RACIAL POLITICS AND THE ELUSIVE QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION

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This article examines the factors that influence the development of educational policies and practices designed to ameliorate the achievement gap in relatively affluent school districts. To provide a context for understanding the issues surrounding efforts to promote educational equity, the article begins by describing initiatives undertaken by schools in the recently established Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN). The remainder of the article draws on research collected from a 4-year study carried out at Berkeley High School (BHS) to illustrate how racial disparities in academic outcomes are influenced by the structure of opportunity within schools and how efforts to address inequities often become politicized. The goal is to use the case of BHS to show how political factors complicate efforts to reduce racial disparities in student achievement and to make it clear why political strategies, rather than educational strategies alone, are needed to respond to the racial achievement gap.

The relationship between race and academic achievement is once again the focus of national attention. Periodically, this issue has become the subject of debate in the national news media, and on each occasion various experts are called on to put forward explanations of racial differences in academic performance—preferably one that can be summed up in two minutes or less. As the current debate about the relationship between race and student achievement has heated up, the performance of Black middle-class students in particular has been the subject of intense scrutiny. Despite their relative privilege, middle-class Black students typically lag behind White and Asian students of similar and even lower socioeconomic status (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Spencer, 2000). Similar patterns can be seen among Black and Latino students who attend well-financed, integrated schools in affluent communities (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). For such students, arguments related to inequities in funding and access to educational opportunities, which are relevant to poor students, do not seem pertinent. As such, the search for explanations to this apparent paradox has inspired renewed interest in the relationship between race and academic performance, but once again there is more confusion than clarity in public discussions of the issue.

The last controversy surrounding the racial achievement gap was triggered by the publication of The Bell Curve by Herrnstein and Murray (1994). In this case, the authors argued that genetic differences between Blacks and Whites accounted for unequal outcomes in academic performance, and much of the controversy related to their book centered on whether or not there was actual proof that African Americans were genetically inferior.

In the current period, cultural factors figure more prominently in the explanations that are proffered by experts and touted in the media. Scholars such as John Ogbu (1987) and more recently, John McWhorter (2000) attributed the lower performance of Black students generally, and the middle-class students in particular, to an “oppositional culture” (Ogbu, 1978), “anti-intellectualism,” and “a culture of victimology” (McWhorter, 2000). Despite the fact that such arguments tend to be based on generalized descriptions of Black American culture rather than intensive investigations into the experience of Black students in school settings, such theories have been widely embraced by scholars and educators. Like the genetic theories of intelligence that preceded them, cultural theories that attempt to explain the link between race and academic performance generally locate the cause of the problem within students (i.e., lack of motivation, devaluing academic pursuits, etc.) and in so doing, effectively absolve educational institutions of responsibility for finding solutions.

With the hope of shedding some light on the complexities surrounding the relationship between race and academic performance, this article examines the factors that influence the development of educational policies and practices designed to ameliorate the achievement gap in relatively affluent school districts. To provide a context for understanding the issues surrounding efforts to promote educational equity, the article begins by describing initiatives undertaken by schools in the recently established Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN). The remainder of the article draws on research collected from a 4-year study conducted at Berkeley High School (BHS) to illustrate how racial disparities in academic outcomes are influenced by the structure of opportunity within schools and how efforts to address inequities often become politicized. The goal is to use the case of BHS to show how political factors complicate efforts to reduce racial disparities in student achievement and to clarify why political rather than educational strategies alone are needed to respond to the racial achievement gap.
THE MINORITY STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT NETWORK

In February 1999, the superintendents of 14 urban and suburban school districts came together to form the MSAN. This newly formed consortium was created for the purpose of providing the districts with strategic support in tackling a common problem: the racial gap in student achievement. Although racial disparities in student performance are recognized as a national phenomenon (Jencks & Phillips, 1998), the 14 districts believed that they might be better positioned than most to eliminate or significantly reduce the gap because of the favorable conditions present within each of the member districts. All 14 districts in MSAN were located in affluent communities where per pupil expenditures generally exceeded the state average (MSAN, 1999). In addition, each of the districts has a record of high achievement among many of their White students as measured by performance on standardized tests and college enrollments (MSAN, 1999). This record of success led many to believe that it should be possible to produce similar outcomes among students of color. Finally, all 14 districts are in communities known for their liberal political values and their support for public education, and several of the districts are located in close proximity to major research universities. Since its inception, MSAN has hoped university-based researchers could be enlisted to support this effort.  

Despite the relative advantages of school districts in cities such as Berkeley, Cambridge, Chapel Hill, and Ann Arbor, past efforts to elevate the academic performance of minority students yielded little success. Moreover, in each of the districts, clear direction with respect to future steps that could be taken to raise student achievement was lacking. Lack of success could not merely be attributed to institutional indifference or a lack of effort. Each district had a long history of developing innovative programs and enacting a variety of measures to boost the academic performance of students of color (MSAN, 1999). Moreover, at varying points in the recent past, several of the districts had been led by an African American, and in all of the districts, people of color occupied significant leadership roles. However, good intentions and the presence of an ethnically diverse leadership have not been sufficient to keep any of the districts from becoming mired in bitter political disputes that have arisen as a result of their failure to significantly improve the performance of minority students. 

