Moja
An Interdisciplinary Journal of Africana Studies

August 2020 – Volume 1 Issue 1

Addressing Opportunity Gaps in Asheville City Schools: The Role of Educational Leaders

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The City of Asheville, located in the Appalachian Mountains in Western NC, is a tourist destination. The fall leaves, the Biltmore Estate mansion, the hiking trails and unique shopping experiences all make it a place that draws people from all over the country. Unfortunately, Asheville is not only known for its beauty; Blue Ridge Public Radio correspondent Matt Bush described disparities in Asheville's school achievement by saying, "It's not only one of the worst in North Carolina, but in all of the US" (Bush, 2019, para. 2). This short essay will discuss the opportunity gap that persists in Asheville City Schools and the role of school leaders in cultivating the type of teachers necessary to disrupt this longstanding trend.

The Educational Opportunity Gap

The opportunity gap is not a "nicer" way of saying achievement gap. On the contrary, the phrase acknowledges the gaps in educational opportunities that result in differential achievement outcomes. It puts the onus on educators, researchers, and concerned citizens not only to examine the outputs of educational systems but the inputs that produce the outcomes. Dr. Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, the Charles Howard Candler Professor of Urban Education Emerita at Emory University and premier scholar on multicultural education, explains disparate achievement results from:

> the teacher quality gap; the teacher training gap; the challenging curriculum gap; the school funding gap; the digital divide gap; the wealth and income gap; the employment opportunity gap; the affordable housing gap; the health care gap; the nutrition gap; the school integration gap; and the quality childcare gap (Irvine, 2010, p. xii).

Opportunity gaps, and subsequently disparate achievement, are the result of complex systems that operate within society and within classrooms. Opportunity gaps are a wicked problem. They are wicked in the sense there is no simple straightforward solution, and wicked in the traditional sense of the word—malicious and intending to harm. Dr. Linda Darling-

Hammond has written extensively about societal aspects that contribute to gaps in opportunity in what she describes as the anatomy of inequality.

The first contributor in the anatomy of inequality is poverty. According to the US Census Bureau (2019), about 15% of Asheville lives below the poverty line. However, when examining African Americans in Asheville, that statistic jumps to 25.1%. There are a number of other economic indicators that show grave disparities between Asheville's White and Black communities. The estimated 2017 unemployment rate for Whites was 3.5% where it was 11.8% for African Americans. The median household income was $49,183.00 for White Ashevillians, and $29,463.00 for Black Ashevillians.

A second factor in Darling-Hammond's anatomy of inequality is segregation. She is explicit that segregation is not only between schools but within. The National Center for Education Statistics Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE) illustrates that African American students make up 13% of the students in Asheville City Schools; yet simultaneously, the North Carolina Schools Report Card shows in the 2018-19 school year, African Americans were only 6.65% of those enrolled in Advanced Placement courses. Darling-Hammond goes on to discuss differential access to high quality teachers, rigorous curriculum, and early childhood learning opportunities as factors contributing to the opportunity gap as well.

Dr. Rich Milner also provides a framework for understanding the opportunity gap, but his framework examines teacher attitudes and behaviors that manifest as barriers to students' opportunities to learn within the classroom. He outlines five "interconnected" areas: "1) colorblindness, 2) cultural conflicts, 3) the myth of meritocracy, 4) low expectations and deficit mindsets, and 5) context-neutral mindsets and practices" (Milner, 2012, p. 698). Teacher beliefs and perspectives about students are so critical in determining what they give students, even when they do not realize their beliefs are influencing their actions in the classroom. Their cultural worldview impacts the behaviors they see as problematic; their implicit bias will influence which students they give the benefit of the doubt. While it is necessary for school leaders to take on their traditional roles as community leaders to combat poverty and other societal forces that impact their students, at the very least, the school leader must try to curtail teacher behaviors that further exacerbate differential access to opportunities to learn—such as the ones Milner outlines in his framework.

