

**Culturally Engaging Instruction and Leadership:
A New Framework for Reducing Disparate Student Achievement
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Abstract

Culturally engaging framework for instruction and leadership emerged from a study exploring how Earnest Just Elementary School created high levels of achievement for its African American students. A highly dynamic leadership team of administrators and teacher leaders created a school culture committed to academic and behavioral excellence for every student. This paper outlines the framework of *culturally engaging* instruction and leadership that emerged from the study and then describes how the framework's direct application influenced the achievement of high school students at an urban high school same district, resulting in a successful bottom-up teacher leadership project to promote higher achievement among a diverse student body.

In the nearly 50 years since desegregation of United States schools and despite multiple research insights about potential underlying causes to disparate student achievement, education professionals have failed to produce consistent high levels of achievement among African American students at a rate similar to their peers (Garibaldi, 1992). In the same interval, school leaders have been asked to respond to the diverse needs of students by moving from the role of manager keeping an organization running efficiently to a role of change agent charged with continually renewing or reforming schools.

Given the resources of time and money dedicated to addressing the educational needs of African American students, it is frustrating as a practitioner to witness disparate performances of students when every failing grade is not a statistic—but instead a face, a name, a story and, more importantly, a relationship. During the 60 years since *Brown v. Board of Education*, educational research has yet to create a functional change in practice more equitable student achievement. Although many contributing indicators and influences on school success have been identified, the persistence of achievement gaps indicates the current approach to address disparate student achievement among demographic subgroups needs improvement.

Many instructional leaders aspire to eliminate disparate student achievement among students from diverse backgrounds. Few school leaders, however, successfully establish and sustain a positive, engaging culture that supports achievement of all students. All African American students at Earnest Just Elementary School², along with all students receiving free and reduced price lunch services, scored proficient—the target score—or higher on statewide accountability tests in 2009. This paper describes the exceptional leadership of Earnest Just Elementary School that contributed to high achievement, the subsequent emergent framework of *culturally engaging leadership*, and practical applications to drastically reduce disparate student achievement among students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

A Complex Model of Disparate Student Achievement

Social, environmental, and cultural issues that create disparate student achievement in P12 schools is so complex it is nearly impossible for school leaders to effect lasting school improvement. Currently, the model for addressing student achievement targets specific under-performing minority demographics (typically determined by race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status) for remedial interventions. While admirable, the model ascribed to by educational professionals tends to ignore the reality that many student representatives of these overall under-

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² Pseudonym was chosen to honor the 20th century African American zoologist. Earnest Just Elementary is a small, urban public school located in the Ohio Valley.

performing groups are successful. Likewise, many students with demographics correlating to high achievement are not successful. The current model school leaders use to increase student performance is too complex and has too many exceptional cases to be an accurate model from which to design school improvement initiatives.

Multiple resources describe influences on student achievement that are external to the locus of control by both student and school, personality characteristics that may or may not be related to home culture, and influences internal to schools (cf., Archibald, Glutting, & Qian, 2009; Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Fram, Miller-Cribs, & Horn, 2007; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002; Steele, 1997). Variables external to student and school may include *home factors* (c.f. Bateman & Kennedy, 1997; Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn, & Zamsky, 1994; Kozol, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2009), *community resources* (c.f. Bailey & Paisley; Brown & Gadson, 2010; Garibaldi, 1992; Rothstein, 2004) and *exposure to environmental toxins* (Kozol; Rothstein). Student characteristics include, but are not limited to, *resiliency, self-efficacy, level of independence* (c.f. Bateman & Kennedy, 1997; Chase-Lansdale et al., 1994; Gayles, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Steele, 2010) and *racial identity* (c.f. Cokely, McClain, Jones & Johnson, 2011; Duncan, 2002; Milner, 2006; Spring, 2008; Steele). School descriptors include *student-teacher ratios* (Pianta et al, 2002), *teacher characteristics* (Archibald, 2006), and *quality of leadership* (c.f. Deal & Peterson, 1999; Dimmock & Walker, 2005). Student achievement is the result of these cumulative influences (c.f. Fram et al., 2007; Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010). The multitude of variables creates a complex model of student achievement making it difficult to ascertain the success of any one intervention program (c.f. Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Garibaldi, 1992), therefore limiting the ability of educational professionals to adequately address the needs of all students.

