

## **Culturally responsive practices as whole school reform**

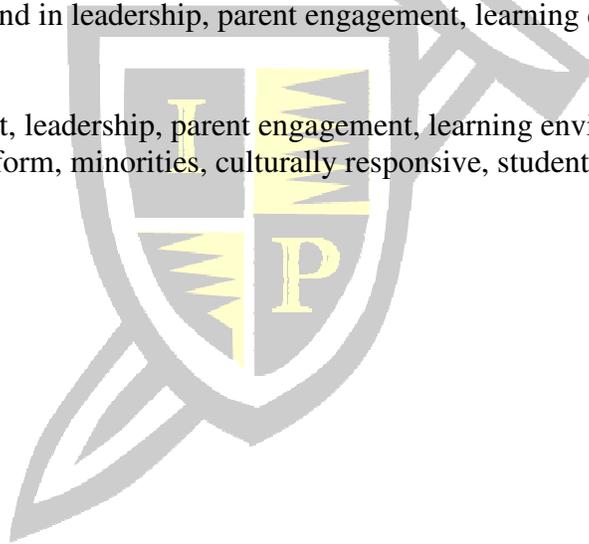
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### **ABSTRACT**

Despite our best efforts, black children still lag behind white children in academic performance on standardized academic measures. Unconscious racism and our lack of ability to confront it present the most salient reason for the indefatigable prevalence of inequitable opportunities for children of color which undeniably result in achievement gaps. This study identified specific culturally responsive practices schoolwide in a middle school that is successfully closing academic opportunity gaps between White and Black students. The findings indicate professional development served as a conduit for ongoing discussions on race and building the cultural competency of staff. These discussions served to promote culturally responsive practices found in leadership, parent engagement, learning environment, and pedagogy.

Keywords: Achievement, leadership, parent engagement, learning environment, pedagogy school improvement, school reform, minorities, culturally responsive, student management.



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## INTRODUCTION

For over fifty years, educators, parents, and politicians alike have been championing the cause of educational equity and closing the ever illusive achievement gap. Recent literature has reframed the issue as symptomatic of a broader complex injustice in which children of color receive disparately different opportunities that impact their ability to learn (Milner, 2010). For example, opportunity gaps manifest when poor and minority children have 1) inexperienced teachers, 2) teachers with little or no ongoing professional development, 3) less school funding, 4) students who lack access to good healthcare or nutritional diets and 5) lower expectations as evidenced by unchallenging curriculums (Basch, 2011; Berliner, 2010; Florence, Asbridge, & Veugelers, 2008). Conditions such as these create gaps in students' opportunity to learn and are exacerbated by school practices and policies which continue to perpetuate inequalities. One of the subsequent outcomes of inequitable practices is an achievement gap with disparate academic outcomes between White and minority students (Reis & Renzulli, 2010).

What many educators fail to realize is that educational inequities between minorities and Whites are no accident. Hundreds of years of oppressive and dehumanizing policies and legislation were deliberately contrived and manipulated to maintain power and privilege within the hands of a few while Jim Crow laws and other subversive forms of oppression decimated economic and educational opportunities for blacks and other minorities (Alexander, 2010; Allen, 2008; Paige & Witty, 2010).

Through a variety of legislative efforts, the federal government has endeavored to rectify educational inequities, but little attention was given to bridging the chasms of opportunity by dismantling biased ideological structures embedded in school programs or challenging the entrenched beliefs of teachers. "All children can learn" became a mantra publicly espoused by educators but seldom scrutinized by the microscope of equitable practices, procedures, and patterns. It would seem to reason that the vestiges of the brutal history of racism and apartheid educational structures could not be erased by mere implementation of technical practices but rather through the deliberate implementation of practices that serve to mitigate historically derived imbalances of power and privilege while providing students with equitable opportunities and resources. And yet many schools have chosen solely technical strategies to improve overall academic achievement of students of color while ignoring the underlying values and beliefs of the individuals delivering the instruction to them (Campos, 2008). The researchers assert this approach is naïve at best and culturally criminal at its worst. Yet school practitioners can hardly be completely at fault for neglecting to integrate culturally responsive practices when the literature has been fairly vague on articulating specific behaviors that demonstrate them – particularly outside the realm of teaching (Johnson, 2007).

