The Myth of the 'Culture of Poverty':
Addressing and Examining Its Harmful Effects in Schools and Human Services: Part II
Presentations from the Field to Help Address the Impacts of Poverty and Prejudice

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Major Issues Discussed During First Webinar

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Addressing the Adversities of Poverty

• The concept of a “culture of poverty” is conceptually flawed, ignores structural factors, and leads to deficit thinking.

• There are adversities related to poverty
  • The Adverse Childhood Experience Study (ACE) (Felitti, et al. 1997)

• These adversities can be addressed
  • Social emotional learning
  • Increased Support
Helping All Children Thrive

• Focus on well-being and thriving not just on remediation and fitting in
  • Lisa Delpit, *Multiplication is For White People*

• Corey Keyes, “The Mental Health Continuum: From Languishing to Flourishing in Life”

• Say Yes to Education Monitoring and Intervention System (http://www.sayyestoeducation.org)
  • Off Track
  • On Track
  • On Track to Thrive
What About Mental Health?

• Schools affect mental health outcomes – positively and negatively (Jones, 1971; Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2002)

• Mental Health support can play a key role in helping some students succeed
  • See: *The role of education in a system of care* (Woodruff et al., 1999)
  • *Safeguarding our Children: An Action Guide* (Dwyer & Osher, 2000)

• Culture should be a strength, not a deficit in mental health
  • See “Culture as a resource for mental health” (Cross, 2003)
  • *Closing the gap: Cultural perspectives on family driven care* (Osher et al., 2011)
What Affects Learning Outcomes?

Enhanced Capacity to Realize Better Outcomes

Competencies

Conditions
Work at Three Levels

**Provide Individualized Intensive Supports**
Provide coordinated, intensive, sustained, culturally competent, individualized, child- and family-driven and focused services and supports that address needs while building assets.

**Intervene Early & Provide Focused Youth Development Activities**
Implement strategies and provide supports that address risk factors and build protective factors for students at risk for severe academic or behavioral difficulties.

**Build a Schoolwide Foundation**
Universal prevention and youth development approaches, caring school climate, positive and proactive approach to discipline, personalized instruction, cultural competence, and strong family involvement.
Thinking Poverty in School Practice: Vulnerable Kids at Continuous Risk

Dr. Eddie Fergus
Metropolitan Center for Urban Education
Three Strands

School Services
- College Prep Programs
- Literacy and Math Coaching

Applied Research, Evaluation and Policy
- Program Evaluation
- Research Studies on School Context
- Research Studies on Vulnerable Populations

School Change
- Center on Disproportionality
- Bilingual Education Center
- Hip Hop Education Center
Defining Impact of Poverty (O’Connor and Fernandez, 2006)

• Common thought:
  – *Poverty comprised of the high-risk environment* that shifts cognitive development and learning to the left of the normal curve of achievement – NRC 2002 report
  – Poverty is presumed to *compromise the human development of children*. In other words, the home context “depresses” the cognitive and linguistic capacities of children – this turns into an internalized trait.
Complicating Culture of Poverty (COP)

1. Poverty is an economic issue
2. Culture of poverty arguments focus on behaviors as expressions of maladaptive development and are non-conducive for an educational orientation and academic engagement.
   - These arguments omit the practices of schools as exacerbating these behaviors (maladaptive or not)
3. Expressions, whether or not derived from high-risk environments, do not simply need to be defined as deficits – what does it entail to examine them as competencies?
POVERTY LANGUAGE IN SCHOOL PRACTICE: THE CASE OF DISPROPORTIONALITY
Two cases of school districts experiencing disproportionality

CARROLL AND HANNOVER
Both Carroll and Hannover are located in suburban communities outside of large cities in New York State, making them typical of the school districts that were cited by NYSED for disproportionality.

Each district was cited under New York State’s Chapter 405 law, which used chi-squared analyses to determine whether the predicted levels of Black or Latino students identified for special education were statistically significant from the actual levels of Black or Latino students.
Carroll

- 2,500 students.
  - 75% White; 20% Black; 3% Asian and Pacific Islander; 2% Latino
- Overall classification rate of 13.56%
  - 16% of the Black student population and over 23% of the Latino students were classified as disabled.
    - This meant that Black students were one and a quarter (1.24) times as likely to be classified disabled compared to all other students and Latino students were nearly one and three quarter (1.70) times as likely to be classified disabled compared to all other students.
- Over 9% of their overall district population was classified as ED, LD, or SI.
  - 12% of the Black student population and over 21% of the Latino students were classified as ED, LD, or SI
  - This meant that Black students were over one and a quarter (1.31) times as likely to be classified disabled compared to all other students and Latino students were nearly two and a quarter (2.23) times as likely to be classified as ED, LD, or SI compared to all other students.
Hannover

