

## Preparing Suburban School Leaders to Recognize Everyday Narratives that Promote Opportunity Gaps

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### Abstract

The ability of school leaders to recognize and confront marginalizing narratives that prevent equitable access and outcomes for their historically underserved student populations is critical to transforming their schools. This article is designed to build the leadership capacity of suburban school leaders to intervene in inequitable practices by leading them through an exploration of eight beliefs and assumptions - and the problematic decisions often prompted by them - that have been identified in the literature as barriers to the academic and post-secondary advancement of historically underserved student populations attending suburban schools.

**Keywords:** *Suburban Schools; Opportunity Gaps; Deficit Narratives*

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### **Preparing Suburban School Leaders to Recognize Everyday Narratives that Promote Opportunity Gaps**

Leaders of today's suburban schools face challenges that are relatively new to this demographic including increasing cultural and economic diversity amongst families and higher levels of accountability for performance disparities in students (Lewis-McCoy, 2018; Logan, 2014; Wells et al., 2014). Especially challenging for leaders of more high-performing affluent districts is managing the pressure from the school community to maintain a competitive edge while working to disassemble traditional hierarchical structures and practices known to create inequitable outcomes for their historically underserved student populations (Diamond, 2006; Holme et al., 2014 ; Kelly & Price, 2011; Theoharis, 2007a; Theoharis, 2007 b; Tilly, 2003).

Gaps in opportunity and achievement are common in suburban schools, even in those displaying high *average* performances (Diamond, 2006; Logan, 2014). Yet, in attempting to eliminate disparities, many suburban school leaders are surprised and frustrated when their well-intended improvement plans fail to show appreciable academic gains, or increased participation in high level opportunities, by their Black, Brown and lower-income students. Despite increased academic interventions, scheduling changes and diversity celebrations, their initiatives often do not yield the anticipated results. Yet, on closer inspection, many school improvement designs are largely comprised of transactional "tweaks", failing to challenge core, systemic attitudes and assumptions that breed exclusionary cultures and practices (Burke & Litwin, 1992; Khalifa et al., 2016; Lewis-McCoy, 2018). Academic interventions, for example, may not be accompanied by improvements in relational and social-emotional conditions that influence students' *beliefs* about their abilities and impact their *commitment to learning*. Attempts at improving school climate often rely heavily on short-term, superficial interventions, such as diversity assemblies, that fail to acknowledge deeper systemic influences (Gorski, 2019). They focus largely on student behaviors, rarely engaging *educators* in ongoing self-reflection about their own implicit beliefs and practices which though, perhaps unintentional, often serve to protect the hierarchies of privilege that fuel unhealthy school climates and disparate student outcomes (Andrews, 2014; Cooper, 2009; Farrington et al., 2012; Gorski, 2019; Ochoa, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Leistyna, 2001; Lewis-McCoy, 2018).

#### **The Role of School Culture in Sustaining Opportunity Gaps**

While, in theory, the priorities of organizations are driven by their missions, their prevailing *cultures* actually determine their potential to enact them (Torbene, 2014). The quote "*Culture eats strategy for breakfast*" underscores the tremendous influence that culture - meaning the shared assumptions, values, norms and actions that drive how individuals fulfill their roles - bears on organizational outcomes (Torben, 2014).

The fact is, the beliefs of teachers, counselors and other school staff about student potential and privilege, and the responsibility they assume for promoting student success, have a tremendous impact on everyday decision-making around students and families. As such, school leaders are *uniquely situated* in their organizational hierarchies to shape the cultures that dominate their buildings (Burke & Litwin, 1992; Horsford et al., 2011; Kaplan & Owings, 2013; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011). Their formal power affords them influence over design and implementation around student course placement, discipline practices,

professional learning, curriculum development, instructional supervision, family outreach, and resource allocation.

*Ultimately, the beliefs and dispositions that leaders sanction in their buildings, and the levels of accountability they place on their staffs for day-to-day processes and outcomes, greatly impact the learning environment, including who and what will be valued and prioritized* (Diamond et al., 2004; Khalifa, 2011). As such, engaging in a rigorous and honest examination of the micropolitical culture of the school, including its beliefs and practices, must be a priority in leading transformation (Diamond et al., 2004).

A characteristic common to equity-minded school leaders is the ability to create what Johnson & Uline (2005) refer to as a “collective relentlessness” in their schools around interrogating operational beliefs, structures and practices for their impact on historically underserved student populations. As some of the exclusionary beliefs and attitudes that sit at the foundation of unhealthy school cultures might be overlooked or underestimated in terms of their contributions to sustaining opportunity gaps, it is critical that school leaders enter their roles able to identify marginalizing, exclusionary narratives in their buildings and to critically examine how they are tied to operational and relational practices that promote inequitable outcomes for some students (Marx & Larson, 2012; Shields, 2004).

