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Letter

Examining current issues in education highlighting the ongoing work of the faculty of the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University.

A Mind-set is a Difficult Thing to Change: Why Reforming Low-Performing Schools Requires Eradicating Negative Beliefs About Students

By Gail Thompson

Numerous researchers have devoted their careers to school reform. At the same time, many politicians have gotten elected by promising to fix failing schools. Although a lot of time, energy, and money have been invested in tackling this problem, the problem persists: Too many schools in the United States are failing to prepare too many students for admission to four-year colleges and universities or to be eligible for decent-paying jobs immediately after high school (Kozol, 2005).

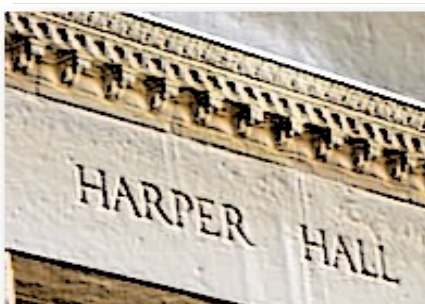
Study after study has shown that when we take a closer look at the students who tend to be underperforming in K-12 schools, African American, Latino, and low-income students are overrepresented. Explanations

for the ongoing achievement gaps can be divided into two schools of thought. One camp believes that the parents and their children are at fault. The second camp argues that the problems plaguing low-performing schools are systemic, and until the system is fixed, the problems will persist. Proponents in this camp believe that the entire K-12 school system is similar to U.S. society as a whole, and just as institutional racism is embedded in most organizations, the same is true of schools. These researchers maintain that policies and practices are designed to keep low-income children, and many African American and Latino children locked perpetually in a cycle of poverty, low-paying jobs, and underrepresentation at four-year colleges and



universities (Franklin, 2005 ; Kozol, 2005; Thompson, 2007; Wing Sue, 2003).

Though the topics of school reform and the achievement gaps have generated a lot of research, discussion, and controversy, one related topic that hasn't received as much attention as it should is the effects of negative mind-sets, attitudes, and beliefs about low-performing students. In recent years, I have become



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increasingly convinced that true reform won't ever occur until detrimental mind-sets have been addressed and eradicated. To put it bluntly, many of the people who are in a position to improve schools harbor beliefs that are counterproductive to what they say they want to do, and that actually end up harming the same groups of students who have historically underachieved. In this article, I'll describe four common harmful mind-sets about African American, Latino, and low-income students that I've identified through my research and from the work of other researchers, and show how these mind-sets affect students. One harmful mind-set involves parents, the other three pertain to the students themselves, and taken together these mind-sets have contributed to the inequality of educational opportunity that remains rampant in the United States.

Mind-set One

The first mind-set, what I call "The Parents Don't Care" theory, maintains that the parents of low-performing students don't care about their education. In other words, many educators and policymakers believe that certain parents, particularly African American, Latino, and low-income parents, aren't concerned about their children's education (Thompson, 2003; Thompson, Warren & Carter, 2004), and if they were, the problems plaguing low-performing schools would disappear (Thompson, 2002; 2003; 2004; 2007). In one study that I conducted at a low-performing, predominantly minority school, 64 percent of the teachers said that parents were responsible for their children's poor academic performance, and one third of the teachers said that most of their students' parents didn't care about their children's education. Because parent involvement has been linked to several positive outcomes, including better grades for students (U.S. Department of

Education, 2001b), it is understandable why some educators and policymakers blame parents for their children's poor academic performance. However, even though this mind-set is prevalent throughout the United States, research has shown that most parents, including low-income, African American, and Latino parents, do care about their children's education (Thompson, 2003; 2004; 2007). In two large national studies, the U. S. Department of Education found that the majority of the parents, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, were concerned about their children's education, and tried to help them to become academically successful (U. S. Department of Education 2005; 2001a). In spite of this research, many educators and policymakers continue to blame the parents of low-achieving students.

Mind-set Two

A second popular mind-set posits that low-performing students do poorly in school because they are lazy and apathetic about their education. In the same aforementioned study that I conducted at a low-performing school, nearly 60 percent of the teachers said that when students fail to pass a test or an assignment, the students are at fault, and more than half said that students who do poorly in school are at fault (Thompson, 2007). However, through my research at *several* low-performing schools, I have found that most students do want to do well and are serious about their education (Thompson, 2002; 2007). In his research, Dr. Jwanza Kunjufu revealed that most African American boys are eager to start elementary school, but over time, common school practices destroy their "school" self-esteem and cause them to be disproportionately placed in Special Education classes (Kunjufu, 2005). In a study that they conducted at several schools

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in North Carolina, Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2004) found that school practices, such as the tracking system that disproportionately places African American children in non-college preparatory classes, are among the reasons why some African American students become disillusioned with school over time. The very assumption that certain students don't value education leads some educators to lower their expectations and offer these students a substandard curriculum (Thompson, 2007).

