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Addressing Unseen Suffering and Reimagining Possibility Through Community Engagement: Lessons from the Back of the Bus

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I begin this paper by recognizing the wealth of traditionally minoritized communities. Minoritized communities have a wealth of knowledge, experience, capital, and ability. Local examples include: The YMI Cultural Center, YWCA, Burton Street Community Association, The Block, Shiloh Community Association, and Stephens Lee, to name a few. However, these communities' collective wealth and capital are consistently overlooked and undermined by educational reform efforts which fail to view school improvement and community development as inextricably tied to one another (Warren, 2005). As a result of ignoring community-based capital, American schooling has struggled to meet the needs of Black students and families, in particular (Anderson, 2004). It is important to recognize the efforts to provide education for Black people like: the Freedman bureau schools, the Rosenwald schools, the rise of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, to name a few (Anderson, 1988; Watkins, 2001). Research chronicles the critical role of historically Black institutions' freedom crusades in the South, particularly through literacy campaigns, agricultural, and trade skill training (Anderson, 1988).

Additionally, more recent efforts like increased accountability standards (e.g., No Child Left Behind) and increased recruitment of minoritized educators, are worth recognition. However, despite a rhetoric of inclusion and equality, many of the aforementioned improvement initiatives have re-centered white, male, and middle-class belief systems and framed Black communities as chronically deficient (Anderson, 2004; Wun, 2014). Therefore, these initiatives continuously provide protracted educational advantages to those whose identities are privileged in society (i.e., white, middle class students) and disenfranchise Black and other minoritized communities (Leonardo, 2004). Additionally, Schutz (2006) explains "current social conditions suggest major limitations in schools' traditional focus on individual achievement as a path to success" (p.692) (e.g., NCLB). Hence, the efforts to improve the educational experiences of minoritized students should recognize the importance of their communities and the structural conditions that affect them. This requires practitioners to see Black communities as capable. This position paper serves two primary purposes: (1) it critiques historical and contemporary

educational reform efforts and, (2) it proposes a model for engaging Asheville's Black community perspectives in future educational reform.

A Legacy of Community Cultural Wealth

Before reviewing the history, it is important to highlight some of the key assets, or forms of capital, that Black communities (i.e., Black Asheville) could offer school improvement efforts. Yosso (2005) defined Community Cultural Wealth as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression" (p.77). She posits six forms of such capital: (1) *aspirational capital*, which highlights the abilities of communities to maintain their hopes and dreams despite structural barriers, (2) *linguistic capital* which recognizes the importance of communities' communication practices (e.g., multi-lingual communities, storytelling), (3) *familial capital*, or the value of community-based history and memory practices which foster kinship, (4) *social capital*, which recognizes the importance of social connections and community-based resources to help community members navigate society, (5) *navigational capital*, or the abilities of minoritized communities to outmaneuver racist and classist institutions and, (6) *resistant capital*, which acknowledges communities' abilities to engage in oppositional behaviors when presented with structural and overt inequalities (e.g., The Little Rock Nine, Greensboro Sit-Ins). These alternative forms of capital highlight and define the untapped resources that could be leveraged to improve educational outcomes for Black youth in contemporary public schools.

A Brief History of Black Education

Despite the research on wealthy communities of color, scholars have consistently highlighted the inability of educational researchers, leaders, and policy makers to recognize the strengths and resistant legacies of Black communities (Horsford & Heilig, 2014). Hence, educational improvement initiatives continuously frame Black communities as deficits needing to be saved, rather than assets to reform initiatives. Horsford & D'Amico (2015) stated:

> Without a historical lens, researchers run the risk of presenting educational issues as temporal phenomena that result from a chronologically isolated moment and an idiosyncratic place, rather than the latest incarnation of a much larger and more involved legacy. The lack of historical sensitivity produces skewed definitions of problems and incomplete reform initiatives (p.864).

Without a historical lens that acknowledges the strengths of Black communities, educational reform efforts will continue to intensify outcome inequalities for such communities. Simply put, ignoring the history of structural disenfranchisement of racially minoritized people in favor of short-sighted, paternal solutions to inequalities, is racist. Next, I will outline a brief history of strong and wealthy Black community educational efforts.