### **The Lack of Preparation of Suburban School Leaders to Serve Diverse Populations**

Unfortunately, many suburban school leaders feel largely unprepared to address issues involving race and privilege. One contributor is that, despite rapidly increasing racial and ethnic diversity in most suburban schools, the demographic composition of school administrators has remained largely unchanged; approximately seventy-eight percent of principals are White. Additionally, most have had little to no formal training in working effectively with diverse students and families, in understanding how systemic racism manifests itself in schools, or in addressing political tensions around racial issues (Horsford et al., 2011; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Tefera et al., 2011). In fact, some surveys identify both the management of racial and ethnic complexities, and the lack of confidence in handling the political and technical demands of school transformation around equity, as significant challenges to school leader practices (Cooper, 2009; Gardiner & Tenuto, 2015; Horsford et al., 2011; Hynds, 2010; Madsen & Mabokela, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Theoharis, 2007 a; Theoharis, 2007b; Young et al., 2010).

### **Helping Educators to Understand Opportunity Gaps As Failures of Systems, Not Students**

The Aspen Institute (2017) defines equity as access by every student “to the resources and rigor they need at the right moment in education despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background or family income” (p. 3). This definition emphasizes not only the importance of acknowledging and responding to individual differences in students, but suggests *the critical relationship between rigor and equitable outcomes*. In addition, it highlights the need for timely resources; in fact, educators who confuse the *availability* of quality academic and career-promoting resources in their schools with their *access* by their historically underserved student populations risk overlooking a potentially critical barrier to creating equitable outcomes (Boykin & Nogeura, 2011; Diamond, 2006; Simmons, 2011).

According to organizational expert Tom Northrop (2008), “All organizations are perfectly designed to get the results they are now getting. If we want different results, we must change the way we do things.” In leading for equity, suburban school leaders need to build improvement plans based in the knowledge that opportunity gaps are the result of organizational *design* rooted in a system conceived over a century ago to prioritize the advancement of White, middle class students (Andrews, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006). They must understand how the unquestioned, continued implementation of certain longstanding academic and social conventions - even by relatively high-performing, affluent suburban districts - often functions to maintain disparities by diverting attention and resources away from their Black, Brown and lower income students (Andrews, 2014; Diamond, 2006; Marx & Larson, 2012). To begin to address the “debt” owed to Black, Brown and lower income students as result of decades of educational neglect (Ladson-Billings, 2006), suburban school leaders must be willing and able to lead their schools in making systemic overhauls, beginning with changes in *culture* that will enable them to support *every* student (Diamond et al., 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

To undertake this work, leaders must have the capacity to recognize and interpret prevailing beliefs and expectations and their impact on the daily communications and decision-making in their buildings (Diamond, 2006; Gross & Shapiro, 2004; Theoharis, 2007a; Theoharis, 2007b). Given that many school leaders may themselves have benefited as students or teachers from certain hierarchical practices, building awareness may require explicit study, coaching and reflection. The purpose of this article is to improve the ability of suburban school leaders to identify some highly problematic, common narratives, as well as some related traditions of practice, that are known to result in inequitable academic and post-secondary outcomes for historically underserved student populations. It is anticipated that by increasing their awareness and sensitivity to these themes and practices, they can be more effective in diagnosing and intervening in inequitable learning conditions and practices in their schools.

### **Exposing the Narratives that Prevent Equitable Outcomes in Suburban Schools**

The *shared attitudes and beliefs* about intelligence and human potential by educators significantly impact many decisions made for and about their students (Diamond et al., 2004). The following is an exploration of eight narratives and some closely connected practices that are commonly found in school cultures that exhibit significant and persistent opportunity gaps:

#### **1. “Minority Students Attending Affluent Schools Operate on A Level Playing Field”**

While many suburban Black, Brown and lower income students may attend schools that are highly-resourced, they are not always situated to take advantage of their benefits. A study by Chetty, Hendren, Jones & Porter (2018) indicated that Black males raised in affluent neighborhoods often do not maintain their wealth at the same rates as their White peers. While these findings may be partly explained by discriminatory worksite practices, they are also likely the result of inequitable post-secondary preparation and disparate access to capital-building resources (Lewis-McCoy, 2016). As such, educators working in suburban districts need to understand how misconceptions around income and access can act as barriers to supporting the academic success and post-secondary preparation of some

Black, Brown and lower income students attending their schools (Lewis-McCoy, 2018; Simmons, 2011).

For example, one erroneous assumption that educators sometimes make is that all students residing in wealthier zip codes experience a “level playing field” (Diamond, 2006). In fact, income, which is typically defined by wages, has *not* been found to be a reliable gauge of a family’s access to academic and vocational resources (Lewis-McCoy, 2016). However, family wealth, which is a broader measure that includes savings, property, and other assets (often accumulated generationally) is a better indication of the potential access to resources that a family can leverage to advance its children’s academic, economic and social opportunity (Diamond, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Research indicates that though many suburban Black and Brown students are not poor, their families often do not possess the same levels of wealth as their White peers (Diamond, 2006). African American families, for example, often accumulate less wealth due primarily to historical policies and practices that prevented prior generations from accessing business loans and home mortgages, social security benefits and other government benefits. They more often financially support older relatives who lack sufficient retirement funds. As such they often have less expendable income for such resources as college tuition, tutors, private transportation and other resources that can support their children’s advancement (Bettes, 2011; Coates, 2014; Diamond, 2006; Lewis-McCoy, 2018; McDonough et al., 1997; McIntosh et al., 2020).