- 8,500 students
  - 50% White; 35% Latino; 12%; Black; 3% Asian and Pacific Islander
- Overall classification rate of 15.74%
  - 18% of the Black student population and nearly 17% of the Latino students were classified as disabled
  - This meant that Black students were more than one and a quarter (1.29) times as likely to be classified disabled compared to all other students and Latino students were only slightly more to be likely (1.11) to be classified as disabled compared to all other students.
- Over 12% of their overall district population was classified as ED, LD, or SI
  - 16% of the Black student population and over 14% of the Latino students were classified as ED, LD, or SI.
  - This meant that Black students were over one and a quarter (1.34) times as likely to be classified disabled compared to all other students and Latino students were nearly one and a quarter (1.21) times as likely to be classified as ED, LD, or SI compared to all other students.
Collecting Data

• In providing technical assistance to Carroll and Hannover data was collected to ascertain the root causes of disproportionality in each district.
Data Sources

- **Post-session evaluations.** Data were collected after each technical assistance and professional development session from session participants via post-session evaluations. The evaluations contained open and closed-ended questions regarding session satisfaction, allowing the participants to respond directly to information presented or discussed in each session as well as provide anonymous feedback.

- **Focus groups and interviews.** Yearly focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with key district personnel regarding session satisfaction, and what challenges they faced in identifying and addressing the root causes of disproportionality, and feedback for enhancing sessions.

- **Surveys.** The end of year surveys captured a retrospective on policy, practice and belief changes. The surveys contained open and closed-ended questions and were administered to every participant; this comprised nearly 300 individuals.

- **Document evidence of district policies and practices.** The documents included new board policies regarding RtI, adopted referral forms, approved interventions, etc.

- **Process activity notes.** The project conducted at least one process activity during each training session and collected information regarding district process and the beliefs surrounding the topics discussed during that session.
Key Findings

• District and school personnel espoused deficit thinking in ability construction: *The belief that poverty influences cognitive ability.*

• Districts provided poor institutional safeguards for struggling students

• In addressing disproportionality, districts were implementing institutional fixes but did not demonstrate changes in beliefs
The belief that poverty influences cognitive ability.

CULTURAL DEFICIT THINKING IN ABILITY CONSTRUCTION
Cultural Deficit Thinking

• When asked about why Black and Latino students perform academically at lower levels teachers often espouse cultural deficit thinking (see Fine, 1991; Lipman, 1998) – citing deficiencies in those students’ home-lives, socioeconomic status, or culture that they believe impede those students’ ability to learn.

• Similarly, when looking at how students enter the special education system, teachers explain disproportionality through cultural deficit thinking.

• This cultural deficit thinking is evident in how districts talk about the root causes of disproportionality.
Cultural deficit thinking in ability construction

• In Carroll and Hannover, practitioners overwhelmingly identified poverty or conditions related to poverty as underlying causes of the patterns of disproportionality. Their explanations included the following:

  • “Low-income status”
  • “Lack of books at home”
  • “Lack of belief in education among the students and parents”
  • “Connections in achievement gap between lower socio-economic and higher groups”
  • “Correlation of Head Start students and special ed. classification. Correlation of poverty to classification”
  • “The federal statistics of programs given through the administration for the disenfranchised poor. When the Bush administration funds programs for poor and children some issues will disappear”
  • “They bring ghetto to the school”
  • “They don’t speak English”
• It is also important to note that although the educators in the two districts where this work was carried out were typically unable to explain how poverty might cause a learning disability, they nonetheless readily cited it as a cause.

• This indicates that the cultural deficit thinking may be grounded in broader and previously unchallenged or unexplored cultural conceptions.
Othering

• In Carroll, this “othering” was continuous and at times driven by the overriding and growing presence of Black students. In a focus group with teachers, several teachers commented about the fear that developed as a result of the mere presence of Black students:

Teacher: And I think the fear is still there. I mean, you have to figure the kids are just as big a fear. I mean, that’s—
Researcher: So teachers are fearful?
Teacher: Exactly, the teachers.
Researcher: Okay.
Teacher: There’s a fear. There’s a fear of an overload of black people at one time, too. You know, if there’s too many in one setting, the fear sets in. I mean, it’s like—and then I’m the only black teacher. So it’s oh, my God, what do we do?
Blaming the Parents

• In Hannover and Carroll, there was a continual blaming of parents of struggling students as key culprits in the minimal academic ability of their children.