Black communities, despite obstacles, have found unique ways to circumvent educational barriers, including but not limited to Antebellum educational exclusion and the desegregation efforts of the mid 20th century**.** Despite threats of flogging and death, enslaved Blacks practiced

subversive education on southern plantations (Williams, 2009). By the end of the Civil War, Blacks in the South swayed the general public to consider universal education for all. Dubois (1964) stated "public education for all at public expense was, in the South, a Negro idea" (p.641). In response to the "separate but equal" rhetoric of *Plessy vs. Ferguson 1896*, segregated Black communities developed and supported their own educational institutions which provided Black youth: (1) strong, safe havens for communal bonding, (2) wrap-around services and supports, (3) parental engagement and, (4) racial uplift, radical love, and communal counseling (Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Siddle Walker, 1996). In Asheville, such schools included: Victoria Academy, Hill Street School, Mountain Street School, and Livingston Street School. Additionally, Stephens-Lee High School—Asheville's only Black public high school—opened in 1923 (Waters, 2012). The "castle on the hill" supported African American students through rigorous curriculum, high academic standards, and college-going skills (Waters, 2012; Davis, 1980).

Contemporaneously, Blacks in the south also developed their own privately funded, grassroots post-secondary schools like Bethune Cookman College (Anderson, 1988). These institutions were funded by local communities and churches to help develop Black students for a desegregated world that did not yet exist (Siddle Walker, 1996). Locally, the Shiloh A.M.E Church housed a school for Black children in the church basement during the Reconstruction era (Waters, 2011). George Vanderbilt, who had recently relocated the Shiloh community to build his estate, noted the importance of school funding from the community (Waters, 2011). These locally supported institutions had obvious funding disparities; yet, they provided a space for Black communities to support their own through academic achievement.

By the 1950's, desegregation efforts across the South eroded much of the assets and capital developed by Black communities (Baker, 2001; Tillman, 2004). The *Brown* decision ushered in a host of disruptive policies and practices which threatened the social, economic, and cultural fabric of segregated Black communities (Horsford, 2011; Tillman, 2004). The subsequent losses of Black educators, school leaders, and schools contributed to the decline in the Black middle class and other vestiges which exacerbated the educational, social, and political disenfranchisement of Black communities (Baker, 2001). In 1965, Asheville's Stephens-Lee High School was closed, leaving a shocking blow to the Black community; one which the community has yet to recover from. Davis (1980) states the decision to close Stephens-Lee in favor of school integration efforts "divided the Black and White community more than any issue in this century" (p.43).

Unfortunately, contemporary educational improvement initiatives like the accountability or standards movement, neoliberal reform, increase in charter schools, and other neoliberal programs (e.g., Teach for America) have continuously ignored the history and wealth of Black communities. As such, the aforementioned initiatives intensify "gaps" in opportunity for Black communities via school closures, district turnaround policies, and threats of district takeover, to name a few (Lipman, 2015). As a result of continued, incomplete improvement initiatives, Asheville City Schools (ACS) touts the 5th largest achievement gap between Black and White students in the nation (Scarbrough, 2019).

Given this knowledge, I suggest school and district leaders re-engage Black communities in ways that center their assets and wealth, over deficit-based conceptualizations of their abilities and commitments to education. In other words, through a brief read of Black educational history, one can ascertain that contemporary deficit narratives which position Black communities as lazy, unconcerned about education, and in need of aid-based initiatives are at the very least historically inaccurate. Therefore, ahistorical and deficit-based problem framing lead to insufficient reform efforts which exacerbate inequities rather than address them (Horsford & Heilig, 2014; Wun, 2014). Hence, educational leaders and policy makers must develop a lens which recognizes and incorporates the collective legacies, wealth, and perspectives of local Black communities when developing reform initiatives. Next, I propose a model for school and district leaders to practice asset-based community engagement with Asheville's Black communities.