Conflicts about what could broadly be termed "educational equity issues" have plagued the districts within MSAN. Most often, these conflicts take the form of hostility from impatient and frustrated minority parents directed at district administrators. However, affluent parents whose students are generally well served by the schools are not disinterested parties in these disputes. Occasionally, some of these parents also enter the fray when they believe their interests are endangered. Though by no means monolithic in their sentiments, this constituency has the ability to exert tremendous influence on district policies through its political and economic resources, which can be deployed whenever it believes high academic standards are threatened. Although it is unlikely that any interest group will ever directly oppose efforts to improve the academic performance of minority students, occasionally the interventions that are proposed require a reallocation of resources or the restructuring of educational programs. Such changes often encounter fierce opposition from the parents of high-achieving students if or when they are interpreted as compromising the educational interests of their children. Examples of the kinds of measures that might evoke the ire of this constituency include efforts to eliminate or reduce tracking or to open up access to gifted and talented or advanced placement courses (Wells & Scrinia, 1996). 

Faced with frustrated minority parents who believe their children are not well served and well-organized, affluent parents who are prepared to do whatever it takes to defend the educational interests of their children, the leaders of MSAN find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place. They must find ways to respond to the pressing concerns raised by the parents of low-achieving minority students while scrupulously avoiding any measure that might provoke the wrath of parents of high-achieving White students. The perception that the pursuit of academic excellence and the pursuit of educational equity are goals that are fundamentally at odds, and exist within a zero-sum scenario, is at the crux of many of the conflicts experienced by the districts in MSAN. The stakes are high in these conflicts because in most cases, they take on an unfortunate racial character, and if they escalate, the ensuing polarization can have an injurious effect on intergroup relations in the broader community and the job security of district administrators.

Hence, the districts that came together to create MSAN faced a common need. All were searching for educational strategies that would enable them to make measurable progress in the performance of their minority students but that would not arouse opposition from their affluent parents. Moreover, with the adoption of high-stakes testing in several of the states where MSAN districts are located, there was an even greater need for such strategies. Many of these districts were faced with the prospect that high percentages of their minority students were at risk of failing state-mandated assessments. The likelihood of such an outcome added to the urgency associated with the search for solutions to the racial gap in student achievement.  

However, after nearly 3 years of meetings and conferences, it is becoming clear that a common experience with failure in past efforts to raise minority student achievement, and a common need to demonstrate genuine progress...
on the issue, may not be enough to serve as a useful basis for new direction and insight. Despite sharing research and information on their programmatic interventions among themselves, there is still no sign that the districts in MSAN have discovered ways to close the achievement gap or to reverse these disturbing academic trends. MSAN members continue to hold meetings several times a year at which information on best practices and research findings are shared, but the optimism that was present when the consortium was first established is gradually beginning to fade. Already, it is becoming increasingly clear that MSAN is largely a support group and that the organization is not able to provide its members with clear answers or direction.

I am one of several university-based researchers who was asked to serve on an advisory board of MSAN. Since the consortium was first created, I have attended their meetings, and on occasion I have been asked to deliver presentations on research I have done that relates to the MSAN effort. Having been a researcher and parent of four children who were enrolled in the Berkeley public schools, and having served as an elected member of the school board in Berkeley, I am intimately familiar with the problems and issues confronting these kinds of schools and communities. From the beginning, I was intrigued by the ideas that had influenced the establishment of MSAN, and I believed, or at least hoped, that the theory of change guiding its work had merit and could lead to improvements in patterns of academic achievement. My hope was that if we could show that change was possible, the efforts of MSAN would have national ramifications for the education of students of color, and for me, such a prospect was very compelling.

However, even as I hoped for the best, my past experience in the Berkeley public schools left me with nagging doubts and skepticism. Having worked for several years on an intensive effort to raise minority student achievement at BHS, I was left with the realization that even when an objective analysis of conditions suggested that change should be possible, well-conceived plans could easily be thwarted by obstacles that have more to do with politics and relatively little to do with educational practice. I felt strongly that unless members of MSAN were prepared to confront the political challenges that arise from zero-sum thinking on issues related to educational equity and excellence, their good intentions would fail to produce the results that were hoped for. In the absence of a strategic vision that could provide guidance on how to attain this balance, I was sure that MSAN would eventually be dismissed as yet another good idea that had not lived up to expectations.

In October 2000, I was invited to speak on a panel to address the subject of the achievement gap before an audience composed of program officers from major foundations. Also on the panel was Ron Ferguson, an economist at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and, like myself, a research consultant to MSAN. Accompanying us on the panel were two superintendents from districts within MSAN. Because the creation of MSAN had generated national media attention, the audience was packed and those present eagerly awaited information that might be shared from our work.

Instead of revealing findings, much of the panel discussion focused on the goals of MSAN and the initiatives that had been undertaken by the consortium to date. Ron Ferguson started out discussing his research, much of which had been carried out in Shaker Heights, Ohio. His work, which was based on surveys with students, showed significant differences in study habits and attitudes toward school between African American and White students. Although it produced few recommendations for action, his research did shed light on some of the factors influencing the lower academic performance of minority students (Ferguson, 2000). The two superintendents described past efforts that had been undertaken in their districts to raise minority student achievement, and they explained why they invested a great deal of hope in MSAN.

