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Educational Leaders and the Acknowledgment Gap

ABSTRACT: This article takes as its premise the idea that an *a priori* acknowledgment gap exists relative to other kinds of gaps described in the literature on educational disparities between racial and ethnic groups. The authors define the acknowledgment gap as a disparity between some educational leaders and the communities they serve in understanding and valuing the roles of historical context and cultural, social, and economic capital in facilitating or hindering students' academic success. A brief summary of gap discourse is included, providing context for the authors' suggestion that an acknowledgment gap—existing as it does, as a mental state—precedes, explains, and actually lays foundation for the existence of other kinds of gaps describing educational disparities. Examples of the acknowledgment gap are followed by suggested actions that educational leaders can take to reduce it. School leaders working to narrow the acknowledgment gap, the authors suggest, will be creating a stronger platform on which to stand in their ongoing fight to eliminate disparities in educational opportunities and achievement.

KEY WORDS: Achievement, Opportunity, Education, Leadership, Social Justice

> When I was in high school, they drug me into the principal's office and they told me I had a lot of potential, but that I needed to learn how to study hard and make something of myself. And that's when I quit school, because I realized that we weren't operating on the same level of reality. Because, you see, I knew that I already was something. I walked out of that principal's office and the schoolhouse door that day. John Trudell (Rae & Katz, 2005)

Meeting the needs of all students by addressing their academic development alone is like "planting seeds on concrete," said an assistant

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superintendent of a Central Valley school district in an educational leadership class at Fresno State. “Seeds on concrete” is a good metaphor. The image is evocative, representing decades of educational accountability approaches that are tightly focused on closing the achievement gap but lacking in attention to the surrounding contexts (e.g., Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities*, 2002) that help to create and explain that multidimensional chasm. This is a matter of great significance, especially for students experiencing the effects of such social ills as poverty and racism and the inequalities they perpetuate in our nation’s schools (Baker & Corcoran, 2012; Gardner, 2007; Hughes, Newkirk, & Stenhjem, 2010; Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Kozol, 1991, 2005; McKissack, 2008; Public school funding unequal, 2012; Verstegen, Venegas & Knoeppel, 2006). With $604.3 billion being spent annually in the United States on public education, $528.8 billion locally, and $75.5 billion by the federal government (Cornman, 2013), the image of seeds falling on concrete is significant to state and national accountability efforts, as well.

Obviously, closing the achievement gap must be our goal as school leaders, but as two educators with nearly 60 years of experience between us, we are clear in understanding our pursuit of this goal as the long game. Framing it otherwise, that is, to continue on the same path of focusing on the achievement gap as the primary and immediate target for school reform, reduces educational leadership to the fruitless challenge of figuring out how to still concrete. For school leadership to be about the cultivation of effective learning environments and students’ real academic, social, and emotional growth, a longer view of achievement is needed. Different, immediately essential objectives can then come into focus.

BEFORE MOTIVATION, ENGAGEMENT, AND ACHIEVEMENT: CULTIVATING HOPE AND AGENCY

We believe the most essential of concerns, more pressing than the achievement gap, are the senses of hopelessness, alienation, and disenfranchisement experienced by many youth—but especially for racially and ethnically diverse students from high-poverty backgrounds (Dotson-Blake, Foster, & Gressard, 2009; Hill & Torres, 2010; Hughes, Newkirk, & Stenhjem, 2010; Reyes, 2006; Rodriguez, 2012; Schulz, 2011). Since it is common for such children and adolescents to “feel doubtful about their chances of success in a society in which they believe the system is stacked against them and in which they feel little control over their already limited opportunities” (Hughes et al., pp. 22–23), these students’ choices to not-learn and to reject an alienating educational system make an unfortunate

kind of sense. Herbert Kohl explained why, in his aptly titled classic *I Won't Learn from You and Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment* (1994):

> I have encountered willed not-learning throughout my thirty years of teaching and believe that such not-learning is often and disastrously mistaken for failure to learn or the inability to learn. . . . When it is impossible to remain in harmony with one's environment without giving up deeply held moral values, creative maladjustment becomes a sane alternative to giving up altogether. (pp. 2, 130)

Kohl's words are as relevant today as they were 20 years ago, for students whose experience of school is more likely to be alienating than educative. Consider, for example, the following aspect of David Gardner's (2007) response to the question of why an achievement gap has persisted over time. We include the length of this excerpt in deference to the work that it does to name what is seldom heard. We find value in feeling the blow of these words.

> Soon after the funding answer to my question has been proposed, another common response—this one spoken more softly—is that children of color must be inherently less capable, less intelligent. I'm tempted to dismiss this as utter nonsense, except for the tremendous harm such thinking has caused and continues to cause. To believe it is to say we might as well give up on these children. Except for the occasional anomaly, they'll never make it. As a result of an at least tacit belief in this answer, many teachers, schools, and even whole communities have given up on children of color. When this belief prevails, teachers can transfer much of the responsibility for the failure to learn from their own shoulders to those of their students. Teachers go through the motions of educating these children, pay lip service to the ideals, but don't believe, deep down, that these children will ever catch up. (p. 543)

It is exactly this that has been problematized by scholars critical of the "achievement gap" discourse: the transferring of responsibility for school failure from those who create and maintain an alienating educational system and accountability framework to the children and youth most damaged by it. Some scholars, rejecting the standardization-of-outputs-regardless-of-inputs approach to defining accountability, have reframed this discourse as an "opportunity gap" (e.g., Gladson-Billings, 2013; Welner & Carter, 2013); another reframes it as a "receivement gap" (Venzant Chambers, 2009). These explanatory frameworks are discussed in more detail, below, in a brief discussion of gap discourse. Through such lenses, the damage caused by prioritizing achievement over hope and agency is more readily seen.