Mind-set Three

A third common mind-set rests on the belief that certain K-12 students are not smart enough to be academically successful. In his classic work, *The Mismeasure of Man*, the late Stephen Jay Gould described the long history of this theory, related policies that were put into place, and the pernicious effect that it has had on the experiences and life outcomes of countless individuals (Gould, 1996). Although most Americans will not admit publicly that they actually believe that certain groups, such as African Americans and Mexican Americans are not as smart as Whites and some Asian groups, this belief is widespread and affects the schooling experiences of the students who are deemed to be intellectually inferior (Landsman, 2004; Perry, 2003; Wing Sue, 2003). Teachers often claim that they are "colorblind" to racial differences among students (Thompson, 2004), but in one study that I conducted, nearly 20 percent of the teachers admitted that they believe that a student's race and aptitude are connected (Thompson, 2007). I believe that if it weren't for their fear of being "politically incorrect" and of sounding racist, more teachers would have admitted to this belief. Moreover, nearly 40 percent of the teachers said they often had to lower their standards because many of their students couldn't

handle a rigorous curriculum, and 80 percent said that some of their colleagues didn't have high expectations for their students.

On the continuum that starts with intelligence at the top and retardation at the bottom, most Americans, if given a choice, would place African Americans at the very bottom of the continuum, for most do not believe that African Americans as a group are intelligent (Comer, 2002; Gould, 1996; Perry, 2003; West, 2002; Wing Sue, 2003; Woods, 2001). Perry refers to this as the theory of "Black intellectual inferiority" (2003).

At least three negative outcomes are related to Mind-set Three: countless teachers have low academic standards for certain students (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2002; Landsman, 2004); many teachers inflate the grades of these students (Thompson, 2003; 2004), and even when these students go directly to two- or four-year colleges and universities after high school, they are more likely to end up needing to take remedial math and English classes, (Education Trust-West, 2004), decreasing their chances of graduating from college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004).

Mind-set Four

The fourth mind-set is related to the third. Many educators and policymakers don't believe that most African American, Latino and low-income students are "college material." Across the nation, African American, Latino, and low-income students continue to be underrepresented at most predominantly white four-year postsecondary institutions. Consequently, many researchers and policymakers assume that most individuals in these groups don't attend college because they do not want to. However, research has shown that this isn't true. In the study that I conducted at the low-performing high school,

for example, the overwhelming majority of Black, Latino, and White student participants said they planned to attend college immediately after high school, but nearly 50 percent of the teachers didn't believe that most of their students would attend college (Thompson, 2007). In another study that I conducted in which I collected data from students at seven southern California high schools, the majority of African American students who participated said that they wanted to attend college (Thompson, 2002). In a third study that I conducted, 92 percent of the African American parents said they wanted their children to attend college (Thompson, 2003). Larger studies involving national samples have reached similar conclusions (U. S. Department of Education, 2003; Wimberly, 2002).

Despite the fact that many students in low-performing, high-minority schools aspire to attend college, several common school practices often serve as deterrents to them (Thompson, 2002; 2007; Wimberly, 2002). These practices stem from the mind-set that "certain students" aren't college material, and result in disproportionately high percentages of African American, Latino, and low-income students being "tracked" into non-college preparatory classes early in their schooling (Ford, 1995; Oakes, 1999; Tyson, Darity & Castellino, 2004). Because negative labels are placed on these students early in their schooling (Ferguson, 2001; Hale, 2001; Kunjufu, 2005), they are less likely to receive adequate advisement about college from school counselors, and less likely to take the necessary prerequisite courses (Thompson, 2002; 2007).

A Check-up From the Neck-Up:

The 21st century is well underway, yet race continues to be a topic that makes many Americans uncomfortable.

Nevertheless, the U.S. remains a highly racialized society and one of the best places to see its manifestations is in the K-12 public school system. The four mind-sets that I've described in this article have resulted in the perpetuation of inequality of educational opportunity, whereby, many African American, Latino, and low-income students are forced to attend substandard schools. At these schools, students are less likely to have access to the resources, counseling, advanced placement courses, clean and operable restrooms, and "highly qualified" teachers that are prevalent in the schools attended by the children, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren of most policymakers and educators (Children's Defense Fund, 2004; Thompson, 2007). The main reason is that there is a strong but rarely spoken belief among the powerful that these children—America's "stepchildren"—deserve less than other children. Therefore, no matter how often politicians and researchers talk about school reform, the bottom line is that true school reform will never occur until the mind-sets, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are the foundation of inequality of educational opportunity are addressed and eradicated. Because most people are in denial about these problems, changing the status quo will not be an easy task, yet it isn't impossible. First, it must begin with an honest examination of the stereotypes that are related to the aforementioned detrimental mind-sets (Franklin, 2005; Wing Sue, 2003; Thompson, 2007).

Derald Wing Sue, a professor and author, who has studied racism for decades, has drawn several powerful conclusions about stereotypes and beliefs. According to Wing Sue, although stereotypes are extremely common, people tend to hold on to them because stereotypes make them feel better about themselves (in other words, "superior to

others"). Even when presented with logical information that counters their stereotypes, most people become defensive and continue to hold on to them (Wing Sue, 2003). Nevertheless, if the school system in America is ever going to become equitable and a way for more disenfranchised and marginalized groups to use education to improve their lives, the stereotypes that underlie the faulty common mind-sets that I described must be faced with honesty and courage, and then, eradicated before true school reform can occur.

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