to develop and implement. Academic interventions that utilize counselor support are important for students who may not have parents at home that know or understand the school system and course offerings. A class comprised of juniors and seniors with a focus on future and career planning is essential for some students who may not have already thought about their future after high school. Taking students on college visits, preparing them for SATs, filling out FAFSA forms, and giving them opportunities to job shadow or hear from community members are steps that schools can take to ensure that all high school students are prepared for the “real world.” These are also programs that do not require much funding, and they allow students to see relevant applications of their high school academics.

Administrators and teachers also need to rethink how discipline is handled in classrooms. Students will often misbehave in classes because they know they will get sent out, probably to the office or some form of detention. For a student who does not want to be in class in the first place, this system of discipline is ideal, but it does not address the underlying issue of why the student is misbehaving. It also does not usually change the behaviors. Noguera and Wing claim that a school, “punishes its neediest students by denying them the opportunity to learn, and it does so even though there is no evidence that it succeeds at either changing students behavior or improving the climate for learning” (122). Students of color are disproportionately disciplined at many schools, and an effort needs to be made by those in charge to examine and change the systems that are currently in place. The first thing teachers should do when a student misbehaves is call home. Many times just a call home to parents is enough to change student behavior, but for various reasons, these calls are not made often. Indeed, steps need to be taken to implement

systems that focus on creating environments where students are not removed from classrooms, and instead try to change and prevent disruptive behaviors.

Oftentimes in the discussion about the racial achievement gap, many people look at all of the various factors of why students of color do not achieve at the same rates that white or Asian students do, and they tend to focus on changes that schools, parents, and communities need to make. There is another important group that can aid in the elimination of the gap: students. Obviously schools, teachers, and parents need to foster and promote a culture of student achievement, but we also have to change the external and internal dialogue among students. Dr. Ford highlights the “deficit thinking” that is prevalent among teens. Many students associate achievement as “acting white,” which is also something that Ford mentions in her interview. Again, the self-esteem of students needs to be bolstered in order for them to create a strong identity that allows them to achieve no matter what their peers may think. Students should be encouraging one another, instead of devaluing one another’s achievements, and this all starts with the culture of the school.

One way to create a culture of student engagement and success is to implement PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention Support). During his lecture, Dr. Ferguson briefly mentions the positive impact this program can have on schools. PBIS is obviously not a program that is successful overnight, and there are many steps involved in its development, but it has to start with buy in from teachers and student leaders in order to slowly change the school culture. PBIS can address many of the problems and issues that face schools with diverse populations of students, and, at the very least, it can create an open dialogue among teachers, administrators, parents, and students.

Ultimately, we need to understand and recognize that closing the racial achievement gap cannot be done in isolation. It takes a number of different groups and individuals coming together and making changes in order to create opportunities for success for all students. Whatever is done needs to be adjusted and continually evaluated and revised. Nothing in teaching is ever finished, and we can always and should always strive to do better for all of our students.

Works Cited

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