Consider the reality that inadequate school facilities and learning conditions are more likely to be experienced by students of color, and by Latina/o students in particular. Nancy Hill and Kathryn Torres (2010) summarize findings from the past two decades indicating that Latinas/os attend the nation's most segregated, impoverished schools and are most likely to be taught by the least experienced teachers working with inadequate resources and instructional materials. In such circumstances, rejecting an alienating educational system can be appreciated as a commonsense strategy for self-preservation—but not from an achievement orientation. From this perspective, it is the children and adolescents most poorly served by their society's educational leaders[1] who have failed.

Consider also the impact of poverty on a child's ability and desire to do well academically. Among other things, poverty for children means inadequate nourishment during critical stages of development, fewer resources in the home, and fewer opportunities to engage in the kind of learning activities that are typically valued in school (Gardner, 2007, p. 544). While 22% of all American youth lived under the federal poverty line in 2011,[2] that average conceals the disparate impact of poverty on children of color (see Figure 1 for breakdown by race/ethnicity). For these students in particular, reasons to think hopefully about the future are necessary for developing academic goals, agency, and a healthy sense of entitlement to belonging and feeling respected in school.

We adopt Snyder's understanding of hope as "the perceived capacity to: (1) develop workable goals; (2) find routes to those goals (pathways thinking); and (3) become motivated to use those pathways (agency

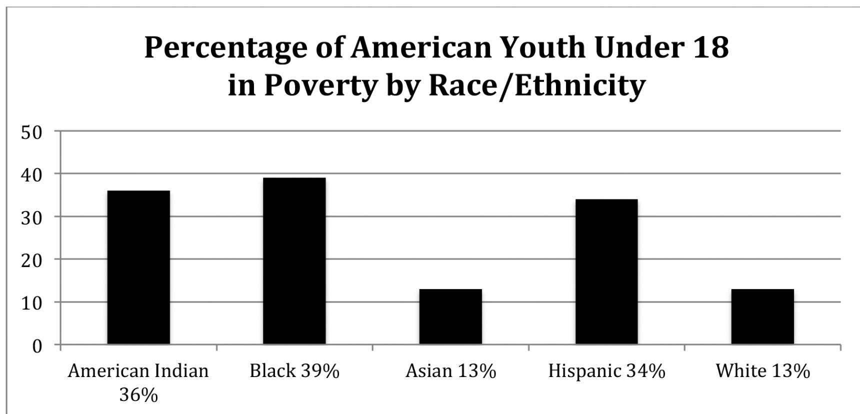

Figure 1. Percentage of American Youth Under 18 in Poverty by Race/Ethnicity

thinking)" (2005, p. 73). Having hope is critical to healthy development, which includes "physical and emotional well-being, goal orientation, and avoidance of risk behaviors" (Duke, Borowsky, Pettingell, & McMorris, 2011, p. 87). In the absence of hope, exhortations for academic achievement are illogical, at best, and students know it. These students know the ground they walk is hard and that not all of the educators in their lives are interested in meeting them there. They know, too, that they stand a good chance of being seen in their classrooms only for what they cannot yet do, and that even their strengths—their personal, familial, cultural, and/or linguistic identities—may be cast as deficits. Accepting responsibility for the students in our care must begin with acknowledging *them*—their strengths, their interests, their needs for hope and belonging—before we go about the essential work of holding high academic standards for all students and finally closing the deep-seated gaps in educational equity, opportunity, and achievement in America.

THE ACKNOWLEDGMENT GAP

This article takes as its premise the idea that an *a priori* acknowledgment gap exists relative to other kinds of gaps described in the literature on educational disparities between racial and ethnic groups (e.g., achievement, opportunity and receivement gaps). We argue that the acknowledgment gap must be the first to close. A brief summary of the gap discourse follows, providing context for our suggestion that an acknowledgment gap—existing as it does, as a mental state—precedes, explains, and actually lays foundation for the existence of other kinds of gaps describing educational disparities.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF GAP DISCOURSE

Gloria Ladson-Billings highlighted the need for clarity in naming and understanding educational disparities between different racial and ethnic groups, observing, "How we frame an issue is at least as significant as the argument we make about it" (2013, p. 12). Critical of the "achievement gap" framework for its deficit perspective on students, families, communities, schools, and teachers, she wrote, "Ample empirical evidence demonstrates that Black and Latino students perform at levels significantly lower than White students. The question is whether what we are encountering is an achievement gap or something else" (2013, p. 12). The "something else," she contends, is an "education debt" resulting from decades, even centuries of an opportunity gap created by economic, political, and moral

decisions made in the United States impacting the education of its youth. These decisions have had immensely detrimental effects on educationally underserved minority populations, compounding over time and resulting in the academic attainment disparities we see today. Kevin Welner and Prudence Carter (2013), also critical of the "achievement" orientation's blind focus on outcomes rather than gaps in opportunities made available to different kinds of America's children, wrote that "Thinking in terms of 'achievement gaps' emphasizes the symptoms; thinking about unequal opportunity highlights the causes" (p. 3).

