

# *Diversity Responsive Schools*

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## OVERVIEW

GIVEN THE GAPS BETWEEN THE ACHIEVEMENT OF STUDENTS OF DIFFERENT RACES AND ETHNICITIES, it seems reasonable to assume that there are conditions in schools related to race and ethnicity that affect student motivation and opportunities to learn. When one does hear discussions of the need to address diversity, the usual strategy is to target the improvement of teaching. This strategy is understandable and important. But, even when the improvement of teaching is a high priority improvement strategy, the professional development that is needed for educators to meet the needs of racially and ethnically diverse students, often referred to as “Culturally Responsive Pedagogy,” is seldom integral to efforts to improve the teaching of core academic subjects.

Two other frequently heard remedies for racial and ethnic achievement gaps are “strong leadership” and an inclusive school culture. But neither of these provides much guidance for programmatic school improvement. Effective leadership is usually described in terms of heroic personal attributes—charismatic, committed, intolerant of failure, inspirational, and indefatigable. The complexity of school culture is often reduced to “high expectations” (and a requisite workshop).

Two frequently prescribed sets of strategies for narrowing the achievement gap that are *not* dealt with here are: (1) inequities among schools—such as allocation of teacher expertise and financial resources (cf. Sklar, et al., 2010; Sunderman et al., 2011)—and (2) characteristics of effective schools in which race and ethnicity are not usually implicated. To be sure, students of color benefit from clear goals, a tight fit between curriculum and assessment of learning, coherent programs, professional learning communities, extended learning time, staff stability, and other “essentials” of highly effective schools (cf. Bryk, et al., 2010; Scott, 2009; Murphy, 2010).

This paper argues that in order to improve learning outcomes for students of color, it will be necessary to focus more on improving within-school policies and practices that are particularly relevant to facilitating the learning of racially and ethnically diverse students. School conditions affect teaching effectiveness in powerful ways (Kennedy, 2010), not the least of which is their effects on student motivation. And, attending to these policies and practices are among the essential tasks of school leaders and these policies are the embodiment—the artifacts—of school cultures.

Of course, race and ethnicity are not the only dimensions of diversity; but they are correlated in many cases with other influences on learning, including socioeconomic status, community and family cultures, and English language facility. Moreover, everyone is diverse in some way that is relevant to their learning. Thus, by focusing on school conditions that are particularly important to the success of students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, we can learn lessons that help to identify and address school conditions that can improve the learning opportunities and outcomes of all students.

## THE ESSENTIALS OF DIVERSITY RESPONSIVE SCHOOLS

How would we know a Diversity Responsive School when we saw it? School policies and practices that maximize opportunities to learn for all students, but are particularly important to enhancing the learning outcomes of students of color include nuanced monitoring of both outcomes and influences on learning, relevant professional development, access to and support for success with rigorous content, fair and sensible disciplinary practices, culturally and linguistically responsive family engagement, a multicultural curriculum, an inclusive school climate, efforts to recruit and retain a diverse staff, and open and productive discussions of issues related to race and ethnicity. These conditions can be thought of as a set of indicators of a school's responsiveness.

*1. Multiple forms of data are continuously collected and used to monitor possible racial and ethnic differences in student achievement, disciplinary actions, access to learning opportunities and the composition of student learning groups.*

Collecting and analyzing data on student test scores and dropout rates is commonplace. However, disaggregating outcomes by race and ethnicity needs to be more detailed than is required by state and federal policy because there are often big differences in student performance within broad categories such as Hispanic (Latino) or Asian. Second, in addition to subgroup data on student achievement, data on differences in opportunities to learn—such as grouping for instruction, curricular differences, attendance, and discipline—are also needed to make problem-solving possible (cf. Archibald & Keleher, 2008). If such data are to lead to school-wide improvement, collaborative decision-making and the willingness to engage issues related to race and ethnicity are critical—though often difficult.

*2. Teachers' professional development opportunities include diversity-rich content that is integral to the teaching of academic content.*

The quality of teaching students experience is the single most important school-based influence on student learning (Lewis, 2009; Rice, 2003). Sometimes, diversity-related professional development assumes that a focus on teacher awareness and dispositions is adequate to improve instruction and student learning. More important, teachers need to master diversity-related pedagogical skills, including those that are content specific, if they are to enhance the learning of racially and ethnically diverse students. Moreover, teachers need to know how to build productive interpersonal relationships across student subgroups. The difficulty of developing such relationships, which are essential to student motivation, is often underestimated. And, the importance of these caring relationships to student success appears to be greater among many students of color than they are for white and Asian students (Ferguson, 2002).

