Reframing the Educational Narrative:
Impacts of Culture, Implicit Biases, and Opportunities

Joseph L. Fox
Fox Management Consulting Enterprises, LLC

Abstract

The educational system in the United States has remained basically the same throughout its history as one that disproportionately has a negative impact on women, the poor, and students of color due to system and cultural biases. To fully understand the flaws in the system, one must first understand the implicit biases that foster a culture of gender-based and race-based discrimination that have led to a wider opportunity gap. The opportunity gap is related to the achievement gap in that the lack of educational resources, support, and opportunity lead to reduced academic achievement. Race-based bias has been examined as it relates to the criminal justice system (Russell-Brown, 2018), and can provide some clear examples that can be transferred to discussions related to biases found in the educational system. Likewise, a discussion related to culture (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2010), provides insight as to the formation of culture that leads to discriminatory practices and implicit biases. A comprehensive approach must include a discussion related to the impact that Redlining and Greenlining (Kuthy, 2017) have on educational success, as well as a comparison of students' success in resources-rich locations and students' success in resources-poor locations. These cultural biases have created a system of rating the success of students based on indicators that continue to widen the opportunity gap. Students of color that attended schools during their formative years that were located in "Red Zones" were not afforded the same resources as schools located in "Green Zones." The cultural biases led to naming these schools located in resources-poor locations as underperforming schools, thus tying perceptions that students from "Red Zone Districts" are underprepared for and not college ready. The intent of the following narrative is to provide a framework in which to start the discussion related to the cultural biases steeped in the educational system from its inception. It is not intended to provide an in-depth narrative of the cited works. More in-depth analysis is needed related to each topic, as well as more research specific to certain geographic locations that have common characteristics.

Keywords: Culture, Biases, Opportunity Gap, Redlining, School to Prison Pipeline

Introduction

Understanding culture is an extremely important aspect of identifying biases that have occurred in the United States Education System. Kreitner and Kimicki (2010) defined culture as shared values and beliefs when discussing the behaviors that lead to perceptions and attitudes of individuals that make up a workforce. The authors' work is a compilation of theories and practices that shape the discipline of Organizational Behavior, and provide a framework for understanding organizational culture, including:
- Antecedents (Values)
- Organizational Culture
- Organizational Structures and Practices
- Group and Social Processes
- Collective Attitudes and Behavior
- Organizational Outcomes (p. 65).

When viewing the Educational System as a subsystem of components that form the foundation of a country, the discussion turns to those factors valued by the society related to educating the citizens of that society. The culture is espoused by individuals who have access to educational resources, the perceived value of education, the preparation of teachers and professors, and the value of credentials and degrees. Cash (2003) examined the early support of public universities in the United States and stated that the prevalent attitude during the early colonial colleges period of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton was that of promoting civic virtue for the privileged. Thus, the early culture was viewed as educating the wealthy, and particularly white males from wealthy families. The changing landscape of education for the general public was supported by the Land Ordinance of 1785 in which federal lands were set aside for state universities (Cash 2003). As state universities sought funding, private donations led to the creation of the fundraising model that excluded education for women, the poor, and students of color. Cash (2003) discussed the model as an important part of the start-up phase at the University of Vermont and the University of North Carolina. The support from prominent citizens, literary societies, as well as ministers shaped not only the fundraising model, but the early culture of the state universities, and created the system of privilege that led to an early elitism model of education. This model excluded women and persons of color and became the basis for public education.

Land-Grant Colleges (The Morrill Acts)

Sorber (2018) examined the early land-grant colleges that had a mandate to provide practical education to the public as an alternative to the elite, classical colleges and universities. The Land Grant College Act, also known as the Morrill Act of 1862, provided federal support for the education of former slaves and other Black Americans. However, he quoted a study at the Illinois Industrial University that found that the majority of its students were from the larger, affluent farms instead of the smaller farms. Sober (2018) stated:

> With regard to the Northeast, previous works have revealed that Brown College, Dartmouth College, Yale College's Sheffield Scientific School, and the University of Vermont did not become more accessible after being designated land-grant institutions. Indeed, there was little change made to the high admissions standards (including the

Latin requirement), the liberal arts and science curricula, traditional classroom pedagogy, or the socioeconomic profile of the student body at these former colonial colleges (p. 103).

Land-grant colleges in the south, such as Clemson and South Carolina State, tended to align more closely to fulfilling the mission of land-grant universities related to teaching agriculture science, and engineering. For the most part in the South, the early education for Blacks was by the Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that provided open access to students of color.

Historical Black Colleges and Universities

The Freedmen's Bureau, also known as the Bureau of Refugee, Freedmen, and Abandoned Land, mission was to ease the transition of former enslaved people to freedom. Allen, Jewell, Griffin, and Wolf (2007) examined the rise of HBCUs and stated, "Historically Black colleges and universities have been at the center of the Black struggle for equality and dignity" (p. 263). Allen, et al., quoted the work of Jewell (2007) and stated,

> In many ways, African Americans viewed education as the ultimate emancipator, enabling them to distance themselves from slavery, move past their subordinate status in society, and achieve social mobility. Despite opposition from Southern conservatives who viewed educational access for freed slaves as a threat to White supremacy, African Americans and their allies began establishing schools. In the 25 years after the Civil War, approximately 100 institutions of higher learning were created to educate freed African Americans, primarily in the southern United States (p. 267).