Similarly, income does not indicate a family’s level of *social capital* - including the dispositions, cultural knowledge, human support and social networks known to create pathways to mobility - or the extent to which family members can effectively *advocate* for their children’s educational needs (Coleman, 1988; Diamond, 2006; Simmons, 2011). Research indicates that first-generation students, in particular, rely heavily on their schools to provide practical and academic “insider” information and guidance (Borjas, 1992; Diamond, 2006; Farrington et al., 2012). Regardless of the affluence levels of their communities, suburban school leaders need to ensure that their schools are working *intentionally* to eliminate opportunity gaps by conducting proper needs assessments, by adequately mentoring, and by supporting social capital development in their historically underserved populations of students and families (Avallone, 2018; Simmons, 2011).

## 2. “Some Kids Aren’t Able to Handle Challenging Work”

***The Effect of Educator Expectations on Student Performance.*** The psychological significance of teachers’ expectations on students, including their impact on non-cognitive processes, is not a new discovery (Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L., 1968); even highly successful students can stop putting forth effort if they feel unacknowledged and incompetent in an environment. Non-cognitive factors that contribute to learning include academic behaviors, perseverance, mindsets, learning strategies, and social skills (Farrington et al., 2012). Academic behaviors include the actions taken to engage in learning, such as good attendance, studying, completing outside assignments and participating in class discussions. Perseverance, or the critical ability to persist on a task, is largely influenced by the conditions in which students are expected to learn. Academic mindset refers to students’ sense of belonging, to the value they place on what they are learning, and to their beliefs in their ability to grow and learn (Jones, 2018; Farrington, et al.; 2012). Learning strategies and social skills are tools and dispositions that students use

to approach novel situations successfully. Research indicates that these skills and dispositions are not fixed and can be *cultivated in the learning environment* (Dweck, 2007; Farrington, et al.; 2012).

Given both their authority and the significant amount of time they spend with their students, educators' behaviors towards students contribute significantly to the social-emotional environment that serves as the backdrop for learning. For example, studies on the motivation of Black males - a demographic that has often demonstrated lower achievement - indicate that they are particularly responsive to teacher encouragement (Ferguson et al., 2002). As such, it should not be surprising that educators who display growth-minded dispositions and hold rigorous expectations have been found to positively impact students' cognitive and non-cognitive growth and development (Dweck, 2007; Farrington et al., 2012; Verschelden, 2017). In fact, when students perceive confidence by educators in their potential, receive support for their individual academic and social-emotional needs, and when they are encouraged to value and leverage their strengths and cultural assets, they are more likely to develop the "will to learn" that is critical to ensuring access to the learning environment (Farrington et al., 2012; Tomlinson, 2014).

***The Impact of Educator Bias on Student Achievement.*** However, the reality is that all educators possess implicit biases that can consciously or unconsciously impact their judgments of others, weaving their way into their pedagogical and relational behaviors. As such, when students feel that they are perceived as "deficient" by nature, or limited in their potential, these messages can have profound effects on their levels of engagement and their desire to succeed academically. (Bean-Folks & Ellison, 2018; Dweck, 2007; Fiarman, 2016; Gorski, 2109; Osta & Vasquez, n.d.; Shields, 2004; Vinopal & Holt, 2019; Yosso, 2005). For example, when educators attribute underachievement to poverty, to deficient parenting, or to inherent "intellectual inferiority", such misplaced blame and bias often lead to further misinterpretation of students' behaviors and needs (Chamberlain, 2005; Gorski, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2017; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Shields, 2004). For example, deficit-minded teachers who have low expectations of Black and Brown students may attribute instances of poor homework completion to a perceived "disinterest in learning"; in fact, research indicates that, while these students complete slightly less homework on average than their peers, they put forth equal effort but report greater struggles with comprehension (Ferguson et al., 2002). Another unfounded yet common racial bias held by some educators is that Black students are less motivated by college aspirations than their peers (Ferguson et al., 2002).

Educators who hold deficit beliefs are often unwilling to reflect on their pedagogy as they often do not acknowledge the connection between their performances and student outcomes; as such, they may make decisions that result in lesser investments of time and resources in these students, perpetuating cycles of failure (Diamond et al., 2004; Gorski, 2019; Lewis-McCoy, 2016; Marx & Larson, 2012; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Deficit beliefs can prompt educators to hold some students to lower standards of accountability for work completion, attendance and socially appropriate behaviors (Khalifa, 2012; Lewis-McCoy, 2016). A study by Khalifa (2011) found White teachers to be more accepting of disengaging conduct exhibited by some of their Brown and Black students, overlooking work avoidance tactics, tardiness, and allowing students to visit other staff during instructional time. Other studies have found that schools often disproportionately surveil and discipline Black and Brown students, identifying them more often for behavior-related

disabilities such as emotional disturbance (Ahram et al., 2011; Chapman, 2013; Gershenson & Dee, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016; Ochoa, 2013). White female teachers have been found to respond more harshly to the behaviors of Black and Brown males, more frequently requesting office-level interventions to manage less serious behaviors (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Lewis-McCoy, 2016; Osta & Vasquez, n.d.). The continuous exposure of many Black, Brown and lower income students to cultural clashes, low expectations and stereotypes in their schools can take a negative toll on both their cognitive and non-cognitive functioning, increasing the incidence of withdrawal, school avoidance, behavioral issues and stress-related illnesses (Gershenson & Dee, 2017; Verschelden, 2017; Farrington et. al, 2012; Khalifa, 2011; Schmader et al., 2008; Usher & Pajares, 2008; Steele, 2011).

