

Unheeded Voices in the Quest for Education Equity

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A key theme present in the texts in the course is that in conversations and decision-making about improving education for students of color, the voices of adults of color are much-needed, but too often excluded. This is not due to a lack of interest in education on the part of parents and educators of color (Villenas & Dehyle, 1999, p. 424); rather, it is due to oppressive attitudes, structures and institutions throughout society, including schools and their leadership. Lisa Delpit (2006) describes the dearth of educators of color—a dearth that data suggests is getting more severe over time (p. 105). In a study by Solomon (2002), even in schools in which “racial minorities outnumbered the socially dominant (white) group of students,” teachers and administrators were overwhelmingly white (180). Delpit (2006) finds that when educators of color *are* present in schools and teacher education programs, they are not listened to: they are a part of a “silenced dialogue” in the field of education in which they “believe their voices to be unheard, their concerns unheeded,” and their experiences invalidated (pg 23, 107, 108).

Similarly, parents and families of students of color are devalued and ignored by schools. Villenas and Dehyle (1999) found in their studies that parents of color are “‘kept out’ of schools by the negative ways in which they are treated” and are “made to feel unwelcome in schools and are belittled and critiqued” when they are involved in their student’s education or advocate for their wellbeing (p. 415, 434). Flessa (2009) similarly concluded that school leadership often views parents of color as problematic rather than resources or partners, and desires limited parent participation—participation that “does not challenge [their] authority” (p. 356-7). Parents of color are rarely invited to share meaningful power with school leadership, and “strategies for...involving parents are typically not incorporated into most school reform plans” in low-income communities (Noguera, 2004, p. 1). Noguera (2004) suggests that there are often significant physical, social, and cultural separations between school leadership and the communities and families they serve, “which reinforce or contribute to the development of biases among the outsider professionals who come to see poor children, their families and the communities which they live as deficient, dysfunctional and even hopeless” (p. 5). As parents and communities of color are blamed for students’ underachievement, these “deficit perspectives delegitimize...[their] voices” (Khalifa, Jennings, Briscoe, Olesweski, & Abdi, 2013, p. 157).

This exclusion of the voices of families and educators of color is deeply problematic, and it seems that any effort to provide equitable education for minoritized groups without those voices would be futile. The current system of education—with its roots in industrialism and the current prevalence of neoliberalism—stifles creativity and agency of all students, especially students of color (Burch, 2009; De Meij, 2010; the RSA, 2010). Adults of color must be included if effective reforms are to occur and if Kumashiro’s (2000) vision of a multi-pronged approach to anti-oppressive education is to be realized. To this end, Solomon (2002) advocates for the development of hiring practices that prioritize diversity, and writes that “a racially (and ethnically) diverse teaching staff has the potential to enrich the school curriculum and pedagogy with a breadth of knowledge, perspectives, resources, and experiences beyond that of a homogeneous staff” (p. 192). Delpit (2006) supports this perspective, explaining that educators of color have used “their own learning experiences and...their own cultural backgrounds...[to develop] models for educating children of their own cultural groups” (p. 124). Parents of color, too, are resources for improving equity in education. Villenas and Dehyle (1999) found that parents of color encourage their children to be successful in school, and imbue values that can support educational achievement, including resilience (p. 424-426). Noguera (2004) positions parents as invaluable partners for schools, since parents “have knowledge of children’s lives outside of school, which teachers typically do not have, and that knowledge can prove helpful in

developing effective pedagogical strategies” (p. 15). Indeed, Lucas, Henze, and Donato (1990) list meaningful parent involvement as one of the “key features that promote the success of language-minority students” (p. 325, 322). The research is clear: when educators and families of color have power in their communities, it is conducive to the success of students of color.

The texts we have studied in this course suggest ways that schools can begin the work of transforming their relationships with families and communities of color into more equitable partnerships. Several of the articles suggest that school leadership and administration have an important role to play, and that effective leaders can make the education of minoritized groups and inclusion of adults of color a priority (Solomon, 2002; Lucas et al., 1990; Flessa, 2009; Noguera, 2004). Noguera (2004) includes examples of instances when school leadership took concrete, positive steps to involve families of color in school decision making, including hosting a yearly “parent empowerment conference,” establishing neighborhood parent centers, and assigning parents a “greater role in the governance of the district and particular schools” (p. 13, 12). This collection of research indicates that principals and members of school leadership have important roles to play in working to diversify staff, allocating resources to parent communication and relationship-building, and creating a more equitable distribution of power between the dominant group and minoritized groups in schools. Still, I think of Foucault’s theories of power and his idea that power flows and circulates, and I am convinced that the work of leadership alone (a top-down approach) is not sufficient to make education equitable: instead, we need to engage everyone who is a part of the net of power in making change.

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