Chasing Down the Educational Debt by Centering Race in Educational Supervision

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Abstract

Educational professional development is ubiquitous; yet the gains on student learning are minimal as measured by local, state, and federal assessment measures. Although there is widespread agreement that assessment data alone does not tell the story of what students are learning and teachers are teaching, the data is still alarming. Why is there a gap between the billions of dollars spent on professional learning and student learning outcomes? In this article, the author seeks to shed light on this disconnect, offering a framework that links deficit perspectives of Black, Brown, and Indigenous students and opportunity gaps associated with inept monitoring of instructional practices contributing to the educational debt in America (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Keywords

deficit mindset; educational debt; supervision; instructional leadership; professional development

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Introduction

Arundhati Roy, in writing about the devastation of the coronavirus pandemic, said, "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next" (Roy, 2020, para. 47).

I wonder where this pandemic will lead us as there is a crisis of a larger scale among us, one that extends beyond the discomfort caused by Covid-19, which should cause us to question the quest to return to the "normal" that existed before March 2020. Webster dictionary defines a crisis as "the turning point...; a decisive or critical moment" (Merriam-Webster, 2003). The crisis I am highlighting is all too familiar to some of us, one that continues to exacerbate inequities, increase disparities, further oppression, and expand racial injustice. And, it is one that instructional leaders must take on with the utmost sense of urgency.

Instructional leader is one of many titles used to describe the role of principal; however, the role of supporting and monitoring instruction must be embedded in every facet of a school organization. For the purposes of this article, instructional leaders include, but may not be limited to, principal supervisors, principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches. More importantly, the current crisis I write about for instructional leaders to address head-on is specific to the educational debt owed to millions of students who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). The educational debt was described at length by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings during the American Educational Research Association (AERA) 2006 Presidential address. In her address, Dr. Ladson-Billings argues that the framing of the achievement gap is a distraction. A distraction she further describes as a means to steer us away from "the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies" that have shaped our society" (p.5). My intent is not to write a piece about the educational debt; Dr. Ladson-Billings did that all too well. Rather, my intent is to illuminate that the debt is not only still present but has been exacerbated.

The coronavirus brought our country to a standstill in the early spring of 2020, and soon thereafter America witnessed another brutal killing of a Black man, Mr. George Floyd, at the hands of police. Months later, a presidential election exposed a deeper racial divide, which brought out acts of violence fueled by the divisive rhetoric of the 45th President of the United States and enabled by some of his supporters. The insurrection on January 6, 2021 exposed just how deeply divided our country remains. These events, coupled with the lingering effects of covert racism, elevated the cries of the unheard. For many BIPOC educators, the devastation of our community was not new. The rhetoric of the disparities appeared unrelenting and steadfast with mounting protests and calls for change, some of which crossed racial lines in an attempt to acknowledge the suffering of BIPOC communities. And yet, as some posited that the insurrection that transpired after a tumultuous election *was not America*, countless Black folx cried out, *yes, this is in fact America* (Kendi, 2020). What resulted is yet another impasse in our society, not a failure of BIPOC Americans, but the failure of White Americans to accept the history of our country that is steeped in racism, White supremacy, and the unwillingness of some to accept that the America we see today has always been America. Thus, this impasse does not allow our country to move forward collectively to ensure all Americans, especially our most marginalized populations, can be given equal treatment in all institutions.

A Re-envisioned Role of Supervision and Instructional Leadership

In contemplating how we can begin to eradicate this persistent racial divide and eliminate inequities, I situate my thoughts from the lens of an educational practitioner. Therefore, the reflections and recommendations shared are not all inclusive. For example, racial division appears in almost every facet of a BIPOC person's life: from economic to health disparities; from housing disparities to mass incarceration; from disproportionate out of school suspension rates to disparities in learning outcomes. To eradicate these racial disparities, we must promote educational change in both words and in action. In addition to how schools are funded, we must fundamentally change the way we think about education and the supervision of instruction in the classroom to ensure equity exists and more directly addresses the educational debt in America. For a point of reference throughout this article, I define equity using language from the *Tennessee Leaders for Equity Playbook*, which "means that every student has access to effective teachers and the resources, experiences, and rigor they need to be successful" (2018, p. 20).

