

**The Journal of the  
Texas Alliance of  
Black School Educators**

**JTABSE**



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# JTABSE



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# **The Journal of the Texas Alliance of Black School Educators 2020**

*The Journal of the Texas Alliance of Black School Educators* is published by the Texas Alliance of Black School Educators (TABSE), 3100 Richmond Avenue, Suite 306, Houston, Texas, 77098. *The Journal of the Texas Alliance of Black School Educators* carries a variety of articles and manuscripts that contribute knowledge and ideas in the quest for excellence in educating children of African descent and other minority learners. Each issue contains research articles, general interest articles, and book reviews. Views expressed do not necessarily reflect the position taken by the Texas Alliance of Black School Educators.

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## FROM THE EDITORS

The Texas Alliance of Black School Educators (TABSE) has a long legacy of providing critical insight into research related to minority students in both higher education and PK – 12 settings. Given this, we see The Journal of the Texas Alliance of Black School Educators (JTABSE) as an effective tool in reaching a broader audience in hopes of effectuating positive change throughout the state and nation. The purpose of this journal is to provide peer-reviewed research addressing topics that continue to impact minorities in public and higher education. Our goals are to:

- Provide current research relevant to the education of minorities in the state of Texas and beyond.
- Contribute to and extend the current body of existing literature.
- Spark further conversation and interest in the research presented within the journal.

We hope that you enjoy the manuscripts provided in this edition. The next edition will be available in Fall, 2021. All manuscripts are subject to a double-blind peer review process. As a peer-reviewed journal, we periodically screen for scholarly reviewers. If you are interested in being a reviewer, please contact JTABSE editors at [highereducation@tabse.net](mailto:highereducation@tabse.net) for consideration. We ask that reviewers currently hold a doctoral degree, demonstrate knowledge related to the subject matter being reviewed, and have experience in the use of current APA style guidelines.

Thank you for your continued support of the Texas Alliance of Black School Educators! If should have any questions, concerns, or want to offer any feedback, please do not hesitate to contact either Dr. Toron Wooldridge or Dr. Detra Johnson at [highereducation@tabse.net](mailto:highereducation@tabse.net).

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**Transitioning from Transactional to Transformational PBIS Leadership: The Design and Implementation of Equitable and Inclusive PBIS Systems**

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# **Transitioning from Transactional to Transformational PBIS Leadership: The Design and Implementation of Equitable and Inclusive PBIS Systems**

## **Introduction**

Classrooms are constructed around a set of values, norms, and behaviors that characterize culture. As different learners have a unique set of values and cultural backgrounds, a low tolerance approach ensures their learning needs are addressed (Delpit, 1992). One of the useful three-ways of improving positive learner behavior is considering both cultural and linguistic variables. This article presents a summary of how Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (CRPBIS) can change behavioral outcome disparities for marginalized students and enhance and magnify the positive behavior of English Language Learners (ELLs).

## **Context**

School leaders continue to face many challenges when tasked with creating a lasting, sustainable climate and culture change. In order to build capacity, school leaders must have a clear vision as it drives school performance. The culture reflects expectations, and culture is often a determiner of academic achievement. Exceptional school leaders take every opportunity to express and share the school vision, ensure that the school's mission drives the day, and encourage and empower by identifying and developing the strengths of the staff. Moreover, it makes student achievement the constant and time the element, and ensure that all initiatives align with the school's SMART goals.

## **What is Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)?**

In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) made school leadership ever-evolving with the introduction of research-based practices. One significant practice required by IDEA is the use of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which was first discussed in 1996 and included in the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 (Sugai & Horner, 2019). PBIS is typically a three-tiered model with the first reaching about 80% of students, the second reaching 10-15% and the third reaching the remaining 5-10% (Freeman, Kern, Gambino, Lombardi, & Kowitt, 2015).

### **PBIS Design**

While mandated by IDEA (2004), PBIS is not a single strategy, but a behavioral approach and a positive lens in which to view behaviors (Freeman et al., 2015; Sugai et al., 2000; Sugai & Horner, 2019). PBIS designed is not only for behavioral but also for academic achievement (Freeman et al., 2015). There are four tenants that any PBIS program needs. The PBIS programs require effective transactional and transformational leadership from the classroom teacher with district administrator support to promote academic and behavioral success effectively. The program must be (a) outcomes-focused, (b) data-driven, (c) systematic and (d) evidence-based (Freeman et al., 2015).

## **Transactional and Transformational Leadership**

The exceptional school leader utilizes transactional and transformational leadership to implement a classroom, school, and district-wide PBIS program effectively. PBIS design can be a highly effective strategy for behavioral modification when and implemented appropriately. Transactional leadership, like initial PBIS programs, uses rewards based on goals and objectives to motivate compliance and subordination. For long-term sustainability, transformational leadership, however, uses inspiration towards a mission, not necessarily a specific compliance and subordinate targets (Boscardin, Schulze, Rude, & Tudryn, 2018).

## **Transactional to Transformational PBIS Leadership**

Initial PBIS designs are transactional. In general, PBIS was designed for the dominant culture – quiet, straight postured, and independent. However, all students are not quiet. As they talk to one another, some may promote hugs and other physical contact as compared to others, and how staff praise and reward positive behaviors must match student cultural backgrounds (Cressey, 2019).

For PBIS to become transformational in the school culture, the PBIS program must have a student assessed social/emotional present level of performance. The transformation allows the class, school, and district team to best determine the needs of the students and help guide the adoption of strategies. In order for transformation to occur, behavioral data should be reviewed to determine the most problematic and frequent behaviors to target while building the system around positive interventions and the promotion of relationships.

## **Data Collection**

It is critical to think of how various cultures affect student behavior. Therefore, data drives a good PBIS program. There are several ways to collect, monitor, and make adjustments based on the data. In some schools, students carry point sheets to earn points, and the school staff then enter their daily points into a program to find trends and identify struggling students. Other schools may use a token economy and track the money earned and spent by students. Others may use office discipline and other types of behavioral referrals to track behaviors.

## **Fidelity**

To best align PBIS programs, evaluation instruments to assess fidelity are critical. Fidelity means that the designed program is fully and completely implemented by the staff, students, and community. There are three primary tools, the Tiered Fidelity Inventory, School-Wide Evaluation Tool, and the Benchmarks of Quality. Each of these measures can be used to determine the effectiveness of a PBIS program, as well as the level of fidelity.

## **Transactional PBIS Leadership**

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, if not careful, will live in the transactional state of "status quo" versus the transformative state of "change." Care must be taken to ensure that the PBIS program's goal is to not only praise students and staff for the maintenance of the dominant patriarchal culture norms but also to promote the sense of acceptance and acknowledge inclusion and belonging to all groups. When not considering the intersectional identity of every cultural and social being, these dominant patriarchal culture norms do more to

perpetuate the dominant culture versus the diversity of experience, perspective, and values among staff and students.

### **Dominant Cultural “Normalcy” and Status Quo**

Intersectionality is a metaphor for the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound and create often, misunderstood obstacles (Crenshaw, 2018). These misunderstandings are the result of the one-stop fix all mindset educators face daily due to a lack of adequate training, a lack of time for implementation, a lack in fidelity of programs, and a lack of outlook and vision for expected outcomes. Therefore, programs, regardless of intent and research-based acumen, situated in dominant culture "normalcy" and comfort aim to dismiss the nuances of individual identity and meanings of existence. Implementers of these programs reward individuals whose cultural mannerisms for socializing and existing fit the dominant narratives of "appropriateness," "politeness," and the "good student."

Those without the background and knowledge of the dominant cultural norms find themselves misunderstood. They lose their genuine and authentic identity while their experience becomes one of compliance and invisibility. "The rules were created without any thought of me or any concern about how these rules would impact my well-being. I am invisible. I do not exist" (Griffen & Carrier, 2017, p.18).

### **Dominant Cultural “Normalcy” and PBIS Reward Bias**

Examples of dominant cultural normalizing behaviors are students receiving PBIS rewards for walking in straight lines, remaining silent during hallway transition, and never/ever responding in class unless called upon. Due to a lack of cultural responsiveness nor any sort of cultural

consciousness (Gay, 2002), children running towards each other are construed as "disruptive," "defiant," "unruly," and "aggressive" versus children just being happy to see one another. (Griffen, 2020). Therefore, how we reward student action and inaction punishes the natural movement and cultural identity of particular students of difference whose way of navigating any environment is by finding a comfortable plain of existence through singing and/or loud talking - both viewed in discipline practice (not policy) as disrespectful and disruptive.

### **PBIS Reward Bias**

The punishing of natural movement and cultural identity is traced back to pre-service teaching, where pre-service teachers reveal racialized perceptions in Black versus White faces and perceive hostility and anger more frequently in Black boys and girls than their White peers (Halberstadt et al., 2018). PBIS is a system meant to promote safety and positive behavior. When pre-service teachers already have these perceptions of Black boys and girls, they will implicitly and explicitly bias their classroom practices to reward students who fit their experiential definition of "safe" and "positive."

Whereas implicit bias is our subconscious bias, and explicit bias is our known and willingness to bias, the unchecked dominant cultural lens will create confirmation bias. Confirmation bias occurs when the design of an environment and system ensures a particular outcome and behavior that confirms the designer's internal and comfortable beliefs about diverse population groups - Black, Hispanic, Muslim, and LGBTQIA. Because the designed PBIS system, for example, rewards confirmed and acceptable mannerisms, communication styles, and values, anyone who does not fit that system confirms an "abnormal" label and not a fit for the environment. Bias goes beyond behaviors and actions. Evidence of explicit and confirmation



bias exists when schools redesign their student management policies in order to address “potential” changes in dress code, gender identity, and sexual orientation among their student body - banning natural hair, banning long hair among boys, banning the use of pronouns and/or the preferred name among LGBTQIA students.

### **Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (CRPBIS) Framework and Positive Behaviors among English Language Learners (ELLs)**

Classrooms construct a set of values, norms, and behaviors that define culture. Since different learners have a unique set of values and cultural backgrounds, a low tolerance approach ensures their learning needs are addressed (Delpit, 1992). One of the effective ways of enhancing positive learner behavior is considering both cultural and linguistic variables.