***The Social-Emotional Impact of Colorblind Behavior.*** In an effort to avoid conflict or being viewed as racist, some White educators claim not to distinguish differences in how race or ethnicity impact the experiences or needs of their students (Andrews, 2014; Fiarman, 2016). In fact, colorblind attitudes can negatively impact educators' attempts to build productive relationships with their minority students as they fail to acknowledge the unique variances in students' cultural assets, their current and historical experiences of power and privilege, and the social-emotional challenges faced by many suburban minority youth who often must navigate peer acceptance and identity development in majority White schools (Chapman, 2013; Fiarman, 2016; Jones, 2018; Lewis-McCoy, 2016; Marx & Larson, 2012; Verschelden, 2017; Vinopal & Holt, 2019). Furthermore, educators who fail to display a critical consciousness of racism and privilege through their curricular, instructional and relational practices, deny *all* students valuable opportunities to reflect and take action around social justice issues that are critical to their lives (Jones, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Schniedewind, 2005; Shields, 2004)

### 3. "Every Student Here Is Given An Equal Chance"

***Bias in Student Placements.*** Studies indicate that where and when students learn *matters* (McKenzie et al., 2008). In fact, certain placement decisions that appear routine can often have long-lasting reverberations, preventing some students from ever moving into higher level academic and post-secondary trajectories. Even some determinations made as early as the primary grades can significantly impact access to opportunity in later years. For example, the failure to provide middle school algebra instruction at levels sufficient to prepare students for high school math often leaves them permanently behind; in many schools, the inability to place in geometry by the freshman year can preclude them from advancing later into the highest level math and science courses ((Diamond, 2006; Hanover Research, 2016; Noguera & Wing, 2006).

As suggested previously, expectations play a significant role in educators' decision-making, including how and where they place students. While many claim to base placement decisions on objective criteria, research indicates that their deliberations are often largely informed by their own subjective standards around behavior and work habits, or by limited indicators of student academic ability, such as the results of single standardized tests (Fiarman, 2016; O'Connor et al., 2011; Ochoa, 2013; Osta & Vasquez, n.d.; Shields, 2004; Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). In competitive suburban schools, parental pressure has also been found to significantly influence placement decisions (Ochoa, 2013; Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). Even college recommendation practices can be influenced by adult

biases; one study found that counselors who worked at schools that had lower college-going rates recommended four-year institutions less often than those employed in other demographics (Simmons, 2011). Given the long-term implications of student placement decisions, it is critical that equity-minded school leaders collaborate with their vertical K-12 counterparts to carefully scrutinize the assumptions and processes that underlie placement determinations and remove barriers to accessing high level opportunities by their historically underserved populations of students.

#### 4. “Students Who Get Ahead Deserve It”

The narrative of meritocracy that operates in many competitive schools suggests that students who attain success do so by working harder than others, or attribute it to perceived “superior intelligence” (Diamond, 2006). Though diligence and perseverance, or “grit”, are essential to advancement, the contribution of social capital cannot be underestimated; most adults who have built successful careers and secure economic statuses have benefited from some type of physical, emotional, financial or social support from others at critical points in their lives (Ochoa, 2013; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Usher & Pajares, 2008). As such, this myth denies the very real and critical contributions of students’ social capital, including the advocacy and mentoring of adults, their access to critical information, and modeling of useful dispositions and contextual social skills. It also denies the historic systemic inequalities that have presented barriers to academic and vocational advancement for generations of minority and lower-income families (Andrews, 2014; Diamond, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Yosso, 2005). Meritocratic school cultures often maintain opportunity gaps by funneling elite resources to more “deserving” groups of students (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013).

As mentioned previously, students’ timely exposure to the key practical and cultural information and skills valued in a given environment, as well as their access to useful social connections and supports, are essential to their academic and vocational mobility (Blankstein et al., 2015; Lewis, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, 2013). And, while all students and families possess tools that can help them to succeed in specific environments, they may need to cultivate certain skills and build networks that may be more valued or practical in novel contexts. For example, in supporting their children on the path to higher education, college-educated parents often have an advantage over other parents due to their familiarity with navigating this culture and its unique expectations (Boykin & Noguera, 2011).

School leaders seeking to eliminate opportunity gaps acknowledging the barriers that have been experienced by historically underserved populations and work to transform meritocratic school cultures into inclusive environments by working *intentionally* to expand social capital in students and families. They implement practices that engage all students in rigorous academic work, career-related skill development, and the development of helpful human networks - and provide tailored information and support to first-generation parents so they can advocate effectively for their children. (Andrews, 2014; Blankstein et al., 2015; Lewis, 2001; Pollack & Zirkel, 2013; Simmons, 2011; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, 2013).

### 5. “Students Learn Best When Separated By Ability”

The systematic “sorting” of students by race, ethnicity and class dates back to the origins of American compulsory schooling (Ochoa, 2013). Fueled by the need to supply industry with labor, and supported by prevailing biases around class, race, and ethnicity, early twentieth century schools intentionally focused curricula for “non-White” students on content and skills deemed sufficient in preparing them for low-paid, low-status occupations (Ochoa, 2013). The modern practice of leveling, or “tracking”, is a vestige of this sorting system and involves the practice of grouping students, sometimes as early as the primary grades, by *perceived* ability into distinct levels that are provided different curricular coverage, instruction and resources (Ferguson, 2004).