Community Engaged Leadership Practices

> *"You can't change the school without changing the neighborhood, you can't change the neighborhood without changing the city, ain't nobody prepared to change the city because "they" want the city to be white."*- James Baldwin, 1979

Learning About Black Asheville

School and district leaders should lead efforts to engage the communities they serve. However, effectively engaging communities that have experienced various forms of oppression from official institutions, like schools and local government, requires leaders to carefully develop the appropriate perspectives of and relationships with Black communities (Khalifa, 2018). In other words, all efforts to engage Black communities should be subject to the terms and pace set by the community members. Green (2017) suggests that schools should complete Community Based Equity Audits to address common organizational disparities like: discipline disproportionalities, inequitable representation of minoritized students in gifted/talented programs, and attendance disparities, to name a few. Community Based Equity Audits call for the following steps: (1) develop a diverse, school-based leadership team to lead the audit, (2) create asset maps with the communities and conduct interviews with local community leaders, (3) co-construct a leadership team comprised of school and community leaders, and (4) collect asset-based data like community history, spatial assets, and local conditions. After the completion of the data collection process and analysis, the co-constructed leadership team should collectively discuss community-based goals and actions steps for improvement (Green, 2017). This initial step starts the process of rebuilding trust between communities and schools. Further, the process of learning could ensure that school and community goals are consistent. Below, I highlight some key ideas that school-based personnel should consider when learning about communities.

- All educators should become aware of the history of the Black neighborhoods and communities they serve.
- All educators should be keenly aware of the current political, economic, and social situations of the Black communities they serve.
- Students' knowledge of and experiences within communities should be featured and discussed at the school.

- School leaders should recognize and learn from the **assets** of Black neighborhoods and communities.

Engage with Black Asheville

After responsive and informed learning occurs, schools can effectively re-engage Black communities. Educational leaders (including school-based leadership teams) can responsibly re-engage communities by: (1) maintaining open lines of communication with students and families, (2) attending community-based events and forums, and (3) building responsive relationships with community leaders and families. Khalifa (2018) suggests that culturally responsive school leaders should hold forums or rap sessions which allow students and families to speak their truths and voice their concerns about school-based issues. Additionally, school leaders should engage community assets to inform curriculum. Communal human resources such as business owners, elders, and other local intellectuals could be leveraged to teach lessons and tell community history in classrooms (Khalifa, 2018). Moreover, community walkthroughs via report card delivery is a great way for educational practitioners to develop relationships with caregivers and guardians (Khalifa, 2018). Finally, educational leaders must stay abreast of community-based initiatives by visiting local YWCA's, YMCA's, businesses, churches, and other community hubs in hopes of gaining additional perspectives of the diverse communities they serve (Green, 2017). These engagement practices, although not exhaustive, represent a cadre of responsible efforts that educational leaders can integrate into their regimen. Below, I highlight a set of practices and ideas that educators and school leaders should incorporate to regain trust and support the communities they serve.

- School leaders should be responsibly involved in neighborhood and/or community politics (e.g., boards, advisory committees).
- School leaders should be keenly aware of and regularly attend community-based events (e.g., faith-based events, community gatherings, neighborhood preservation meetings).
- All educators should participate in community walk-throughs and home visits.

Partner with Black Asheville

Finally, scholars suggest that schools have the responsibility to both provide resources and leverage existing community resources to support all of the needs of students and families (Khalifa, 2012, 2018; Green, 2015, 2017). Green (2015) suggests that schools should be positioned as a spatial community asset and align resources to support students and families. Schools can leverage their connections with other institutions (e.g., local institutes of higher education, health facilities) to support the needs of the communities they serve (Green, 2015). In one case, Green (2015) detailed the engagement practices of a school leader who developed multiple partnerships with supportive institutions. One partnership included a health facility which provided a free or reduced cost community-based clinic at the school. The same school leader leveraged their relationship with a local university to provide financial workshops for parents and other community members, on school grounds. Additionally, Green (2015) highlights the work of a school leader who developed a community garden to provide fresh produce and agricultural learning experiences, in a low-opportunity neighborhood. In each case, the school leader, who had developed strong relational ties with the community, leveraged their

position to champion the needs of the surrounding Black community. These exemplars, although by no means exhaustive, provide powerful portraits of the possibilities of school leaders committed to improving the experiences of Black youth and their communities. Below, I provide some additional thoughts for school leaders to consider.