External Influences on Achievement

Family descriptors such as *family structure* (c.f. Bateman & Kennedy, 1997; Chase-Lansdale et al., 1994; Pittman & Boswell, 2007), *cultural history* (Fordham, 2008; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Kozol, 1992; Milner, 2006; Sleeter, 2008) and income (Fram et al., 2007; Huston, McLoyd & Coll, 1994; Kunjufu, 2006; Murnane, 2007; Pohlman, 2008; Ratcliffe & McKernan, 2010) have been shown to be predictors of student success. Environmental factors such as the *presence of environmental toxins* (c.f. Kozol; Miranda, Kim, Reiter, Overstreet Galeano, & Maxson, 2009; Rothstein, 2006) and access to health and dental care (Rothstein, 2004) also have been shown to correlate with student achievement. The effects of poverty or low socio-economic status have been shown to be negatively correlated with academic achievement (Kozol, 1992; Payne, 1996; Rothstein, 2004). Students from low-income families are often exposed to environmental toxins, sub-standard health care, and other influences that negatively correlate to achievement (Kozol; Rothstein; Prince, Pepper & Brucato, 2006). Furthermore, while more White students live near or below the poverty line than African American students, African American students experience poverty at a higher percentage than their White peers for statistically longer intervals and deeper levels. The effects of poverty are cumulative over time (Payne, 1996; Rothstein). Given these statistics, some practitioners may give up on pushing these students to meet academic standards or excuse low achievement on socioeconomic issues. However, many students who experience poverty are successful in schools (Prince et al.). Current models of student achievement tend to neglect the cases of high student achievement despite lower monetary resources as well as the fact that African American students express a greater desire for academic pursuits than do their White peers (Mickelson, 1990). An accurate model of student should predict both the high and low achievement cases for all students.

Student Characteristics and Achievement

Educational research has shown that specific student characteristics are positive or negative influences on success³. Personality descriptors of resiliency (Connell, Spencer & Aber, 1994; Gayles, 2005), self-efficacy (Galla & Wood, 2012; Uwah, 2012), sense of belonging or identifying with schooling (Booker, 2004; Fordham, 2008; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Spring, 2008; Steele, 1997), independence and future goals (Garibaldi, 1992; Gayles) have been shown to be predictors of student success. High self-esteem and independence may assist African American students who attempt to overcome negative peer pressure from non-engaged peers (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986) to do well in school. A vision for the future and future goals may provide the needed motivation to stay on course

³ The following citations while lengthy have been provided to emphasize the overwhelming amount of research covering each topic.

despite negative experiences. Strong mentors may provide direct instruction or for culturally sanctioned behaviors like homework completion, and in the role of coach provide additional motivations.

Interventions

Many studies have provided numerous valuable potential interventions for underachieving students (e.g., collaborative models, direct instruction, all male academies for African American students, heterogeneous groupings). Many of these interventions have been adopted as best practice in our nation's schools; however, due to the complexity of variables and unique contextual factors, it is impossible to ascertain how student success is related to these specific interventions (Bailey & Paisley, 2004; Garibaldi, 1992). Many programs that promote student success appeal to a subgroup of students who already exhibit one or more characteristics listed in the previous section. These programs therefore, likely have a history of successful outcomes due more to the students they attract than the intervention attempted. Many researchers claim successful interventions because they report anecdotal success stories, which are relevant, but with such infrequent and complex examples that it is not possible to show definitive causal or even correlative links to programs. These critiques are not intended to detract from the positive influence that many research-based interventions have on the success of African American and other students from minority backgrounds. Rather, the intent is to demonstrate the complexity of reducing disparate student achievement and the difficulty school leaders face in choosing, implementing, and assessing appropriate instructional strategies and school structures.

Implementing interventions to improve student achievement at the classroom or district level, however, has resulted in a piecemeal approach that is chaotic at best, and has done little to improve the overall ability of practitioners to educate students equitably. Models explaining the achievement gap ascribed to by both researchers and practitioners in education need to be reevaluated. The success attributed to best-practice interventions suggests they reduce the need for student resilience and self-efficacy though a combination of increasing students' ability to identify with schooling, successfully navigate systemic bureaucratic procedures, and sustain the effort over 12 or more years of schooling.

Student Resiliency, Independence, and Self-Efficacy

Efforts to describe adequately the negative experiences of African American students to a larger audience have been attempted (Fordham & Ogbu, 1984; Kozol, 1992; Payne, 2005; Rothstein, 2004; Steele, 2010). Unfortunately, many of these reports have led to an emotionally charged discourse (Spring, 2008; Liamputtong, 2010) that prevents free exchange of ideas among those dedicated to improving the schooling experience for African American students. What appears lacking in the research is recognition that African American students—and other students from minority backgrounds or special circumstances—*need* to possess resiliency, independence, or self-efficacy to be successful, which implies that traditional schooling is an otherwise negative experience for minority students. In other words, only those students with exceptional personal characteristics can be successful.

The current model of disparate student performance fails to question the arbitrary definitions used to sort students into discrete groups based on various indicators of socioeconomic status, racial or ethnic identity—and thus neglects to ascribe importance to the interplay of cultural influences. High- and low-achieving students are separated into discrete groupings for both assessment and research, and ultimately intervention purposes. The definition of poverty is an arbitrary number set for government purposes, and thus, the definition of poverty for schooling purposes is likewise arbitrary. The government determines poverty level based on income and number of family members and is “intended for use as a statistical yardstick, not as a complete description of what people and families need to live” (U. S. Census Bureau, n.d.). However, researchers treat the academic performance of students as if their economic status directly influences academic potential. That is, the desegregation of student data applies the definitions of poverty and affluence as if these conditions are discrete characteristics as opposed to a continuum of financial resources.