Race-based disparities in behavior and discipline is a continuous issue in many schools. Historically, ELLs have faced enormous disparities in educational outcomes for several reasons. Such inequities have had negative behavioral and social-emotional consequences (Palardy, et al., 2015). Factors such as cultural differences, unique cultural mores, language barriers, and prior traumatic experiences or trauma affect how ELLs are treated in learning institutions (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In fact, teachers and school leaders often disproportionately place ELLs in special education programs for emotional or behavioral disorders. Some ELLs also receive exclusionary school discipline more severely and frequently for reasons like disrespect, insubordination, and excessive noise (Bal, 2015).

## **CRPBIS Framework**

For school communities to improve equity in education, they need to look closer at their cultural practices. Factors such as stereotypical perceptions, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism can affect how teachers interact with ELLs (Nieto, 2013). In the quest for equity and positive outcomes for learners, schools need to adopt a model that supports culturally responsive practices (Fallon & Mueller, 2016). A CRPBIS framework provides a systematic transformation approach that can be used to examine the social and academic activities that place ELLs at the margins (Bal et al., 2012). CRPBIS starts with revealing and analyzing the long-lasting social presumptions within the education framework that are duplicated, forming school climate, traditions, and schedules. When properly implemented in a classroom, the CRPBIS framework can create safe, democratic, and inclusive climates for all students. It is also a good starting point in closing discipline gaps in schools and moving towards a culturally responsive learning environment (Delpit, 2006).

Social personalities of ELLs' are a part of the social development of learning and improvement. Social behaviors are critical in communication and learning procedures in a class—students who are new to learning a different culture and language experience various communication and learning barriers. Since every student comes with a distinctive culture and values, it becomes difficult to standardize the variables and interventions that bring effectiveness to the learning environment of the classroom. A classroom is a place of interaction among students and teachers. Consequently, communication in this environment is defined by the behaviors. ELLs may have certain reasons for engaging in challenging behavior, while the teacher is responsible for understanding the expressions and developing a social culture that enhances learning (Bal et al., 2018).

## **Guiding Principles and Actions of CRPBIS**

The CRPBIS framework goes beyond simply stating that culture matters. Instead, it lays out how culture matters in educational settings. The model offers a praxis-oriented and cultural theory that practitioners can use to implement positive behavior intervention supports and achieve equity in learning environments. The guiding principle of the CRPBIS framework is that everyone is biologically cultural (Bal et al., 2012). The framework is different from others because it provides a research-based inclusive process for solving problems; for example, educators in a learning institution co-design with local stakeholders culturally responsive discipline systems (Bal, 2016). This way, the cultural needs and values of ELLs are properly addressed and considered. In other words, the model positions ELLs as social agents that can create change instead of passive objects of reform efforts (Bal, 2012).

## **Five Interceptive Actions**

The CRPBIS model follows five interceptive actions. They include forming a learning lab, establishing the desired outcomes, culturally and empirically validating research-based practices, and utilizing data to continuously improve, innovate, and institute systematic change. These five actions promote positive social behaviors by restructuring the social organization of the school. The model is designed to remediate the academic and social activities of a school that place ELLs at the margins. It also reconstitutes the norms, practices, rules, rituals, and division of responsibilities within the context of school culture and activity (Bal et al., 2012). By following a culturally responsive approach, educators can establish communication and coordination with ELLs (Bal et al., 2018). They will not only understand the cultural needs of the learners but also impart the more appropriate knowledge (Piazza et al., 2015).

***The classroom learning lab and determining clearly defined outcomes.*** The five interceptive actions that are crucial to the success of the CRPBIS are enhancing ELLs' positive behavior. First, considering the classroom as a learning lab involves bringing together the various stakeholders impacted by the school environment. The key stakeholders include teachers and administrators, students and parents, community leaders, and skilled behavior interventionists (Ladson-Billings, 2014). The learning lab concept forms the CRPBIS methodology and addresses the outcomes of disparities of learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

The goal of bringing the stakeholders together is to promote equity in the school environment by addressing their specific cultural needs (King, 2017). Second, the desired outcomes of the CRPBIS framework should be determined and clearly defined. Ideally, CRPBIS encourages educators to define the goals within the classroom and school context that will accompany equitable outcomes while eliminating opportunity gaps. The desired outcomes may include respect among teachers and school leaders, increased student-learning activities, reduction in bullying, or non-exclusionary discipline (Bal et al., 2012; Gay, 2013).

***Cultural and empirical validation.*** Third, CRPBIS research-based practices should be culturally and empirically validated (Bal, 2016; Bal et al., 2018). The learning community needs to recognize and understand the impact of culture at the national and local levels of ELLs. Since learners continue to learn even after leaving the classroom, educators must consider what and where ELLs learn outside the school environment (Gay, 2013). Information gathered about ELLs' learning progress should then be used to develop strategies that support continuous learning both inside and outside the classroom (Orosco & O'Connor, 2015).

***Data for continuous improvement and innovation and ongoing systemic change or transformation.*** Fourth, classrooms as learning labs need to utilize data needs for continuous improvement and innovation. The data collected and analyzed should show patterns in equity and student achievement to be useful (Bal, 2016). Fifth, the approach should follow an ongoing systematic change or transformation. Meaning any opportunity gap in positive behavior among the ELLs can only be closed by continuously promoting equitable practices (Bal et al., 2012).

### **Enhancing Positive Behaviors for English Language Learners (ELLs)**

Implementing CRPBIS as a school-wide approach to behavior will enhance ELLs' positive behavior in several ways. Teachers, learners, and school leaders get to enjoy a consistently collaborative environment (Nieto, 2004). Alternatively, diverse learners will understand that they are expected to behave in certain ways throughout the school. Moreover, educators give diverse learners more space and success opportunities in the educational environment.

Learners with cultural and linguistic differences can develop positive behavioral norms for better outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Similarly, school leaders and educators will feel the need to work together in a coordinated effort to improve the behaviors and outcomes of the learners (King, 2017). For instance, many ELLs struggle in class because of elevated levels of affective filter. A school-wide approach can help in lowering the affective filter using strategies like knowing the learners' background, incorporating home languages, modifying assignments and assessments, and putting English learners in collaborative groups or pairs with those who are proficient in the language (Wyman, 2018).

## **Tracking Progress**

Since the goals of the model are clearly defined and mutually agreed upon, everyone will work towards a better learning environment. Both the teachers and school leaders understand the kind of outcomes they are aiming for and how to achieve them (Banks & Obiaikor, 2015).

Another way in which the CRPBIS contributes to ELLs' positive behavior development is accurately tracking their progress. Teachers are more likely to provide more relevant content in a multicultural learning environment when they track students' progress (Gay, 2002). The CRPBIS model requires constant gathering and analysis of data to measure improvements. Using CRPBIS requires the implementation of appropriate measures and changes in the school policies, outlines, disciplinary action, and student behavior (Bal et al., 2012).

## **Concluding Thoughts on CRPBIS and ELLs**

The Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (CRPBIS) model can be used to enhance the positive behavior of English Language Learners (ELLs). The success of the model relies on the five interceptive actions of forming a learning lab, establishing the desired outcomes, culturally and empirically validating research-based practices, utilizing data to continuously improve and innovate, and systematic change. The CRPBIS model rests on the principle that everyone is biologically cultural (Bal et al., 2012).

## **Narratives of Transformational PBIS Leadership at Northeast Academy for Engineering (NAE)**

Based on the principle that everyone is biologically cultural (Bal et al., 2012), transformational PBIS leadership promotes a sense of equity and inclusion to achieve its desired

outcome for all in the school environment. This transition from transactional – compliance and status quo - to transformational – flexible and fluid outcomes based on the biological beings – provides for an environment where the needs of the cultural environment outweigh the needs for maintaining the comfort of the environment. Equity and inclusion are key to the transformation.

Equity is providing for others' needs according to their individual and unique needs, with the intent of improving their identified group's holistic outcomes. Equity should never occur in a vacuum. Equity demands that we first meet the individual's needs and then use those met needs as a benefit for everyone - such as required wheelchair ramps going into buildings. At a deeper layer, equity is also providing for an individual's needs with his/her input (naming those specific needs).

Inclusion comes before equity, just as diversity is a precursor to inclusion. One cannot expect to have inclusion without first ensuring that the diversity of perspectives, experiences, values, backgrounds, and beliefs - in addition to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality - are at the decision-making table. In addition to bringing diversity to the table for input, inclusion occurs when we consider who is not in the room and who stands to be affected positively and negatively. By being inclusive, even if it means slowing or even stopping, the process starts to move into a social justice-oriented system of transformation.

### **Northeast Academy for Engineering (NAE)**

To move forward on a plan, design, idea, or strategy without inclusion, for the sake of time, is inherently oppressive and will produce the multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage for which Crenshaw (2018) referred. Thus, compounding and creating those misunderstood obstacles. Therefore, for PBIS to be equitable and inclusive, staff and students must provide

input and play an intentional role in the development, implementation, evaluation, and modification of the program - an equitable and all-inclusive PBIS system created with students and staff in mind.

The Northeast Academy for Engineering (NAE), a seventh and eighth-grade middle school, located in the North District of Southeast, Texas, kept students and staff in mind at the beginning, in the middle and the end of their PBIS planning process during the fall of 2009. To do so, NAE utilized a previously determined character profile of staff and students to develop their PBIS Matrix and then combined the program with other previously used student management systems. Northeast Academy for Engineering (NAE), North District, and Southeast represent pseudonyms in this paper for the school, the school system, and the school's location.

## **The Beginning**

During the 2006-2007 school year, Northeast Academy for Engineering (NAE) staff and students developed Teacher and Student Profiles (Appendix A). Teachers filled out the profile for the ideal NAE student, while students completed the profile for the ideal (NAE) teacher. There were several character traits provided for teachers that included caring, fun, knowledgeable, and organized. For students, the character traits included organized, focused, responsible, and respectful. NAE utilized the student traits to develop their PBIS Matrix (Appendix B). The PBIS Matrix is an acronym that is short and articulable for the school community.