- Educational leaders must partner with community assets (e.g., grassroots organizers, community centers, faith-based institutions, non-profits) to provide wrap around services for students and families.
- Educational leaders must engage local health facilities, businesses, and institutes of higher education to provide additional support for low-opportunity communities.

Implications and Possibilities

Researchers, educational leaders, and policy makers should understand that we cannot hope to pursue educational equity and justice without leveraging the assets of the communities that we serve. Hence, educational leaders must develop a deep understanding of Community Cultural Wealth and how to leverage that wealth to improve the educational experiences of minoritized youth. Scholarship has proven that community-based reform efforts are effective (Green, 2015; Khalifa, 2018). Such efforts can potentially improve graduation rates, community service participation, and increase writing scores, to name a few (See Green, 2015 and Khalifa, 2018 for more details). Armed with this perspective, it is morally irresponsible to ignore the abilities of Black communities to both self-define and self-determine their path to educational justice. Hence, I offer the following suggestions for educational practitioners to begin the work of engaging community, immediately:

- ***Clean up your own house***—engage in book studies, lectures, conferences, and other learning opportunities to develop racial awareness at a personal and institutional level,
- ***Organize for justice and stop the bleeding***—develop school and district-level teams to lead the equity work. Address issues in: School Improvement Plans, Curriculum, and Discipline Matrices,
- ***Coalition Build***—develop strong relationships with the communities served by the institution. Use geospatial technology, social networking, and other methods to identify the assets of each community served. Attend community events and forums,
- ***Working with, not for***—cultivate a plan for educational improvement in partnership with local community leaders,
- ***Use your platform***—leverage existing networks and connections to align resources which support historically disenfranchised communities (Green, 2015, 2017; Khalifa, 2018).

This scholarship calls for a renewed vision of educational reform for practitioners and policy makers. The implications of this brief review of research are clear. Collective progress toward educational justice requires educational practitioners to: bridge the gap between communities and schools, leverage Community Cultural Wealth, and continue to coalition-build on the community's terms. Collectively, educational practitioners and communities can co-construct a vision of improvement and liberation for all students. All educational practitioners must: (1) *listen* to community perspectives, goals, and needs, (2) *engage* the assets and abilities of communities' in improvement efforts, and (3) *partner* with community and other local resources

(e.g., MDTMT, MSTMT, YTL, Youthful HAND, YWCA), to continuously develop both schools and communities.

The Elephant in the Room: Closing Thoughts for Asheville's Schools

Asheville's educational leaders have a responsibility to redress the historical inequities which have strong implications for current gaps in opportunity and achievement. Local educational officials mustn't presume that their education, experience, connections, finances, or expertise will unilaterally solve Asheville's district-level inequities. These assumptions are short-sighted, naïve, paternal, and decidedly absurd. Moreover, educational officials cannot continue to ignore the aptitude and collective ingenuity present in local Black communities. Historically, these communities have proven that they can and will educate their own in efforts to secure their long-term success. Most recently, local, Black leaders have unabashedly supported the establishment of PEAK Academy, which explicitly focuses on the needs of Black and low-income students (Gordon, 2020).

As stated above, efforts to improve conditions for Asheville's Black students and families must begin and end with local expertise over top-down reform. Without this lens for community, schools will continue to see disparities in achievement, attendance, discipline, and a host of other immeasurable outcomes. Continued disregard could lead to a mass exodus of Asheville's Black families, in search of richer soil. Many may seek out the PEAK Academy which is scheduled to begin classes in August of 2021. These are the consequences of structural and institutional forms of racism. Regardless of the educational provider (e.g., ACS, PEAK Academy), educational leaders must re-engage Black communities and place their expertise at the center of school and district improvement efforts. Period.

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