I started my presentation by suggesting that the lack of progress in minority student achievement in MSAN districts was a paradox in need of an explanation that went beyond a focus on the attitudes and study habits of minority students. Using language that made both superintendents visibly uncomfortable, I argued that the lack of progress on student achievement in MSAN could be attributed largely to the difficulty inherent in serving the educational needs of two different constituencies: affluent Whites and low-income African Americans and Latinos. I pointed out that middle-class Black and Latino students were more likely to identify with lower-class members of their racial group and that, based on my experience in Berkeley, it would be difficult to raise their academic achievement unless it was possible to move beyond the zero-sum terms that framed how this issue was perceived. Particularly if the districts intended to initiate major changes in educational programs, fierce opposition was likely and should be expected.

Given that affluent White parents were typically more powerful and politically influential, I posited that it would be nearly impossible to bring about significant change in student outcomes unless the educational leaders in MSAN found a way to address the concerns they were bound to raise. Specifically, I suggested that MSAN had to find a way to deal with the perception that advances in educational equity would necessarily come at the expense of the educational interests of affluent White students. To the discomfort of the superintendents that were present, I also pointed out that in some communities, superintendents had been fired and school board members re-called when the pursuit of educational equity ignited the wrath of powerful and privileged parents. I concluded by arguing that the solution to the achievement
gap in MSAN districts would be based on political more so than educational strategies and that unless the political solution could be found, there would be no progress.

**THE ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE IN THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP**

My pessimistic prognosis on the efforts of MSAN are rooted in my experience with the Berkeley public schools, where for years I have worked with others to find ways to raise minority student achievement. In the beginning, I could not understand why schools that possess a track record of success in educating affluent White students are largely unable to produce similar success with students of color from low- or middle-class backgrounds. However, after years of experience and research in the Berkeley public schools, I have come to the conclusion that the explanation is complicated because it cannot simply be answered within the context of educational practice. Certainly, part of the answer lies in the difficulty educators experience in responding to the different needs of poor and affluent students; educational strategies that work for some students simply are not effective for others. However, a closer examination of the issues reveals that much more is involved.

The complexity surrounding the relationship between race and achievement is particularly evident when we consider what appears to be a paradox in the performance of two broad categories of students: recent immigrants and middle-class Black and Latino students. Several studies reveal that immigrant students of color, many of whom are from low-income families, are often academically successful (Ogbu, 1987; Stepick & Castro, 1991; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). In contrast, many middle-class Black and Latino students tend to be less successful even though their families are relatively privileged (Ferguson 2000, Jencks & Phillips, 1998). Although several factors directly and indirectly influence these patterns, it is my contention that both phenomena are largely related to the ways in which identities related to race and gender are constructed in school settings and to perceptions and expectations that develop among adults and students in response to these perceived identities.

For many years, a number of researchers have recognized the significance of the link between identity and academic performance. The subjective positioning of students has been found to have bearing on motivation and persistence (Newman, 1992), relationships with peer groups and teachers (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998; Steinberg, 1996), and overall self-esteem (Williams, 1996). Yet, despite the substantial body of research in this area, there is far less agreement among scholars about how the development of racial identities among adolescents influences the stance and orientation that is adopted in relation to schooling. Despite overwhelming evidence of a strong correlation between race and academic performance, there is considerable confusion about the process through which students come to perceive a linkage between their racial identities and their academic ability and how these in turn shape their aspirations and behaviors toward education.

Scholars such as John Ogbu (1987) and Signithia Fordham (1996) have suggested that Black students from all socioeconomic backgrounds develop "oppositional identities" that lead them to view schooling as a form of forced assimilation. Positioned in this way, they argued, Black students and other "non-voluntary minorities" (e.g., Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans) come to equate academic success with "acting White." For these researchers, such perceptions lead to the adoption of self-defeating behaviors that inhibit possibilities for academic success. The few who manage to achieve academically pay a heavy price for success. According to these researchers, Black students who perform at high levels are compelled to adopt a "raceless" persona so as to avoid the stigma associated with membership in their racial groups (Fordham, 1988).

In contrast, Ogbu and others (Gibson, 1988; Matute-Bianchi, 1986; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001) have argued that immigrant students of color are largely immune to the insidious association between race and achievement that traps students from domestic minority backgrounds. So-called "voluntary minorities," whether they be Mexican, Asian, African, or West Indian, are more likely to recognize schooling as a pathway to social mobility, and for that reason they are also more likely to adopt behaviors that increase the likelihood of academic success. Moreover, having been raised in societies where people of their race or ethnic group are in the majority, they have not been subjected to socialization processes that lead them to see themselves as members of subordinate or inferior groups. Less constrained by the history of racial oppression in the United States, these students are more likely to accommodate the dominant culture and conform to the prescriptions that are integral to the social experience in schooling (Spring, 1988). Even if they avoid complete assimilation, they are more likely to adopt behaviors that contribute to school success (Gibson, 1988; Ogbu, 1987).