The authors also discussed that initially schools were staffed by African Americans and members of the community. Sources of funding included churches, the community, and associations such as Disciples of Christ, American Missionary Association, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The college education of Black students was almost exclusively conducted by HBCUs prior to the 1950s (Allen, et al., 2007).

Brown (2013) discussed the impact of the Morrill Act of 1890 in which funds were mandated to be extended to educational institutions that enrolled Black Americans. The South had continued the practice of segregation in which public HBCUs, also referred to as the "1890 schools" were treated as separate public entities. Brown argued that the unintentional consequence of the Act was to create a system of "separate but unequal" education (p.9). His work cited Walters's (1991) goals of HBCUs as:

a. Maintaining the Black historical and cultural tradition (and cultural influences emanating from the Black community)
b. Providing leadership for the Black community through the important social role of college administrators, scholars, and students in community affairs
c. Providing an economic center in the Black community
d. Providing Black role models who interpret the way in which social, political, and economic dynamics impact Black people

e. Providing college graduates with a unique competence to address issues and concerns across minority and majority population

f. Producing Black graduates for specialized research, institutional training, and information dissemination for Black and other minority communities (p.5).

Brown (2013) stated that for all of the benefits of the HBCUs, they were still not funded at the same level as traditional white colleges. Disparities still occur related to faculty salaries and funding levels.

Community Colleges

The general white adult population was beginning to enroll in community colleges which tended to be more vocational in nature. Cohen and Brawer (2003) provided a comprehensive view of the community college system in the United States. The authors described community colleges as fulfilling a greater need for local citizens by its comprehensive nature in which the purposes addressed students' remediation needs, workforce development, college transfer, continuing education, and career education. Most notable, the authors provided background concerning social forces leading to the expansion of community colleges as an extension of high school, changing student demographics, and the prevailing values of the time in which the aim of education was access for the general population. However, that general population remained mainly the focus of educating the "common man," primarily the less privileged white male. If the growth of the community college system did anything in the United States, it shed light on educational resources that were not equally dispersed throughout geographic locations. Cohen and Brawer (2003) wrote extensively about the intent to have a community college within a thirty-minute drive from all communities. They did not take into consideration the impact of redlining on the poor school districts and communities. Thus, the continuation of the dominant culture's view of low-wealth community students and students of color not being college ready.

Impacts of Redlining and Implicit Biases

Kuthy (2017) examined the impacts of Redlining and Greenlining in Baltimore, Maryland, as the foundation of understanding root causes of racial inequities. She quoted Lipsitz (2011) as saying, "Racially segregated spaces have historically skewed opportunity and life chance along race lines: space has been one of the primary ways racial meaning has been constructed, teaching what places—and by extension who and what—matter" (p. 51).

Kuthy (2017) examined Baltimore's law in 1910 that prohibited Blacks and Whites from moving into areas occupied by the other race. The United States Supreme Court found the law unconstitutional in 1917; however, Baltimore became known as the first city to use restrictive covenants to limit the movement of Blacks and Jews. The practice of using restrictive covenants was not limited to Baltimore. The practice was part of the culture throughout the United States. The continued practice led to the passage of the National Housing Act of 1934. Kuthy (2017) pointed to the history of Redlining and Greenlining that built upon restrictive covenants and traced the practices to the National Housing Act of 1934. The Act established the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Kuthy built upon the work of Coates (2014), Lipsitz (2011), and Pietilla (2010) when describing the function of the FHA of insuring private mortgages, lowering

interest rates, and reducing the down payment required to buy a home. The FHA requested that the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) create "residential security maps" for 239 cities. The maps identified desirable "Greenline" zones and undesirable "Redline" zones based on perceived investment security for underwriting mortgages. As could be expected, the better school districts would follow into the areas of the "Greenline" zones, as well as other investment opportunities (Kuthy 2017).

Kuthy (2017) also examined the GI Bill of 1944 that was intended to assist returning veterans in purchasing homes. She argued that it widened the racial wealth gap (Opportunity Gap) as less than 2% of African Americans received federally insured home loans. She stated that African-American communities lost value as they deteriorated in the "Redlining" zones (p. 52). The racial biases continued to make it difficult for African Americans to utilize the GI Bill and take advantage of better schools, banks, and homes in the "Greenlining" zones.

School to Prison Pipeline

Russell-Brown (2018) examined the impact of implicit racial bias in the Criminal Justice System; however, her work provides insights that can be applied to the educational system. She defined implicit biases as attitudes and stereotypes that develop unconsciously. The implicit biases can lead to behavior based on unconscious thought processes. One example that she used is a White police officer that has implicit bias toward Black males that might mistake a cell phone in the Black male's hand for a gun due to unconscious stereotyping of Black males as criminals. The same officer might perceive the cell phone in the hands of a White male as a phone instead of a gun because of the implicit bias (p. 186). Using this thought process, one must ask when applying it to the educational system, how do White teachers see Black students, particularly Black males, if those teachers have not been taught to recognize implicit biases? One must also ask of Black teachers, what are the implications of internalized racial biases?