When delving into differential access to high quality curriculum and low-expectations and deficit ideologies, it is also critical to discuss race. It is difficult to discuss race and racism in a city like Asheville, because of so many well-meaning White people. Robin DiAngelo (2018) discusses in *White Fragility* how most White people have learned to think about racism and racists in terms of good people and bad people, and no one considers themselves a bad person. In such contexts, people want to discuss class instead of race. For example, Asheville City Schools' new superintendent, Dr. Gene Freeman, acknowledged, "There is an epidemic of Black kids falling behind," while also explaining that the epidemic is rooted in class differences (Gordon, 2019, para. 15). Dr. Freeman explains, as documented in the Asheville Citizen Times, "The data speaks for itself. However, I don't want to put that label on a group of students. Because when you really look at it, it's poverty-driven" (Gordon, 2019, para. 18).

DOWN Magazine (Defining Our World Now), a publication by students of color at Yale, speaks at length about White liberalism and how it can be detrimental to movements seeking to alleviate oppressions of people of color. When there is a refusal to discuss or acknowledge whiteness and its benefits, there is also a refusal to understand the plight of people of color generally, and Black people specifically. *DOWN* explains that under the guise of egalitarianism and championing the cause of the marginalized, "The white liberal will use reform to make incremental improvements in various systems of domination all while maintaining the underlying structures that engineer the harm in the first place" (2019, para. 3). Fifty-two (52) years prior, Martin Luther King Jr. (1967) expressed a similar sentiment; he explained:

> The majority of White Americans consider themselves sincerely committed to justice for the Negro. They believe that American society is essentially hospitable to fair play and steady growth toward a middle-class utopia embodying racial harmony. But unfortunately, this is a fantasy of self-deception and comfortable vanity. . . [Their] limited degree of concern is a reflection of an inner-conflict which measures cautiously the impact of any change on the status quo. As the nation passes from opposing extremist behavior to the deeper and more pervasive elements of equality, White America reaffirms its bonds to the status quo (p. 557-558).

In a place like Asheville, that is a liberal city, it is critical to understand how liberalism and white supremacy can intersect, even if it is unintentional. Research on White teachers in a liberal city found that:

> White privilege clouded and distorted the lens such that most . . . teachers were 'disabled' from seeing their own portraits. Most teachers seemed to show little awareness or understanding of the structural nature or roots of racism or its institutional manifestations in education (Kailin, 1999, p.743).

That is why in an effort to eliminate opportunity gaps for African American children, race has to be on the table. The data alone put race on the table; when disaggregated data illustrate in 2018-2019, 81% of African American children were not proficient in Mathematics and 78% were not proficient in English and Language Arts in Asheville City Schools (NC Schools Report Card 2018-19).

If leaders fail to center race in their pursuit for equity, teachers in Asheville will not be able to recognize cultural dissonance in the classroom, or how their deficit ideologies of certain groups leads to some students being referred to gifted programs while others are overlooked. Opportunity gaps will persist if educators cannot get to the root of the varying intersecting systems producing this problem—it is societal (i.e.: poverty and segregation) as well as interpersonal (teacher perceptions and practices). Leaders must get uncomfortable; without acknowledging the biases within school personnel—which mirror the biases in the larger society—one will not improve opportunities for children to learn.

It is essential to discuss the etymology and complexity of the opportunity gap before delving into solutions for several reasons. First and foremost, it is essential educators do not misuse the word and think it is synonymous with achievement gap. It is not. Second and of equal

importance is an understanding of the complexity of the problem which leads to a realization there is no single action that can solve such a problem. There is no silver bullet to equitable educational outcomes because there is no singular cause. As such, what is offered in the latter half of this essay is only one piece of a multifaceted strategy that will need to be employed for the success of the children in Asheville City. The remainder of this essay will present a framework for school leaders to employ to cultivate teachers to help mitigate and not contribute to gaps in opportunities.