Terah Venzant Chambers (2009) offers another critical perspective on the "achievement" frame by drawing attention to the positive connotations it provides to "high achieving" students, to the unspoken denigration it conveys for "low achieving" students, and to its disregard for historical context. She explores connotations with the word "achievement," citing dictionary definitions that include phrases like "superior ability," "special effort," "great courage," and "heroic deed" (p. 418). Like Ladson-Billings, Chambers provides historical context for this discourse, observing,

> The greatest irony of the term "achievement gap" and the dictionary definitions that imply "great heroism" on the part of White students in their educational accomplishments is that if any group has displayed heroic effort in its educational pursuits, it is unquestionably the African American community. Therefore, an important counter-story to the achievement gap narrative comes from the tradition and history of African American education itself. Much of the African American community valuing academic achievement can be seen in its historical struggle to gain access to education. (p. 418)

While appreciating the work that the "opportunity gap" does for understanding school failure (i.e., not as an outcome of inherent deficits in students of color and their families and communities, but resulting from extraordinarily different quality and quantity of inputs and opportunities over time), Venzant Chambers presses for a more nuanced and critical frame. She argues that the educational disparities we are seeing across racial and ethnic groups are evidence of a "receivement gap" (p. 418), and she describes the experiences of Black students navigating their way through tracked high school classes to explain what her concept of receivement means: "Time after time, when students needed just a little more—time, resources, encouragement—they received less" (p. 426). The stark reality requiring acknowledgment is that the educational system and we who are its leaders—the educational policymakers and implementers at federal, state, and local levels, past and present—have created this reality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT GAP DEFINED

We stand gratefully on the shoulders of scholars who have critiqued the standardization-of-outcomes perspective of the achievement gap discourse, and who defend instead a disparity-of-inputs stance—equity-oriented and historically situated—for understanding educational disparities across racial and ethnic groups. However, we find that even the equity-oriented gap frameworks described above, the opportunity and receivement gaps, do not sufficiently take into account and challenge the internal world where educational leaders live with their own privileges, biases, and beliefs. We suggest, therefore, that the first, most accessible, cheapest and most impactful gap for educational leaders to close is what we are calling the acknowledgment gap.

We define the acknowledgment gap as a disparity between some educational leaders and the communities they serve in understanding and valuing the roles of historical context and cultural, social, and economic capital[3] in facilitating students' academic success. We believe that an unwillingness to acknowledge the significance of context and capital to educational achievement is a mental commitment required of a critical mass of educational leaders, in order for schools to function as instruments of social reproduction. In this context, the acknowledgment gap is a necessary precondition for an accountability system that requires standardized outcomes in profoundly nonstandardized conditions for teaching and learning, and a guarantee that the American promise of equal opportunity for every child is undermined through our nation's schools, particularly for students of color from high-poverty backgrounds.

EVIDENCE OF THE ACKNOWLEDGMENT GAP

We suggest that evidence of the acknowledgment gap exists in many forms, pointing to patterns of behavior that are so common in most schools that the gap in acknowledgment itself escapes notice. These patterns of behavior, difficult to detect because they require us to question normalcy and "make the familiar strange" (Spindler, 1982), can nevertheless be identified and interrupted where will exists. We offer the following examples of the acknowledgment gap and in the next section suggest strategies for addressing them.

Ideology of Achievement in the Absence of Equity

An acknowledgment gap exists when educational leaders (i.e., policymakers and implementers at federal, state, and local levels) fail to acknowledge

the effects of inequalities experienced every day by America's children—most devastatingly by those without reliable access to food, safe housing, health care, dental care, and school facilities and resources that inspire learning—particularly when defining and implementing standardized expectations, measures, and consequences for students' and schools' academic performances (Addy, Engelhardt, & Skinner, 2013; Gardner, 2007; Kozol, 1991, 2005; Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Verstegen, Venegas, & Knoeppel, 2006).

Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991) and *Shame of the Nation* (2005) document the distinctly different kinds of educational experiences made available to different categories of America's children. Verstegen, Venegas, and Knoeppel (2006) summarize and reiterate these in "Savage Inequalities Revisited: Adequacy, Equity and State High Court Decisions," noting that multiple court cases across the nation continue to find school facilities, educational programs, and learning conditions to be grossly inadequate for children of the poor.

> America prides itself on justice and liberty for all, yet the shame of America's schools for children of color, the poor and others fundamentally challenges this notion. The inequalities documented by Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* have not lessened over the past decade and a half. In fact, today we witness entire states in which school funding is found to be inadequate, unsatisfactory, and insufficient, creating an affront to any standard of decency and caring for America's future—its children and youth. (pp. 73, 74)

Ideology of Amoral Familism

Sociologist Edward Banfield coined the term "amoral familism" after seeing an Italian village so devastated after World War II that people were unable to come together in community to rebuild. Instead, he saw each family desperately working to ensure their own survival. They competed for resources rather than working more effectively together, as a public in pursuit of collective well-being. Of his book, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958), Banfield wrote:

> The book is about a single village in southern Italy, the extreme poverty and backwardness of which is to be explained largely (but not entirely) by the inability of the villagers to act together for their common good, or, indeed, for any end transcending the immediate, material interest of the nuclear family. This inability to concert activity beyond the immediate family arises from an ethos—that of "amoral familism." (p. 10)

Amoral familism is the ideology and type of school culture promoted by federal, state, and local education policies that pit students and schools

in competition against each other. Through a number of mechanisms (e.g., letter grades, grade-point averages, percentile rankings on norm-referenced tests), students are explicitly taught that their success in school is not about their own growth and learning; it is meaningful only in relation to the performance of their peers. The existence of winners and losers is a design feature of the achievement-based accountability system, given that mechanisms like norm-referenced, standardized tests are explicitly designed to ensure a normative distribution of results (i.e., the bell curve, with a few students placing at the high and low ends and most clustering in the middle).