## WHAT ARE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES?

Culturally responsive practices evolved from an earlier body of research on multicultural education. Multicultural education emerged during the 1970's as an ideological approach to affirming diversity operationalized in five different manners as identified by Sleeter and Grant (1996). Teachers using the *Teaching the Exceptional and Culturally Different* approach aimed to help students of color acquire the language and cultural values of dominant American society. The *Human Relations* multicultural approach attempted to promote interracial harmony by focusing on the need for tolerance and appreciation between people of difference. The third way

in which multicultural education was implemented was through a *Singles Group Studies* approach which focused on the positive contributions of people from a singular group. The intent of this approach was to help students feel proud of their heritage and empowered for their potential. *The Multicultural Education* methodology adapted the curriculum to include the stories and perspectives of people of color. Finally, *The Education that is Multicultural and Social Reconstructionist* approach taught students how to alter society by creating inclusive processes in which power is shared equitably. Multicultural education, while idealistic in nature, was optimistically situated in a racially neutral context. The approaches did little to consider the ideals, beliefs and values of the people who were implementing the curriculum. Yet examining personal beliefs and assumptions and the beliefs and assumptions on which school policies and procedures rest is as critical to fostering a fair and equitable learning environment as the mastery of effective instructional strategies (Gay & Kirkland, 2003)

Cultural responsive practices (CRP) which followed the body of work on multicultural education, married the idealism of multicultural education to its sociopolitical and historical context (Banks, 2006). In addition to the implementation of a multi-culturally rich curriculum and environment, culturally responsive schools cultivate the cultural competency of staff, create consistent critical examination of personal beliefs and assumptions, the interrogation of school policies and procedures, and the promotion of social justice for all people (Andrews, 2007; Cooper, 2009; Madsen & Mabokela, 2002). In culturally responsive practices the promotion of equality and difference meet the imperatives of antiracist education to suppress and eradicate racism in the environment.

Culturally responsive teaching was introduced by Geneva Gay when she researched the successful practices of African American teachers teaching students of color. Gay (2000) defined culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively”. The literature on culturally responsive teaching is well documented, but the research base on practices in other areas of school that would impact learning is limited. Using the cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives of ethnically diverse students to more effectively educate them would most certainly have applications in other areas of school practice.

The researchers built upon the literature from multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching to define culturally responsive practices as *behavioral and policy actions that acknowledge stakeholders’ cultures and utilize that knowledge to create an optimal learning environment where personal beliefs and assumptions are regularly examined, cultural identities are nurtured, institutional policies and procedures are interrogated for bias, cultural competency is developed, and social justice is a transformative imperative*. These kinds of practices craft an ingeniously innovative setting for students from all cultural backgrounds.

While culturally responsive practices are not a revolutionary concept, they remain a radical conception for traditional school systems that have failed to examine the overarching influence of institutionalized racism in America and how it manifests in schools. The characteristic traits of culturally responsive schooling are particularly necessary for the education of Black students because of the deeply embedded negative attitudes and perceptions teachers may unconsciously hold toward students of color (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Without intentional and consistent examination of teacher beliefs and school practices, it is likely that schools will continue to unconsciously perpetuate socio-cultural conditions of oppression that have thwarted positive identity development and academic advancement of Black students for decades (Rodriguez, Jones, & Pang, 2004).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS FOR EDUCATING CHILDREN OF COLOR