School Leaders

In their review on Culturally Responsive School Leadership, leadership scholars Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) called for a broad criteria of practices for culturally responsive leaders: critical self-awareness, culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation, culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, and engaging students and parents in community contexts. The framework I present here is not as inclusive as what Khalifa and associates put forward. Instead, I examine one piece, developing critically conscious teachers, which is a critical piece in the interpersonal web that lead to gaps in opportunities within the classroom. Previously when describing this framework, the author used the metaphor of a plant, articulating its needs for growth:

> For a plant to grow, it needs soil, water, and sunlight. Similarly, growing a critically conscious teacher requires a school climate and culture built on equity and justice—soil, a coherent induction and professional learning model that prioritizes maximizing opportunities to learn for all children—water, and a parent and community outreach agenda that recognizes the expertise and values the contribution of a wide array of stakeholders, particularly those form marginalized communities—sun (Hinnant-Crawford, 2019, para. 6).

Metaphor aside, to develop critically conscious teachers, leaders have to shape the school context, build instructional capacity, and engage school communities. For the purpose of this essay, a critically conscious teacher is one who has prophetic imagination about creating a better world and sees the role her students can play in bringing about that world. They also look at their students and see raw potential that it is their job to nourish and cultivate (not train or subordinate). When their students fail to perform, they reflect on their practice (and the practices of the school) and examine how the environment is not conducive to the students' success rather than blaming the students, the students' cultures, the students' families, or the community for lack of achievement. A critically conscious teacher believes deeper learning is necessary for all students and does not reserve such pedagogies for those labeled as gifted. They seek to understand their students and to understand their selves, as cultural beings, and are aware of how the classroom culture gives advantage to some while simultaneously being risk-inducing for others. A critically conscious teacher is a warm demander, holding students to high expectations while also displaying revolutionary love (Carroll, 2020). A critically conscious teacher does not sacrifice relevance for rigor or rigor for relevance, as they understand their students need both to access the material and see its applicability. Critically conscious teachers employ culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies. While every parent, especially Black parents, want

a critically conscious teacher, the likelihood of receiving such rests on the leaderships' ability to shape the context, build the capacity, and engage the community.

Context

When a novice or veteran teacher enters a new building, they are inducted into that building's culture and climate. Culture and climate are distinct, but sometime conflated as one construct; in truth they work in tandem to create a context for critical consciousness or a context toxic to critical consciousness. Culture comes first. A school's culture is the values and beliefs of that particular school—explicit and implicit. Asheville City has an expressed commitment to equity, as the mission for the district is to "create learning environments that ensure excellence with equity for all students" (ACS, 2019). Their vision articulates a similar commitment to equity as the district seeks to, "empower and engage every child to learn, discover, and thrive" (ACS, 2019). Within this mission and vision there is an explicit commitment to *every child*. It is the responsibility of school leadership to articulate and garner support for the school's mission and vision. In a school with known disparities, the mission should speak to the leader's prophetic imagination, of a school that meets the needs of all children. The mission and vision are not the only things that communicate a school's values. Meeting agendas, organizational priorities, and the leader's speech and discourse around students, especially those historically marginalized, impact the culture of the school. The culture is not only expressed through rhetoric, but through praxis.

Culture influences the school's climate. Climate can be defined as how students, teachers, parents, and a variety of stakeholders experience the school space. It can also be defined as practices that lead to this experience. Is the school a welcoming space? Does coming into the office feel like signing in to see inmates at a correctional facility? Whose culture does the artwork throughout the building reflect? Whose contributions does the curriculum reflect? Are important signs posted in multiple languages? A climate that is conducive to the development of critically conscious teachers is one that is both inclusive and oriented towards improvement. An improvement orientation means a school that is constantly trying to improve its practices and processes to better serve all students. There is a built-in expectation of reflective practice. Currently, educators are looking at data and asking "how we can improve?" but they are often exploring those questions among themselves and not asking how structures they built or uphold are perpetuating inequity. For example, school leaders in Asheville should be asking how in 2018-2019, there were nearly 572 suspensions per 1000 Black students and nearly 49 suspensions per 1000 white students. The literature on discipline disparities explains time and time again that such disparities are usually not due to real differences in behavior, but to different perceptions of the behavior and different perceptions of who is innocent (Goff, Jackson, Leone, Lewis, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014; Simson, 2014; Skiba, Chung, Trachok, Baker, Sheya & Hughes, 2014). Leaders faced with such data must guide educators through root cause analyses to identify the root cause of the disparities and then develop interventions and test their effectiveness in addressing the problem. Perhaps through such an exploration they would find a need to change their climate by embracing transformative justice practices (Ruffin, 2020).