## **SWAG**

NAE called their PBIS Matrix the SWAG culture to use an acronym that best fits the culture of our students and community we serve. SWAG stood for Strong Character, Willingness to Succeed, Accountability, and Goals. SWAG was determined to be the acronym after a student and staff vote. As the predators, NAE had other choices that included ROAR, PAWS, and POUNCE. Using SWAG as our PBIS matrix acronym, the students, and staff of NAE showed the value in and acknowledged the natural and cultural ways in which our students moved, communicated, and matriculated the hallways. For example, some students meandered to class, while others walked at a quick pace. NAE had students who would stop and chat with multiple groups of students while others stopped to greet teachers. Then some would "post up," meaning they would lean against the wall in a group and watch others pass by during hall transition. The overall PBIS slogan was, "to be Northeast Predator you have to have SWAG."

## **The Middle**

Following the vote on SWAG as the acronym and the slogan, NAE began to work through the campus PBIS SWAG culture. This vote meant developing the NAE PBIS campus-wide matrix where students and staff would exhibit agreed-upon behaviors across multiple areas of the campus, including the classroom, gym, restroom/water fountain, cafeteria, locker room, hallway, bus ramp, and all offices. To incorporate input from staff and students, the PBIS Matrix was divided into departments: English, Math, SPED, Science, Social Studies, Electives, Front Office Staff, Administration, and P.E./Coaches (they took the locker rooms and gym). Each department met over one week and began to develop the SWAG matrix for their area. They determined expectations for their area per each character trait in SWAG. For example, to have

Strong Character in the Hallway, the following were considered: Walk on the right side of the hallway; Arrive at class on time; Respect others' space when walking; Walk, do not run.

Upon completion by all departments, NAE shared the matrix with the student body for input and revision. It is amazing to see students engaged in a new student management system, providing input and feedback to make the system inclusive. Once approved by staff and students, multiple posters were made, which were posted in every area of the building: Hallways had the Hallway SWAG Matrix; Gym had the GYM SWAG Matrix; Classroom had the Classroom SWAG Matrix; the Main Hallways by the front office and by the back of the school had the overall NAE PBIS SWAG Matrix. The purpose of posting the Matrix was to serve as a reminder to all students and staff of what the expectations were in that area. At any given time, a student or staff member would inform another that they were not meeting the PBIS expectation. Over time, we developed a PBIS Matrix for Emergency Dismissal, After School Dismissal, and for Bus Behavior.

## **The End**

The success and failure of any PBIS system - equitable and inclusive or not - is in the accountability, evaluation, and modification of the system, as necessary. NAE developed SWAG bucks for students to hand out to students who were "caught being good" around the building. Any teacher could provide a buck to any student. Before its implementation, however, there was some development among staff on relationship building and recognizing the various communication and movement styles of the multiple cultures at NAE, which included a student population that was over 85% of students of color in 2009 when the SWAG Matrix was designed.

Also, NAE had an ELL and SPED population over 30% with a Free and Reduced Lunch population over 80%. NAE is a very diverse campus, economically and socially. As a magnet school, NAE's student body represents every area of the North School District in which it resides.

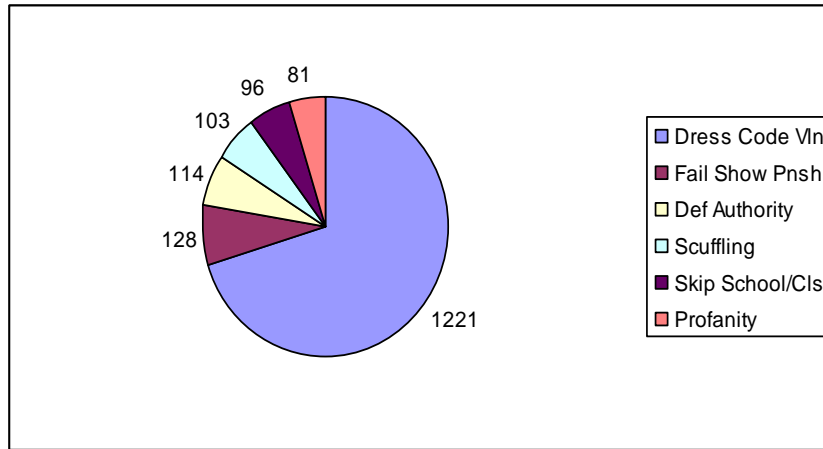
Therefore, the NAE staff development included culturally responsive (Gay, 2002) and culturally relevant practices (Ladson-Billings, 2009) as well as the recognition and appreciation of virtue (Boykin, 1983). These frameworks were critical due to the looming disciplinary issues the North District and NAE had regarding suspensions, and most damaging, the suspension of special education and second language learners. NAE utilized the culturally responsive and relevant practices to improve staff and student relationships, staff and family partnerships, and student-to-student interactions.

### **Success and Modification**

At the end of the 2009-2010 school year, disciplinary referrals decreased from 2,545 total incidents to 1,745. Behavioral specific incidents decreased from 1,683 to 1,265. This decrease meant that students were spending less time in the office and more time in the class. NAE attributed this change to the PBIS system allowing students and staff to remain aware of overall expectations. The charts below show a three-year trend in discipline data at NAE (2007-2008 to 2009 – 2010). The legend in each chart represents the top discipline incidents:

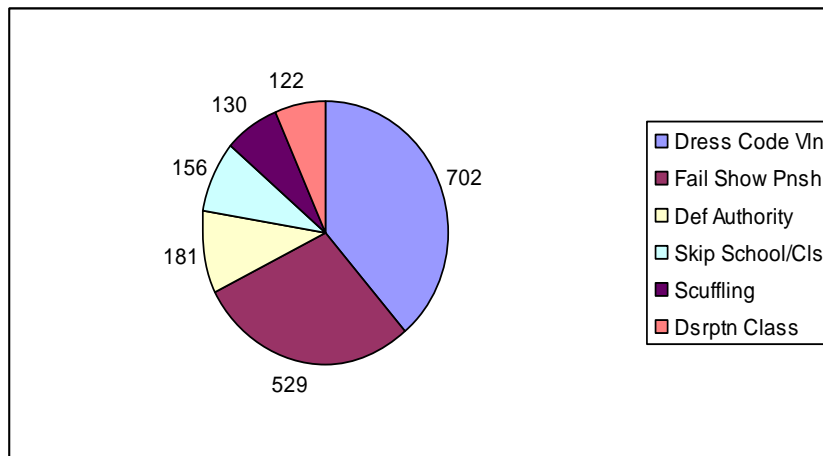
## 2007-2008

Total Discipline: 2,476 Behavioral: 1,053



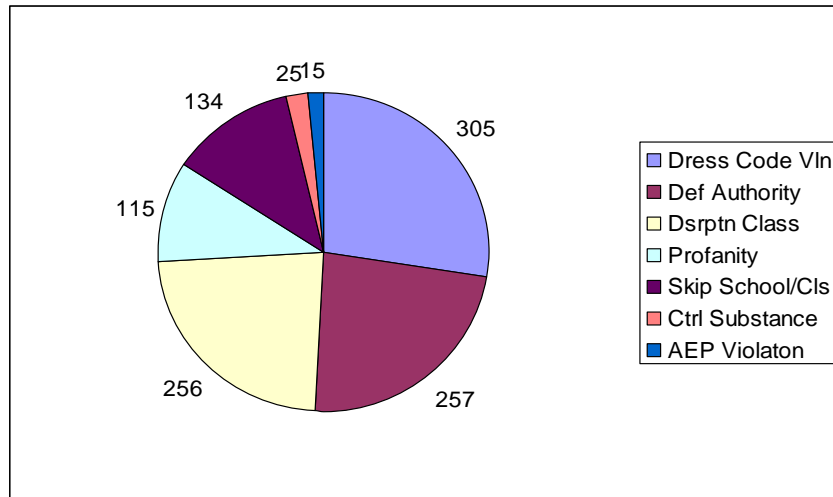
## 2008-2009

Total Discipline: 2,545 Behavioral: 1,683



## 2009-2010

Total Discipline: 1,725 Behavioral: 1,265



These tables show that over two years, total discipline remained well above 2,400 incidents. In addition, from 2007-2008 to 2008-2009, while total incidents increased by 100, total behavioral incidents increased by over 600. Behavioral incidents are those events that do not include dress code, cell phone, and tardy violations. Therefore, behavior incidents included but were not limited to: skipping class, disruption of class, defiance of authority, profanity, and fighting. However, in 2009-2010 there were over 800 fewer total discipline incidents and over 400 fewer behavior incidents.

### Good Behavior Referral

From 2010 to 2013, the overall discipline increased in 2010-2011 and began to dip slowly over the next three years. The greatest success was in 2011- 2012, when we had a 50% decrease in overall campus discipline. This decrease was the result of staff, students, and parents providing feedback that only "bad" students who improved were receiving through PBIS acknowledgment. Staff, students, and parents wondered how students who were consistently

"well-behaved" received acknowledgment. NEA reviewed the PBIS system and implemented the "Good Referral." This was a referral provided to students who exhibited good behaviors in class *and* the hallway.

In addition to SWAG bucks, students' classroom teachers gave a good behavior referral. Teachers were developed to give these out prior to, and after giving a discipline referral. The good behavior referral was the NAE way of implementing a 5:1 (5 positives to 1 negative) culture in addition to the PBIS SWAG culture. Therefore, a teacher might give a disciplinary referral and then, for the remainder of the week, seek to provide five good behavior referrals. What NAE found was that the training in cultural responsiveness and relevance allowed teachers to notice student behaviors more positively. Several of NAE's struggling learners are beginning to improve socially, behaviorally, and academically because of receiving multiple good behavior referrals.

### **The Rule of 748**

To capitalize on this, teachers were to follow the rule of 748. 748 represented the number of discipline referrals for defiance of authority in 2010-2011. In addition, 748 represented the two periods with the highest number of classroom discipline referrals - seventh and fourth - and the expected eight positive parent contacts teachers were to make each week. After conducting an audit of disciplinary referrals and locations, NAE discovered that the majority of its classroom discipline referrals were occurring during the fourth period (A, B, and C Lunch) and the seventh period, at the end of the school day. NAE determined that if it could begin to decrease the likelihood of students being referred during the fourth and seventh periods, then overall

classroom discipline, specifically defiance of authority, would improve. For buy-in, NAE shared detailed data of teachers who had zero classroom discipline referrals during those two periods.