To identify areas of school practice where culturally responsive practices could be exercised, the researchers reviewed the literature on success factors for the education of students of color. The intentional distribution of power is a common theme in the literature for improving outcomes for Black children. In many traditional school practices teachers and administrators wield the larger share of power in schooling decisions that impact children (Delpit, 2006). Delpit (1997) advocates the necessity of helping Black children and families understand the rules of power, in part because the people with the least amount of power recognize when it is unbalanced (Delpit, 1997). Distribution of power was also an overarching theme in Bemak, Chi-Ying, and Sabdo's (2005) research with African-American students considered at risk. They improved Black student achievement through empowerment counseling groups. Their recommendations included the development of familial type support structures, high expectations from teachers and a warm, welcoming environment to greet them each day (Bemak, Chi-Ying, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005). Likewise, Scribner and Reyes' (1999) framework for working with high risk minority students recommended leaders share leadership with all stakeholders, hold everyone accountable for their actions and abolish traditional hierarchies allowing for shared power structures (Scribner & Reyes, 1999). Darling Hammond (1998) agreed with the need for examining traditional power structures while building the capacity of teachers. She recommended tenets for equitable education embody shared decision making, caring behaviors and collaborative knowledge building for teachers. Pines and Hilliard (1990) offered a framework for improving the education of black students that also included increased pedagogical efficacy and a system of professional development that helped staff uncover their unconscious bias (Pines & Hilliard, 1990). Based on their recommendations, culturally responsive practices could conceivably be found in the areas of pedagogy and professional development. Boykin's (1983) Afro-cultural themes for educating Black students included a focus on the educational environment as well. Among the themes, Communalism denotes an interdependent, cooperative approach to learning where students can readily learn with and from each other. The Movement Theme conveys the ability for students to engage in dance, or other rhythmic approaches to learning, and Verve suggests heightened levels of physical stimulation. In addition, Boykin stressed African American children have a need for expressive individualism where they can express themselves uniquely (Boykin, 1983). This need for Black children to express themselves as individuals was reinforced by Fordham and Ogbu (1986). They found that African American adolescents' academic achievement was significantly affected by their racial identity attitudes. African American students may begin to demonstrate behavioral difficulties when they feel like their teachers fail to appreciate their differences (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

A culturally responsive environment where identity development is intentionally nurtured supports the holistic development of students of color (Cohen & Garcia, 2008). An inclusive environment with positive reinforcement of a child's identity is also supported by Banks' (2006) five dimensions of multicultural education which details the examination of the entire school culture to ensure there is a welcoming environment and equitable practices in place. The dimensions have increasing levels of involvement for teachers and staff. The first dimension is content integration which constitutes integrating the cultures of students into the curriculum and curricular materials. The second dimension is knowledge construction which is a process of helping students to understand the cultural assumptions inherent in the curriculum and language of American culture. The third dimension is equity pedagogy which requires teachers to expand

their teaching repertoires to include a variety of strategies that support learning for students of various cultures. Prejudice reduction, the fourth dimension, is an intentional instructional focus on reducing bias and prejudice in the classroom. Empowering school culture and social structure is the fifth dimension. Banks argues that the entire school culture must be empowering and it is the role of educators to ensure their policies and procedures do not advantage some students while disadvantaging other (Banks, 2006).

Ladson-Billings' framework for culturally responsive teaching placed importance on the integration of culture into the curriculum as well as instructional and curricular coherence. Like Pines and Hilliard (1990) she saw a great need for professional development on culture that allowed participants to examine their beliefs. Additionally she promoted parent involvement as integral to the success of Black students.

The researcher synthesized the predominant themes from the literature on educating Black students (See Table 1) to formulate a conceptual framework for areas of practice in a school where ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender pluralism could be affirmed through culturally responsive practices.

**Table 1. A Synthesis of the Research on Educating Students of Color**

Researcher	Pedagogy	Parent Engagement	Student Management	Leadership	Learning Environment	Shared Beliefs
(Banks, 2006)	*Equity Pedagogy *Content Integration		*Prejudice reduction		*School culture	*Knowledge Construction
(Hilliard & Pines, 1990)	*Multicultural curriculum *Pedagogical practice *Character development		*Improving self esteem	*Minority teachers	*Improving self esteem	*Challenging racism
(Bemak et al., 2005)	*High expectations	*Familial support			*Welcoming environment	
(Boykin, 1983)	*Movement *Communalism *Individualism *Orality *Social time	*Spirituality	*Harmony	*Verve	*Affect	
(Darling-Hammond 1998)	*Serious learning *Student work		*Caring	*Shared decisions	*Teacher collaboration	

(Ladson-Billings, 1994)	*Cultural Instruction *Curricular Coherence	*Parent involvement				*Professional Development
(Scribner & Reyes, 1999)	*Innovation & discovery *Question, sharing * Prior knowledge *Advocacy Oriented	*Community contributes * Parents involved *Cultural informants *Adult education	*Everyone accountable	*Empowerment *Shared leadership *Principal inspires	*Bureaucracies abolished	
(Davis, 1995)				*Recognize dynamics *Navigate conflict *Problem solve		
(Delpit, 1997)	*Rules of power	*Rules of Power				