An acknowledgment gap exists when educational leaders in affluent schools, typically the achievement "winners," embrace the ideology of amoral familism. In doing so, these leaders fail to acknowledge the impact of such things as their students' food security, consistent health and dental care, and high-quality school facilities, resources, and learning opportunities on their winning performance. In the spirit of amoral familism, they celebrate their test scores and performance rankings without acknowledging the advantages they enjoy over impoverished schools, playing a rigged game on an uneven playing field (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1999; Tollefson, 2008).

Ideology of Dominant Culture Privilege

An acknowledgment gap exists when the existence, history, and/or accomplishments of a people are underrepresented or omitted entirely in the curriculum, and the legacies of formal systems of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism) fail to be acknowledged as present-day realities impacting the day-to-day operations of classrooms, schools, and school districts (Gardner, 2007; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Tollefson, 2010). For example, Kaia described this phenomenon and its impact on sexual minority students in "Straight Privilege" (2010).

> Educators' cooperation in "disappearing" LGBT people from the P-12 curriculum increases the probability of anti-gay violence in schools. When teachers participate in the othering of this minority by banishing them from view and by insisting the words *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, and *transgender* remain unutterable in front of 10- and 15-year-olds—and unthinkable in front of 5-year-olds—we communicate volumes to all of our students. (The Disappeared section, §1)

This same failure to acknowledge human equality is referenced in "Everybody Grieves but Still Nobody Sees," in which Louie Rodriguez (2012)

calls for “a praxis of recognition” (Unveiling the Hope section, §5) for Latina/o students in U.S. schools, arguing that not all students are equally recognized within the school context. This may be the most egregious form of distorted curriculum experienced by students who live their lives on the margins of dominant culture: that students are not equally “noticed, greeted and acknowledged” in school (Unveiling the Hope section, §1). It is the acknowledgment of human existence itself, denied by the dominant culture on many dimensions of difference, which must be won. This acknowledgment, Rodriguez argues, is accomplished by “legitimizing the unequal conditions and struggles they face in school, by recognizing their potential to act on their own behalf, and by contextualizing their experiences in a larger struggle for voice, identity, and existence for historically marginalized communities” (§2).

An acknowledgment gap exists when dominant culture identities are privileged, a concept Peggy McIntosh made famous in “White Privilege” (1989). Her enduring contribution was to bring the advantages of oppression into view, enabling readers to see the other side of prejudice—that is, the profitable flip side—and in the context of her article, to hold White people accountable for participating in and benefiting from an institutionalized system of discrimination. Taking the concept of an acknowledgment gap seriously requires educational leaders to understand when they and their schools benefit from the unearned advantages that come with their student demographics (e.g., “winning” the achievement game, working in well-appointed facilities with sufficient resources) and to be accountable for examining, problematizing, ameliorating, and helping others to understand the correlation of student demographics to school funding, opportunities to learn, and educational achievement patterns.

Deficit Ideology

An acknowledgment gap exists when educational leaders view race, ethnicity, culture, language, sexual orientation, and other categories defining identity as deficits to be overcome, rather than as strengths that students bring to school every day as the lenses through which they think and learn (Dray & Wisneski, 2011; Gorski, 2010; Konik & Stewart, 2004; Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Deficit thinking seeks to explain student failure through some aspect of the student’s identity rather than understanding “failure” contextually and structurally (e.g., as a logical consequence of poverty in childhood; as an act of resistance to Eurocentric, heterosexist curriculum, policies and practices). Valencia (2010) describes deficit thinking as “tantamount to the process of blaming the victim,” whereby “the more powerful party locates the blame for the problem or injury in

the individual person, the victim, rather than in the structural problems of the unit" (p. xiv).

McKenzie and Scheurich identify "a deficit view" as one of four "equity traps," which they define as "ways of thinking or assumptions that prevent educators from believing that their students of color can be successful learners" (cited in Valencia, 2010, p. 135). One of these assumptions commonly involves the idea that parents who are poor, particularly parents of color who are poor, do not value education and do not teach their children to value education (Dray & Wisneski, 2011; Valencia, 2010). Valencia (2010) admonishes simplistic deficit thinkers who equate behavior with values.

An acknowledgment gap exists when educational leaders decide that they know what parents' values are, based on how they behave relative to the school leader's definition of parent involvement. This gap is especially prominent when that leader's judgment is made with neither curiosity nor information about the parent's realities and their understanding of what being involved in their child's education means to them. In *Volatile Knowing: Parents, Teachers, and the Censored Story of Accountability in America's Public Schools* (Tollefson, 2008), Kaia wrote of "the problem with 'parent involvement'":

> The political construction of "parental involvement" at local, state, and federal levels has been framed in such a way as to reinforce the historic "unequal structuring of power and knowledge" between families and schools (Waggoner & Griffith, 1998, p. 65), to separate the interests of parents and educators, often resulting in alienated and/or adversarial home-school relationships (Fine, 1993; Waggoner & Griffith, 1998; Nakagawa, 2000), to further privilege families that already have large amounts of economic, social, and cultural capital (Vincent, 1996; Birenbaum-Carmeli, 1999; Miller-Kahn & Smith, 2001), and to promote the idea that "parent involvement" is an individual, rather than a collective responsibility. (Fine, 1993; Vincent, 1996) (p. 45)

An acknowledgment gap exists when educational leaders fail to interrogate their assumptions about parents and their values, their educational involvement, and their supposed deficits. None of this is to say that failure cannot occur at the individual student's level or that parents are not responsible for supporting their children's success in school. But "failure" is not an accurate label if the student did not try to succeed (Kohl, 1994) and had no investment in the learning goals set for them (Tollefson & Osborn, 2008). Deficit thinkers are willing to call "failure" in such circumstances rather than be curious about why the student didn't appear to try; they place their faith in the structure (e.g., the standards, learning goals, resources, activities, assignments, assessments, and the evaluation system), not the student.