The current model also tends to ignore that many White students living above the poverty line are also failing to succeed in schools. The current model of the achievement gap describing achievement for African American students and students from homes low economic resources does not account for exceptional cases. This creates a model based on a fictitious reality that is too complex to describe through a single narrative and results in an

impractical model for use by practitioners. Thus, little progress has been made in eliminating disparate student achievement among demographic subgroups of students. Truly, the environmental hazards frequently experienced by poorer students do contribute to the achievement gap due to physical impact on students' health and well being (Kozol, 1992; Rothstein, 2004). A question must be asked: What if the underlying values, beliefs, and behaviors by which cultures are defined result in poverty as defined by government standards and lower student achievement as determined by policymakers and researchers?

Incompleteness

Many researchers, and therefore practitioners, appear to neglect the basic tenets of Piaget and Maslow concerning universal human maturation and developmental needs. Furthermore, little within the current model of the achievement gap describes why some students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds are very successful in schools despite multiple negative indicators and why some students from affluent backgrounds fail to achieve as their peers do (Connell et al., 1994).

Cultural Influences

Cultural attributes of students (defined here as values, beliefs, and behaviors reinforced by families and communities) can influence overall student performance in schools. The closer a student's home culture is to the culture of the school, the more likely the student is to perform well (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Spring, 2008). Because we desegregate data by racial and socioeconomic subgroups, the current model of disaggregating student populations tends to define students' culture by those subgroups. Doing so leads to a deficit model focused on differences. What is the definition of African American or poverty culture? As a White practitioner, my definition of African American culture probably does not match any African American's definition, and more curiously the definition provided by an African American probably does not describe any single African American. The same would be true for poverty culture, or Appalachian culture, or Asian culture, or any culture. Therefore, the cultural definitions used for research and practice are non-operational, in fact nearly useless, and result in deficit descriptors initially promoted by Payne (1996). They also lead to emotionally charged discourse Spring (2008) warns about that developed around Fordham and Ogbu's (1987) descriptions of the disengaged subgroup of African American students.

The experiences of students throughout their public schooling are cumulative. As a practitioner, I have yet to meet a child who was not excited about starting school as a preschooler or Kindergartener. By the time they enter my high school classroom as juniors—whether Black or White, poor or affluent—many have been failed by the system or do not identify with schooling as it is presented. When a student's home cultural cues do not match with her or his school's cultural cues, confusion results in an emotional response called *affective dissonance* (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). This emotional response builds over time and leads to some African American students disengaging from the educational process and even becoming oppositional. Logically, in order to counteract this cumulative response to schooling by African American students, it seems appropriate for practitioners to match the school culture more closely to the home culture. Because there are no operational definitions for African American culture or poverty culture that practitioners can rely on to address the needs of African American students, the resulting actions often result in deficit models for addressing underachievement by African American students or those living at poverty level. Furthermore, American public schools have to educate students from diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds making it nearly impossible to individual needs of all students. Another question arises: How can school prevent affective dissonance that arises from misinterpreted cultural cues among members of a highly diverse population?

When *cultural dissonance*—defined here as meanings of cultural cuing from all sources that do not match between the school environment and the student's home environment—occurs, it creates powerful internal confusion and emotive disquiet that Fordham and Ogbu (1986) term *affective dissonance*. The cumulative effects of this emotional disquiet can lead to disengagement and in extreme cases oppositional behavior (Fordham & Ogbu). Some students are able to resolve this dissonance independently by camouflaging cultural behaviors between peer groups and cultural settings or by exhibiting a sense of independence and personal fortitude despite peer influence to disengage. Others may resolve this dissonance through the assistance of a strong personal mentoring relationship. The resolution of this affective dissonance, however, most likely drains energy reserves preventing

even high achieving students from performing at their best.⁴ The need to resolve cultural dissonance explains why students with higher levels of resilience, self-efficacy, independence, or future goals to motivate perseverance are found to endure (Gayles, 2005).

Imagine for a moment if schools could relieve African American students and other students who experience cultural dissonance from this burden that drains the energy reserves of students from diverse backgrounds and prevent them from achieving at their highest potential (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Steele, 2010). This is critical because intellectual capacity is often diverted toward resolving affective dissonance rather than focusing on academic matters. If this is the case, then school leaders should endeavor to reduce as much cultural dissonance as possible not only for African American students but also for all students from cultural backgrounds dissimilar from the educators who serve in those schools.

Reducing cultural dissonance for students, especially in a highly diverse school, may sound Herculean. As long as teachers and administrators continue to approach improving student achievement by treating various defined groups as independent of each other and with different responses to similar stimuli, little will change with regard to student achievement. As researchers, we tend to neglect the reality that (a) all students are human with the same needs of belonging and affection described by Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, (b) that *culture* is defined as the set of values belief and behaviors adhered to by a group of people, and (c) that practitioners have finite financial, temporal, and energy resources with which to improve student achievement. It is possible, however, to address cultural dissonance for students by adapting school structures from a more generalized paradigm.