For the rule of 748 (See Appendix C), teachers could only send out good referrals to the office during the fourth and seventh periods for 2011-2012. Whenever students came to the office for a good referral, they had their picture taken, and their parents were called to inform them of the good behavior. Teachers were also permitted to send good referrals during other periods as well (but no discipline referrals could be sent during fourth and seventh). Teacher comments included sharing which of the SWAG characteristics they displayed in addition to location, period, and time. For example, a teacher could write, "Sam Student shared strong character today in the hallway by de-escalating a conflict in the English hallway during fourth period." Another example could be, "Caron New Transfer showed accountability during the first period in the front office this morning by admitting that I had not charged them for a new I.D." Over time, the walls were filled with pictures of students, and several had multiple pictures. Phone calls home sometime resulted in tears from parents who up into middle school never received a phone call telling them what their child was doing "right." This practice turned out to be a great way to reward "bad" and "good" students.

Throughout the 2011-2012 school year, defiance of authority and overall discipline referrals as a whole dropped by 50%. Over this time, NAE sustained a Recognized rating under the Texas Accountability System and multiple increases in enrollment to over 1,100 students. The reason for the sustained drop was the initial inclusive element brought into the design of the system and the willingness of staff and students at NAE to provide feedback and adjustments. Furthermore, by targeting a specific behavior category that was steeped in bias (defiance), the staff and students were able to navigate common expectations for engagement among staff and

students and students and peers. This practice affected our special populations as fewer students with special education and second language services were being referred to the office or suspended for misinterpreted behaviors.

Because overall discipline referrals declined, more serious incidents such as fights, and drugs also declined. The 5:1 positive environment in partnership with the equitable and inclusive PBIS system (and later Love and Logic), resulted in a transformative change versus a transactional one. The school became an organic system that responded to the needs of staff and students, equitably and inclusively.

## **Conclusion**

This article discussed the transformation of PBIS leadership from transactional to transformational through the implementation of a Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) system from the classroom to district levels. It provided an analysis of how Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (CRPBIS) enhances the positive behavior of English Language Learners (ELLs). Lastly, through the discussion on the implementation of a district-wide and a campus PBIS program at Northwest Academy for Engineering (NAU), this article promoted culturally responsive and equity-based design and implementation measures that support a lasting cultural change toward the inclusion of all students, faculty, and stakeholders.

## **Recommendations**

School leaders will continue to face many challenges as they attempt to create a lasting and sustainable climate and culture change within schools. The mirrored reflection of academic



achievement is a school leader's expectations. Culture is the determinant of academic achievement. The hope of this article is that future thoughts and research on PBIS design and implementation include a solid, critical lens in equity and inclusion that will promote the biological whole over the comforts of the status quo individuals. Secondly, PBIS programs must be designed with ELLs and all culturally and linguistically diverse learners in mind by promoting positive social behaviors and restructuring the school's social organization. Lastly, kids are meant to talk and engage, not sit in social isolation from their peers. Therefore, this article also hopes that school systems and leaders review and reassess their PBIS program data by engaging stakeholders in the evaluation, redesign, and newly implemented equitable and inclusive PBIS systems.

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*Characteristics of a NAE Student:*

- **Problem-Solver**
- **Productive Citizen**
- **Critical Thinker**
- **Engaged**
- **Self-Motivated**
- **Responsible**
- **Respectful**
- **Prepared for Class**
- **Follows Directions**
- **Organized**
- **Positive Attitude**
- **Cooperative**
- **Open-minded**
- **Goal-oriented**
- **Hard-worker**
- **In Dress Code**
- **Never Gives Up**
- **Completes Assignmen**
- **Perfect Attendance or  
Few Absences**



**NAE PREDATORS**

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## *Characteristics of a NAE Teacher:*

- **Rigorous**
- **Passionate**
- **Fair and Consistent**
- **Thought Provoking**
- **Knowledgeable**
- **Enthusiastic**
- **Continually Learning**
- **Excellent Attendance**
- **Students Engaged with Hands-on Activities**
- **Examines Data**
- **Team Player**
- **Goes Above and Beyond**
- **Supportive, “Cheerleader”**
- **Differentiates Instructional Strategies**
- **Flexible, makes Adjustments**
- **Believes, ALL Students Can Achieve**
- **On-going Parent Communication**
- **Pushes Students Beyond Their Limits**



**NAE PREDATORS**

## Appendix B

### To be a Northeast Academy Predator You Have to Have **S.W.A.G** *Strong Character, Willingness to Succeed, Accountability, and Goals*

| NAE PBIS SWAG Matrix. MATRIX  | Classroom  | Hallway   | Cafeteria  | LMC  | Restroom/ Water   | Entry/ Dismissal   | Emergency Evacuation   | Bus/ Bus Ramp   |
|-------------------------------|--|---|--|--|---|--|--|---|
| <b>Strong Character</b>       | Respectful of themselves and others<br>Actively participates in class<br>Makes good judgments and is responsible<br>Have materials ready when bell rings   | Remember to use manners (please, thank you, excuse me)<br>Respect others.<br>Be considerate of others' space and things.<br>Follow the "Respect Each Other Policy"            | Enter in a quiet and orderly fashion<br>Go directly to your seat<br>Sit three to a bench only<br>Leave table only when your table is dismissed<br>Respect other and their property | Follow directions for handling wanted and unwanted materials<br>Help others when requested<br>Model appropriate behavior for others<br>Follow guidelines at all times  | Go to the restroom during hall change<br>Wash hands before leaving the restroom.<br>Flush the toilet and turn off the water.<br>Keep restroom clean<br>Wait your turn.                                    | Be Positive, respectful, and supportive to all<br>Follow Metal Detector procedures<br>Enter/Exit the building quietly and orderly.<br>Does not bring prohibited items to school.   | Treat all drills as real thing<br>Walk silently during all evacuations<br>Help others who do not know the procedures                           | Be courteous to others and obey the bus and driver safety rules.<br>Be respectful to others and their property.<br>Use appropriate tone and language on the bus.<br>Follow the driver safety rules for boarding and exiting the buses |
| <b>Willingness to Succeed</b> | Complete all assignments on time and in a timely manner<br>Ask for help when needed<br>Read, listen, and learn at all times<br>Learns from failures, never say never                                   | Go directly to your classes.<br>Listen and follow adult directions.<br>Walk on the right hand side of the hallway.<br>Walk quickly; do not run.                               | Remain quiet when someone is speaking on the stage<br>Read/Know the menu prior to entering the cafeteria<br>Bring only enough money to pay for what you are purchasing that day.   | Attempt to use the directions, signs, and resources independently<br>Learn how to use the catalogue and databases<br>Look for materials before asking where they are kept<br>Follow computer, Internet, and printing rules | No more than three in the restroom<br>Use restroom passes wisely<br>Use the restroom nearest to your class.<br>Follow "Respect Each Other Policy"   | Bring your backpack, agenda, homework, and other assignment every day<br>Focus on learning<br>Take all materials home needed for homework and reading counts<br>Go directly to your designated location (car, bus, cafeteria, class, etc.) | Follow teacher directions<br>Move quickly and quietly to required location<br>Listen intently for directions<br>Leave the building immediately | Follow all directions provided by the bus driver.<br>To ensure safety, remain in our seat while the bus is in motion.<br>Go directly to your bus during dismissal.<br>Remain in your seat while the bus is in motion.                 |
| <b>Accountability</b>         | Taking ownership or your own work<br>Take initiative; be a positive leader not a follower<br>Always meets deadlines and completes assignments<br>Become self-disciplined and responsible member of NAE | Have shirts tucked in and ID visible at all times<br>Be on time to all classes every period every day.<br>Use inside voices.<br>Have all your materials with you at all times | Go to the restroom during hunch.<br>Know your pin number<br>ID Badge is visible<br>Shirts tucked in and pants pulled up to the hip with a belt.                                    | Sign in as soon as you enter the LMC<br>Have ID ready<br>Return books on time - pay any late fines<br>Replace any lost/damaged books for which you are responsible   | Schedule restroom breaks during hall change.<br>Use restroom passes only when necessary.<br>Use restroom passes for restroom only   | ID Badges are visible and around your neck<br>Shirts are tucked and buttoned<br>Pants are above your hips with a belt<br>Enter the building immediately after being dropped off at school.   | Stay in a single filed line<br>Do not horseplay<br>Follow directions<br>Follow the procedures  | Demonstrate self control and use appropriate language.<br>Remain in dress code on your way to the bus.<br>Board your assigned bus only<br>Go directly into the school once you have exited your bus.                                  |
| <b>Goals</b>                  | Make each day a high quality educational experience<br>Learn something new everyday<br>Do the best you can.<br>Work at or beyond individual potential  | Follow the 5:1 policy<br>Report to class on time.<br>Walk at all times.<br>Follow all directions the first time they are given.   | Choose the shortest line.<br>Pay attention to information provided on the over head screen<br>Listen carefully to the speakers on the stage<br>Remain quiet in the kitchen area.   | Read more pages this week than the last<br>Read different genres each six weeks<br>Read for recreation<br>Read for educational and personal growth.  | Be on time to class despite going to the restroom or getting water<br>Make sure your shirt is tucked in and ID badge visible prior to leaving the restroom<br>Do not forget any materials in the restroom | Be on time to school everyday<br>Eat breakfast<br>Give 110% in everything that you do<br>Follow directions first time they are given   | Evacuate the building safely<br>Make a commitment to being safe.<br>Move quickly and quietly out of the building                               | Clean up after yourself and keep the bus clean.<br>Be on time to your bus stop<br>Remain in dress code<br>Keep hands, feet and objects to yourself.   |

# **Classroom Expectations**

## ***Strong Character***

- Respectful of themselves and others
- Actively participates in class
- Makes good judgments and is responsible
- Have materials ready when bell rings

## ***Willingness to Succeed***

- Complete all assignments on time and in a timely manner
- Ask for help when needed
- Read, listen, and learn at all times
- Learns from failures; never say never

## ***Accountability***

- Taking ownership of your own work
- Take initiative; be a positive leader not a follower
- Always meet deadlines and completes assignments
- Become self-disciplined and responsible member of NAE

## ***Goals***

- Make each day a high quality educational experience
- Learn something new everyday
- Do the best you can
- Work at or beyond individual potential



# 5:1

## Hallway Expectations

# 5:1

### *Strong Character*

- ❖ Follow the 5:1 policy.
- ❖ Follow the “Respect Each Other Policy”
- ❖ Be considerate of others’ space and things.
- ❖ Remember to use manners (please, thank you, excuse me).