When viewed in combination with Claude Steele's work (1997) on the effects of racial stereotypes on academic performance, a compelling explanation for the identity-achievement paradox begins to emerge. Through his research on student attitudes toward testing, Steele has shown that students are highly susceptible to prevailing stereotypes related to intellectual ability.
According to Steele, when "stereotype threats" are operative, they lower the confidence of vulnerable students and negatively affect their performance on standardized tests. According to Steele, "Ironically, their susceptibility to this threat derives not from internal doubts about their ability but from their identification with the domain and the resulting concern they have about being stereotyped in it" (p. 614). For Steele, the debilitating effects of stereotypes can extend beyond particular episodes of testing and can have an effect on overall academic performance. In his other work, Steele (1992) suggested that schools and universities can adopt strategies to reduce the stigma experienced by women and racial minorities and thereby mitigate against the effects of stereotype threats.

If we attempt to compare Ogibù’s arguments to those of Steele, one could extrapolate that recent immigrant students are less likely to be susceptible to the threat associated with negative racial stereotypes because their "newness" to the American social landscape protects them. Having not been socialized to see themselves as inferior, immigrant students are less likely to resist aspects of schooling that require conformity and assimilation to values and norms that domestic minorities regard as White and middle class. In contrast, middle-class Black and Latino students are more likely to identify with the styles and behaviors of lower class members of their racial/ethnic group (Portilla, 1999). Rather than risk being ostracized for differentiating themselves from their peers, these students may adopt attitudes and behaviors that undermine their possibilities for achieving academic success.

My own research on this topic suggests that the racial identity development process is not nearly so dichotomous (Noguera, 2001); a range of possibilities for expressing one's identity exist. Racelessness, or "acting White," is just one possibility. There are also many examples of Black and Latino students who manage to do well in school while retaining a sense of pride in their racial and cultural identity. In addition, there are many who achieve by adopting multiple personas: They adopt the cultural norms that are valued in school settings while embracing the speech, style of dress, and larger identity construct associated with their racial group outside of school.

Understanding the process through which racial identities are constructed in school is essential if we are to devise strategies that can transform the ways in which race and achievement become linked. The following section draws on data from 4 years of research at BHS to demonstrate how the link between racial identity and student performance becomes operative. However, in departure from both Ogibù and Steele, I will also show how the structure and culture of this school—and, I will argue, others like it—contribute to the creation of this linkage. That is, rather than treating racial identities as fixed categories, I maintain that oppositional identities and an antiacademic orientation (e.g., an unwillingness to enroll in challenging courses) are social products that are directly related to the school experience of many Black and Latino students. Furthermore, I show that political factors related to the protection of privilege serve to maintain and reinforce structural and cultural barriers that obstruct efforts to improve minority student achievement. Without a strategy for confronting these barriers, lasting gains in student achievement at BHS or the schools in MSAN cannot be made.

GOOD INTENTIONS ARE NOT ENOUGH: THE FAILURE OF INTEGRATION AT BHS

To the unknowledgeable outsider, Berkeley would seem to be one of the most likely places to find excellent schools available for all children. Home to a world-class public university, the people of Berkeley tend to be highly educated and socially progressive. In fact, the liberalism and idealism of the citizenry have consistently placed the city at the forefront of various social movements and at the vanguard of innovation in American politics. From the movement against the Vietnam War to the movement to promote recycling of household goods, Berkeley has been at the forefront of progressive change in the United States. Not surprisingly, the liberal political inclinations of the community have historically also had a profound influence on the character of the public schools.

In 1968, Berkeley was one of the first cities in the nation to voluntarily desegregate its public schools (Kirp, 1982). It accomplished this through a novel system of shared bussing that called for minority students from the flatlands to be bussed to predominantly White schools in the hills in the early grades and for older children from the hills to be bussed to flatland schools in the later grades. Berkeley’s progressive stance toward education did not stop there. Even as the rest of California embraced a revolt against property taxes in the 1970s and 1980s, Berkeley voters demonstrated a willingness to adopt a variety of local tax measures to provide additional funding to public education (Noguera, 1995).

Yet, despite this impressive track record of public support, Berkeley schools are characterized by extreme disparities in academic outcomes among students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. At every school in the district, patterns of student achievement on most standardized tests adhere to a bimodal distribution of scores (see Tables 1 and 2). The majority of White and Asian students score at or greater than the 80th percentile on most norm-referenced tests, whereas the scores of Black and Latino students
are generally closer to the 30th percentile (Berkeley Alliance, 1999; Noguera, 1995). Similar patterns emerge when the composition of special and compensatory education programs are compared to the composition of gifted and talented and advanced placement courses: Black and Latino students overwhelmingly compose enrollment in the former, whereas affluent White students populate the latter. Similarly, wide disparities are evident in the grades assigned to students, attrition rates, and suspension and expulsion rates at all schools in the district (Diversity Project, 2000).