The next few pages outline an argument for changing our most basic assumptions about factors that influence student achievement in the expectation of allowing students from diverse backgrounds to free themselves from environmental and sociological burdens and maximize their potential within the classroom. This argument describes an underlying symmetry of humanity that when applied to a classroom, faculty, or district addresses the need of underperforming students to (a) identify with schooling and (b) successfully navigate systemic bureaucratic procedures. The model this paper presents describes how both students and adults are affected by environmental and social cues from the first day of classes and how those experiences—positive and negative—accumulate over time driving a student toward successful outcomes or less than ideal performance. Furthermore, this article will describe practical applications for school leaders to use student and staff cultural backgrounds to engage them in scholastic pursuits. This new framework describes how to utilize universal human mechanisms to culturally engage students and faculty in the larger learning community. The framework of *culturally engaging instruction* promotes a new approach for to address disparate student achievement and guide more efficient schooling practices.

Earnest Just⁵ Elementary School: The Original Study

The study of Earnest Just Elementary School sought to identify influences on high levels of achievement among its African American students, with the hopes of replicating similar strategies in other schools. The study exposed a dynamic leadership team committed to the success of every student. Analysis of data showed a distinct connection between school cultural practices, cultural dimensions described by Spring (2008), and strategies that reduced potential stereotype threat (Steele, 2010) among its minority students. The study exposed a dynamic leadership team committed to supporting rigorous learning for every student. Implemented strategies created a culture of excellence, a strong sense of community among shareholders, and a high level of trust in the principal. A risk-safe culture among staff, students, and community resulted in a positive energy which resonated two years later, despite a full-school renovation, a new principal, and nearly complete faculty turn-over. The culturally engaging framework emerged from this study to describe the key influences on student achievement in the hopes of creating similar success at other institutions.

⁴ I described this phenomenon to a male, African American 11th grade student once. Emotion welled up in this linebacker's eyes as he responded, "Ms. McLaughlin, you just described my life."

⁵ Pseudonym chosen to honor the 20th century African American zoologist

The case of Earnest Just Elementary School (McLaughlin, 2012) emerged from an environmental scan of 23 district schools that compared their socioeconomic and racial demographics to overall student achievement on 2009 state accountability testing. On average the district scored similarly to national statistics: schools with higher diversity and lower family incomes overall scored lower. Three schools consistently defied the model. Two consistently performed lower than suggested by their demographic. Earnest Just persistently scored better than other district schools with similar student body composition. Earnest Just was in the top third of district schools by both percentage of students receiving free or reduced price lunch and by percentage of students identified as African American. They were also in the top third of elementary schools in the district for their 2009 state accountability scores. Furthermore, in both social studies and science, 100% of African American students scored proficient or better—the target scores—on the test, even though not all white students did. Additionally, the gap between the performance of African American students and their peers for other subject was much narrower than it was at higher scoring schools. Five years prior to the peak of success, Earnest Just Elementary school received state assistance and interventions due to unsatisfactory performances on accountability testing. The remarkable turnaround combined with high levels of student success made it a case worth investigating.

Methods

Earnest Just was selected as the study site to determine what strategies were working well for African American students. Two research questions guided the study: (a) “What structural initiatives are in place within the school to support the academic achievement of African American students? (McLaughlin, 2012)” and (b) “What informal supports are occurring within the school to enhance student achievement among African American students? (McLaughlin). For this study, structural initiatives were defined as formal practices developed by legislative, district, or school personnel and included both externally developed legal mandates and commercially available programs for strategic intervention. Informal supports were defined as strategies that were implemented without formal written policy that became part of school culture as success spread. Many of the identified strategies contributed to the overall high achievement among African American students.

This study was an exploratory study involving document review, on-site observations, ~~interviews and interviews~~ with administrators, teachers and parents. Beginning in April 2011 and ending in December 2011, data collection occurred more than 2 years after the initial successful student testing in 2009. In those two years the school was fully renovated, the faculty turned over by 50% each year, and even the principal was different. The facility where the research occurred had little in common with the facility that fostered high achievement among its students from minority backgrounds.

Thirteen participants enrolled in the study, chosen for their role in the school on the recommendation of another participant. Four parents of students, two of whom were African American, represented a range school and community involvement, resources, student grades, and class levels. Of the three teachers enrolled in the study that was employed at Earnest Just in 2009 and in 2011, only one was available for interviews. Additionally, the district elementary school coordinator, the principal from 2009 and the 2011 principal were each interviewed. Additional participants allowed for their classroom to be observed.

All data were collected and analyzed for emergent themes. As themes appeared, they were compared to the literature. Three cycles of successive analysis that occurred. Findings were crosschecked and given to participants to review for verification. The final report was presented to participants for review to allow them the opportunity to refine the description of their experiences to match their recollections. It was during the last phase of analysis that the framework of culturally engaging educational practices emerged nearly accidentally.