• In a focus group with teachers, one teacher talked about “getting caught up” in the blaming of parents:

“They probably don’t—the one thing I will say that we talk at the elementary building …And I’m even, you know, I get caught up in it. And it is what do with them at home? You know, that’s the problem that we have…if education is a priority at home, I mean, that’s your most important resource. And if they’re not buying into it, if they’re not telling them at home, you need to do this, you need to do that, how are you going to make that - -? That’s one thing we do hear from our teachers in the elementary level. So they’re not taking ownership of their child’s education.”
POOR ACADEMIC SAFEGUARDS
Poor Academic Safeguards

• “Our training is focused on moving level 2 students into level 3 (proficiency), we haven’t been trained to move level 1 students to level 2.”

• Both districts, though intentionally focused on supporting the academic growth of students below proficiency at level 2, the school system had been operating in such a way that it did not know how to structure itself to serve the neediest learners. These “level 1 students” become expendable or beyond the pale of help and, in the case students in Carroll, ended up classified as disabled.
Ineffective Instructional Supports

- In Hannover while reviewing the academic records of a random sample of 86 students with disabilities, not one record contained IST referral forms with complete information.
- The inconsistent framework surrounding what are interventions, the referral forms, and the differential patterns of students being referred to IST demonstrated how this one element of the special education referral process without the proper safeguards operated as a tipping point in causing disproportionality in these districts.
- Examples of interventions noted by teachers and IST members:
  - “moved child seat to front so they can behave better”
  - “told parent to read more books at home”
  - “paired child with a stronger reader.”
- Although such strategies may provide some benefit in conjunction with more prescriptive interventions, these strategies tended to be listed singularly, thus implying that’s all the teachers tried with the student.
ADDRESSING DISPROPORTIONALITY: INSTITUTIONAL FIXES BUT NOT BELIEFS
In 2006-07 both districts’ superintendents presented to their school board members a plan for improving the academic outcomes of all students. These plans contained some of the following new policies and practices:

- Use of research-based instructional practices in Tier 1 Response to Intervention; utilization of social and emotional development framework (SEDL);
- Implementation of positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS) at middle and high schools,
- Re-examination of the process of student assignment to honors and AP courses,
- Improvement of the professional development regarding English language learners in monolingual classrooms,
- Development of a bank of research-based interventions for Tier 2 RtI, improvement of effectiveness of co-teaching model,
- Reduction of the number of self-contained classrooms,
- Improvement of communication between home and school environments,
- Development of a multicultural team to examine the culturally responsive nature of curriculum, development of a community collaborative to bring in parents,
- Development of transition programs at the middle and high school levels,
- Support for and encouragement of culturally responsive instructional professional development, and
- Development of alternatives to suspensions.
The most substantive area of institutional change involved the re-development of the ISTs forms, membership and systematic collection and usage of data. A district director commented on the various changes involved in ISTs.

“[E]verything’s electronic. We have referral forms and tracking forms. Everything related to the IST process and so we know when a student’s first having trouble, what happens, you know they do have that strong team that reviews them in advance. And we’re much keener about making sure everyone gets intervention no matter what color. No matter what language they speak.”
PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENTS
Adult Belief Work for Creating Protective Environments

1) Personal
Personal readiness to become the type of person who can successfully engage issues of racism, fairness, equity, and responsiveness in his or her life and practice

2) Structural
Identify the power of the individual practitioner to counteract structural or societal problems, racism and inequity

3) Strategies
Develop concrete actionable steps and practices that can be taken by practitioners based on theories about racism, fairness, equity, and responsiveness

(Pollock. Deckman, Mira, & Shalaby, 2010)
Student Outcomes of Protective Environments

- Academic Resilience
- Higher Order Thinking
- Cross Cultural Capacity
- Social/emotional management
Question and Answer

Please type your question into the Q&A box
PARTNERS IN SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION™
It Can Be Done!

Educators Collaborating to Change Systems of Poverty to Systems of Success

Lisa Thomas, Ed.D.
American Federation of Teachers
Who Are Our Teachers?

Approximately 75 percent of full-time teachers are women. By race:

- 83 percent are White
- 7 percent are Black
- 7 percent are Hispanic
- 1 percent are Asian

(Conditions of Education, 2012)
Who Are Our Students?

• In one-third of the 100 largest school districts in America, the student population is more than 75 percent non-white (NCES, 2010).
• Schools with high African American and Latino populations are much more likely to be high-poverty schools.
• In 86 percent of schools that have high concentrations of African American and Latino students, over half of those students qualify for a free or reduced lunch. (Kozol, 2005)
This is what it looks like...
Poverty Knowledge vs. Cultural Relevancy

Poverty Knowledge Framework
• Continues to put vulnerable students at risk;
• Impacts teacher recruitment and retention (AFT, 2007);
• Perpetuates beliefs that circumstances are fixed and poor student outcomes are an artifact of those circumstances; and
• Reinforce structures and practices that negatively impact non-whites.