Based on the synthesis of the previous frameworks, a conceptual framework for areas of school practice which could theoretically embody culturally responsive practices was formulated (See Table 2). This framework which guided the study allowed the researcher to turn a laser focus on areas of a school in which practitioners could implement a multi-culturally rich curriculum and teaching, cultivate the cultural competency of staff, create consistent critical examination of personal beliefs and assumptions, interrogate the cultural assumptions of school policies and procedures, promote social justice and positively develop people’s cultural identity while empowering them in ways that were historically uncommon. It should be noted that although shared beliefs is not typically thought of as part of a school program, it was included because none of the other areas could flourish without a set of shared beliefs.

**Table 2. Culturally Responsive Areas of School Practices Framework**

1. Leadership
2. Parent Engagement
3. Learning Environment
4. Pedagogy
5. Student Management
6. Shared Beliefs

While the literature establishes the importance of culturally responsive practices for increasing the achievement of students of color (Burns, 2005; Epstein, Mayorga, & Nelson, 2011; G. Gay, 2000), little is known on whether these practices are evident in schools that have been successful in closing achievement/opportunity gaps and what specific culturally responsive practices are demonstrated in different areas of school practice. This study examined a school that was successful in closing achievement/opportunity gaps for minority students to determine if it was also embedded with culturally responsive practices throughout the school – either deliberately or unintentionally. It also identified specific behaviors and activities that fulfilled the ideals of culturally responsive practices. This study is salient to educational policy makers as great sums of money are being spent on efforts to close achievement/opportunity gaps in poor and minority schools with little attention or resources directed at the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of staff toward people of color and the inherent cultures they bring with them to schools and the learning environment. Additionally practitioners need concrete guidance on specific culturally responsive practices and how they are manifested throughout an entire school program.

## METHODOLOGY

### Site Selection and Participants

To select a school that was successfully closing an achievement gap the researcher reviewed academic achievement results by subgroups for middle schools in a western state. A growth model was used to analyze individual growth of students longitudinally. This measure analyzed the school's progress on closing an achievement gap. School growth rates were determined by combining growth percentiles from individual students. Growth rates for individual students were calculated by comparing their state assessment scores over consecutive years. Melody Middle School (a pseudonym) was selected with a median growth rate above the average for the state. The average academic growth for minorities was 57% in 2008 and 55% in 2010. Minority achievement was particularly significant in math where the median growth rate was 58% in 2008 and is 63% in 2010; Whites' growth in math remained stable at 61% and 62% respectively. Growth rates for both minorities and Whites were above the state average in both reading and math.

**Table 3. Melody Middle School Median Growth Percentile: Reading**

Race	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Black	40%	55%	48%	51%	47%
Hispanic	48%	59%	50%	56%	51%
White	50%	53%	43%	55%	50%

**Table 4. Melody Middle School Median Growth Percentile: Math**

Race	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Black	52%	57%	55%	60%	66%
Hispanic	53%	58%	55%	67%	67%
White	52%	61%	54%	62%	62%

## **Participants**

A general presentation to the staff explaining the study and its purpose was provided to all staff members. As a result, twenty seven staff from Melody Middle School volunteered to participate including the principal, two assistant principals, and three deans of student management. Personal interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants and focus group meetings occurred during lunch hours.

## **Data Collection**

Three types of data collection techniques were collected: observations, interviews, and focus groups. The researcher looked for specific behaviors, policies, and procedures that met the definition of culturally responsive practices in the areas of school practice identified from the literature review: leadership, parent engagement, learning environment, pedagogy, student management, and shared beliefs. Two major questions guided the study: 1) What culturally responsive practices, if any, are in a school that is closing opportunity gaps between Black and White students? 2) Which specific strategies are utilized?