### *Willingness to Succeed*

- ❖ Go directly to your classes.
- ❖ Listen and follow adult directions.
- ❖ Walk on the right hand side of the hallway.
- ❖ Walk quickly; do not run.

### *Accountability*

- ❖ Use inside voices.
- ❖ Have shirts tucked in and ID visible at all times
- ❖ Be on time to all classes every period every day.
- ❖ Have all your materials with you at all times

### *Goals*

- ❖ Keep hallways clean and clear of trash and debris.
- ❖ Report to class on time.
- ❖ Walk at all times.
- ❖ Follow all directions the first time they are given.

## Appendix C

### SWAG Bucks

|          |                               |  |          |                     |
|----------|-------------------------------|--|----------|---------------------|
| <b>X</b> | <i>Strong Character</i>       |  |          | <b>Classroom</b>    |
|          | <i>Willingness to Succeed</i> |  |          | <b>Hallway</b>      |
|          | <i>Accountability</i>         |  | <b>X</b> | <b>Cafeteria</b>    |
|          | <i>Goals</i>                  |  |          | <b>LMC</b>          |
|          |                               |  |          | <b>Bus/Bus Ramp</b> |

**Closing the Achievement Gap: Perspectives, Practices, and Strategies for Success**

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## **Abstract**

This article aims to discuss multiple perspectives on the existing achievement gap and the unprecedented challenge possessed by educational stakeholders to close it. Since the causes of these gaps are multiple and complex, there is a variety of well-crafted and managed strategies used to close it. This article will examine the ins and outs of the different factors that led to the achievement gap and approaches that can be used to close the gap. Due to the achievement gap being in almost every school in the United States, this article will further explore the implications that high and low resource communities, race, wealth, and life at home might be creating barriers and educational inequalities for minority students. Southern states have a different history related to education, so Texas's achievement gap will be a focus state due to its unique history and academic data. Another focus is the achievement gap between African Americans and Whites; therefore, many points will be catered to the African American student population.

*Keywords:* achievement gap, education, strategies, culturally responsive pedagogy

## **Closing the Achievement Gap: Perspectives, Practices, and Strategies for Success**

### **Introduction**

There are several challenges in education but finding research-based solutions for closing the achievement gap continues to receive much attention. The achievement gap refers to the distance between students of different races in academic performance, and educational attainment revealed through standardized testing. White children have performed higher and better than Black and Hispanic children on academic tests across the United States for many years. This achievement gap has attracted much attention because "the quality of experiences and outcomes at all levels of U.S. public education is relentless and extensive" (Howard, 2010, p. xvii). However, the academic gap has not received the attention it deserves from researchers despite its essential role in molding policymakers' behaviors. The challenge to close the achievement gap is due to complex and debatable factors, and if not properly addressed, the achievement gap will continue to widen every year. There are many perspectives related to the existence of the achievement gap, practices adopted by school districts, and proven effective strategies used in classrooms to close the achievement gap. Even though the continuous efforts toward remediation to close the achievement gap are still producing uneven results, this outcome has not stopped the pursuit to research and discover effective ways to address the achievement gap epidemic. To address this single most pressing and perplexing issue in education in the 21st century, this research article will examine and analyze perspectives, practices, and strategies that enhance the progression towards the goal of providing an equitable educational opportunity. There are many factors, demographic shifts, training opportunities, politics, policy, self-esteem builders, standards blending, and conditions that people must understand before addressing these

major issues. Knowing that contributing factors towards widening or closing the achievement gap vary from school to school, district to district, and community to community, the research must consider factors that have been identified in various studies as contributing to the achievement gap.

## **Public Opinion**

The public opinion about an issue can affect how that issue is addressed, so exploring the public opinion about the achievement gap can shape policymakers' agendas and decisions. The opinion of the public is important, but there have been a few attempts to assess and compare what Americans believe about today's gaps with students of different races, cultures, and economic statuses. Valant and Newark's (2016) research examines what the U.S. public believes about three distinct test gaps. The findings reveal strong, consistent evidence that the American public is more concerned about wealth-based test gaps than race or ethnicity-based gaps. After examining several proposals widely understood by the American public, three proposals that were plausible to gap-closing strategies were highlighted. The proposals focused on schools with mostly Black and Hispanic students from poor families by offering experienced teachers bonus money, providing government funds to help pay for private school tuition, and creating summer programs that these students could sign up to attend for free. Howard (2010) believes the achievement gap that exists is "merely a by-product of the gaps that exist in society at large and are only magnified in schools" (p.14).

Any attempts to give schools the primary responsibility of closing the achievement gap are extremely misguided because the schools did not create this gap in the first place. The public also thinks schools are only addressing the achievement gaps and educational debt on the surface

because it is the equitable thing to do to avoid scrutiny. If the system fails to address the public's concerns about education, it leaves everyone short in upholding important pillars of democracy, such as fairness, equity, and justice.

Taylor, Kyre, and King (2018) inform us in an article that Black parents in urban cities are interested in transforming the quality of education to help their children succeed, but they feel unwelcomed by the school. The U.S. public continues to support its public schools, but they want schools to become more effective. The public is willing to endorse a wide variety of reforms it thinks will bring the change they want to see in the schools. Overall, Americans are guided more by practical considerations than by ideals. They need to see which approaches were measured as successful when there was an implementation of practical applications in the classrooms. Americans are searching for something that works as it may relate to accountability, choice, class-size reduction, and changes in teacher recruitment and pay. Educational reform proposals in each of these areas are supported by the public's votes, not necessarily the majority votes, but in some instances, though, sizable portions of the public remain unconvinced by advocates on either side.

### **Demographic Shifts**

For the first time, the overall number of Latino, African American, and Asian students in public K-12 schools is expected to surpass the number of white students. The changes in demographics have widened the achievement gap and posed additional issues for teachers, leaders, and policymakers.

Change always brings difficult challenges. Change is something that presses us out of our comfort zone. It is destiny-filtered, heart grown, faith built. Change is inequitable, and not a

respector of persons. Change is for the better or for the worst, depending on where it occurs. Change has ripping effects on those who won't let go. Flex is the key. Change is won by victors not victims; and the choice is ours... Change is measured by its impact on all who are connected to it. Change happens in the heart before it is proclaimed by works. Change is like driving in a fog - there is low visibility, but the trip is still possible... Change is here to stay (Howard, 2010, p. 35).

As schools encounter the demographic shift, they must prepare to make the necessary adjustments to deal effectively with the change because the ethnic demographics have important implications for schools and classroom teachers. Many believe that the way to address the achievement gap is by closing the opportunity gap. One of the greatest challenges that faces this nation is educational inequality in race, class, and gender. The well-being of our society is threatened by the achievement gap of children of color between lower and upper-income families (Bennett, 2015).

Due to the major demographic shift of students attending public schools, researchers must pay attention to the specific data surrounding this shift. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) released a report titled "Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2017," which indicates that for 16 years, the percentage of White and Black students' attendance decreased, but in contrast, other racial/ethnic groups increased. The increases included Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and children of two or more races. The analysis of poverty levels in the NCES report reveals that in 2014, the number of children under 18 living in poverty was the highest for Black children (37%), followed by Hispanic children (32%) and White and Asian Children (12%) each. Analysis of these demographic differences and disparities has prompted educational researchers to situate the



achievement gap in a clearer context of what they believe as the opportunity gap. For those students who are considered disadvantaged, low achievement has a wide-reaching effect, including higher dropout rates, incarceration, poor health, substance abuse, poverty, and more. The United States must improve the educational outcomes for its diverse learners because their success is linked to the nation's well-being. The demographic shift in enrollment is a milestone that carries many challenges for educators. More students are living in poverty, more are requiring English-language instruction, and more are having different life experiences from those of their teachers, who remain overwhelmingly white (Maxwell, 2019).

### **Perspectives of Education in the Southern United States (Texas)**

According to Young and Young (2016), African American students consistently perform at lower levels than their counterparts despite evidence revealing efforts and financial contributions for establishing accountability standards in Texas for the purpose of addressing the academic dilemma. Texas increased standards and academic accountability to motivate teachers, parents, and students to work to elevate this academic dilemma, but their efforts are perceived as superficial by some researchers due to its static results.

Education in the Southern United States for people of African descent is marked by enslavement. The state devalued human beings, valued inexpensive laborers, and used education as a socializing agent for shaping the society and its norms. According to the NCES (2015), there are 12,413,455 students in rural public schools in the United States with 1,235,964 of them being of African descent. Texas has the most students attending schools in rural areas within the United States, with 937,886 students, and has 401,314 students attending schools in rural Texas, which is more than in other states. Nearly one in five students in rural Texas are impoverished, and this

number is growing yearly (NCES, 2015).

Fox and Walt (2016) analyze the demographic and academic data to draw conclusions about the reasons for a larger achievement gap in Southern United States, specifically Texas. Students of African American descent must be provided with time and space to authentically express their various forms of intelligences and cultural frameworks because they continue to face more limited life chances and life choices than White students due to performance on a standardized test. In the South, the history of education reveals a pattern of highly excluded and racially segregated groups who historically were denied equal access to schooling for centuries. Education in the South could no longer be used as the equalizer in the United States because these states had more challenges to overcome than other states. The same group of people that was denied education in the past is the same group of people that is struggling in today's educational system. "Many scholars recognize that the distinct differences in academic performance between various subgroups are not new occurrences, but part of an ongoing struggle for democracy, fairness and greater educational equity and access for all students" (Howard, 2010, p. 13).

### **Environmental Factors**

Many argue that parents, peers, churches, neighborhoods, and schools are significant learning ecologies that influence African American children's development. Taylor, Kyere, and King (2018) contend that children's educational success is based on continuous investments in and engagement of each of these variables. Urban students and their families are often categorized as at-risk and suggest low academic involvement. Due to these perceptions, many urban educators seem to doubt the ability for urban students to learn, especially Black learners.

Students come to school with different experiences related to their access to resources, support, and possibilities for academic growth. For disadvantaged students, low achievement has a wide-reaching effect. These students could have had very different lives, had their experiences in school, at home, and in their communities provided them the tools they needed to succeed inside and outside of school.