Given their long history of liberalism and reputation for embracing progressive causes, one might expect that Berkeley citizens would have become outraged at the persistence of such glaring disparities. Yet, a careful analysis of the political dynamics that have shaped policy in Berkeley’s schools reveals that the community has been willing to tolerate a degree of racial inequality in student academic outcomes that any objective analysis would indicate is quite extreme. The most obvious example of this tolerance can be seen at Berkeley’s continuation school that was recently renamed Berkeley Alternative High School. Serving approximately 160 students—most of whom have been sent there because of poor grades, poor attendance, or poor behavior—the school is almost entirely composed of African American students, with a smattering of Latinos and an even smaller number of Whites and Asians. Though the school was recently moved to a new facility, in almost every sense imaginable, this racially segregated school has been marginal to the district. In fact, the academic performance of students at the school has received so little attention that such basic information as graduation, dropout, and college attendance rates is not even maintained.6

Yet, my own experience as a former school board member, parent, and researcher in the Berkeley schools leads me to reject the idea that there is a conspiracy to deny Black and Latino students educational opportunities. To understand how these disparities are rationalized and thereby come to be tolerated and maintained, it is necessary to understand how efforts to enact change tend to become politicized. In the following section, I will examine two elements of the structure and culture of the school: the practices used to assign and sort students into courses and the informal practices that shape voluntary association in clubs and other extracurricular activities. It is my contention that research on the organization of academic opportunity in schools can serve as a means to reveal the practices through which racial inequality is produced and maintained. Critical discussion of these practices must be the first step in the process of closing the achievement gap, because without such careful scrutiny, issues related to race and student achievement become obfuscated. As I will show, the lack of clarity about the nature of the

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**TABLE 1**

1999 Report on Student Performance on Stanford 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>White</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60th to 90th NPR</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>47.7</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>81.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st to 30th NPR</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: NPR = National percentile ranking.

**TABLE 2**

Grade Point Averages for Berkeley Unified School District Eighth-Grade Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Luther King</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>3.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willard</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longfellow</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

problem limits the possibility that action can be taken to improve academic outcomes for failing students.

**TWO SCHOOLS IN ONE: SORTING STUDENTS AT BHS**

BHS is a relatively large school with approximately 3,000 students and nearly 200 teachers, counselors, and administrators. According to the district’s data, approximately 40% of the students at BHS are White, 40% are African American, 10% are Latino, and 10% are Asian American (Berkeley Alliance, 1999). These numbers may be inaccurate because approximately 10% of the students who responded to a survey administered by the Diversity Project to the class of 2000 identified themselves as mixed race (Diversity Project Final Report, 2000). Racial differences tend to correspond closely to class differences. The vast majority of White students reside in middle-class and affluent neighborhoods in the hills and north Berkeley, whereas the majority of African American and Latino students come from low income communities in the flatlands of south and west Berkeley. In addition, approximately 25% of students do not reside in Berkeley at all. They enroll in BHS either through interdistrict transfer or by surreptitiously claiming Berkeley residence, and the vast majority of these are Black students from poorer neighborhoods in Oakland (Diversity Project, 1999).
On the basis of almost every significant indicator, BHS is a school that does not serve its Black and Latino students well. Nearly 50% of Black and Latino students who enter BHS in the ninth grade fail to graduate, and among those who do graduate, few complete the course requirements necessary for admission at the University of California or the state college system (Berkeley Alliance, 1999). African American students constitute the overwhelming majority of students who are suspended or expelled from the school for disciplinary reasons (Diversity Project, 2000), and they compose the majority of students enrolled in special education classes. Finally, the English as a Second Language (ESL) program functions as a distinct school within the larger school, and its students, most of whom are Latino and Asian, are effectively denied access to college preparatory classes and resources available at BHS.

In contrast, for most White and some Asian students, BHS is a highly successful school offering a vast array of educational opportunities and enriching experiences. The vast majority of White students graduate and matriculate to 4-year colleges and universities, and a significant number are admitted to Ivy League colleges and the University of California (Berkeley High School Counseling Department, 1996). BHS consistently produces several national merit scholars, most of whom are White, and the jazz band, debating club, and school newspaper (all of which are almost exclusively White) have received several national awards. With its rich and innovative curriculum, BHS is one of few public schools that actually draws White students away from private schools. Their parents, many of whom are professionals with advanced university degrees, know a good thing when they see it, and as a result, many have refused to abandon this urban public school in the way that many White middle-class families have done elsewhere (Nocera, 1991). In fact, many White parents and students perceive the diversity of the school as an added benefit, and some regard sending their children there as an inherently progressive political act.

When Berkeley schools were desegregated in 1968, issues related to race and schooling seemed so simple and clear-cut that the advocates for desegregation merely argued that “it was the right thing to do” (Kirp, 1982, p. 67). However, addressing racial disparities in the postintegration period has been far more difficult. With the advent of Black nationalist movements in the 1970s, “the right thing to do” became more ambiguous. In 1969, Black students at BHS demanded and were granted the first African American Studies department established at a high school in the United States. The logic behind this concession was rooted in the notion that separate and distinct approaches to educating Black and White students were necessary and desired. Such thinking led to the creation of several smaller separate high schools in the mid-1970s, including the Umoja House for Black students seeking a culturally defined educational experience and the Raza House for Chicano students seeking something analogous for themselves. Ultimately, these experiments in racial separation were brought to an end by the U.S. Department of Education, which determined that maintaining racially separate schools was a violation of several civil rights statutes and was therefore illegal.