All interview and focus group participants were queried on their professional and overall school practices in the six areas of culturally responsive school programming. Additionally, over the course of a week, the researcher utilized the conceptual framework to observe interactions, behaviors, and educational practices that met the criteria for culturally responsive practices which affirm the culture of students and empower them as individuals. Observations occurred during every instructional period, all administrative team meetings, grade level meetings, content team meetings, parent meetings, and discipline meetings. Observations were additionally made in the cafeteria during lunches, on the playground during recesses and in the counseling and health offices. In addition to observations, personal interviews and focus groups were conducted with 27 staff members who included administrators, parents, and teaching staff. Data were recorded in the categories of school practices from the conceptual framework.

## **Data Analysis**

Each day of the study, tape recordings from the interviews and focus groups were transcribed and observation notes were synthesized by school practice categories. Field notes and logs from observations had descriptions of the context of events, conversations, and interactions. The researcher especially worked to capture the exact language of individuals to reflect their emotions.

After all data were transcribed, it was coded using Constant Comparative Coding Analysis. The six areas in the conceptual framework - leadership, parent engagement, learning environment, pedagogy, student management, and shared beliefs - helped the researcher to explore the evidence of culturally responsive practices in common areas of school life while remaining open to the emergence of new areas and strategies. Subsequently, after all the data were coded, an additional area emerged as a significant area of practice in the school – building cultural competency through ongoing professional development.

## **FINDINGS**

Culturally responsive practices were confirmed in five of six areas from the conceptual framework: leadership, parent engagement, learning environment, pedagogy, and shared beliefs. There was little evidence culturally responsive practices in student management. Administrators and teachers employed little, if any knowledge of a student's culture to exercise student management policies or procedures at Melody Middle School.

### **Culturally Responsive Leadership**

The school leadership ensures Melody Middle School maintains a relentless focus on acknowledging and respecting difference. Each week the administrative leadership team meets to discuss school business but this is no usual meeting. All discussions, including those of teacher observations are couched within the cultural context of the stakeholders. Time reserved for building cultural competency is a permanent discussion item on the agenda. At one meeting the team watched a video of researcher Michelle Alexander's presentation on Black male incarceration. It was followed by a rigorous discussion led by the principal.

**Table 5. Excerpts from Administrative Team Discussion on Black Male Incarceration**

Excerpts of Administrators' Discussion
<p>"There is lots of money made on prisons. It puts a lot of White people to work."</p>
<p>"The system lacks fairness. It responds one way if you are Black and another way if you are White."</p>
<p>"When she (lecturer) is talking about embracing the humanness of criminals, I can't see it if they have done a serious crime like rape or molestation!"</p>
<p>"The School district policy is 10 days of suspension if caught with drugs. It is only 3 days if you take a \$90 class and parents attend 3 days of classes. Unfortunately poor kids usually end up missing 10 days so our school system is unfair too!"</p>

The administrative team was uniformly aligned with the goal of having an earnest conversation about race. The candid discussion of institutionalized racism during the meeting reflected the principal's determination to make topics of race and culture open, transparent and transformative. Although one of the assistant principals took a contradictory stance against understanding the humanity of criminals, she was allowed to speak openly and justify the reasons for her perceptions. Without judgment, the other team members listened intently. As the discussion drew to an end, the principal reminded the team to be cognizant of the challenges the Black males in the school faced.

Culturally responsive leadership is also fostered at the student level at Melody Middle School. There are several student leadership teams that function based on racial and gender self-identification. There are Black male and Black female leadership teams, Hispanic male and

Hispanic female leadership teams, a White leadership team, and a multiracial school leadership team. The race and gender specific leadership teams meet to discuss issues of race important to them and are involved in service related activities in the community. For example, the Hispanic girls provide babysitting and translating services to a nearby hospital while the Black males are participating in a manhood program that teaches college preparatory study skills and entrepreneurship.

At Melody, the leadership team created a space where people were free to be their cultural selves by designing time and spaces for knowledge acquisition, reflection, and action for social change. One grandparent enthusiastically articulated the role of the principal in transforming the school:

The principal is where it all started. If it wasn't for her leadership none of this would be happening. Most definitely she's the one who started this and she is the one who speaks about White privilege and has conferences where teachers sit at the table and talk about how their lives were affected so the teachers can better understand White privilege and what minorities have to go through.