During the span of my 27-plus year career in education, I have participated in my fair share of professional development workshops, and I have led several learning sessions in my own educational institutions. In addition to attending professional development, I have also made a conscious effort to stay abreast of current trends in education by participating in webinars and listening to podcasts. I have read countless books to become as well-versed as possible on issues relative to curriculum updates, instructional shifts, leadership models, school finance, and more. I imagine many other school and district leaders engage in the same, if not more, ventures to stay abreast of the changing educational landscape for their respective roles.

Due to the enactment of No Child Left Behind in 2001, for the last two decades schools have been held accountable for disaggregating student performance by student groups and, more importantly, narrowing and/or closing long-standing gaps in student learning outcomes. These student groups include race/ethnicity, students with limited English proficiency, and students with disabilities. Most states suggest educational agencies and local educational agencies are required to develop an improvement plan to explicitly address the gaps in learning outcomes. The names of these plans vary from school improvement plans to unified improvement plans to any number of other labels. Nevertheless, the goal is the same: to create a framework to improve student learning outcomes by employing leader and teacher professional development as an intervention strategy. Multiple states, including California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Maryland, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, and Texas, identify professional development as one of many interventions within their respective state improvement plan. To ensure students have access to highly effective teachers, districts have relied heavily on teacher professional development. For example, according to *The Hechinger Report* (Mader, 2015), school districts spent nearly $18,000 on professional development, per teacher, per year. Affirming the advantages of professional development on teacher practices and student learning, Dr. Darling-Hammond (2005), researcher and policy maker from the Learning Policy Institute, also touts the benefits of investing in teacher development. John Hattie (2003), a favorite reference of practitioners, reminds us that professional development has a relatively large effect size (.41) on improving successful teaching and learning practices in schools. If professional development is evidenced as an effective intervention, and therefore is suggested across local educational

agencies as a method to improve student learning, why do we continue to see large learning gaps for our most marginalized students?

African American and Latinx students continue to underperform their same-aged peers in almost every academic category measured. So, despite the efforts put in place by Title I, NCLB, and The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the academic gains are minimal at best. Consider the results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The NAEP is the only assessment that measures what U.S. students know and can do in various subjects across the nation. Also known as The Nation's Report Card, NAEP has provided important information about how students are performing academically since 1969. Although not every school district participates in the NAEP assessment, the results from the 2017 assessment depict the disparity in student learning outcomes across race and ethnicity. For example, the overall average score for all students combined in 2017 was 267 out of a possible score of 500. However, the average score on the eighth grade NAEP reading assessment for White students was 274 compared to 248 and 255 for African American and Latinx students respectively, albeit both student groups performed slightly higher than the 2015 test results. Two years later, in 2019, all student performance scores on the NAEP reading assessment measure decreased; however, African American student scores dropped from 249 to 244 and Latinx students from 256 to 252 thereby widening the gap between their same-aged White peers (USDOE, 2019).

And yet I still ask myself, with the plethora of financial dollars spent on professional learning within education, why do educational gaps still persist? Although I do not suggest that there is one single answer, I do contend that disparities in student learning outcomes across race and class persist due to a lack of bold leadership. Bold leadership is not walking with a megaphone and demanding people and practices change, but rather bold leadership requires that we assure inept instructional practices are corrected with intensity. While there are varied explanations for the decline in scores and pervasive performance gaps between specific student groups, disparities are not just evident in national assessments. According to a study conducted by The New Teacher Project (TNTP), 40% of all college students had to enroll in at least one college remedial course in comparison to 66% of African American and 53% of Latinx college students (TNTP, 2018). Engaging in college remedial courses not only exhausts some families of already limited financial resources, but as research suggests, students are more likely to disenroll from college after taking just one remedial college course. These researchers also found that of the 180-classroom hours, students spent more than 130 of those hours on non-grade level tasks (TNTP, 2018). These findings are appalling and speak to a greater issue specific to leadership. Lance and Spencer (2021) posit that "inept leadership, unintentionally or not, allow for racial inequalities to impede academic progress for all children, especially children of Color" (p. 200). So, what does this mean for PK-12 schooling? I contend there must be an intentional focus on instructional practices. More specifically, the reliance on professional development and instructional evaluation tools to positively influence student learning outcomes, alone, will not suffice. Effective instructional supervision and support is a necessity.