Findings

The study identified 79 distinct strategies and supports that supported the academic achievement among African American students. It eventually became clear that the leadership team tried everything they imagined and kept what appeared to work. A formal and highly successful anti-bullying program reduced social barriers to success for students. Parents and teachers both reported a high level of comfort and trust for the administrative team. It became apparent that four participants created a dynamic leadership team of two classroom teachers and two

administrators that took personal responsibility for the academic success of every student. Three additional third-grade team members were described as teacher-leaders by multiple participants but were unable to participate in the study. Common themes of effective strategies that emerged from analysis showed (a) high expectations for staff and students, (b) quality teachers and (c) strong interpersonal relationships. These findings are similar to those of Ladson-Billings (2009).

Strong sense of community. Many of the strategies and supports implemented at Earnest Just Elementary School enhanced a sense of overall community in the school. To prepare for the annual state testing, students engaged in friendly competition between classrooms, setting goals and pushing each other to achieve more during weekly learning checks. Individuals were pushed to do their best through positive peer pressure to help the class achieve the overall school goal on testing. Goals were communicated clearly, and progress toward the goal celebrated. Every student mattered; including one new student with special needs who achieved proficient scores. He enrolled at the school with virtually no reading skills eight weeks prior to testing who was subsequently assigned to sit and read with the custodian after school while waiting for the bus. Lower elementary students created a gauntlet and cheered for the testing fourth graders as they processed from classrooms to the cafeteria to test. When a student failed to achieve the academic or behavioral standard a team including parents and staff convened to collaboratively design and implement positive interventions. Students also positively and proudly identified with the school community, often telling newcomers engaged in bullying or poor work habits, “This is Earnest Just, we don’t do that here.” This sense of collective engagement in the school community directly ties to the first half of the culturally engaging framework.

Comforting environment. Strategies and supports at Earnest Just Elementary School also promoted a sense of security among its community members. Teachers reported trusting and being trusted by the administration. Parents and teachers both reported feeling comfortable in the school and with administration, including a parent who admitted her son had challenging behavior. Parents reported feeling welcome to enter and visit students and teachers at any time. Additionally, an anti-bullying program that was integral to school culture promoted a sense of psychological, sociological, and physical comfort to students. Teachers reported students as young as second grade recognizing, intervening, and preventing bullying when it happened. Preventing bullying became a source of pride among the students. Furthermore, students were given multiple opportunities and support to learn and re-learn skills until assignments met the standard, providing a risk-safe environment for struggling learners. The low levels of environmental stresses at Earnest Just Elementary School directly tie to a reduction of social anxiety as described in the second half of the culturally engaging framework.

Leadership team. The leadership team at Earnest Just was described by all participants as energetic, trustworthy, and committed to the high achievement for all students. A principal, administrative assistant, and two teacher leaders participated in interviews describing the events at Earnest Just. An additional third-grade team of three teachers were reported by participants to be instrumental in the high levels of school success. The synergy of this dynamic team resonated two years later, despite a full school renovation, a change in principals, and nearly full turnover of faculty and staff. Participants recalled events at Earnest Just with the same kind of battle-fatigued nostalgia that a soldier may use to retell stories from the trench, and regaled the principal with the same mythic respect and admiration that soldiers use to describe their heroic commander.

The principal recalled a specific conversion moment when she became convinced that promoting high achievement was her personal responsibility. She molded Earnest Just Elementary from a school receiving state intervention to a high performing school. She took a no excuses approach to the failure of students to meet academic and behavioral expectations. Teachers were expected to collaborate with families and support staff to develop interventions that were successful. Furthermore, when teachers approached her with innovative approaches to increasing student success, the principal invariably responded with, “What do you need?” As a visionary leader, the principal committed to the vision of high student achievement and was instrumental in sustaining school improvement.

The administrative assistant had a key understanding of the school’s history and was able to support the principal’s vision of school improvement. When student behavior interrupted the learning climate, her priority was to handle

discipline personally in cooperation with the student's family with the goal of returning students to instruction as quickly as possible. This freed the salary of the support staff assigned to in-school suspension to be freed to directly influence achievement. She is credited with discovering the science teacher and creating the opportunity for him to be hired. Furthermore, she had the ability to research, write, and obtain grants to support strategies collaboratively developed by the staff. After the pinnacle of achievement, worn out, she retired saying she did not have the energy required to continue.

The science teacher created a science curriculum that exposed students to regular science instruction in the lab setting and supported classroom teachers in providing science instruction. Using lesson plans that *constructed knowledge* (Grant & Gomez, 2001) through hands-on activities based on previous knowledge. On his walls, he celebrated prior students who made target scores on state assessments with large poster board lists that hung from the ceiling. Visual cues that learning was a priority hung in every part of the room. His naturalistic teaching style made him an obvious favorite among students and his afterschool science club a popular activity.