Culturally Relevancy Framework
• Avoids race neutrality and embraces diversity;
• Educators invest in systems change rather than accepting status quo;
• Operate from a model of acceleration rather remediation; and
• Audits structures that perpetuates deficit models and practices (Thomas, 2011)
Reconnecting McDowell

- Reconnecting McDowell (www.aft.org/mcdowell)
  - Took on poverty in one of the poorest school districts in the country, McDowell County, West Virginia
  - Collaboration between public, private, non-profit and labor groups
  - Reconnecting McDowell began with 40 partners; it now has about 110 partners and a board of directors, who are seeking solutions to challenges McDowell faces involving education, jobs and the economy, social and health services, housing, technology and transportation.
Reconnecting McDowell

• McDowell students and schools literally "reconnected" to the world:

  – Frontier Communications wired every county school with fiber optics to expand bandwidth and allow students to have consistent Internet service.

  – Shentel Communications is now working, similarly, to wire 10,000 homes for Internet access.
McDowell County, West Virginia

• 49 percent of all school age children live in poverty – which is the fifth highest in the nation per capita.
• 46 percent of school age children do not reside in a home with a biological parent.
• 23 percent of school age children have a family member living at home which is third lowest in the nation per capita.
• Leads the state in teenage pregnancy with 91 out of 1000 resulting in pregnancy.
Reconnecting McDowell Continued

• Improving literacy:

  – First Book has given away 4,500 books to McDowell's 3,600 students, with the promise of 18 more books per child per year for the next five years.
  – Verizon provided $50,000 to First Book for 10 Family Literacy Centers throughout the county, set to open in early 2013.
  – Save the Children is operating after-school programs for about 200 students in three elementary schools, with a special emphasis on literacy skills.
Cleveland Metropolitan School District

- 100 percent of students receive free lunch at school;
- More than 80 percent of the students are Black or Latino; and
- In 52 of the district’s 99 schools, students of color comprise more than 90 percent of the student body.

(Osher, Poirier, Jarjoura, Brown, Kendziora, 2013)
Cleveland Metropolitan School District

- The Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) improved student engagement and outcomes by improving safety, order, and conditions for learning.
- Implemented a district wide, empirically validated social and emotional learning program to help elementary-aged students learn to understand, regulate, and express emotions.
- Utilized student support teams – a referral process to respond to student needs in a timely, coordinated manner.
- Implemented planning centers which replaced punitive in-school suspension with a learning centered approach.
Results for CMSD

• Improved conditions for learning for students in Grades 5 – 12.
• Improved teacher ratings of student social competence and attentiveness, but not for aggression, for students K-5 during the 2010-12 academic years.
• Improved student attendance district wide, 1.5 percent increase.
• Improved student behavior – reduction of reportable suspendable behavioral incidents from 233.1 to 132.4
• District-wide out-of-school suspensions decreased by 58.8 percent.
Results for CMSD Continued

• Achieved measurable improvements despite personnel cuts, changes in school leadership, and a contentious labor contract negotiation.

• The Chief Academic Officer, Mayor, and Cleveland Teachers Union leadership succeeded in having voters pass the first tax levy for education in 15 years.
What Do These Two Examples Have in Common?

- Collaboration
- Partnerships across stakeholder groups
- Focus on strengths of the community and its members
- Long-term commitment and investment to change
- Systems audits – data, data, and more data driving change
# Conditions for Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students are supported</th>
<th>Students are socially capable</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful connection to adults</td>
<td>Emotionally intelligent and culturally competent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong bonds to school</td>
<td>Responsible and persistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive peer relationships</td>
<td>Cooperative team players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective and available support</td>
<td>Contribute to school and community</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Students are safe</th>
<th>Students are challenged</th>
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<tr>
<td>Physically safe</td>
<td>High expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally and socially safe</td>
<td>Strong personal motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treated fairly and equitably</td>
<td>School is connected to life goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid risky behaviors</td>
<td>Rigorous academic opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>School is safe and orderly</td>
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What Schools and Agencies Need to Do to Promote Well Being and Success

(Nurturing Environments

- Minimize Toxic & Maximize Conditions that Support Resilience
- Richly Reinforce Prosocial Behaviors
- Limit Opportunities for Problem Behavior
- Social & Emotional Competence

(Adapted from Tony Biglan, 2012)
Do you have any suggestions for us about next steps following this “Myth of the Culture of Poverty” webinar series?

*Please type your response in the chat box*
Question and Answer

Please type your question into the Q&A box
References


References


Thomas, L. (2011). Reframing the poverty narrative to improve instructional practices for diverse student populations. AFT Professional Development Conference, Presentation, Baltimore, Maryland.