CLOSING THE ACKNOWLEDGMENT GAP

Before focusing on equality of achievement for different subgroupings of students, we argue that it is essential for educational leaders at every level (classroom, school, district, county, state, nation) to devote ourselves first to closing the acknowledgment gap. Rather than continuing to plant seeds on concrete, attending only to students' academic development and their achievement of standardized learning outcomes, we must first tend to the soil. On every farm and in every garden, this need is obvious: soil conditions need to be right for growth to be possible. Roland Barth would agree. He wrote that if "running a school is about putting first things first," then "leadership is determining what are the first things, and management is about putting them first" (2007, p. 162). He went on to suggest that the first thing educators must do is "to discover and provide the conditions under which people's learning curves go off the chart" (p. 162). Attending to the conditions in which students and educators want to learn—to take risks, to be vulnerable, and to make the kinds of mistakes that are necessary for learning to occur—is soil-tending work.

We suggest that the discovery phase of this most essential responsibility of educational leaders must begin with self-discovery. What is needed is an honest, unflinching examination of our own biases, beliefs, and behaviors and of the policies and practices in our schools that create "alienating, inequitable learning environments" (Valencia, 2010, p. xv) for some of the students in our care. We must have enough humility to accept responsibility for those alienating, inequitable conditions for learning and enough confidence to believe we can change them—for every learner. This is essential work and is much more difficult than focusing immediately and solely on students' varying levels of academic achievement. It is far easier to examine and hold children accountable than to hold ourselves in critical view—to acknowledge that we who are educational leaders are responsible for the learning conditions our students experience, and that these conditions contribute to the persistent disparities in educational attainment we are seeing. Our acknowledgment gap precedes their achievement gap. It even precedes the gaps of opportunity and receivement, as the biases, privileges, and beliefs of educational leaders collectively dictate the quality and quantity of educational resources our society is willing to make available to different kinds of students.

In the preceding section, we elucidated this argument—that an acknowledgment gap precedes other gaps defining educational disparities—and provided several examples of the acknowledgment gap. We grouped these examples under the headings of what we believe to be four prevailing ideologies in the current era of education in the United States.

These ideologies, singularly and collectively, serve with vicious effect to undermine the American promise of equal opportunity for every child: (1) the ideology of achievement in the absence of equity, (2) the ideology of amoral familism, (3) the ideology of dominant culture privilege, and (4) deficit ideology.

We have further argued that it is the responsibility of every educational leader and policymaker, at every level, to accept personal responsibility for changing the reality that "alienating, inequitable learning environments" (Valencia, 2010, p. xv) are allowed to exist in our schools—comfortably, in the shade of those four prevailing ideologies named above. To work for this change is to tackle the "first thing" that Barth (2007) described as the school leader's most essential responsibility—that is, the essence of educational leadership work—of discovering and providing the conditions that students need to learn "off the charts" (p. 162). Who would disagree?

The problem with our thesis, of course, is that what we are exhorting educational leaders to do is not only to surface their own unacknowledged biases and beliefs about failure, low-income students and families of color; we are asking them to challenge prevailing ideologies and bring about fundamental changes in school culture. Barth (2007) called this the most important and difficult challenge in school reform. "A school's culture," he wrote, "has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal can ever have" (p. 159). Clearly, the stakes are high.

STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

We suggest the seven strategies below as actions that school leaders can take to reduce the acknowledgment gap, both intra- and interpersonally. In formulating these strategies, we drew on nearly 60 years of combined experience as educators, with roughly half of those years devoted explicitly to work in contexts of formal educational leadership.[4] The strategies we suggest were developed in keeping with the theoretical orientations that we share, as critical theorists, critical race theorists, and feminists. They are thus offered as practical, feasible mechanisms for explicitly challenging and disrupting the four prevailing ideologies described in the preceding section. In keeping with our theoretical orientation, we believe these four ideologies have proved to be extraordinarily effective as mechanisms for safeguarding and reproducing current social structures and the unequal power dynamics they create between dominant culture and minority populations.

Foucault (1984) theorized the mechanisms by which social reproduction is achieved. In doing so, he described the genius of power in modern and postmodern times through its accomplishment of what he called an "inversion of visibility." In earlier days, he explained, the ruling classes were ostentatiously visible and power was exercised through that visibility. In modern and postmodern times, power has come to reside in the ability to not be seen and to control what is visible. The accountability movement in education provides an illustration of this. Those who make the decisions and the profits remain faceless, while children, educators, and "failing" schools are fixed firmly in the beam of the accountability spotlight (Tollefson, 2008).

The strategies we suggest aim at reinverting visibility. They encourage educational leaders to lay their hands on that accountability spotlight and help to direct the focus of its beam. An important part of this work of reinverting visibility is attending to what Barth (2007) calls "nondiscussables . . . subjects sufficiently important that they get talked about frequently but are so laden with anxiety and taboos that these conversations take place only at the parking lot, the restroom, the playground, the car pool, or the dinner table at home" (p. 161). The strategies we offer below invite educational leaders to challenge themselves and others to "name, openly acknowledge the existence of, and address the nondiscussables" (p. 161) in their settings. Making racism, for example, a visible, acceptable, and necessary topic for public conversation is something we need to learn how to do, if our goals are to achieve a positive school culture and the conditions for learning that our students deserve. As Barth put it, "The health of a school is inversely proportional to the number of its nondiscussables" (p. 161).