The social studies teacher self-reported being the youngest of nine children in her family. She grew in one of the poorest areas of the city and referred to her students—present and past—as “my babies.” She designed the social studies curriculum to emulate that of the science curriculum, focused primarily on vocabulary development, and utilized project based learning. For an economics unit, the students created soup companies that sold and advertised soup for sale within the school. At night, she went home and cooked the soups for the following day in her own kitchen. She saw herself as an example to all her students that regardless of background success was not only possible, but expected.

These four school leaders turned a low achieving school into a high achieving one. It took extreme amounts of personal fortitude and energy due to the sheer volume of strategies they tried. If something worked, it was kept. If a strategy was unsuccessful, it was dropped and something else replaced it. Without a guiding framework to use to design or choose strategies, promoting high levels of student achievement for all students is labor intensive beyond the ability of committed teachers to sustain. Public schooling is a twelve year endeavor. Conserving enthusiasm of committed, quality teachers and leaders is paramount. By the writing of this report, student achievement at Earnest Just Elementary School while still high,high is not representative of its 2009 success.

The Emergent Culturally Engaging Framework for Instruction and Leadership

Assessment data for achievement gains an overall snapshot of the school. Demographic groups based on racial identification and socioeconomic statuses are chosen due to the history of oppression of citizens of minority status. The goal is to compare how well schools are addressing the needs of each demographic group, to assure that the groups are receiving equal access. Unfortunately, because of the necessity to analyze data by demographic group, research tends to investigate a particular segment of the population and interventions are applied by demographic group. Furthermore, within any one demographic group variance in student achievement occurs. Not enough attention has been paid to this within group variation, to understand why students fail, survive, or thrive (Connell et al., 1994). The result is a complex model of education with piecemeal approaches to narrowing the achievement gap that are reactionary to classroom concerns. While individual interventions are often effective, the achievement gap still exists. Is there an underlying symmetry to the current interventions that simplify the model of the achievement gap and practitioner responses?

A functional model of disparate student performance will be (a) operational, (b) explain disparate student achievement as a function of universal human mechanisms, and (c) accounts for the spectrum of variations in student performances. The culturally engaging framework recognizes a continuum of values, beliefs, and behaviors exhibited by all students, and validates the unique experience of African American students in schools. This framework provides a scaffold for anticipating the varied cultural needs of students and intentionally drawing on those needs to engage students in the school community prior to knowing which students walk in the door, thus reducing the labor intensive process for practitioners of responding to students as if their needs are independent from each other.

Culturally engaging instruction and leadership is a proactive strategy to supplement school reform that utilizes the diverse cultural beliefs, values, and behaviors of students and staff as valuable resource. The *culturally engaging* framework relies on the descriptors of collectivist and individualist students (Spring, 2008); aligns those behaviors, beliefs, and values on a continuum, and strategically overcomes a risk to professional status that prevents otherwise committed and qualified professionals from creating and sustaining systemic changes in school policy, procedures, and culture. The *culturally engaging* framework (a) describes an underlying symmetry of disparate student performance in schools—including outlying cases—while validating the experiences of researchers, practitioners, and students; and (b) identifies a potential stereotype threat (Steele, 2010) experienced by practitioners that prevents even the best of school reform from becoming established within school structures.

The leadership team at Earnest Just Elementary School created a school culture where both students and teachers experienced a high level of comfort. The individual strengths of the leaders combined to create a synergy that allowed for, encouraged, and supported the growth of all students—and interestingly, supported the growth of the faculty and staff. The strategies utilized resonated with all students across a cultural continuum of values, beliefs and behaviors, and provided environmental cues to staff and student that success was expected on all endeavors.

Cultural Continuum

The history of oppression minority groups in schooling and public policy necessitates desegregating student data to evaluate the equity and equality of instructional practices. Researchers, however, do these students a disservice when they investigate interventions to reduce disparity in a piecemeal approach for individual cultural groups. Identifiers used to disaggregate student assessment data are non-operational cultural descriptors; therefore interventions based on those cultural definitions are liable to fail. Culture has been treated in educational literature similarly as gravity has in science literature. Both are well studied, oft mentioned and, due to complexity, relegated a very minor role in their respective studies. If culture describes the underlying symmetry of the achievement gap, as gravity universally explains both experiences of an apple falling and the moon orbiting Earth, it should be less labor intensive to create opportunities for success among all students.

Difficulty with cultural discourse. Words do not necessarily have the same meaning across cultural boundaries. In speaking, this is addressed by altering speech to conform to the expectations of the audience; however, in writing the ability to word an idea clearly so that it is interpreted correctly by all readers regardless of cultural background is difficult, and often accidentally leads to descriptors that appear to be the result of deficit thinking or outright blame of either educators or its patrons for issues regarding disparate student performance. In the ensuing outpouring of emotions, the underlying ideas that were purveyed—the truth of a person’s perceived experience—are lost. While authors’ descriptors should be carefully worded to communicate across a wider cultural audience Discourse on cultural differences is difficult to engage in without leading to emotionally charged responses (Liamputtong, 2010; Spring, 2008), it is only fair to ask the reader to attempt to attribute the authors’ cultural meanings to descriptions of cultural experiences. Payne (2005) and Fordham and Ogbu (1986) describe school experiences when there is a high level of cultural conflict. Because language used to communicate these experiences were either not sanitized to prevent deficit descriptors or gave the appearance to placing blame on one group of the larger school community the underlying symmetry between these two reports was largely ignored in moving forward the discussion of the influence of culture on schooling.