The effects of environmental and social stressors demonstrate the vulnerabilities of socioeconomically and environmentally disadvantaged children. Health science and policy are at a crossroad because the persistence of health disparities and environmental inequalities are contributing factors to the achievement gap. Advocates for such communities have argued for a long time that their neighborhoods are threatened by multiple environmental stressors. These stressors could include air and water pollution and substandard housing. These community leaders also contend that existing regulations fail to protect residents adequately because the regulations are focused narrowly on pollutants and their sources. There is growing evidence that shows social stressors, including poverty, racial discrimination, crime, malnutrition, and substance abuse also affect these communities. Research is beginning to show how the cumulative effects of social and environmental stressors can produce health disparities, ultimately contributing to the achievement gap.

### **Responsibility of Policy Makers**

There are policies that schools can implement to support students who experience low achievements. According to the Department of Education's website, they collect information on schools and teachings that would help the States establish effective school systems. Their responsibility is to focus and emphasize getting information about what works in education to

teachers and education policymakers. Despite the growth of the Federal role in education, the Department of Education never strayed far from what would become its official mission, which is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.

The Department of Education carries out its mission in two major ways. First, the Secretary and the Department play a leadership role in the ongoing national dialogue over how to improve the results of our education system for all students. This effort involves such activities as raising national and community awareness of the education challenges confronting the nation, disseminating the latest discoveries on what works in teaching and learning and helping communities work out solutions to difficult educational issues. Secondly, it pursues its twin goals of access and excellence through the administration of programs that cover every area of education and range from preschool education through postdoctoral research.

The findings of the study by Hung et al. (2019) show that although policy and program efforts have been used to equalize the educational gap, the investments have not been able to reduce the disparities further. In the era of U.S. education policy shifts, such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the more recent Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a common aim is to reduce the achievement gaps, particularly between White and Black students. "The ineffective increase in spending highlight that the United States cannot just throw money at a problem, but rather must address the underlying issues that create and sustain achievement gaps, where inequality in opportunity may exist outside the classroom" (Hung et al., 2019, p. 13).

### **Substantial Matters of Policy**

Before recommending changes in policy, researchers and policymakers must initially

consider policy matters because they are also critical for closing the gap. One significant matter is English Language Learners (ELLs). ELLs are the fastest-growing population within the educational system in the United States, and the majority of these students are U.S. born and speak Spanish as their first language. In 2015, about 4.7 million public school students participated in ELL programs. According to Language Acquisition and Educational Achievement of English-Language Learners (2018), Hispanic students made up the National ELL Achievement Gaps Addressing Achievement Gaps. Policies and systemic changes are needed to close the achievement gap for the majority of this group (78 %), with around 3.6 million participating in ELL programs. Many of these students also come from low-income families, and most perform well below their peers, which reveals a distinct achievement gap (NCES, 2017).

Another major matter of policy is absenteeism. According to the recently released data, 6.5 million U.S. public school students are chronically absent. Balfanz (2016) defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10% or more of school days for any reason. The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights surveys 15 or more days as its matrix. Balfanz (2016) states, "average daily attendance rates mask attendance challenges" (p. 9). All U.S. schools must track attendance, but the system they use does not measure chronic absenteeism. Studies on chronic absenteeism have consistently found links to lower achievement levels, especially from children of low-income families. Furthermore, chronic absenteeism is also negatively linked to increasing the odds of dropping out of school and encounters with the juvenile justice system, putting these students in the middle of the school-to-prison pipeline.

If we ignore the discipline gap, we will be unable to close the achievement gap. Of the 3.5 million students who were suspended in 2011-12, 1.55 million were suspended at least twice.

Given that the average suspension is conservatively put at 3.5 days, we estimate that U.S. public school children lost nearly 18 million days of instruction in just one school year due to exclusionary discipline (Losen et al., 2015). The discipline concerns led to another matter of policy. Discipline issues plague the classroom around the United States. Out of school suspensions are more common at the secondary level and are racially and ethnically divided across the country where African American and Latino males are consistently suspended more frequently than white males and all female students. African American females with disabilities are also more likely to be given out of school suspension as a disciplinary practice than any other ethnicities with disabilities. ELL students that attend schools with English-only policies are also more likely to be suspended. Out of school suspensions result in the following damaging results that can have a significant lifelong impact: 1) denying students valuable instructional time, 2) failing to recognize students' emotional, social, and academic needs, 3) increasing the academic challenges of already disadvantaged students, and 4) potentially violating students' civil right to have access to education.

All significant matters of policy must be considered when policymakers discuss policy reforms and decisions about strategies to close the achievement gap. Policymakers have the responsibility of determining the priority issues in education and finding measurable ways to fix this problem.

### **Recommended Changes in Policy**

To close the achievement gap, there need to be changes to policy. The states could expand their definition of education to include early learning for three to five-year-old students so that all students, regardless of race, can have access to high-quality early education to prepare

them for success in school. Specifically, African American students tend to start kindergarten significantly behind their peers in their early learning development, so their reading and math skills are low. For the ELL student population, it is important to establish educational policies that allocate resources to support the teachers, students, and their families and to provide high-quality professional development in ELL instructional practices and cultural competence.

Another recommendation for policy change could be to revise statewide improvement plans so that districts and schools with a minimum of 45% of minority populations need to be identified to establish a statewide achievement gap oversight committee. The purpose of the committee would be to actively monitor the plans and efforts of these identified schools and districts to close the achievement gaps within their student populations. This committee would also provide resources to help these schools and districts create or revise improvement plans with specific goals and strategies, as well as monitoring benchmarks to address the needs of minority students specifically. The revision of policy should be a collaboration with individuals and boards within higher education to revise and develop statewide practices that increase college, technical school, and career access for minority students. Creating partnerships between higher education institutions and school districts to provide professional development programs for educators who emphasize improving school climate, engaging diverse classrooms, and employing instructional strategies specifically for diverse students.

Another policy change would be to revise how attendance is reported by districts. The policy can identify schools with a minimum of 20% overall chronic absenteeism to establish a statewide oversight committee. The purpose of the committee would be to actively monitor these schools and adopt an initiative program like My Brother's Keeper Success Mentor Initiative. This program assigned a mentor to students with chronic absenteeism, which had an overall

improvement in student academic and behavior achievement. This committee would also provide resources and incentives to help these schools and districts create or revise improvement plans with specific goals and strategies, as well as monitoring benchmarks to address the needs of the students with chronic absenteeism specifically.

Another policy revision recommendation could be accurately tracking discipline infractions fairly and justly. District and school leaders are in the best positions to effect a meaningful change in the culture and discipline practices at schools by fostering an awareness of the disparaging effects of out-of-school suspension and implementing school and district-wide restorative discipline practices. Districts and schools also need to put in place the following policies and practices: (1) Track the discipline patterns at individual campuses by collecting school data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and gender in order to positively impact institutional effectiveness and equity, (2) provide resources to support school and district-wide professional development focused on implementing more effective, practical, and alternative discipline practices, including restorative practices that address students' needs and help teachers understand how to meet their professional and legal responsibilities and avoid unjustifiable disciplinary exclusion, (3) protect the civil rights of children and provide them equal access to learning, and (4) establish accountability measures to ensure the implementation and support of more effective, equitable, and thoughtful discipline practices (Losen et al., 2015).

### **Infuse Cultural Competence**

Cultural competence has been proven as an effective way to close gaps. Establishing standards and strategies for culturally responsive practices for educating Black and Latino males and creating tools and guidelines for implementing and assessing them can help close the



achievement gap. Prioritizing and holding district and school-based educators accountable in their evaluations for cultural responsiveness can ensure that all teachers and staff members participate in regular professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy and behavior management, and ensure that daily, in-school professional collaboration time is used to improve the curriculum and instruction, paying specific attention to Black and Latino males (Tung et al., 2015).

Developing the ability to do or learn something well and easily among district and school leaders in understanding theories about the education of students of color so that they can model explicit talk about racism and other isms in our schools and classrooms. According to the National Education Association website, in matters of school policy reforms, it is important to consider the following questions: (1) Are the communities these policies affect contributing to the policy-making process? (2) Are their voices heard and concerns represented? (3) What might be the unintended consequences of this reform? (4) Will the educational outcomes of this policy reform raise the level of achievement of all students or only that of students of a certain demographic? (5) How will the policy outcomes be monitored? (6) How will the data be collected and interpreted? (7) Are these reforms setting up all teachers and all students for success? Howard (2010) revealed five specific practices for improving student academic performance: visionary leadership, teachers' effective practices, intensive academic support, the acknowledgment of race, and parental and community engagement.

Systems and organizations that exemplify cultural competence demonstrate acceptance and respect for cultural differences. The National Center for Cultural Competence provides guidelines for creating a mission statement for an organization that articulates principles, rationale, and values for cultural and linguistic competence in all aspects of the organization,

which is vital. There must be an implementation of specific policies and procedures that integrate cultural and linguistic competence into each core function of the organization. Schools must identify, use, and/or adapt evidence-based and promising practices that are culturally and linguistically competent and develop structures and strategies to ensure consumer and community participation in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of the organization's core functions. Schools must make policies and procedures to recruit, hire, and maintain a diverse and culturally and linguistically competent workforce. Lastly, schools must provide fiscal support, professional development, and incentives for the improvement of cultural and linguistic competence at the board, program, and faculty and/or staff levels.

It does not stop after the hiring of great faculty. Regardless of the experience of the teachers hired, schools must dedicate resources for both individual and organizational self-assessment of cultural and linguistic competence. There must also be a way to develop the capacity to collect and analyze data using variables that have a meaningful impact on culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Teachers and school leaders must practice principles of community engagement that result in the reciprocal transfer of knowledge and skills between all collaborators, partners, and key stakeholders (National Center for Cultural Competence).