### **Culturally Responsive Parent Engagement**

Parents are an integral part of school life at Melody and are empowered in ways few minority parents are. For example, once a year there is an annual parent observation day in which parents utilize a specially designed rubric to observe teachers in classrooms. At the end of the day, they meet with teachers to provide feedback and discuss their observations. One seventh grade teacher described the format:

“It's a very open forum where they (parents) can really speak their mind and say this is great or this sucks.” - 7<sup>th</sup> grade Math Teacher

Parents are also empowered within the teacher professional development program at Melody. Each year, parents train teachers on how to work with parents of color. This approach evolved when the administration noticed Black parents were not being called as often as White parents. An open discussion with staff led some teachers to confess they simply were frightened of talking with Black parents. One teacher states...

J.B.: We've got a lot of people in the building that, this may be the first time that we ever sat across the table from a Black mother. That may be the first time we ever did that.  
I figured that there would be this hostility, this - one of my least favorite expressions ever - reverse racism. That there would be all this hostility, whether it bubbled up to the surface or just stayed hidden that there would be this tension that was all centered around race and that I'm not going to be able to get past that. Here I am I'm this White guy that's telling this woman that her son is being a punk in my class. Well, her son IS being a punk in my class. I'm not wrong.

Researcher: You just expected her to be angry.

JB: Oh yeah. Absolutely.

Parents take turns serving as hall monitors. Retired grandparents roam the hall - encouraging students and ushering them to class. During class times, parents converse over a cup of coffee in the lunchrooms or peruse the student work in the hallways. The parents and grandparents know many of the students and their families. They have generally lived in the neighborhood for a number of years and serve as vital liaisons between the work of the school and the community.

Along with the PTA and Accountability Teams, there are three different parent groups that meet based on their racial identification: Black parents, Hispanic parents, and White parents. There is soon to be a Multi-Racial Parent Group established. We asked why.

What we found is that when these groups were in a mixed racial settings they weren't getting to the bottom of issues. So African Americans weren't talking about what their real issues were in a room full of White people. We also realized that the African American Group, their focus is much different than the Hispanic Group. So to just group them all together wasn't working. The Hispanic families have issues with language, and have issues with immigration - those were some of their main concerns - how their kids were going to get funding to go to college. The African American parents want to know, what are we doing about these black boys? Or what are some of the discipline issues looking like. So very different focuses. - Dean of Discipline

### **Culturally Responsive Learning Environment**

The learning environment at Melody is rich with cultural artifacts. A large map in the front of the school delineated the various places around the globe that were represented by students at the school. Lining the hallways were large portraits of multicultural families and students represented at the school, flags from around the world in the entry, and positive messages of high expectations throughout the campus.

The campus exudes warmth and inclusion. The multicultural staff can speak a variety of languages and utilizes their skills openly. Guests are greeted warmly by the security and office staff. Students of all races sit together during lunch and play or talk on the playground. While the soccer field is largely populated with Hispanic players and the football field is dominated by Black students, the basketball courts have multi-racial teams and there were no verbal or physical conflicts observed.

### **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

High expectations and expanded opportunities for all students provided academic choices, empowered students and challenged them to explore a variety of interests. Melody Middle School has seven periods of classes during the school day, including advisement. Advisement period teachers teach enrichment classes such as advanced algebra, biology lab, writing for publication, and ceramics. Many of the math and science advanced classes are some of the first to be filled. That may be due to the fact there is a new charter STEM high school being built right next to the school and parents are eager to have their children transition to the new facility.

Integrating culture into the curriculum and instructional practices is both expected and evaluated. Instructional strategies observed were varied with teachers making numerous references to modern social and cultural artifacts. The administration makes a point of monitoring classrooms for inclusion of culturally relevant content. One language arts teacher discussed the accountability measures in place to ensure inclusivity and equity,

We've been monitored sometimes in our classrooms. They come in to see how we are treating kids of color. It's just been a lot of learning [and] a learning curve for the old people who are not used to thinking about it. That's the only way to express it.

### **Culturally Responsive Student Management**

Culturally responsive student management was the weak link in the school's program. There were few instances in which a student's cultural influences were considered when responding to student misbehavior. Students languished in the discipline offices for minor offenses such as pants sagging, lack of writing utensils or the "common catch-alls", such as "lack of respect" and "insubordination". Although the deans sought to process students quickly, some students were absent from the instructional period for thirty minutes or longer. In one classroom, a teacher publicly corrected a Black male in front of the class. "Be back here at your lunch time to serve detention." The young student lowered his head and agreed. It was not clear what the infraction had been, but his punishment was made public and the student made to feel ashamed.