Further complicating the open discourse of culture is one of membership. A non-member has great difficulty describing cultural attributes of a specific group that would be agreed upon by members of the group. Furthermore, members of a cultural group would rarely define its own culture in a manner that would match the values beliefs and behaviors of any one member. This difficulty can be side stepped in daily life by tailoring word choice for the listening audience, but becomes its own trap for writers when discussing organizational, ethnic, or socioeconomic culture.

Unfortunately for research, categorical cultural descriptors (*ie-i.e.* Business culture, poverty culture) are non-operational definitions and therefore useless for fully describing any experience. Additionally, models describing students’ achievement rarely include the anecdotal stories of students who are successful despite numerous

factors associated with poor academic performance or multiple cultural advantages. Two legitimate operational definitions of students in schools: successful and unsuccessful. Even these descriptors define two ends of a large spectrum of student outcomes.

Operational definition of cultural attributes. Cultural attributes—values, beliefs, and behaviors— are described by Spring (2008) in two discrete categories. *Individualists* work for personal gain and recognition, tend to work poorly in groups, and are less sensitive to social rejection. *Collectivists* work for the good of a group, contribute well to group endeavors, and are more sensitive to social rejection. The list of attributes for individualists and collectivists is much more detailed than this brief overview but the attributes for each category are likewise exhibited to different degrees by individuals and organizations (Spring). A cultural continuum with the most extreme cases of individualism at one end and the most extreme cases of collectivism at the other is a more operational model. The multiple dimensions of societal and organizational culture outlined by Dimmock and Walker (2005) can be effectively plotted on this cultural continuum, as well as the identifiers Spring details.

Result of cross-cultural cueing. Affective dissonance—internal stress—occurs when individuals’ cultural expectations conflict with the expected cultural responses of the setting (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). This internal emotive response is the reaction to *cultural dissonance*—defined here as the external conflict between expected and actual response due to cross-cultural misinterpretations. More extreme experiences of external cultural dissonance lead to more extreme responses of affective dissonance. In students whose worldview falls more on the collectivist side of the continuum, even low amounts of cultural dissonance could lead to high levels of affective dissonance due to higher sensitivities to being social rejection and embarrassment. The energy and mental workload required to reconcile affective dissonance detracts from overall performance. During the twelve-year cumulative process of schooling, lower levels of achievement create a negative feedback loop that may eventually lead to students engaging in oppositional behaviors (Fordham & Ogbu).

American public schools reward individualist behaviors to varying degrees. In order to be successful in academic pursuits, educators necessarily ascribe to varying degrees to the values, beliefs, and behaviors of public schooling in order to attain their relevant positions in the power structure. Public school is a self-replicating system. Moreover, professionals are motivated to continue employing the traditional strategies because they (a) were personally effective in order obtain the position and (b) are reinforced on an intermittent schedule because the individualist-motivating structures work for most students.

Application. School Leaders at Earnest Just Elementary incorporated into the school culture systems that would have resonated with both individualist and collectivist students. Classroom competitions, pride in achieving school accountability goals, and intervention teams that included family as valued members for supporting student success are just a few strategies that motivated potentially unsuccessful students toward high achievement. In the case of one student with low reading ability, an intervention strategy included reading with the custodian after school while waiting to be picked up—sent a strong message to both student and staff member about their high value in the community (McLaughlin, 2012). The students at Earnest Just would have experienced lower levels of cultural dissonance allowing achievement levels to soar. The prudent school leader, committed to success for all students, will incorporate policy and structures that are motivational to students with collectivist worldviews into the current individualist structures.

The Burden of Negative Stereotypes

Beyond the need to resolve affective dissonance, many students face an additional burden of confronting negative stereotypes in the classroom. The efforts utilized by students to counter *stereotype threat* have been found to reduce achievement to the same level as the disaffected student (Steele, 2010). The additional burden associated with students’ attempts to counter stereotype threat may be related to the *burden of “acting White”* in African American students as described by Fordham and Ogbu (1986). Students from many demographics (e.g., women in math) confront the additional burden stereotype threat in academics in certain settings.

Many African American students experience a nexus of influences that appear to exponentially depress academic performance. African American students who confront perceived negative stereotypes regarding academic potential in the classroom will experience stereotype threat to varying degrees in all academic classes. Other demographic subgroups only experience stereotype threat (Steele, 2010) in specific content areas (eg. women in math). In the cumulative experience of K12 schooling, a reduction in school performance across the curriculum for African American students can only lead to a reduction in acquisition of basic skills required for success in more complex and advanced content, making subsequent success difficult. Because stereotype threat affects African American students across the curriculum it leads to more pronounced deficits in achievement. Moreover, this deficit is increased when the content is challenging and matters to the student. Stereotype threat affects the highest level of student the most.