### **Effective Principal Leadership Practices**

Research on effective principal leadership and developing high levels of supportive social capital provides a context for reviewing the attached body of educational research that explores effective practices, programs, and structures to increase student learning and close the achievement gap. Principals have the power to build a positive school culture that supports a growth mindset for all learners. A student's mindset is powerful in predicting scores as compared

to a student's home environment and demographics. In addition to building a school culture with a growth mindset that benefits all learners, effective principals also create conditions where collective teacher efficacy (CTE) can flourish. CTE is a shared belief that educators working collaboratively can positively influence student outcomes. "When teachers believe that together, they are capable of developing students' critical thinking skills, creativity, and mastery of complex content, it happens" (Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells, 2017). When teachers collaborate, there is a boost of energy, motivation, and confidence to try new approaches, take on challenging tasks, and set rigorous goals that improve learning for all students.

School leaders play an important part in building teacher efficacy. The greatest power that principals have in schools is that they can control the narrative of the school, establishing a culture where students and teachers can grow, learn, and be acknowledged for their efforts. If the narrative is about high expectations, growth in relation to inputs, what it means to be a 'good learner' in various subjects, and what impact means, then teachers and students will think about learning in a different way (Donohoo, et al., 2017, p. 21).

## **Self-Esteem**

According to Schellenberg and Grothaus (2018), academic achievement has been consistently likened to self-esteem. Research shows that students with higher levels of self-esteem attain higher levels of academic achievement; therefore, schools need to adopt programs that increase it.

Historically, students of color and those from families with low income have experienced a significantly lower rate of academic achievement than their White middle-class peers, resulting in low self-esteem. Teachers need high self-esteem as well to be successful in teaching all

learners, but more specifically, the urban learner who needs it most. Educators can have a negative impact on students' self-image, academic achievements, and school experiences, so it is important for schools to use strategies to help build a learner's self-esteem.

Saphier (2017) suggests that surrounding students with positive and reassuring messages maximizes learning, and it helps students to believe in themselves. These messages and beliefs in one's own ability to learn are at the core of closing the achievement gap. Saphier (2017) encourages students to believe in themselves by first letting them know that they have an able brain, and secondly, the effort is the main determination of their academic success. Teachers must give students belief, confidence, tools, and desire to be academically and behaviorally successful.

Standards blending is a culturally responsive strategy that consists of the integration of core academics and school counseling standards. Schellenberg and Grothaus (2018) suggest that standards blending specifically aligns school counseling interventions with school academic missions and demonstrates a direct impact on student achievement and closing the achievement gap. Effective standards blending builds self-esteem and character and helps to close the achievement gap.

### **The Importance of Teacher Collaboration**

National, regional, and local policies and practices have the potential to create conditions that promote student success. Some practices include investing in and setting high standards for high-quality teacher education, providing time for teacher collaboration in planning curriculum, engaging in meaningful and relevant professional development, and revising teacher evaluation criteria to include inquiry and collaboration. Some practices come at a steep cost. Systemic

practices that impede providing all students with enriched educational experiences often involve the inequitable distribution of resources. Not only do low performing schools tend to serve large numbers of poor and minority students, but these schools also struggle to attract and retain high-quality teachers. As a result of poorly maintained school facilities, outdated technology, and an obsolete curriculum, inequitable school funding occurs and becomes an issue. Institutional racism and a lack of cultural competence at district and school levels need to be recognized and understood as impacting students' experiences.

Schools that have had success with closing the achievement gap have established policies and practices that focus on addressing human capital needs. First, teachers who work to close the achievement gap should be well-prepared to address students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Secondly, teachers should be supported in their efforts to revise and improve their instructional practices in order to yield high achieving student performance. Increasing the awareness, knowledge, and commitment to culturally responsive teaching results in better outcomes for all learners, the culture of schools, and the attitudes of the teachers.

## **Conclusion**

There is a sense of urgency to close the achievement gap, but during this fast pace race to find strategies and practices that work, researchers and policymakers must slow down to thoroughly examine all contributing factors to this problem in order to really offer effective ways to help this academic crisis in the United States. No longer can decision-makers take a passive approach to solve the academic gap epidemic, because if the gap is not addressed properly, the United States will be in worse condition in the future. Each of us has a moral responsibility to ponder what role we are taking to close the achievement gap, what questions we are posing to

eradicate discrimination and educational inequalities, and what actions we are engaged in to end exclusion and oppression no matter what shape or forms it takes. This article reveals many different perspectives about the achievement gap and the collaboration needed in the effort to create the change that the majority of the people want to see in education.

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**Technology access and equity issues for students of color related to COVID19: A case study  
in an urban school district**

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## **Introduction**

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court unanimously ruled separate but equal should not apply to public education and separate facilities were in and of themselves unequal (Brown, 2006). Although the appearance of equity in the form of integration was happening, another form of segregation was just starting: The school choice movement and zip code attendance zones. Schools service students according to the zip codes near the school. It was thought that the court ruling would begin to see some semblance of equity across schools because of integration. Even though the law says to integrate, we still have equity issues in school.

Limited research has been reported on the practices, responses, and experiences of COVID-19, considering that the public is in the crux of understanding and addressing the unique challenges of this pandemic. However, there is some available literature that helps to provide context of the implications and impact of this unprecedented event that society is continuously learning to adapt and adjust to. For example, social patterning research has focused on the impact, and particularly the equity implications on the perspectives of seasonal schooling (e.g., no school during the summer, no school during winter break). The perspectives focus on summer learning and seasonal patterning of academic losses and gains for students. The pandemic-enforced learning environments could be similarly compared to seasonal school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2001). Students are attending or “doing” school; however, they are not “in school”. Therefore, even though teachers and parents are continuing to teach children, the absence of the structured learning environment can be viewed as out of school learning (Alexander et al., 2001).

For most students, COVID-19 has presented several challenges, including transitioning

from face-to-face classes to online learning. Students and their parents are waking up every day to a computer monitor, smart phone, and/or tablet with some type of internet accessibility and connectivity in order to complete their assignments, but what about those students and those families that do not have computers or internet access? Public spaces (e.g., coffee shops, public libraries, fast food restaurants) where people could normally get free access are not open during the pandemic. However, there seems to be a critical issue in which many students lack the required resources to continue their learning during the absence of structured learning environments (Reich et al., 2020; Roth, 2020). Now questions are being asked as to how the issues of access to technological resources are being addressed and how the decisions are made to address equitable access to resources – that is, who is making sure that students get access to resources and how are they deciding who gets what resource. Some school districts are partnering with internet providers. Other districts are leasing out technology from large computer companies. In the meantime, school districts are creating at-home learning kits or packets that are available for delivery or pick up. While we know that these efforts are definitely needed and appreciated, and in this time of crisis in which the obstacles of gaining access to instructional materials are relevant, how can we as learning communities support students academically, socially, and emotionally to meet the achievement success for all students? Our students deserve and need appropriate and equitable access to technology. We have a responsibility to build a more sustainable system in our schools so that we can be able to deal with the unprecedented circumstances of COVID-19.

### **Research Problem Statement**

Considering the unprecedented events of COVID-19, businesses, organizations, and

institutions including public schools have had to respond in quick and deliberate manners to deal with the events associated with this pandemic. Specifically, public schools were struggling with transitioning from face-to-face schooling to some version of virtual learning environments. School leaders and teachers attempted to continue to teach and meet the needs of students as normally as possible. However, in their efforts to “teach all reach all,” there was the realization that whether students were in the richest or of the poorest of districts, the gamut of socioeconomic needs for students were out of their control. School leaders are charged with providing equitable access to instruction and technology for students on their campus. As a result of this pandemic-enforced distance learning, students and communities of color across the country are experiencing disparities and are being marginalized because they are not receiving adequate and equitable resources. Subsequently, there is major concern of whether and how school districts are able to provide equitable access, including internet and essential equipment (e.g., laptops, tables, hotspots for internet connection) for distance learning to all students to help them stay connected with their schools, classrooms, and communities.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of the study was to investigate equity, specifically technological access including internet and laptops or technical devices related to two middle schools in the Houston Independent School District (HISD). This study also seeks to understand what factors the schools considered to determine how technology would be distributed to students. Equally, this study will help provide insights into how the district may be able to provide equitable access to technology for the future.

## **Research Proposition**

This explanatory investigation of how schools attempted to figure out how to adapt to their new learning environment was to identify specific practices, including data collection, that will be used in a later study and used to identify specific analytic procedures proven useful to develop the conceptual framework for a final study.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Question**

For this case study, the following research question was used as a guide and focus: How are decisions made to determine equitable access for students of color during virtual and distance learning related to COVID 19?

### **Research Design**

A case study method was the approach used for the project. This empirical method was specifically designed “to investigate a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin, 2018, p. 15). Therefore, a case study was more beneficial in understanding real-life situations or cases, assuming that contextual background is particularly relevant to the case. In this particular case, two middle schools located in one of the country’s largest urban school districts were investigated to understand how decisions were made by campus leaders to address equitable access, specifically to technology, to meet the academic needs of students during pandemic-enforced altered learning environments. The two campuses were selected due to their student demographics, predominantly African American, and their

diverse campus administration, particularly experience, race, and gender.

## **Data Collection and Sources**

Multiple sources of archival records, documents, and scientific data (e.g., Texas Education Agency Statistical Reports (TEA), Houston Area Realtors, Social Explorer.com) was used to develop this case study. As indicated by Stake (1995), triangulation is applied to avoid misperceptions and invalidity by having the reader gain insight into the case for the construction of meaning as well as the quality of the research which is not based on reproducibility, but on whether or not the researchers' personal perspectives are valued.

Data was collected from Social Explorer, which provides information about demographics and allows the user to create data maps for any part of the United States (*Maps - Social Explorer*, n.d.). By using the zip codes related to the attendance zones for each campus in Social Explorer, we were able to retrieve information regarding demographics, median income, median home value, percent of residents with post-high school education and percent of homeowners and renters. Additional data was collected from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), which is responsible for overseeing K-12 public education in Texas (TEA, 2020). School rating data from the School Report Cards (SRC) provided by TEA were used. The SRC links data from the Texas Academic Performance Reports (TAPR), state accountability ratings and campus financial information.

## **Site Selection**

Houston Independent School District (HISD) is a large urban public-school district in Texas. HISD has 280 schools which serve 209,772 students (Houston Independent School

District / Houston ISD Homepage, n.d.). HISD covers over 300 miles of Houston and surrounding suburbs (Houston Independent School District / Houston ISD Homepage, n.d.). For this study, two middle schools were selected.