In Figure 1, I illustrate the vicious cycle of inattention not to classroom practices through supervision and support. The first step suggests that in education, teachers who hold a deficit mindset possess a belief that some students cannot proficiently engage and perform in cognitively challenging coursework. This deficit mindset results in teachers having low

expectations of BIPOC students and those low expectations transfer into low-level instructional tasks. Unfortunately, deficit mindsets and low student expectations manifest into a belief that by giving students tasks that do not challenge them that teachers are doing students a favor. These first steps lead to students rarely, if ever, meeting or exceeding local and state academic benchmarks. The fourth step finds BIPOC students placed in remedial courses as a result of the preceding three steps-each shaped by teachers' beliefs about students' abilities. Step five finds our BIPOC students working overtime to counter negative perceptions of their academic abilities. Thus, rounding out this fourth step is stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is an additional level of emotional trauma our BIPOC students may carry around (Andersen & Martin, 2018). Stereotype threat is deep anxiety experienced by BIPOC students for fear of confirming

Figure 1
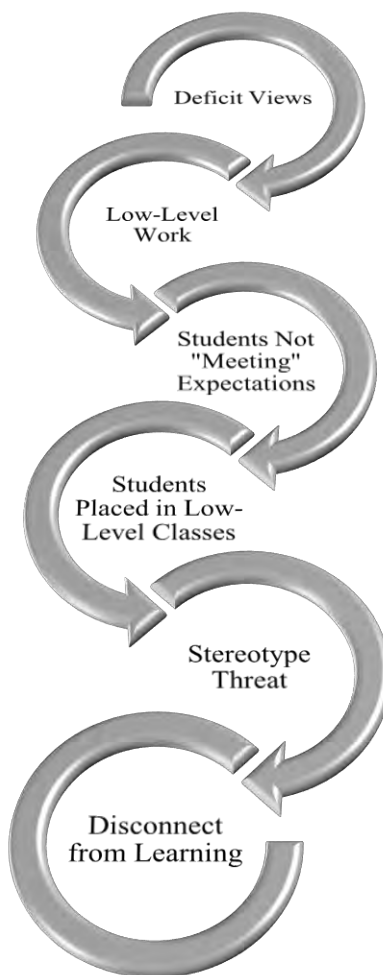
or being judged by the negative stereotypes of them induced by society. Consider the enormity of this anxiety for BIPOC students who may be the only Student of Color sitting in an honors or advanced placement course. Although many BIPOC students attend school with the weight of stereotype threat, Ford (2010), a leading researcher of giftedness among Black children, found that due to the underrepresentation of Black girls in gifted classrooms, feelings of isolation are often experienced. Moreover, in spaces where racial stereotypes are more salient, students of negatively stereotyped groups are typically more conscious of the content of those stereotypes, which has a strong potential to negatively affect their academic performance (McGee & Martin, 2011). Finally, we see students disconnect from their learning and possibly, their learning environment.

Implications for PK-12 Supervision

There are several implications to consider as we think about how to create learning outcomes that are indicative of an educational debt paid in full. First, we need to be deliberate in the "why" of professional development and not merely the what. Secondly, we need to think more intentionally about the influence classroom teachers have on student learning outcomes from a practical perspective. Finally, we need to focus fervently on the role of instructional leaders and how they support classroom teachers.