Tracking, or “leveling”, is especially common in higher-performing suburban districts where public schools often compete against private institutions for enrollment of students from affluent families (Betts, 2011). Its proponents claim that instruction can be better fitted to the needs of students when they are grouped by “ability” (Betts, 2011). However, tracking has been found to be largely problematic for ethical, academic and social reasons (Kelly & Price, 2011; Ochoa, 2013; Ogbu & Davis, 2003; Loveless & Diperna, 2003; National Education Association, 2012; Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008).

Perhaps the most glaring concern around tracking is the wide disparity in rigor and quality of instruction often provided between levels (Ferguson, 2004). In fact, research indicates that spending at least three hours a day in well-executed direct instruction in which students take active roles in constructing and directing their learning is correlated with high levels of achievement (Ferguson et al., 2002). This finding may help to illuminate how tracking practices perpetuate performance disparities; studies have found that, while students enrolled in higher levels are often provided more inquiry-based, self-directed learning in less authoritative conditions, their lower-tracked peers are often largely engaged in teacher-centered, rote activities that do not emphasize higher-order skill development or develop student agency in their learning (Christensen et al., 2012; Diamond, 2006; Ferguson, 2004; Flores, 2007; Noguera, 2017; Ochoa, 2013). Other research on tracking corroborates this pattern: a high school study found that students assigned to lower level English classrooms spent significantly less time discussing curricular texts than students situated in the higher tracks (Ochoa, 2013; Ogbu & Davis, 2003). Schools also tend to assign less experienced, less qualified teachers to lower tracks (Ansalone, 2006; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Diamond, 2006; Flores, 2007; Lewis-McCoy, 2016; Ochoa, 2013; Skrla et al., 2009; Vinopal & Holt, 2019). Such disparities in access to quality curriculum and instruction likely explain why students assigned to lower levels rarely ever catch up to their higher-tracked peers (Ochoa, 2013).

Another frequent criticism of tracking is the *criteria* used to “sort” students. As suggested previously, assessing the capability of students, especially those attempting to learn in low expectancy environments, can be challenging due to the subjectivity of grades and the diagnostic limitations of standardized testing, neither of which are necessarily reliable assessments of students’ actual abilities (Ahram et al., 2011; Betts, 2011; Chamberlain, 2005; Gershenson & Dee, 2017; Gonzalez et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ochoa, 2013; Usher & Pajares, 2008). In fact, assessment differences are often found between tracks; for example, behavioral expectations are often measured in lower-tracked students that may not be assessed in higher-tracked students (Ochoa, 2013). Perceptions of student behavior by educators are also highly subjective; for example, a

study of middle school teachers' judgments of student conduct found misalignments between teachers' *expectations* and what is actually considered normal behavior at that stage of adolescent development (Farrington et al., 2012). As mentioned previously, students who feel invalidated by perceived cultural biases in curriculum and instruction, or who experience low expectations, may present behaviorally in ways that make it difficult to discern what they actually know and can do (Farrington et al., 2012; Gorski, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ochoa, 2013; Shields, 2004; Steele, 2011). In one suburban study, parents of young Black males expressed concerns about the racial "lumping" of their sons into classes together, and about social promotion instead of remediation (Lewis-McCoy, 2016).

Additionally, common course scheduling practices, such as limiting in advance the number of sections of accelerated courses, can force arbitrary placement decisions and deny capable students the opportunity to attempt higher rigor courses including courses that serve as prerequisites to advanced study (LaSalle & Johnson, 2016; Pisoni & Silverman, 2019).

Another serious long-term consideration is that tracking often eventually becomes self-perpetuating. When, beginning in elementary years, students experience vastly different academic experiences in segregated social environments, course-taking decisions later in middle school can be impacted, often influencing their interest in and eligibility for more rigorous courses in high school (Ochoa, 2013; Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). Some studies have found lower-tracked students to exhibit less self-confidence than their higher-tracked peers; as such, some students may *self-select* lower-rigor courses over time, especially when faced with intimidating gatekeeping practices including entrance examinations, complex paperwork and harsh penalties for dropping courses (Ansalone, 2006; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Grossman & Aness, 2004; Kelly & Price, 2011; Ogbu & Davis, 2003; Steele, 2011; Verschelden, 2017). Other deterrents to advancing into higher levels levels for some Black and Brown students include fear of the potential impact on peer relationships, and the discomfort of entering classrooms that have historically been dominated by White students and teachers (Grossman & Aness, 2004; Howard, 2006; Kelly & Price, 2011; O'Connor et al., 2011; Ochoa, 2013; Verschelden, 2017). Students also identify the lack of mentoring and encouragement by their teachers and counselors as deterrents to attempting high level courses (Grossman & Aness, 2004; Howard, 2006; Ochoa, 2013; Ogbu & Davis, 2003; Simmons, 2011); lower-tracked students in one study complained that less time and attention were provided to them by their school counselors around course selection and college planning than to their higher-tracked peers (Simmons, 2011).