These strategies also have in common the aim of helping educational leaders to do what Margaret Wheatley implores in *turning to one another: simple conversations to restore hope to the future* (2002). They focus on creating opportunities for people to build trust and relationship through substantive conversation about things that matter. They don't require much in the way of resources. But they do require access to texts (mostly digitally available), time for text-based discussions with colleagues, and a "willingness to be disturbed" (Wheatley, 2002, p. 38) in and through these essential conversations.

Seven strategies that educational leaders can use to reduce the acknowledgment gap are briefly introduced in Table 1. These seven strategies are designed to disrupt the four prevailing ideologies, described above, which serve to undermine the goals of educational equity and access for all. Table 1 identifies the prevailing ideologies that each strategy aims to disrupt. Each strategy is then fully described in the following section.

Table 1. Reducing the Acknowledgment Gap by Disrupting Prevailing Ideologies

Strategies for Reducing Acknowledgment Gap	*To Disrupt Prevailing Ideologies*
Strategy 1: Discuss examples of the acknowledgment gap with administrative, teaching and staff colleagues; identify additional examples that you find in your classroom, school, and/or district.	Ideology of achievement in the absence of equity Ideology of amoral familism Ideology of dominant culture privilege Deficit ideology
Strategy 2: Make a study of alienating school factors (i.e., elements of the school culture that can contribute to a lack of engagement and sense of belonging for some students)	Ideology of achievement in the absence of equity Ideology of amoral familism Ideology of dominant culture privilege Deficit ideology
Strategy 3: Cultivate awareness of your biases and work to ameliorate them; facilitate opportunities for others to do the same.	Ideology of dominant culture privilege Deficit ideology
Strategy 4: Listen and look for examples of your own and others' deficit thinking about students and their families, cultures and communities, and facilitate opportunities to reframe these from a strengths-based perspective.	Ideology of achievement in the absence of equity Ideology of amoral familism Ideology of dominant culture privilege Deficit ideology
Strategy 5: Demonstrate value for culturally responsive teachers.	Ideology of achievement in the absence of equity Ideology of amoral familism Ideology of dominant culture privilege Deficit ideology
Strategy 6: Welcome and communicate equal respect for all parents.	Ideology of achievement in the absence of equity Ideology of amoral familism Ideology of dominant culture privilege Deficit ideology
Strategy 7: Cultivate hope, agency, and a culture of praxis.	Deficit ideology

Strategy 1: Discuss Examples of the Acknowledgment Gap With Administrative, Teaching and Staff Colleagues; Identify Additional Examples That You Find in Your Classroom, School, and/or District

Addressing the acknowledgment gap through educational transformation is not about becoming comfortable; it is about facing those issues that make us uncomfortable. It is about making schools better places for young people, which is often likely to be an uneasy process. Increasing the understanding of how race, ethnicity, class, and gender bias, among

other issues, prevent students from learning all they can in classrooms and in schools is imperative, yet educational leaders rarely openly discuss these "nondiscussables" (Barth, 2007, p. 161). Instead, "we walk about carefully from day to day, trying not to detonate them. Yet by giving these nondiscussables this incredible power over us . . . we issue that underperforming teacher a hunting license to continue this year as he did last year" (p. 161).

Help others to expect discomfort at first. Make discomfort an explicitly acknowledged expectation in the process of examining the acknowledgment gap in your context. To do this, consider facilitating a text-based discussion using a chapter from Wheatley's (2002) *turning to one* another entitled "willing to be disturbed" (pp. 38–41). Make a point of noticing and celebrating when these conversations happen more easily, more often, and more honestly.

Strategy 2: Make A Study of Alienating School Factors

Schulz (2011) defines alienation in education as "the lack of belonging and engagement of students in a school setting" (p. 76). We recommend reading and discussing with colleagues articles on the topic of alienation in general, before examining yourselves, your school, and/or your district through this lens. Learn about the dimensions of alienation as preparation for tackling the important challenges of ensuring that all students know they belong in your school, and for understanding how best to facilitate their engagement in learning. We recommend Lisa Schulz's "Targeting School Factors that Contribute to Youth Alienation" (2011) as a good text to begin this study.

As Nancy Hill and Kathryn Torres argue, "Teachers are trained to reproduce U.S. mainstream culture, and it shows in the curriculum, the class structure, and behavioral expectations" (2010, p. 98). It takes studied effort to be able to identify the aspects of school that are normalized by practitioners but alienating to many students and their families. Consider, for example, normalization of the phrase, "at-risk students." Roland Barth and Richard Valencia have, separately, problematized the concept. Barth observed that "unhealthy school cultures tend to beget 'at-risk' students" (2007, p. 165) and Valencia stated that "at risk has become a person-centered explanation of school failure" (2010, p. xvii). If both are correct, this is deficit ideology on steroids: unhealthy school cultures help to put students at risk and then students are blamed for being at risk and failing.