Despite this setback, the underlying philosophical premise that produced the racially defined schools retained its influence. Over time, BHS effectively became two schools within the same facility: an elite college preparatory school serving affluent White students and an inner-city school serving economically disadvantaged Black and Latino students. Officially, there was only one school, with one principal, one faculty, one football team, and so forth. But, for students and anyone else who spent their days at the school, the fragmented nature of BHS, where divisions occurred along racial and class lines, was evident and ever present in nearly every aspect of the school.

Patterns of racial separation are most evident when one enters the school grounds at the beginning of the school day. Across the sprawling campus, students can be seen huddled in racially distinct groupings. Black students congregate in front of the administration building near a map of Africa that has been painted on the asphalt. White students gather on the steps of the Community Theater. Along Martin Luther King Way on the periphery of the campus, groups of Latino students come together near and around a Mexican mural. Smaller groups of Asian students find their place along a wall adjacent to the Science Building. Each grouping is racially distinct, but the lines between them are permeable as can be seen from the significant number of students who mingle in mixed groups or who cross over to interact with individuals from another group.

Although this form of separation may be most noticeable, and such voluntary associations create the sense that this is what students prefer, the separation that occurs in classrooms throughout the school are largely involuntary and substantially less visible, yet their effect on student outcomes is far more profound. During the course of a 4-year study carried out at the school, the Diversity Project analyzed course enrollment patterns and the trajectories they create for students. Our analysis of the data revealed that White students are concentrated in the honors and college track courses, whereas African American and Latino students are predominant in less demanding remedial courses. These patterns are set in place from the time a student enters the school in the ninth grade; for this reason, this is where our initial research efforts were focused.

Since 1993, reports on the number of D's and F's received by students in major courses were produced and released to the public at the end of each
made it clear that it would be highly unlikely that more than a handful of these students would be able to complete the math and science course sequence needed to fulfill university entrance requirements. Moreover, students placed in pre-algebra were not likely to be enrolled in a college-prep science course.

Spanish or Swahili (Diversity Project, 1999), Most surprising of all was the fact that nearly all the students who had entered BHS through interdistrict transfer of the city’s second largest public school district, the Portland Public Schools (PPS), had the average grade point average (GPA) for map revealed reading and analysis was the highest GPA. Interestingly, although the map revealed to the contrary, that everyone associated with the school, including the student, was striking. Teachers viewing the map were amazed at this blinding. Something must be going on (personal communication, May 2, 1997). The map revealed a copy of the map the teachers from the Portland sections of the city did not think they were doing so well. BHS and Ethnic Achievement in the relationship between social class and academic achievement that the expectations of one of the teachers were not met. It was discovered that, in fact, 83% of teachers who had been set up to help students that were struggling academically.

There were similar results to those of the survey that was presented in another classroom. The survey was administered to students who were asked questions about what could be learned from the data, and they wanted to know more about what could be learned from the data. Instead, those presented the students in math, compare these results, as in English, science, and social studies (Brown, 1997). How did the students in the math compare to those in English, science, and social studies? How effective were academic support programs that had been set up to help students that were struggling academically?

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students indicated that the diversity of the student body was one of the things that students liked best about their experience at BHS. Students also expressed considerable support for the "freedom" they enjoyed at BHS, which they identified as the opportunity to set their own course schedule and the ease with which they were able to cut classes without being caught.

Discussion of the data generated from the student survey and course enrollment patterns opened the door to a more difficult discussion about the implications of the findings for students and the school as a whole. Confronted with evidence that course assignment in the ninth grade would determine the trajectory students were on during the next 4 years, some teachers began to question the fairness of the course assignment process. As teachers learned that course assignments in math were made by counselors who based their decision on a review of student transcripts and without a formal assessment of student ability, questions about the fairness of the process were raised. Concerns about the lack of structure at BHS (e.g., the absence of a coherent tardy policy and the inconsistent application of penalties for cutting) led to a discussion about the permissive culture of the school, which effectively allowed large numbers of students to fail and slip through the cracks.

The presentations in the third and fourth rooms focused on how patterns of separation extend beyond the classroom and show up in those areas of the school where membership is based on voluntary association. Our data showed that nearly every club, sports team, and extracurricular activity offered by the school had a racially exclusive makeup. Even more disturbing was the fact that any activity that might be regarded as having the potential to enhance one's academic performance (e.g., academic clubs, the debating team, etc.) was composed almost exclusively of White students.

Because they have been in place for so long, such patterns of separation have been rationalized as the product of choices made freely by the students. Some adults at the school consciously condone these practices as a way of accommodating the diverse cultures and interests present within the school and argue that these patterns of separation provide a form of cultural affirmation. However, what some regard as a benign and voluntary form of racial separation actually masks the ways in which these patterns reinforce the racialized nature of academic failure and success at the school. Because many students and teachers have come to accept this form of racial separation as voluntary and therefore unavoidable, there has been relatively little willingness to take responsibility for the wide disparities in academic outcomes and the social tensions that accompany these patterns, nor has there been much acknowledgement that these patterns profoundly influence the future opportunities available to students once they leave BHS.