Finally, tracking has the potential to limit the development of social capital at *all* levels (Carter et al., 2017; Delpit, 2006; Dika & Singh, 2002; Marx & Larson, 2012; Ochoa, 2013). "De facto tracking", occurs when scheduling constraints, often created by tracking in core subjects, inadvertently leads to the scheduling of groups of students into *additional* classes together, creating even greater isolation (Blankenstein et al. 2015; Burris Corbett, 2015; Kelly & Price, 2011; Lasalle & Johnson, 2016; Ochoa, 2013). For first-generation and English Learners, in particular, the resulting lack of exposure to the modeling of more academically advanced peers around course selection, study habits, extracurricular participation and college-going dispositions can be problematic (Marx & Larson, 2012; National Education Association, 2012). However, even higher-tracked students experience disadvantages when they are prevented from learning and socializing alongside a variety

of peers, experiencing first-hand the benefits of engaging diverse perspectives in problem-solving and creative pursuits (Marx & Larson, 2012; National Education Association, 2012).

However, one important caution to leaders who are seeking to transform segregated models of instruction is that de-tracking *in itself* has not been found to increase student achievement if instruction in heterogeneous classes is of poor quality (Ferguson, 2004).

## 6. “Students Who Don’t Show, Don’t Care”

As mentioned previously, even in more high-performing districts, the rates of participation by historically underserved student populations in such rigorous, capital-building opportunities as honors and AP courses, internships and other career-preparation activities are often disproportionate to their peers (Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008; Theokas & Saaris, 2013). In attempting to address this problem, schools often operate under the assumption that their absence in these settings is mainly due to a lack of awareness or interest.

However, as mentioned previously, students’ sense of *belonging* has been identified as a significant influence on their willingness to engage in a given learning environment (Gay, 2002; Hill & Torres, 2010; O’Connor et al., 2011; Shields, 2004; Taliaferro & DeCuir-Gunby, 2008). In fact, students may avoid enrolling in courses in which the learning conditions appear unsupportive or do not appear to validate or align with their cultural practices (Gay, 2002). For example, instructional practices in honors and AP level courses are often designed to encourage individual competition, a dynamic that may conflict with the ethic of *group cooperation* that is common to the cultures of many Black and Brown students (Chamberlain, 2005; Gay, 2002; Lee, 1998; Rothstein-Fisch, C., & Trumbull, E. 2008). As strong communal relationships have historically served as a critical source of social capital for minority populations in overcoming social and economic segregation and marginalization, classroom cultures that build *community* using truly collaborative instructional approaches and culturally affirming practices may be more attractive to many minority students (Barlowe & Cook, 2015; Farrington et al., 2012; Gay, 2002; Pajares & Usher, 2008).

Studies indicate that schools that are successful in addressing disproportionate participation in high level opportunities *make intentional efforts to create inclusive cultures around their highest level opportunities*. They provide ongoing supports including teacher and peer tutoring, mentoring and business partnerships, summer AP preparatory “bootcamps” and bridge programs, and often provide after-school transportation to ensure students’ access to the full array of available school resources (Bavis, 2016; Hanover Research, 2016; Verschelden, 2017; Walker, 2007). They advocate for prospective students through the course registration process, often creating first-generation counseling programs, utilizing screeners to seek out students who exhibit the academic potential to succeed in high-level courses, working to enroll “critical masses” of racially and ethnically diverse students, and removing punitive admission and withdrawal policies (Bavis, 2016; Theokas & Saaris, 2013; Walker, 2007). Finally, they work to recruit and retain minority teachers who can act as role models to counteract racial and ethnic stereotypes about intelligence and potential (Preis, 2017; Chetty et al., 2018; Cooper, 2009; Madsen & Mabokela, 2014; Marx & Larson, 2012; Vinopal & Holt, 2019; Walker, 2007)

## 7. “Parents Who Are Not Visible, Aren’t Invested”

School administrators have traditionally been trained to lead diverse populations to *assimilate* to the practices of their schools, rather than to lead their schools to act inclusively and responsively to the needs of their unique students and families (Gooden, 2002; Marx & Larson, 2012; Yosso, 2005). They often utilize one-way communication strategies that expect parent adherence, or offer predetermined meeting agendas that provide little opportunity for parents to engage authentically in school matters (Galloway et al., 2015). In addition, it is not uncommon for White teachers and counselors who are accustomed to traditional middle-class Eurocentric family engagement practices to evaluate families’ levels of caring and investment based on their visibility at traditional school functions such as open houses and PTA meetings (Gorski, 2019; Marshall & Theoharis, 2007). However, such narrow expectations by educators’ can impede their ability to understand and appreciate the strengths and needs of their diverse students and families (Cooper et al., 2010; Jeynes, 2010; Lopez et al., 2001).