The racial bias in the Criminal Justice System coupled with educational biases related toward Black males have created the foundation for what is commonly known as the school-to-prison pipeline. Mallett (2016) pointed to school policies and practices that provide punitive actions instead of education within public schools. The shift in paradigms is away from parents and teachers handling school disciplinary action to one of juvenile courts interaction. The author tackled the issues of moving from education to discipline, criminalization of education, and zero-tolerance programs. School systems have experienced the increase of police officers in classrooms and monitoring of hallways that resemble a prison environment instead of an educational environment. Unfortunately, the biases related to Black males remove educational opportunities as they become more involved with the criminal justice system than the educational system.

Likewise, Pigott, Stearns, and Khey (2017) examined the impact of School Resource Officers related to the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Defining the School to Prison Pipeline as a system in which young people are arrested instead of disciplined in schools for behaviors that would not normally be considered dangerous or criminal. The authors pointed to a culture of zero tolerance, use of School Resource Officers, high profile school shootings, and media coverage as further determinants of cultural shifts that impact the School to Prison Pipeline. The argument is

made that policies such as the Gun-Free School Act, Zero Tolerance, No Child Left Behind, and Suspension/Expulsions contribute to the number of students caught up in the pipeline. Quoting a study by the NAACP (2016), the author stated, "Thirty-five percent of black children in grades 7 – 12 have been suspended or expelled at some point during their time in school; this number can be compared to the 20% of Hispanics and 15% of whites" (p. 124).

Educational Opportunities

The early cultural perceptions related to the value of education, policies that disproportionately negatively impacted Black students, and the practice of Redlining created the opportunity gap for students of color. Green, Sanchez, and Germain (2017) examined the geography of opportunities of an urban school district in the Northeastern section of the United States. The district was located in a resources-rich city, and the overall goal of the descriptive study was to use Geographic Information System (GIS) to examine the impact of spatial patterns and resources on high schools. The study built on the work of John Powell (2008) who stated, "Residential and spatial segregation is opportunity segregation" (p. 778). Poverty was another driving force to be considered as the opportunity gap seemed to have widened. Factors included in the case study were the economic growth of the city, (pseudonyms used to describe all locations in the study), the technology-based economies, job growth, increased population growth, and the segregated nature of the city. The impact of gentrification on the community of color had forced low-wealth communities out of traditional residential locations. The city had been described as "A place of opportunity, particularly for young, white professionals in the technology industry" (p 784). The overall findings of the study suggested that (1) the same level of quality education was difficult to achieve for high schools across the district, (2) white families typically lived in neighborhoods of privilege that possessed more middle schools rated high-quality schools, and (3) students of color living in low-income attendance school zones had fewer opportunities (p. 799).

Measuring Opportunity

A Call for Change: The Social and Educational Factors Contributing to the Outcomes of Black Males in Urban Schools (2010) was based on research conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools. The study examined several factors such as Readiness to Learn, Grade Four Reading Scale Scores, Grade Eight Reading Scale Scores, Grade Four Mathematics Scale Scores, Grade Eight Mathematics Scale Scores, High School Dropout Rates, Graduation Rates, and Percentage of Students Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmark Scores. Whereas many states used such variables to examine opportunity/achievement gaps, these variables do not tell the full story. A more comprehensive approach is needed to improve the educational pipeline and connect the dots of academic preparation, especially for students of color. Williamson's (2007) dissertation, *Academic, Institutional, and Family Factors Affecting the Persistence of Black Males STEM Majors*, provided a framework to rethink the narrative related to academic achievement. The dissertation examined several factors that lead to success, but the overwhelming factor was the support students received. The early Black schools and colleges provided a community of support for students that cannot be duplicated in traditionally white educational institutions.

Conclusion

When analyzing the educational system in the United States as a whole, the conclusion can be drawn that the system was created with implicit biases from the start. Educators have personally experienced biases and understand the past as prologue related to a culture that has not been too kind to black and brown students. Some of the frustrations that parents and children may be experiencing is lack of knowledge about the educational system, its policies, and procedures that established cultural biases related to the value of education. Understanding the early educational model related to a system created to favor white males from privileged families provides some answers to the lagging opportunity gap between resource-rich communities, low-wealth communities, and predominately black and brown communities in public education. The initial fear of educating slaves, freed men, and their children continues to make its way into policies and procedures that lead to an expanded school to prison pipeline. Additionally, understanding the evolution from the liberal arts philosophy of the early colleges and universities, to the Land-Grant, Historical Black Colleges and Universities, and Community Colleges lead to a better understanding of practices related to educating the adult population. More research is needed on each topic discussed in this article that is intended to provide some initial thoughts around the foundations of educational practices that are now current-day practices.

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Author Note: Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Joseph Fox,, email: Fox Management Consulting Enterprises, LLC, email: josephlfox1@gmail.com .