Teachers can mitigate the effects of stereotype threat and raise overall performance by providing environmental cues that the negative stereotype being confronted is wrong (Steele, 2010). At Earnest Just Elementary, the science teacher had posted on his wall the name of every student who scored proficient or higher in previous years. As the lists were long, most students probably could recognize a sibling or friend that had made the benchmark score, and therefore understand that success was attainable. The Cool Cats program that caught students being good and recognized them publically would have been a daily reminder to students that their peers exhibited good behavior. The cultural messages throughout the school were that every student was valued and expected to meet behavioral and academic standards regardless of background.

Applying Lessons of Culturally Engaging Instruction to Leadership

The culturally engaging framework for instruction is different from other cultural interventions because it provides an operational definition for culture from which to design both school policy and classroom instruction prior to ever meeting the student. Best practices such as collaborative work, building relationships, and peer modeling can be identified as intrinsically motivation for collectivist students. African American students who fared poorly in public education settings yet thrive in private settings (Ladson-Billings, 2009) can be explained by self-selection into a program that reduces exposure to stereotype threat (Steele, 2010) and therefore increases the chance of identifying with schooling unprecedented in the students' lives. On inspection, most studies regarding disparate student performance evaluated through the lens of culturally engaging instruction describe the effects of reducing cultural miscuing among between students and school community, or actively mitigate influences of stereotype threat on student performance.

Throughout analysis of the Earnest Just study, it became apparent that the schooling experience was different not only for the students, but for the faculty and staff also. This was a school where buy-in to leadership structures was nearly 100%. On campus, a sense of pride and lack of cynicism permeated conversations with faculty and staff. It became evident that part of the reason leadership was able to induce nearly 100% buy-in was due to the small size of the school. The four members of the leadership team that were interviewed represented 22% of the 18 member faculty. If a third grade instructional team that took initiative to express and support high standards for all students is included, the leadership team represented 38% of the faculty. The ratio of 22% - 38% is extremely similar to the 20% - 40% of a demographic needed to mitigate the influence of stereotype threat (Steele, 2010). This suggests a negative stereotype confronted by teachers during the course of daily activities that overall reduces job performance.

If a negative stereotype exists that prevents teachers from teaching effectively, what is it? The most obvious negative stereotype is:

Those that can, do. Those that can't, teach. Those that can't teach, teach teachers.

However, this time held summary of how the outside public views the teaching profession is an external stereotype. It should not have an impact on instructional practices in the classroom where virtually all of the faculty would reject the negative stereotype. Any negative stereotype that influences daily job performance would have to be internal, separating teachers in factions of those who embody the negative stereotype and those who

do not. Additionally, embodiment of the stereotype has to risk a loss of status among faculty members. What internal, negative stereotype exists among school faculty?

During efforts to establish new structures and policy to change the status quo, even if shown to widely benefit students, teaching professionals who buy-in face a loss of professional status among colleagues. Professionals who support visibly support initiatives are often viewed by colleagues as naïve or even face open hostility. Change is often actively discouraged in school professional culture. It often means more training, more effort, and frequently the energy output does not coincide with change in student performance. On almost every staff a vocal naysayer, or even faction, exists. Faculty members who directly confront this personality risk a loss of professional status or collegial respect among faculty. Faculty members who support change usually do so privately, behind the closed door of their classroom. At Earnest Just, teachers who did not innovate or cooperate with improvement measures faced the risk of professional status.

Assume for argument sake, that a school has 20 – 40% of teachers working independently and privately to implement an initiative. Initiatives would still fail to take hold and become part of school structures due to these committed teachers being unable to identify each other and therefore believing they are isolates due to their high commitment to student success. They engage in few conversations with colleagues due to the perceived threat to social status because no visible cue exists to identify each other. Therefore the collective efforts of these individuals never combine to fully incorporate improvement efforts into the school culture.

The prudent school leader interested in improving their school should help these individuals identify each other, so they can recognize that they are not alone. Providing this group of individuals with time to brainstorm new interventions and support for innovation despite frequent failures should mitigate the threat to professional status. At the district level, moving these highly effective teachers from schools where they are highly concentrated to a distribution of 20-40% in each school would have a distinct benefit on overall school performance. Furthermore, these teachers would be the most willing to relocate within their district.

Conclusion

This paper describes a new framework from which to investigate disparate achievement that combines the assertions of Spring (2008) and Steele (1997, 2010) which emerged from the study of Earnest Just Elementary School (McLaughlin, 2012) and has been tested in an action research lab—my own classroom. By utilizing the spectrum diverse cultural characteristics in lesson planning and teacher leadership projects, my own energy and success as a practitioner has dramatically increased over the past two years. The potential of the culturally engaging framework to reduce the achievement gap among demographic subgroups is enormous and warrants further investigation.

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⁶ Pseudonym inserted into actual address.