Students attending successful, inclusive schools often describe them as functioning “like families” (Johnson & Uline, 2005). In fact, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler (1997) identify three major influences on parents’ willingness to engage in school including 1) how they define their job as parents (role construction) 2) how confident they feel in their ability to help their children with school-related matters (self-efficacy) and 3) whether they feel authentically welcomed as partners by their children’s schools. The researchers’ claim that the latter variable - the welcoming culture of the school - has the greatest impact on parent behaviors. In addition, practical, social and cultural barriers can impact parents’ degree of attendance at their childrens’ schools. Those who work hourly jobs, for example, may not have the ability to leave work, or may need to prioritize limited childcare due to financial constraints (Gorski, 2019). First-generation parents who lack relevant background knowledge may not perceive the value of their input into meetings around course selection or college planning (Kise & Rusell, 2007); non-English speaking parents may feel unwelcome by the inaccessibility of translators and translated materials (Marx & Larson, 2012). Undocumented families experience their own unique set of barriers to engaging with schools, sometimes fearing the consequences of sharing personal information or requesting help for their children (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011; Turner & Mangual Figueroa, 2019). Parents experiencing severe stress may simply lack the emotional stamina or “bandwidth” needed to engage in planning and problem-solving (Verschelden, 2017).

Consequently, suburban school leaders must build the capacity of educators to create family-friendly school cultures by developing *new conceptions of home-school engagement* that can potentially increase their capacity to engage productively with the increasingly diverse families entering their doors. ( Jeynes, 2010; Marx & Larson, 2012). In doing so, they must facilitate the “unlearning” of deficit beliefs, helping staff to recognize that parents who are less visible often provide valuable supports to their children’s education by providing love, ensuring good attendance, limiting television, encouraging reading, and by making sure that students come to school fed, clothed and ready to learn (Bean-Folks & Ellison, 2018; Gorski, 2019; Jeynes, 2010; Johnson & Uline, 2005; Yosso, 2005).

## 8. “Tolerance for Diversity Creates Equity”

Intolerant student behaviors and ideologies proliferate in school cultures that support or fail to challenge them (Agosto & Karanhxa, 2012). Though assemblies aimed at preventing bullying and embracing diversity may play a role in raising awareness and promoting reflection in some students, they often do not explicitly address implicit racism or its *systemic* origins (Gorski, 2019). As discussed throughout this paper, educators’ beliefs and attitudes, beginning with those displayed by school leaders, play a significant role in influencing school culture. As such, leaders must begin the transformation process by examining the micropolitical climates of their schools, including the *adult* beliefs and practices that promote segregation and unhealthy competition between groups of students, and work to increase staff commitment to, and competence in, implementing inclusive attitudes and practices (Cooper, 2009; Diamond et al., 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Marshall & Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis, 2007b). Furthermore, they must raise the expectations of their school communities from merely promoting the “acceptance” of diversity to fulfilling their higher ethical obligation: the preparation of students who will act not only to fulfill their academic potential, but to nurture their communities by displaying care and concern for individuals and for the greater society (Lewis, 2001; National Education Association, 2012; Tefera et al, 2011).

### How Equity-Minded Leaders Counteract Exclusionary Narratives

#### Dispelling Misconceptions and Raising Awareness

Given the deep-seated and often unconscious nature of bias and deficit-thinking, school leaders must ensure that all educators in their schools receive ongoing training and support to help them to be continually on the lookout for potential blind spots in their thinking and practices (Bean-Folks & Ellison, 2018; Cooper, 2009; Dweck, 2007; Fiarman, 2016; Gay, 2002; Howard, 2006). One important way to help educators to reflect and gain new perspectives is by involving them in the sharing of experiences and perspectives with diverse students and families who can provide “counternarratives” to their preconceived notions and provide critical insights that can inform school improvement efforts (Bean-Folks & Ellison, 2018; Cooper, 2009; Howard, 2007; Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Pollack & Zirkel, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Marx & Larson, 2012; Pearce & Wood, 2019; Schniedewind, 2005; Shields, 2004). Some school leaders accomplish this by bringing educators and parents together in informal living room “chats”, or by facilitating larger “greenhouse” activities aimed at collaboratively revising vision or mission statements with families and other community members (Preis, 2017; Cooper et al., 2010; Tefera et al., 2011). Parent panels, presentations by community providers, neighborhood walks and home visits can also build the cultural capacity of teachers, counselors and administrators, increasing mutual understanding and identifying helpful ways to provide support (LaSalle & Johnson, 2016; Marx & Larson, 2012; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). In fact, increasing the capacity of educators to engage with culturally diverse families has been found to improve students’ academic performance; in one study, a substantial increase in the achievement of a school’s Latino students was observed after its principal hosted regular translated dinner events, to which parents received invitations in their native languages, that engaged them in dialogue with staff about academic and other school-related matters (Marx & Larson, 2012).

School leaders can also work to expand staff capacity over the long haul by actively screening prospective candidates for inclusive mindsets and practices *during the hiring process* rather than continuously working to alter entrenched mindsets and practices (Agosto & Karanxha, 2012; Rivera-McCutchen, 2014; Theoharis, 2010). Additionally, as some individuals may never change their perspectives despite significant support and attention, school leaders must be prepared to counsel out staff who persist in implementing exclusionary practices (Duke & Salmanowicz, 2010; Howard, 2006; Johnson & Uline, 2005; Khalifa et al., 2016).