Aspects of what might be called diversity-rich content of professional development include, but are not limited to, learning activities that help teachers:

- investigate and understand how students' race, ethnicity, social class and language might be related to their learning and behavior;
- understand how the overgeneralization of characteristics of students' cultures can result in stereotyping and other unproductive teaching behaviors;
- examine how their own beliefs and dispositions might affect their relationships with diverse students;

- understand how they react to students' dress, accents, nonverbal communication, dialects and discussion modes and how their reactions affect their interactions with students;
- know how to mediate the effects of stereotype threat experienced by students; and
- develop the knowledge and skills to adapt instruction to the needs and experiences of students from different racial and ethnic groups.(1)

### *3. Students have access to rigorous academic content and the support they need to benefit from that access.*

Students from low-income families are more likely to get a larger proportion of their learning opportunities from school than students from higher-income homes (Raudenbush, 2008). And, of course, English language learners are heavily dependent on schools for their academic learning opportunities. However, for a host of reasons—some the consequence of well-meaning instructional practices that effectively dumb-down the curriculum, some related to biases and misconceptions, and some because students are sometimes reluctant to seek rigorous curricula—students of color are often less likely than white students and many Asian-descent students to be engaged in more rigorous coursework.

Among the issues here is how students are selected for gifted and talented programs and honors courses, and whether students of color have access to and support to succeed in Advanced Placement courses (Barton & Coley, 2009, p.10). Policies and practices affecting access that get less attention include mis-assignment to special education, retention strategies, and how students are grouped for instruction within classrooms.

#### **MIS-ASSIGNMENT TO SPECIAL EDUCATION**

Historically, black and Latino have been over-identified and placed in special education classrooms (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2006). Reasons for this include: 1) inadequate classroom instruction prior to referral to special education; 2) inconsistent, vague or arbitrary assessment and placement policies and processes; and 3) the lack of effective schooling options (Harry & Klingner, 2006).

#### **DISPROPORTIONALITY IN STUDENT RETENTION**

Minority and low-income students are more likely to be retained than their white and more affluent peers (Texas Education Agency, 1996). Research has consistently shown that retention, as commonly implemented, has a negative impact on achievement and socio-emotional adjustment and that it does not help most students “catch up” (Jimerson, 2001). There is also a relationship between retention and dropping out: students who are retained in elementary grades have a higher probability of dropping out of high school (Ou & Reynolds, 2010).

#### **“ABILITY” GROUPING**

One of the more common ways that students experience different levels of academic rigor is that they are tracked and grouped by “ability” (students are invariably grouped by prior achievement, not ability). Grouping is a common and often necessary practice. How it is done—whether it is targeted to specific goals with progress assessed continuously and whether students are held to high standards of performance—is the key to student success. Research is clear that tracking (formal or informal) and inflexible ability grouping disadvantages most students (Hawley, 2007). On the other hand, there is evidence that very high achieving students can benefit from learning in academically homogeneous groups. The resolution of this conundrum resides in flexibility and teacher expertise in managing the instruction of diverse students (2).

*4. There are well understood processes in place to fairly adjudicate school rules, identify perceived inequities and interpersonal conflict, and ensure that disciplinary policies and actions remove students from learning opportunities only as a last resort.*

Maintaining safe and productive opportunities to learn is critically important for all students but many teachers struggle with classroom management and how to deal with what they view as disorderly and disruptive behavior. How teachers meet these challenges affect student motivation and opportunities to learn.

Students of color are much more likely than their white peers to be disciplined (Gay, 2006). Students of color may be more distrustful of authority and respond defensively to criticism and disciplinary action (Cohen, 2008; Noguera, 2008; Carter, 2008). Many disciplinary practices effectively reduce student learning time and this is especially true of suspension (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Thus, rules governing student behavior need to be clear and openly discussed and disciplinary action processes should be characterized by fairness and transparency. The best way to deal with the potential of disruptive behavior is to prevent it through strategies such as positive behavioral supports.

*5. Family and community engagement strategies are well-developed and give particular attention to engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families.*

An effective family engagement program reaches out to engage families in direct support of their children's learning (Boufford, et al., 2009). It is not surprising that some family members who have limited education or who have experienced discrimination may be distrustful and even confrontational. This conflict can cause teachers to back away from their students' families. Nonetheless, to develop the trust of family members and to deeply understand students, it is helpful for teachers to get to know and to engage their students' families outside the school. This is a tall order for teachers, and it requires school level commitment and time for such engagement—more than parent-teacher conferences once a quarter—as well as collaboration with community groups and help with communicating with families with limited English.

*6. The school's curriculum embodies opportunities to learn about different cultures and interact with students of different races and ethnicities while being adaptive to student experiences and preferences for learning.*

An effective multicultural curriculum not only provides students opportunities to learn about different cultures but uses learning resources that are “culturally familiar” to diverse students (cf. Goldenberg, Rueda & August, 2006, p.293).

A multicultural curriculum is important to being a well-educated person but, in itself, does not transform students' preconceived beliefs about different races and ethnic groups. To have such an effect, a curriculum—and the related instructional practices—needs to engage students in intergroup relationships and learning (Stephan, Renfro & Stephan, 2004).