Professional Development

Research has demonstrated that teachers have the most direct influence on student learning (Leithwood & Sun, 2018). If teachers have a significant influence on student learning outcomes, then it makes sense to place a concerted effort in ensuring every student has access to a highly effective teacher. Hence the reason local and state education agencies have poured millions of dollars into professional development for teachers. According to the U.S. Department of Education, almost $1.5 billion Title II dollars are allocated for teacher and school leader professional development. However, "there is little evidence that these expenditures produce an increase in the overall or individual effectiveness of teachers" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., para. 5). I believe that what often occurs is that supervisors of instruction offer professional development and then, sit back in anticipation that student learning will occur and learning gaps across racial divides will dissipate. I liken this to watching a plant grow that you have not watered nor given sunlight.

I have watched in angst while both district and school leaders suggest professional development opportunities that align with the latest craze without a clear rationale for why. Professional development offered as one and done listening sessions will never cure what ails the system. Instead, district and school leaders must include instructional staff in the conversation to explore the strengths and gaps within the learning system and more importantly, identify potential root causes for why those gaps exist. This identification may be painstakingly slow and will unveil a level of discomfort among staff, because the causes of inequitable learning outcomes are within control of the school system. Once those root causes are determined only then should instructional leaders, in concert with staff, create a coherent one-year or multi-year professional development plan. This robust and comprehensive professional development plan should serve as a road map for school improvement, be iterative, and be monitored for impact.

Role of the Classroom Teacher

In 2017-2018, our nation's teaching profession was comprised primarily of White teachers; specifically, 79% of the teaching force was White, 9% Latinx, 7% African American, and 2% were Asian (Taie & Goldring, 2020). However, our public school student population is much more diverse. Relying on data from the National Center for Education Statistics: 48% of students were White, 27% Latinx, 15% African American, and 5% were Asian. This mismatch between the teaching force and student racial composition result in what Ford et al. (2004) refer to as cross-cultural clashes thus leading to culture blindness. And, although there are efforts underway to increase the racial diversity of teaching staff, the time to make a concerted effort to ensure our teachers, regardless of their race and ethnicity, are able to best support their students is long overdue. To assist teachers with a diverse student body, many districts have turned to implicit bias trainings. These one-off trainings are a start, but this alone will do little to reverse the current gaps evident in student learning outcomes. Accompanying implicit bias trainings as of late is a resurgence of training around culturally relevant teaching. Culturally relevant teaching, first introduced Ladson-Billings (1994), is grounded in three tenets: student learning, affirmation of students' cultural competence, and the facilitation of sociopolitical and critical consciousness (1994). It is important to note that the research of Dr. Ladson-Billings affirmed that teachers, regardless of race and ethnicity, can be successful when appropriately equipped to engage and interact with students of diverse backgrounds.

Some educator preparation programs ask students to explore their individual implicit biases and are inundated with culturally responsive pedagogy programs for beginning teachers (Hammond, 2015). Implicit bias is influenced by the stereotypes that we maintain based on our experiences and therefore, influences how we respond to events in an unconscious manner. Thus, even if one purports to be anti-racist or anti-prejudice, an individual may still favor one group, typically our own ingroup, over another. Although having a working definition and acknowledgement of one's implicit bias are important, individual attitudes and beliefs are often situational and subject to change depending upon circumstance. Consequently, engaging in drive by or one-off professional development sessions for new or seasoned educators and instructional leaders is not enough. If we desire to eliminate opportunity and access gaps across every sector within the schoolhouse, then we, including teachers, must be willing to talk about race beyond a superficial level.