This strategy suggests that educational leaders make explicit study of alienating school factors in order to understand how and where

institutional factors contribute to some students feeling disconnected, disrespected, unmotivated, and unengaged. One avenue for this kind of inquiry could be to investigate how "at-risk" is explicitly and implicitly understood and to search for ways in which school policies and practices help to create that condition. A healthy willingness to be disturbed will be needed for investigating one such possibility: How do the school's reward and punishment structures impact students, particularly for low-SES students of color, and specifically in terms of how they exacerbate or ameliorate their potential status as "at-risk students" (as this phrase is explicitly and implicitly understood)? A particularly disturbing question to consider in the context of this investigation is whether Barth (2007) was correct in claiming that *most* school cultures are unhealthy for students, at least in one common regard. He warned that "lurking beneath the culture of most schools (and universities) is a deadening message. It goes something like this: Learn or we will hurt you" (2007, p. 165). Where does this threat exist in your school, for what purposes, and to what effect? What would be required for this message to be transformed, as Barth encourages, from "Learn or we will hurt you" to "Learn or you will hurt yourself"? (p. 165).

Strategy 3: Cultivate Awareness of Your Biases and Work to Ameliorate Them; Facilitate Opportunities for Others to Do the Same

Intentionality and courage are required for this work of understanding our tendencies and capacities for prejudice and openness, certainty and ambiguity, hate and love. This is essential and foundational work, as Parker Palmer (1998) explained:

> Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. . . . When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject—not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth. (p. 2)

Project Implicit provides an excellent set of research-based tools for understanding attitudes, stereotypes, and hidden biases. We encourage educational leaders to explore this site, designed by scientists "investigating the gap between intentions and actions" (see https://www.projectimplicit.net/index.html), with other administrators, educators, and staff members in their schools and districts.

Strategy 4: Listen and Look for Examples of Your Own and Others' Deficit Thinking About Students and Their Families, Cultures and Communities, and Facilitate Opportunities to Reframe These From A Strengths-Based Perspective

Prepare yourself and your colleagues for this activity through text-based discussions to ground yourselves in a common understanding of deficit ideology. Richard Valencia's (2010) *Dismantling Contemporary Deficit Thinking* (previously referenced and described) and Paul Gorski's (2010) "Unlearning Deficit Ideology and the Scornful Gaze" are two good places to begin. Gorski's article synthesizes the work of prominent scholars in defining deficit ideology as "a worldview that explains and justifies outcome inequalities—standardized test scores or levels of educational attainment, for example—by pointing to supposed deficiencies within disenfranchised individuals and communities" (§5). Gorski explains that deficit ideology discounts inequitable, unjust social and economic conditions as explanatory factors for differing levels of access, opportunity, and achievement, and locates those problems instead in children, their families, cultures, and communities.

Discussing these texts with colleagues is a good first step in learning how to identify when deficit thinking is occurring, to understand how our own socialization impacts our perceptions of others, and to take action—interrupting and eliminating deficit ideology when we find it in our minds and in our schools.

Strategy 5: Demonstrate Value for Culturally Responsive Teachers

In *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality*, Joel Spring describes cultural incompetency in education as "destroying a people's culture and replacing it with a new culture" (2004, p. 3). Few educators today are guilty of consciously harboring such a goal; however, as Spring convincingly argues, cultural incompetency and the unexamined racism that results from it have the effect of forcing students to learn a Eurocentric curriculum in school contexts that often neglect the value of diversity. This limited perspective is detrimental to all students' growth and development, but particularly damaging for minority youth who lack opportunities to see themselves in the people, places, and events they study. Teaching practices, curricula, and learning resources must all be examined routinely for distortions in which minority perspectives are excluded, underrepresented, and/or represented through deficit-oriented perspectives.

Educational leaders can make an immediate and powerful difference in all children's lives by promoting cultural competence in teacher education

programs and throughout their schools by valuing culturally responsive teaching. As Louie Rodriguez (2012) explains, "Qualitative studies examining the processes of school for low-income youth of color, and especially Latina/o students, have demonstrated that high expectations, high-quality caring relationships, and dedicated and committed teachers are directly correlated with student engagement, achievement, and success" (Framing the Problem section, §3).

An excellent article to share with administrative, faculty and staff colleagues for schoolwide text-based discussion is Geneva Gay's "Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching" (2002), which she defines as "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively" (p. 106). If finances allow, consider a more in-depth study using the most recent edition of Gay's book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research and Practice* (2010).

Strategy 6: Welcome and Communicate Equal Respect for All Parents

Acknowledge the fact that many parents, particularly Latina/o, African American and Native American parents, commonly say they walk away from interactions with educators feeling misunderstood, unwelcome, alienated, inferior, and/or embarrassed (Hill & Torres, 2010). To have any hope of closing the acknowledgment gap or any other gap in educational inputs and outcomes, this reality simply must change. One possible text to read and discuss with colleagues on the topic of parent engagement is the Nancy Hill and Kathryn Torres article, "Negotiating the American Dream: The Paradox of Aspirations and Achievement among Latino Students and Engagement Between their Families and Schools" (2010). If funds allow, two books warrant schoolwide discussions: Joyce Epstein's *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools* (2011) and Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot's *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other* (2003), particularly Chapter 3, "Truths the Hand Can Touch."

Beyond reading and discussing texts on these topics with administrative, faculty, and staff colleagues, consider the bold move of having these kinds of conversations with parents, in school/home text-based discussion groups. As Kaia has argued elsewhere, the energy that is generated when parents and teachers "gather purposefully to talk with each other—to find and to create connections through focused discussion of important texts and ideas—is transformative. . . . This power of focused conversation is potentially revolutionary" (2008, p. 169).