Several studies on extracurricular activities have shown that students who are involved in sports, music, the arts, and other clubs generally perform better in school than students who are uninvolved (Steinberg, 1996). Students who participate in extracurricular activities are also more likely to be engaged academically. In this way, school activities often counter alienation, antisocial behavior, and an orientation toward school that devalues the importance of academic pursuits. In addition, students who are involved in extracurricular activities are more likely to feel connected and identify with their schools. Studies have shown that the psychological effects of such a connection can positively influence academic performance (Steele, 1992).

Our discussions with teachers about the factors that produce racially distinct clubs and sports teams made it possible for the adults who had long come to accept these patterns as unavoidable to consider actions that might be taken to alter them. Perhaps with some encouragement, Latino students who frequently can be seen playing soccer on their own time in unstructured pickup games could be recruited to the school's soccer team? Similarly, with a concerted outreach plan and even some arm-twisting, minority students could be recruited to write for the school newspaper, try out for a part in a school play, or join one of the predominantly White athletic teams such as golf, fencing, or tennis. It was acknowledged that to increase minority student participation, it might also be necessary to be open to their suggestions for how these activities might become more appealing to their interests and tastes. However, given the social benefits the school might gain from improved intergroup relations and the long-term academic benefits that might result from increased student engagement, several of those participating in the discussion indicated a willingness to take extra steps to make increased involvement from minority students possible.

CONCLUSION

MAKING STEPS TOWARD EDUCATIONAL EQUITY BY OVERCOMING THE INSTITUTIONAL OBSTACLES

As is true in society, the other side of racial inequality at BHS is racial privilege. Just as certain institutional practices contribute to the concentration of African American and Latino students at the bottom rungs of educational performance, other policies and practices work to insure that high-achieving, upper-middle-class White students retain their academic advantages. Of course, a key point to be made here is that institutional bias is generally not
based on overtly racist behaviors and intentions on the part of school personnel. Rather, the policies and practices that reinforce academic disparities appear on the surface to be race neutral, even though close analysis of their impact reveals clear and distinct costs and benefits that break down along racial lines.

At BHS and at most schools, disparities in student achievement are most likely to be attributed to factors related to student motivation. The various ways in which the operations of schools serve to reproduce and maintain racial disparities in academic achievement are less likely to be considered in discussions about the achievement gap. Unless educators are willing to examine organizational practices that facilitate the perpetuation of the gap in academic opportunities, and unless they are willing and able to take actions to undo them, reducing the racial gap in student performance will not be possible.

This is obviously easier said than done because the structural mechanisms through which racial inequality is reproduced tend to be subtle and complex. This is especially likely to be the case in the schools within MSAN where the official discourse consistently appears to support efforts to raise the achievement of minority students. Until educators in these districts are willing to move beyond good intentions to address the institutional practices that reward academically motivated students and harm the interests of underachieving students, little progress can be made.

At the schools within MSAN and at many others as well, there are undoubtedly numerous ways in which race and class differences are maintained within the organizational culture and structure. At BHS, the Diversity Project initiated conversations with teachers first and used research to create a context in which the structure of opportunity could be discussed and challenged. However, even at BHS, changing these practices has been difficult. The difficulty comes from the fact that those who benefit most from existing institutional practices are generally able to mount fierce resistance to any effort aimed at reducing the benefits they enjoy.

To counter such a reaction at BHS, the Diversity Project found ways to provide Black and Latino parents with information about how the school operates so that they could be in a better position to advocate effectively for the educational rights of their children. Organizing African American and Latino parents was not an easy task because these parents have historically not been involved in making decisions at the school. To increase the involvement of Black and Latino parents and bring greater balance to the political forces that exert pressure on the school and district, the parent outreach committee of the Diversity Project organized a series of focus group discussions for Latino and African American parents designed to elicit their views on the school. Specifically, we wanted to know what concerns they had about the education their children were receiving, what kinds of obstacles parents encountered when interacting with school officials on behalf of their children, and what kinds of changes they felt would help make BHS more receptive to their concerns.

During the course of 6 months, more than 70 focus groups were conducted with more than 400 parents. To insure that maximum opportunity was provided for open communication, all of the sessions with Spanish-speaking parents were conducted in Spanish. Food and child care were also provided as an added incentive to attract high levels of participation. The parent outreach committee also recruited parents to join it in conducting the focus groups and carrying out the research. This was important because the core group of the committee is now playing an active leadership role at the school.

As a result of these efforts, the parent outreach group has already gotten the BHS administration to designate a surplus classroom for use as a parent center, and with the support of grants from foundations, two part-time parent organizers have been hired.

Confronted with the demands of an organized constituency, administrators at the school and the district have been forced to find ways to respond to the educational needs of underserved students. In the spring of 2001, Black parents succeeded in getting the administration to establish a new section of algebra classes for students who had failed the subject in the first semester. Although the initial reaction was that such an intervention would be too costly, when confronted by sustained pressure from organized parents, the administration eventually gave in and found a way to support the new initiative.