Role of the Supervisor

There is considerable attention given to the role classroom teachers play in influencing student learning outcomes. However, teachers alone are not solely responsible for what occurs inside of our classrooms. Author, Gholdy Muhammad (2020), in her book, *Cultivating Genius*, contends that most people want culturally responsive instruction and practices but they stop at the leadership part. They don't move to pedagogy. It doesn't work. In addition to having access to robust and culturally relevant curriculum and materials, teachers should also have access to supportive school structures, that include support from their school-based supervisors – principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, etc. With the amount of money spent on evaluation tools in concert with dubious hours of preparing for classroom observations, one would and should question why persistent learning gaps exist. Why are classroom evaluations

viewed as a one-time event? If we view classroom evaluations similar to a summative assessment, then we should make every effort to use classroom visits as checks for understanding. Checks for understanding, when used during effective classroom instruction, would see the teacher carefully extending feedback to students along the way to mastery (Fisher & Frey, 2007). Checks for understanding are an important part of all good instruction. Consequently, instructional leaders cannot leave it to chance that professional development is implemented by design. Instead, instructional leaders must visit classrooms frequently, extend feedback (checks for understanding), monitor who is carrying the cognitive load, support teachers through implementation, and repeat this process regularly. Effective instructional leaders do not lead from behind a desk; they check for understanding.

Khalifa et al. (2016) purport that school leaders must become culturally responsive school leaders (CRSL). In other words, "CRS leaders are bold at creating a school culture that is inclusive of all students, unsympathetically self-aware, adept at engaging both parents and community, and are keenly aware of the importance of preparing staff, specifically teachers of diverse learners" (Lance & Spencer, 2021, p. 204). In practice, supervisors of instruction must visit classrooms to not only monitor but also to support instructional practices. If teachers spend many hours in professional development and millions of dollars are spent on offering professional development opportunities, then school leaders must make classroom visits a daily part of what they do. More importantly, they must embody the work of instructional leadership. As a former principal and school superintendent, I took great pride in conducting classroom walkthroughs and visiting with teachers and students. I examined student work to determine the cognitive load being asked of students and the supports offered by teachers. When there was a positive match, I was sure to let the teacher and/or school administrator know. If either were amiss, I instantly informed the principal. Walking classrooms is not punitive nor does it need to be evaluative. Visiting classrooms, however, should be a norm. Teachers should come to know and expect that your visit is not a one-time event. Rather, your visitations should be welcomed because teachers can expect your visit will be accompanied by a two-way dialogue to affect change.

Culturally responsive leaders embody aspects of anti-oppressive leadership. Therefore, when fully supported by district leadership, CRS leaders will "challenge teaching and environments that marginalize students of color" (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1278). These conversations cannot be left to chance; instructional leaders must take bold steps that may appear uncomfortable for the giver more than the receiver. Nevertheless, it is through the dialogue that change within instructional practices occurs as both the teacher and leader are able to reflect on their respective parts. Leading while comfortable is not leading, it is facade masquerading under fear. To move beyond the fear, you must acknowledge the fear and then determine ways you can begin to address it.

Conclusion

I began this article sharing how the pandemic further illuminated the disparities across our nation. Although the disparities are not new, the widespread attention to how we come out of the pandemic better is new. First, however, we must stop looking at student learning gaps as something BIPOC children arrive at school with because of deficits in the home and are

therefore, more difficult to overcome. Instead, our work as educational practitioners requires something more practical. First, we must recognize our students have strengths and assets; it is incumbent upon us as educational practitioners to fuel those assets rather than extinguish them. Specifically, let us acknowledge that after hundreds of years of enslavement of BIPOC people, followed by Jim Crow laws, segregation, and White supremacy, a debt is owed and BIPOC children and their families have come to collect. Supervision, by and large, has embodied principles of whiteness – and we need to shift our frameworks toward equitable practices that push back on antiquated practices of supervision that reinforce deficit mindsets.

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Teresa A. Lance is an Assistant Superintendent of Equity and Innovation at School District U-46 in Elgin, Illinois. Prior to this role, she served as Superintendent of a high school district in a small suburb outside of Chicago, Illinois. With her colleague, Teresa contributed a chapter entitled, Leading Boldly to *Challenges to Integrating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Programs in Organizations*. In addition to anti-racist approaches, her interests include change theory, leadership, and systems thinking. During her downtime, she also enjoys blogging, which you can find at teresaalance.com, and she recently started a consulting firm, Decisive and Strategic Outcomes, LLC.