Capacity

Scholars have often described the teacher development pipeline in three phases: preparation, induction, and continual professional learning. The school leader is responsible for the final two phases of development: induction and professional learning. Khalifa and associates (2016) explain it is incumbent upon Culturally Responsive School Leaders to "ensure teachers are and remain culturally responsive" (p. 1281). The continuity of capacity building for dealing with diverse learners is critical. One (or a few) professional development session on cultural relevance is not likely to change instruction, no matter how good that professional development is. And without the continuity, *the one and dones*, will lead to false conclusions such as: "culturally relevant teaching doesn't work" and "we had the training and the kids still aren't doing what they are supposed to do."

In North Carolina, leaders cannot expect teachers from other schools or straight out of preparation programs to be culturally responsive. In an analysis of 8 dimensions of culturally responsive teaching evident in state teaching standards, North Carolina's standards were found to only address four, and failed to differentiate levels of performance on those four (Muñiz, 2019). This means the onus is on the principal (and other school leaders such as assistant principals, coaches, and teacher leaders) to ensure teachers are being culturally responsive—without the guidance of professional standards. Subsequently, as the lead learner in the building, the principal must be able to recognize cultural responsiveness and where it is lacking so they can coach teachers to meet the needs of all students.

Building Capacity

In building teacher capacity, leaders must build their capacity in ***what*** they teach (content), ***how*** they teach (pedagogy), and ***who*** they are teaching (social, political, and economic realities of their students). Often professional learning programs fail to explore who students are. When they do explore students, teachers can leave with reinforced deficit ideologies. They may think to themselves, "Our students are poor. We need to make school easy on them since life is hard." This is known as the "you poor dear" syndrome; and critically conscious teachers have high expectations, they do not lower the bar. When leaders cultivate teachers that explore who their students are, teachers should develop an appreciation for their students and their culture that lead to better classroom experiences. Using tools of critical pedagogues and giving students voice and choice in their learning, teachers must develop assignments that give students the opportunity to teach their teachers about themselves. This could be achieved through a variety of means in all disciplines; examples include journaling, projects on their own families/histories/communities, or letting students define their own research questions. With an appreciation for who the students are, comes a degree of humility and a willingness to let the students take the lead in teaching teachers what is relevant. Teachers still need to do research and prompt students to explore things from multiple perspectives—to develop the critical consciousness amongst the students. Critically conscious teachers raise questions that prompt critical thinking such as, when reading text, they ask what may be the antagonist's point of view? Or when exploring history, they question whose voice is not accounted for? When doing mathematics, they challenge students to question how could I use this analytical procedure to understand more about my city or my economic circumstances? Teachers must realize that

teaching is a dialogic action. It is not one way, but two-way and for it to truly be two-way teachers have to appreciate what it is the student brings to the dialogue and who the student is.

There is a substantial amount of literature on building teacher capacity and best practices for doing so. Leaders must understand how adults learn. Adult learning theories from andragogy to self-directed learning suggest when facilitating learning experiences for adults, the adult learner (educator) must see the necessity and applicability of the learning (Cox, 2015; Merriam, 2001). To build capacity for critically conscious teachers, leaders must recognize that previous knowledge, experiences, and socialization—facets that are typically seen as an asset to leverage when teaching adults—may actually be a hinderance. In such cases where life experience has led to deficit perspectives, leaders must begin by facilitating critical self-reflection where educators interrogate their own positionality and axiology as a precursor to learning new content. In fact, Kailin (1999) explains in-service and preservice teachers, "must be given meaningful education that will provide for significant time and breadth of knowledge so that they can begin the long process of unlearning racism" (p.746). It is the leader's job to design such educational experiences for the teachers in their building.