### **Creating an Equity-Focused Lens**

Transformative school leaders not only view equity as an outcome but use it as a *lens* by which they make their daily decisions (Gorski, 2019). They keep it “front and center” in the school culture by embedding it into their school routines through regular dialogue with staff about implicit bias and its potential influence on their practices. Some leaders begin these conversations by centering them around the outcomes of climate surveys and equity audits, or by conducting book discussions that focus on equity-related topics and practices (Andrews, 2014; Capper, 2015; Skrla et al., 2009). Successful leaders stay close to the improvement process, regularly monitoring with their teams how specific practices impact outcomes for their historically underserved populations of students using disaggregated academic data and uncovering “red flags” such as disproportionalities in discipline, attendance and student participation in extracurricular activities (Fiarman, 2016; Howard, 2007; Preis, 2017; Shields, 2004). Some districts employ equity coaches to build the effectiveness and confidence of their leaders in communicating and managing sensitive issues that arise around race and privilege in their schools (Preis, 2017).

### **Managing Stakeholder Resistance**

Despite the fact that research has refuted the fundamental biases and assumptions underlying the eight narratives discussed in this article, their persistence in the greater school culture for over more than a century suggests their utility in helping to maintain an agenda that prioritizes the advancement of White, middle-class students (Pollack & Zirkel, 2013; Shields, 2004). As such, school leaders attempting to challenge the status quo can anticipate various degrees of opposition from some stakeholders (Diamond, 2006; Gorski, 2019; Holme et al., 2014; Hynds, 2010; Kelly & Price, 2011; Madsen & Makobela, 2014; Pollack & Zirkel, 2013; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001; Theoharis, 2007a; Theoharis, 2007b; Tilly, 2003).

It is critical that leaders understand that an *intellectual* comprehension of institutional inequity by some stakeholders may not automatically prompt a willingness in them to support critical changes in traditional policies and practices (Elmore, 2004; Evans, 2007; Pollack & Zirkel, 2013). In fact, proposed priority shifts and the elimination of some traditional practices are often perceived as threatening by some beneficiaries, particularly when leadership has not made efforts to acknowledge their voices early in the transformation process (Capper, 2015; Hynds, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Pollack & Zirkel, 2013); for example, competitive parents and even some faculty may express objections for fear that standards will be lowered, or that elite resources will no longer be exclusively available to certain groups (Hynds, 2010; Madsen & Mabokela, 2014). Anti-immigrant sentiments may elicit resistance to making critical resources available to English

Learners, refugees or undocumented students (Cooper, 2009; McCoy-Lewis, 2018; Ochoa, 2013; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). In seeking community support for their transformational efforts, it is important that school leaders work to develop trust and build coalitions through transparency, ongoing dialogue and the inclusion of stakeholders with diverse perspectives in the process; they must also continually connect the goal of *excellence by all* students to equitable practices (Cooper, 2009; Ferguson, 2016; Howard, 2007; Hynds, 2010; Johnson & Uline, 2005; Jones et al., 2005; Marx & Larson, 2012; Pollack & Zirkel, 2013).

Furthermore, even when buy-in has been established, leaders must be prepared to manage the *tensions* that occur when making significant cultural shifts (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Discussions in meetings about race, or teaching newly integrated classes, for example, may create anxiety in some faculty (Howard, 2006; Hynds, 2010). (Capper, 2105; Ferguson, 2016; Gay, 2002; Hynds, 2010; Kelly & Price, 2011; Pollack & Zirkel, 2013). Gaining their support will not only require promoting awareness of systemic injustice, but will require the acquisition of actionable replacement strategies that can increase their effectiveness and confidence in working in more inclusive ways (Elmore, 2004; Ferguson et al. 2002; Leistyna, 2001; Preis, 2017). However, implementation of new learnings will only occur in a *culture that values and rewards inquiry and shared responsibility for learning*; as such, leaders must first establish supportive, collaborative environments in which educators can experiment without fear of harsh evaluation, while, at the same time, cultivate the shared belief that continuous improvement is neither optional nor negotiable (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Gorski, 2019; Johnson & Uline, 2005; Noguera, 2017; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001).

### Conclusion

While the eight narratives explored in this article are implicated as major contributors to opportunity gaps, the fact is that many suburban school leaders remain complicit with them, underestimating their influence on learning conditions and access to resources by their historically underserved populations of students (Cooper, 2009; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Although making minor adjustments and maintaining neutral stances around race and privilege in their school improvement plans may prevent the discomfort of confronting widely-accepted traditions of practice, such leader behaviors will not budge systems entrenched in core beliefs and values that ultimately prioritize the advancement of some students over others (Gorski, 2019; Khalifa, 2011; Leistyna, 2001; Yosso, 2005).

Consequently, the potential success of leaders' attempts at eliminating opportunity gaps in their suburban schools will hinge largely on their willingness to sharpen their equity lenses, and *act to confront and replace marginalizing environments with democratic, growth-oriented cultures* that promote equitable access to the conditions and resources needed by all students to thrive intellectually, emotionally, socially and economically (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Cooper, 2009; Diamond, 2006; Gorski, 2019; Jones, 2018; McKenzie et al., 2008; Shields, 2004; Shields, 2010; Theoharis, 2007a). Without making such intentional *systemic* changes, many suburban school leaders will continue to find that their carefully-crafted, inclusive mission statements exists merely as words on paper. More disturbingly, their schools risk producing increasing numbers of racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse youth who graduate largely unprepared to fulfill their personal needs, or to attend to their ethical obligations to support and protect the future welfare of our democracy.

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