Observations in student management reflected a disconnect between what teachers espoused in focus groups and what was actually observed in classrooms.

### **Share Beliefs**

The staff collectively expressed two shared beliefs: 1) They believed in their individual and collective efficacy to make a difference in the lives of their students. 2) They believed in the importance of discussing race and culture in a multicultural school. It is interesting to note, however, that the beliefs expressed publicly in the focus groups about the importance of discussing race were not always the same beliefs articulated privately in interviews.

### **Cultural Competency Through Ongoing Professional Development**

The use of embedding cultural competency throughout all communications, professional development and training in the school was a practice that emerged from this study and not an original component of the conceptual framework. All professional development, even training in academic content areas, built stakeholders' understanding of race, culture and its influence in educational systems. Even topics such as mathematics were framed around the performance of the diverse cultures. Professional development served as the conduit for reinforcing shared beliefs and meaningful discussions on race. During grade level team meetings, teachers monitored assessments for achievement gaps and disaggregated data by race. During parent meetings, both parents and staff talked about the influence of race in the school and participated in professional development sessions jointly. During staff meetings, cultural competency was

integrated into the discussion. Race talk coursed through every formal meeting attended in the school, although it rarely progressed to a deep probing of personal perceptions and assumptions. Race conversations, albeit frequent, have been extremely difficult for some members of the teaching staff as some teachers expressed during private interviews.

“I’m tired of being blamed for the whole White society and what they’ve done, okay? I don’t feel like them, but I’m being blamed for it. Sometimes, I think that comes out with people. I love my kids. I don’t think I’m prejudiced, although I know everybody is, but you think you’re not and so why do I have to keep learning about this over and over again?” – 6<sup>th</sup> grade Teacher

“Well I don’t care, that’s how I am, because I don’t see color. I see my kids. You can yell at me and I don’t care. But I don’t care what color a kid is.” – Electives Teacher

“I remember one of my colleagues, a White man, was saying man, I’m tired of getting beaten up about this, you know? There were times when I would say let’s talk about something else for a while. So, it wasn’t that I didn’t want to talk about it. I didn’t want to talk about it *all the time*.” - 7<sup>th</sup> grade Teacher

While all staff publicly espoused their support for learning about the culture of their students, a few staff privately resented it. Their comments in confidentiality reflected their personal allegiance to colorblind racism. It is noted that the majority of the staff consistently sought new information on how to work with students of diverse cultures, and felt comfortable interacting in multicultural contexts. However, the number of staff who were silently withholding their ire is worthy of further research.

## DISCUSSION

Conclusions drawn from this research are done so with the full knowledge that the sample size was small and the length of observation time limited. However, the findings serve as valuable guides to further study in the areas of the formation of shared beliefs, the progression of cultural competency, and culturally responsive behaviors in all areas of school practices.

It was no surprise that leadership led the charge for culturally responsive practices and creating greater opportunities for students of color. Strong leadership is critical in transforming schools and disrupting inequitable practices (Orr, Berg, Shore, & Meier, 2008). Cooper (2009) argues that “Without the intervention of strong leaders who strive to counter marginalizing forces (educational) inequities are perpetuated.” At Melody Middle School the vision for equitable educational practices was clearly, formally, and powerfully communicated by the administrative leadership in every interaction with students, parents and teachers. They held teachers accountable for integrating culturally relevant content, framed academic conversations within the context of schooling culturally diverse children, and created space for relevant, ongoing learning in cultural competency.

Leadership intentionally shaped school practices in consideration of the community norms and parents responded enthusiastically. Parents were empowered as leaders - taking on responsibilities that are often entrusted solely to school administrators. Their excitement and fervor in an empowerment role was contagious with hundreds of community members attending

the parent-organized conferences, scores of parents supporting the supervision of the campus, numerous parents leading professional development for teachers and large parental participation in informal evaluations of classroom instruction. Clearly Melody Middle School has balanced the traditional rules of power so parents have equitable decision making in their children's schooling. Cummins (1986) argued that the educational success or failure of minority students is "a function of the extent to which schools react or counteract the power relations that exist within the broader society" (p. 32). The findings at Melody suggest that minority students are successful at the school, to a great degree, because parents and educators share the power. Accountability for success lies not just in the hands of the educators, but is wholly embraced by a parent population who can and will share responsibility for the academic success of students.