When building capacity in the *what* and the *how* of teaching, leaders who cultivate critically conscious teachers will not put equity on the proverbial back burner. As it is a part of the mission and vision, equity is always on the table and always a priority. And as they consider what is best for students' opportunity to learn, they will also consider what is best for the adults to learn. Leaders may choose to guide their capacity building program with the Learning Forward professional learning standards, which are informed by adult learning theories (Learning Forward, 2020). For instance, the standard on data says, "professional learning that increases effectiveness and results for all students uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system data to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning" (Learning Forward, 2020). If ACS school leaders want to illustrate the necessity and applicability of a book study using the text *These Kids Are Out of Control: Why We Must Reimagine Classroom Management for Equity*, they might begin by looking at discipline data as the impetus for such work. In doing so, they provide justification for the what and the why of this professional learning activity.

School leaders are at the helm of the induction and continued professional learning developmental phases for teachers; they cannot abandon what they already know about teaching and learning. In order to be leaders that build capacity for critical consciousness, they must provide learning experiences that:

- Give teachers an opportunity to explore their own positionality and how that impacts their practice
- Cultivate knowledge in the what (content), how (pedagogy), and who (students) of teaching
- Align with the school's priorities and are relevant to the needs of the organization
- Are designed with the needs of adult learners in mind.

School leaders for critically conscious teachers will develop schools that are learning organizations. Professional learning experiences will not be seen as something additional to do but as an integral part of the organization's continuous improvement culture.

Community

The final thing a principal who cultivates critical consciousness must do is be a liaison between the school and the community. A teacher's job is to learn who their students are, but it is incumbent upon the principal to understand the community their school serves. Lomotey (1993) argues principals need an ethno-humanist role identity, in which they are not merely concerned with student's achievement, but the improvement of the entire community; and in the case of Black students, principals must be concerned with the welfare of the Black community. And when that principal becomes an expert in the community, they can facilitate the teachers' learning about the community and the students. When reaching out to the community, leaders must be well aware of the trauma the community has endured. They must also be aware that some of the trauma may have been inflicted on the community by the schools.

Principals have to make themselves available in the community. They must prioritize attendance at community events, and not to be the leader, but to sit and listen. If there is a forum or town hall, leaders should just be present. Only once the community adjusts to their presence, should leaders lend their voice. Similarly, leaders need to invite the community into their school buildings and not just to fulfill certain positions, such as on a PTO or a school improvement team. Real leaders consult with a variety of stakeholders on various things happening within the school. Leaders might be surprised to realize the untapped potential right there in the community. But if leaders are going to invite community to come and sit at their table, they must be willing to share power. A leader must do as Dr. Stanley (2020) implores: listen, engage, and partner—if they want to cultivate the development of critically conscious teachers.

School Leaders and the Opportunity Gap

School leaders did not create opportunity gaps. A constellation of forces combine to create gaps in educational opportunities. However, the fact that leadership is not the origin of the gap does not absolve them from their responsibility to eliminate the gaps. While teachers are the most important influence on student achievement, leaders are the most important influence on growing the consciousness of teachers. Orchestrating a context, with a culture and climate focused on equity and justice, a comprehensive plan to build capacity—that includes the what, how, and who of teaching, and a community strategy—that does all of what Dr. Stanley suggests: listens, engages, and partners (Stanley, 2020), will enable the cultivation of teachers who are critically conscious. As educators, scholars, and concerned citizens examine the proliferation of forces that impact opportunity gaps, it is essential to remember, teacher development is only one piece of a much larger and complex puzzle; yet it is a piece that must be a priority for educational leaders in Asheville and beyond.

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