Strategy 7: Cultivate Hope, Agency, and A Culture of Praxis

Keith Walker's "Fostering Hope: A Leader's First and Last Task" (2006) would be an excellent article to read and discuss with other colleagues who want to work on reducing the acknowledgment gap in your school context by understanding what hope is and how it is nurtured. Another is Eila Estola's "Hope as Work: Student Teachers Constructing Their Narrative Identities" (2003).

Walker referenced the relationship between hope and power—specifically "in terms of both will power (agency) and way power (pathways) for goals" (p. 552)—which is instructive to the project of understanding what hope is and how it grows. *Will power*, *agency*, and the *tenacity* they require are likely to be common elements of readers' ideas about traits shared by "high-hope organizational leaders" (p. 564). It is helpful to consider what adding the elements of *way power*, *pathways* and *divergent, creative thinking* does to our understanding of educational leadership and who "the hope-givers" (p. 543) are in our schools. This perspective invites us to consider educational leadership as an essentially creative endeavor, a refreshing view of leadership that is in stark contrast to prevailing understandings of the role. These tend to privilege the values of efficiency, accountability, and evidence to the exclusion of more relational and student-centered kinds of concerns. For example, Sergiovanni (in Walker, 2006) observed that hope is the most important, most neglected leadership virtue. The reason for this neglect, he claimed, is "because of management theories that tell us to look at the evidence, to be tough as nails, to be objective, and in other ways blindly face reality" (p. 549). But hope—as something that is forward-looking, sustained in relationship, and situated in conflict (Walker, 2006)—is clearly needed in the context of our work as educational leaders.

Paolo Freire (1970) defined praxis as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. Through praxis, oppressed people can acquire a critical awareness of their own condition, and, with their allies, struggle for liberation" (p. 36). Such work requires hopeful leaders who believe that change is possible and that things can be better than they are today. Hope can be taught (Larson, 2013; Lopez, 2013); a sense of agency can be developed (Williams & Butler, 2010). These must be chosen as our individual and collective priorities if the seeds we plant will have the chance to grow.

CONCLUSION

Educational leaders have the means to address inequities in schools and society but must develop what Michael Fullan (2003) calls the moral

purpose to do so. Our proposition that an acknowledgment gap exists and that its resolution must precede resolution of any other gap is another call for us, as educational leaders, to develop the moral purpose to address inequities in ways already available to us (such as the seven strategies described above). Weissglass makes another compelling argument that there is much we can do now, without great economic expense, to discover and address the alienating, inequitable learning environments experienced most typically by low-SES students of color.

> Although some factors (economics, for example) may be difficult for schools to change, many of the conditions that cause inequitable outcomes are within our reach. We can do something about teachers' attitudes and expectations and the way teachers relate to students. We can change institutionalized practices that work to the disadvantage of children of color and children living in poverty. We can help students deal more effectively with their difficulties. We can ascertain how unaware biases in teaching and counseling practices, in curriculum, in school policies and in hiring practices affect teaching and learning. (2001, Educational Inequity Is Complex section, §2)

The possibility that there would be a high cost in social, political, and/or economic capital to educational leaders' efforts to make nondiscussable issues visible and discussable may explain why Weissglass's do-ables, named above, remain as goals we have yet to collectively achieve. When children and adolescents are being hurt on our watch and in our schools, though, our responsibilities are clear. John Fischer, superintendent of schools in Baltimore at the time of the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to desegregate the nation's schools, provides a case in point. He met with Baltimore's 5,000 teachers just 1 month after the decision was handed down on May 17, 1954. Fischer, who had already been meeting with African American civil rights leaders and creating a desegregation plan, informed the teachers in June of 1954 that Baltimore was integrating its schools and anyone opposed to the new policy could resign. Less than a year later, he wrote a piece called "Implementing the Decision" for *Educational Leadership* (1995, February). His words speak today to educational leaders who would choose closing the acknowledgment gap as our responsibility.

> All that we do is founded upon faith and hope and love. The love of truth, the love of learning, the love of children—these are great forces with which to work. There is no doubt that the world could be transformed if only their power could be fully unleashed. More than most men and women, we are in a position to use that power. (Fischer, cited in Perlstein, 2004, p. 296)

Addressing educational opportunity, receivement, and achievement gaps by working first to close the acknowledgment gap is an invitation and an opportunity for educational leaders who see themselves in Fischer's words, or who want to, and who know the "valuing of humanness as the starting point for education" (Carini, 2001, p. 1).

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NOTES

1. By educational leaders, we mean educational policymakers and implementers at federal, state, and local levels.
2. The Federal Poverty Level in 2011 was $22,350 for a family of four, $18,530 for a family of three, and $14,710 for a family of two. An income of two to three times the poverty level is needed to meet basic needs, depending on locale (Addy, Engelhartdt, & Skinner, 2013). If the Federal Poverty Level were adjusted accordingly, the percentages of American youth under 18 living in poverty, shown in Figure 1 above, would be dramatically higher.
3. In general terms, Bourdieu defined cultural capital as having the knowledge and skills of the dominant culture, especially in the use of language. It exists in three forms: habitus, cultural articles, and cultural institutions and their diplomas, certificates, etc. Social capital he defined as a resource connected with social groups and networks, the relationships that help one to promote one's own interests. Economic capital is convertible to money and is at the root of all other types of capital (Bourdieu, 1986).
4. Between the two of us, we have served in the roles of elementary school teacher, elementary school principal, middle school teacher, middle school principal, curriculum and staff development coordinator, university professor, director of a variety of programs in higher education, and founder/director of a nonprofit organization.

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