One of the challenges facing educators who develop and use multicultural curricula is to avoid over-generalizing about the culture of students typically categorized by common racial and ethnic identities. How a multicultural curriculum is taught may be more important than the curriculum itself. (3)

*7. School policies and practices reflect a commitment to inclusiveness as well as respect for the values and strengths of diverse racial and ethnic groups.*

These commitments are manifest in many ways including student engagement in extra-curricular activities and leadership positions and the representation of students' cultural diversity.

Student connectedness to school and a positive school climate have been identified as factors that support academic performance, attendance and behavior (Weiss, Cunningham, Lewis, & Clark, 2005; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Adolescent and School Health, 2009). Schools that provide opportunities for student leadership and recognize student contributions enhance that connectedness. School policies, practices, or traditions may inadvertently impose requirements that limit the number of students who can compete for elected positions or serve in leadership positions. This can result in decreased levels of student connectedness and negatively impact school climate (McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002).

In racially and ethnically diverse schools, extracurricular activities may be opportunities for interracial contact in positive settings of shared interest (Brawarsky, 1996; Denson, 2009; Slavin, 1995; Cohen, 2004). Such activities can also be opportunities for curricular enrichment and the development of leadership and social skills that ultimately contribute to student academic success. In diverse schools, extracurricular activities should be responsive to the interests of all student groups, and, at the same time, efforts should be made to encourage students of all races and ethnicities to participate in a broad range of activities.

In diversity-responsive schools, the historic experiences, values, and on-going contributions of diverse ethnic, racial, linguistic groups are evident throughout the school, including public displays, classroom environments and the library. For example, the diversity of the student body is represented in the trophy cases, student work, poster boards and other public places and classrooms. And, in depicting the heritage of different groups, stereotyping that uses "traditional" characterizations is avoided and contemporary experiences and achievements are encompassed.

*8. Efforts are made to recruit and retain a racially and ethnically diverse school staff.*

More than 75 percent of teachers and school administrators are white. This reality means that it is often not possible to have a racially and ethnically diverse school staff, especially one that represents the racial and ethnic diversity of a given school. Do students learn more from teachers of their own race? While research is thin, the research indicates that the racial and ethnic fit between students and teachers is correlated with student performance (Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2006). But other factors may matter more. There is evidence that teachers of color are less likely to overreact to student behaviors and thus are less likely to take disciplinary action that removes students from the classroom (Gay, 2006). Moreover, staff diversity may provide students of color with positive role models and allow students to witness positive interracial interactions.

*9. The school has processes in place to surface, discuss, and address issues related to students' race and ethnicity that may represent discrimination, ineffective practice or interpersonal conflict.*

We live in a society in which issues of race are pervasive for a host of economic, social and political reasons. Not surprisingly, there will be intergroup tensions in many schools. Concern about such tensions, and uncertainty about inter-cultural competence, can lead to educators' denial about the relevance of race or unwillingness to discuss perceptions that may be interpreted as racist. For these reasons, school communities need to discuss how racial attitudes and beliefs, even those that are well meaning, might be affecting student performance, professional collaboration and family

engagement. Some issues that appear to be racial will turn out not to be, but a trusting and respectful learning community is critical in creating open discussions around race that lead to problem solving.

### **Conclusion**

We have identified nine characteristics of schools that are likely to be particularly successful in facilitating the learning of racially and ethnically diverse students. These school-level policies and practices are also likely to enhance the learning of all students because, of course, all students are diverse in experiences, values and dispositions about learning.

The policies and practice discussed here are inter-related and reinforcing. But, they can be implemented individually. Research does not tell us what the relative effects of different improvements are and this will depend, in any case, on extant conditions in any given school.

Recognizing the need to be responsive to the complexity of racially and ethnically diverse students can sharpen one's focus on how policies and practices affect all students' opportunities to learn. However, adding responsiveness to students' racial and ethnic diversity to the school improvement agenda is not easy. There will be denial (e.g., we should be color blind), substantial professional development will be needed, curriculum enrichment will be required, and commitments and resources will be necessary to develop school communities of relational trust and cultural proficiency.

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## Notes

1. These are just some examples of “culturally responsive pedagogy”. For overviews of such teaching see Gay (2010) and Irvine (2011).
2. One might expect diversity responsive schools to facilitate learning in diverse classrooms through strategies such as cooperative learning (Cooper & Slavin, 2004); peer-mediated instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009); and differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2003). See also, (Burriss & Garrity, 2008)
3. For example see Hurley, Allen & Boykin (2009) on the importance of adapting reward structures; Lee (2010) on incorporating students’ different cultural and linguistic practices in science lessons; and Cohen, et al. (2009) on differentiation in assigned writing content. However, research on the effects of multicultural curricula is generally modest and findings are inconsistent (see, Goldenberg, Rueda & August, 2006, and Stephan, Renfro & Stephan, 2004).

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