Much more must be done before a genuine balance between academic excellence and equity can be achieved at BHS, but for the time being, at least there is a climate in which a debate about these goals can occur. An active debate in which the concerns of all parties can be aired and openly discussed is undoubtedly the most that can be hoped for at this time. In an ideal situation, excellence and equity would not be regarded as competing goals. However, for now, the history of polarization on these issues makes it unlikely that a broad consensus will be achieved any time soon. The debate has at least allowed the school and district to move beyond the paralysis that previously characterized discussions of these issues, a paralysis that leaves so many other schools mired in acrimony and trapped in a zero-sum framing of the issues.

Even with changes intended to promote equity under way, it will undoubtedly take some time before significant reductions in the achievement gap are evident. Still to be addressed are the more challenging cultural factors that influence the orientation students adopt toward school. Primary among these
is student motivation. Even as new tutoring and support services are provided to low-achieving students, it is not clear that students will seek these out, nor is it clear that they will enroll in more challenging courses once the opportunity is provided. Student motivation does affect student achievement and, although it is essential that opportunities to learn are expanded, it is also necessary for schools, parents, and the community to find ways to motivate students who have come to see schooling and education generally as unimportant. In addition, it will take some time before we know if efforts to change BHS’s succeed in removing the rigid connection between racial identity and school performance that exist in the minds of some students of color. If students regard Blackness as being equated with playing basketball and listening to rap music but not with studying geometry and chemistry, then it is unlikely that changing the school alone will do much to change achievement outcomes for students. Certainly, it would help if similar efforts to change the structure and culture of school were initiated in the lower grades when students are more impressionable. But, it is also important to recognize that in their efforts to challenge the insidious relationship between racial identity and academic performance, schools are up against powerful cultural forces in the media that often reinforce the opposite message (McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993).

Despite the odds against success, the challenge that has been taken on by the 14 districts in MSAN is extremely important not just for the schools involved but for public education in the United States generally. Throughout the country, integration as an ideal and practice is under attack. In the past 20 years, the courts have steadily weakened the legal basis for desegregation, and several communities have withdrawn their commitment to its goals (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). The failure of MSAN to produce significant improvements in minority student performance would further undermine support for the goals of school integration.

Yet, the experiences of places like BHS offer a glimmer of hope. When educators demonstrate a willingness to accept responsibility for their role in maintaining school structures that foster inequality, and when local discussions of these issues move beyond a search for blame to a search for concrete solutions, the possibility for genuine progress in raising student achievement can be significantly increased. Of course, even that possibility must eventually yield measurable results, and obtaining these results will take much more than good intentions.

**NOTES**

1. For reactions to the arguments and evidence cited in The Bell Curve, see The Bell Curve Wars by Steven Fraser (1995) and Inequality by Design by C. Fischer et al. (1996).
2. To provide support from researchers to the work of MSAN, the College Board convened a Research Advisory Board chaired by Dr. Edmund Gordon of Teachers College.
3. Several of the districts in MSAN are located in states where “high stakes” testing has been adopted. For a discussion of these policies and their impact on schools and students, see High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion, and Graduation by J. Heubert and R. Hauser (1999).
4. To review articles that have appeared in the news media on MSAN, go to www.eths. k12.il.us/MSA/MSAnetwork.html.
5. For an analysis of how affluent parents can exercise their power to oppose and resist educational reforms aimed at producing equity in schools, see “Outreach: Struggling Against Culture and Power” by Jeannie Oakes (1999).
6. Educational researchers have long recognized that cultural and class differences among students often require that different educational strategies be employed to meet the needs of different students. For a discussion on this topic, see “School Failure and Cultural Mismatch: Another View” by Maria Villegas (1988) and “Transformation and School Success: The Politics and Culture of Educational Achievement” by Frederick Erickson (1987).
7. Recent research by Marcello and Carolia Suarez-Orozco indicates that immigrant students are more likely to be overrepresented among both high achievers and low achievers. See Children of Immigration by Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001).
8. The lack of data on the performance of students at Berkeley High Alternative School prompted the Diversity Project to undertake an extensive study of the school. See the Diversity Project Final Report (2000) for an analysis of the school.
9. An indication of how many former private school students enter BHS is provided from the Diversity Project survey on the class of 2000. Nearly 25% of the ninth-grade students responding to the survey reported that they had attended private school prior to entering BHS. Also, whereas the percentage of White students in elementary and middle school in Berkeley is approximately 30%, the White student population at BHS is more than 40%.
10. I have heard this sentiment expressed to me on numerous occasions by White parents in Berkeley. Aggravated that her son entering kindergarten had not been assigned to the school she preferred, one Berkeley professor informed me that “I would think that the district should be happy to have White, middle-class kids like my son. For heaven’s sake, I want to do all I can to support the public schools myself, but they’ve got to be more flexible in how they apply their rules” (personal communication, April 16, 1998).
11. For a discussion on the history of these separate schools and the reasons for their eventual demise, see Just Schools by David Kirp (pp. 123-147).
12. The Diversity Project was established in the fall of 1996 as a collaboration between researchers from the Graduate School of Education at UC Berkeley and parents, teachers, and students from Berkeley High School. The focus of the project was to use research to understand and address the factors that contributed to racial disparities in the academic performance of students. See the Diversity Project Interim Report (1999) for a detailed discussion of the goals and findings of this research.
REFERENCES