While the segregation of student and parent leadership groups seemed in conflict with the goals of inclusion and multiculturalism, it was the very action that empowered the minority parents to lead – creating an atmosphere where parents were ready to discuss race and race-related issues important to them. In retrospect, parental segregation may not be the monster it has been thought to be. When parents or students self-segregate by choice and allow other members of any race to participate by choice, it appears, from this study, it can create a comfortable environment where people of similar cultural experiences can meet specific cultural needs and be empowered to lead.

It was the teacher population that somehow had not quite taken up the charge of leadership for equity. Yes, they were actively participating in activities such as the review of student achievement by race, discussing race, and integrating cultural norms into their instructional practice, but we did not see evidence of them taking substantial leadership roles. Not surprisingly, teachers at Melody Middle School conveyed in focus groups that the administrators in the building were more critical to the school's success in narrowing the achievement gap than the classroom practices teachers were using. That may be because the administration was doing most of the cultural weight-lifting and teachers merely followed suit. It would appear that in transitioning the school to a more culturally responsive environment, the principal had initially taken a directive stance with her staff enabling her to move the academic achievement forward in a reasonably short time. Cooper (2009) notes that leaders for social justice use their positional power to empower various stakeholders, including marginalized students and families. What had occurred however was while the parents readily embraced the new distributions of power, the staff was still negotiating their role and a few staff were simply resisting it. Even though the majority staff were implementing practices that were responsive to the needs of students, several of the staff harbored deeply ingrained fears about interacting with parents of color and several teachers expressed resentment about ongoing discussions on race. These kinds of deeply held prejudices may still be influencing their interactions with students in the disciplinary realm, despite the ongoing discussions on race. Baldwin et al (2007) found that White, European American pre-service teachers presumed minority children lacked intelligence, motivation, and were more apt to cause discipline problems (Baldwin, 2007). These kinds of unconscious assumptions and fears are responsible for the traditionally disproportionate number of students of color suspended or expelled from public schools and may account for the number of students of colors seen in the discipline offices at Melody. Having ongoing discussions of race and threading those discussions through the professional development program was an important step in surfacing staff bias but Melody still has a ways to go. There were shared beliefs amongst the staff, but due to the conflicting messages of espoused values versus the silent resentment of some staff toward race discussions, it is not clear if the beliefs expressed were

genuine or compliant with administrative directive. Therefore the school leaders must keep personal reflection of bias and assumptions at the forefront of professional practice. This is consistent with Davis (1995) recommendations for leaders of multiracial groups. He found the interactions of individuals in multiracial groups might be wrought with conflict, especially in the discussion of issues of race. His recommendations for leaders of multiracial groups were threefold: 1) Leaders need to recognize the racial dynamics in the group, 2) anticipate potential conflict, and 3) problem-solve how to resolve them. In describing the professional development on culture, teachers described an informational model with a shallow level of understanding on privilege and how power can institutionalize inequitable schooling for children of color. It appeared that while discussions on race were frequent, they lacked the rich quality of depth that might provoke introspection on personal practices and generally did not transcend to the larger social, economic, and political impact except in the context of the administrative team meeting.

## CONCLUSION

Schools cannot close opportunity/achievement gaps without culturally responsive practices. When the practices are implemented school wide, they can mitigate historically derived socioeconomic and educational disparities by empowering, rather than repressing the voices of all stakeholders. Black parents who have been historically marginalized are ready to share leadership in creating a just and equitable system of education. What is yet unclear is at what point staff are prepared to own the imperative for cultural and racial understanding without administrative directive or influence. Examining unconscious bias is an ongoing and necessary professional practice that cannot be neglected even when the race discussions are woven into every thread of the school's fabric. When all practices in schools are examined through the lens of student culture students have a greater chance of experiencing success. These are not just practices for the classroom or items for occasional discussion however. They are deftly needed in every area of the school program and indispensable for whole-school reform.

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