The two middle schools were selected due to the student demographics and the campus leadership diversity. These characteristics were critical for understanding how these campus leaders made critical decisions to provide equitable access for all students, specifically during the unprecedented event of COVID-19.

### **Cameron Middle School \***

Cameron Middle School is located in the middle of the Oak Forest neighborhood and was founded in 1957 (School Information / History, n.d.). Oak Forest was established in 1947 and is one of Houston's largest neighborhoods. Cameron Middle School's attendance zone includes three zip codes: 77092, 77018, and 77008.

Cameron Middle School, a 6-8 grade campus, is considered a neighborhood school and has easy accessibility to resources and students can participate in after-school and other school activities. The campus received an overall rating of B from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for the 2018-2019 school year (Agency, 2019b). Cameron Middle School received three distinctions: student achievement, closing the gaps, and school progress (Agency, 2019b).

### **Pikes Middle School \***

Pikes Middle School is located on the East side of Houston, Texas, and is about 3.1 miles from the Port of Houston. Pikes Middle School, built in 1979, was named after a former

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\* The name of the middle school has been changed for the purpose of anonymity.

principal known for standing up for justice for his students and staff. Pikes Middle School attendance zone encompasses only one zip code which has 17 subdivisions (Houston Subdivision Information - Neighborhood Finder - HAR.Com, n.d.;).

Pikes is a 6-8 grade campus and had a total enrollment of 673 students for the 2018-2019 academic school year. Even though Pikes is also considered a neighborhood school, the vast majority of its students are bused in because most of them live too far to walk.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Marshall and Rossman (2011), case studies may be dependent on historical and document analysis. Historical and document analysis is an integral component of the data collection process. The reader is taken into the setting and context of the phenomenon with a sense of great detail and presence from the case study (2011). Explanation building and a special type of pattern matching was the procedure used to analyze the data from each of the cases at Cameron and Pikes Middle Schools. After developing our research question, we identified evidence that addressed the research questions. A tentative conclusion was drawn based on the evidence that was collected. For this study, the goal of the analysis was not to generate hypotheses to conclude a study, but rather to develop ideas for further study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Yin, 2018).

More so, the goal of the analysis process was to build a general explanation for one case (Pikes Middle School) that seamlessly fits the explanation of the other case (Cameron Middle School). Yin reports that “the elements of explanations are “to ‘explain’ a phenomenon is to stipulate a resumed set of causal sequences about it, or ‘how’ or ‘why’” some outcome has



occurred” (2018, p. 179). The data was analyzed with the interest of providing explanations that reflect the causal sequences and patterns that revealed significant awareness into social and public policy processes. First, we identified the zip codes of each school's attendance zone from the district data. Next, we used the web-based mapping site to filter for neighborhood demographics, median home values, median income, percent of residents with post-high school degrees, and percent of resident homeowners and renters (*Maps - Social Explorer*, n.d.). While looking at the district data, we identified the school enrollment information for the 2018-2019 academic school year, student demographic data, and state school rating. School specific teacher salary data was identified with The Texas Tribune.

The same case study covered two cases, Pikes Middle School and Cameron Middle School. Ultimately, one single set of cross-case descriptions and conclusions were made for both cases. According to Yin (1994), as cited in Scholz and Tietje (2002), “every case should serve a specific purpose within the overall scope of the inquiry. Here, a major insight is to consider cases as one would consider multiple experiments – that is, to follow a ‘replication’ logic” (p. 45). Other scholars, Bhattacharya (2017) and Merriam (1998) acknowledge the resourcefulness of multiple case studies as a strategy to provide analytical perspectives on characteristics that are similar and different between two case.

As stated earlier, Pikes Middle School is considered a neighborhood school, yet over half of the students are bus riders. The resources available to the students in this area of the district are few and limited. Because most students are bus riders, students have a difficult time participating in after school and other school activities. The campus received an overall rating of C for 2018-2019, from TEA school year (Agency, 2019b). Pikes Middle School also received three distinctions; student achievement, closing the gaps, and school progress (Texas Education

Agency, 2019b).

## Findings

Table 1 provides demographic data for student enrollment by ethnicity and by student groups.

**Table 1**

*Summary of School Demographic Data*

| Item                         | Cameron Middle School | Pikes Middle School |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Total Enrollment             | 1,233                 | 673                 |
| Enrollment by Ethnicity      |                       |                     |
| African American             | 14.6%                 | 21.0%               |
| Hispanic                     | 58.9%                 | 75.6%               |
| White                        | 22.2%                 | 2.5%                |
| Enrollment by Student Groups |                       |                     |
| Economically Disadvantage    | 56.7%                 | 88.6%               |
| English Language Learners    | 14.7%                 | 37.3%               |
| At-Risk                      | 44.0%                 | 70.0%               |
| Disciplinary Actions         |                       |                     |
| In-School Suspensions        | 552                   | 0                   |
| Out-of-School Suspensions    | 359                   | 300                 |

(Agency, 2020)

As shown in the table, both Cameron Middle School and Pike Middle School have different enrollment numbers; however, the campuses' enrollments by ethnicity are similar for African American and Hispanic students. Table 1 provides an overview of out of school suspensions (OSS) and in-school suspensions (ISS) for both middle school campuses. Both Cameron Middle School and Pikes Middle School have high OSS numbers; however, Cameron chose to also utilize ISS options for disciplinary actions where Pikes did not. Even with high OSS and ISS numbers, Cameron Middle School received higher ratings for progress measures and overall school rating than Pikes Middle School. However, both Cameron Middle School and Pikes Middle School fall short in closing the gaps for students.

Table 2 provides comparative data regarding housing for the communities of each school, Cameron and Pikes Middle Schools.

**Table 2**

*Attendance Zone Data*

| Item                                | Cameron Middle School | Pikes Middle School |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Total Population in Attendance Zone | 101,454               | 38,796              |
| Population by Ethnicity             |                       |                     |
| African American                    | 19.5%                 | 19.8%               |
| Hispanic                            | 43.2%                 | 73.0%               |
| White                               | 72.4%                 | 73.4%               |
| Median Income                       | \$77,505              | \$34,967            |
| Education                           |                       |                     |
| Bachelor's Degree                   | 43.7%                 | 6.8%                |

|                   |           |          |
|-------------------|-----------|----------|
| Master's Degree   | 17.8%     | 2.4%     |
| Housing           |           |          |
| Homeowners        | 54.2%     | 59.7%    |
| Renters           | 33.5%     | 40.4%    |
| Median Home Value | \$321,533 | \$73,900 |

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(Maps - Social Explorer, n.d.)

The neighborhood of Oak Forest that sits in Cameron Middle School's attendance zone and has undergone gentrification in the last few years. In 2014, white flight began and land in Oak Forest was up for grabs; the lots and older homes were being bought and demolished to make room for larger pricier homes (Lane, 2014). This has contributed to the higher average home value and median income (*Maps - Social Explorer*, n.d.). With this influx of higher median home values and residents with higher percentages of advanced degrees comes an easier access to resources which is very different from the neighborhoods Pikes Middle School services, which have a significantly lower median home value and fewer residents with advanced degrees. Also, Cameron Middle School has a Vanguard Magnet school within a school which attracts more students to the campus (See Appendix B). The number of students transferring into Cameron Middle School is about 24% while Pikes Middle School has a 1% transfer in rate (Appendix A). As shown in Table 1, Pikes Middle School has a higher economically disadvantaged, at-risk, and, English learner population - 89%, 70%, 37% respectively, and Cameron Middle School numbers are 57%, 44% and 15% respectively (*School Profile & Leadership / School Profile*, n.d.).

Table 3 provides an overview of how the patterns were analyzed and discussed.

**Table 3***School Rating and Teacher Salary Data*

| Item                                   | Cameron Middle School | Pikes Middle School |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------|
| School Accountability Rating           | B                     | C                   |
| School Accountability Rating by Domain |                       |                     |
| Student Achievement                    | B/83                  | D/65                |
| School Progress                        | B/86                  | C/75                |
| Closing the Gaps                       | C/75                  | C/62                |
| Teacher Salaries                       |                       |                     |
| Beginner                               | \$52,530              | \$45,578            |
| Veteran 20+ years                      | \$64,740              | \$68,548            |

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(The Texas Tribune, n.d.)

While analyzing the documents related to teachers' experience and salaries, several patterns emerged. Cameron Middle School and Pikes Middle School have similar average teacher experience, but Cameron Middle School beginning teachers make \$6,952 more than Pikes Middle School beginner teachers. Cameron Middle School veteran teachers, (20+ years) on average, make \$3,808 less than Pikes Middle School veteran teachers (*The Texas Tribune*, n.d.). Considering that beginning teachers might be attracted to Cameron Middle School because of the population and access to resources, Pikes Middle School had a larger pattern of veteran teachers who may have been at the campus for a longer period of time; therefore, these veteran teachers might have stronger ties to the community and choose to stay. Both Cameron Middle School and Pikes Middle School are in HISD's district 2. Even though the schools are located in the same

district, Pikes Middle School has been a part of HISD's Achieve 180 program since its inception in 2017 (Achieve 180 / Content, n.d.). The Achieve 180 program was designed to service underserved and underperforming schools to support, strengthen and empower the students to help improve the schools (Achieve 180 / Content, n.d., p. 18).

## **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, access to resources truly makes a difference in the type of teachers schools attract, and this may contribute to a higher success rate for the school and accountability rating. The district should look at the schools and attempt to offer schools like Pikes Middle School more support with access to resources, regardless of how the community looks. During this stay-at-home period Pikes had to make some tough decisions when distributing technology to students because of the lack of technology on the campus. Pikes Middle School chose to prioritize the students in a special population to receive technology first, then general grade level students and roughly 15% of the student body was able to receive technology (Y. Brown, personal communication, May 5, 2020). Cameron Middle School had the resources for most of their students to receive technology, either because students had devices and internet access at home or distribution from the school (V. Richards, personal communication, May 5, 2020).

Chambers (2009) talks about the "achievement gap" that turns to a deficit way of thinking and focuses on its notion that White students perform better on standardized tests because they exert more effort and ability. Chambers offers an alternative way of thinking by moving from a deficit model that essentially blames the student, to shifting the attention to focus on structures and inputs rather than outputs (Chambers, 2009). If moved to this "receivment gap" way of thinking, districts may be able to close the gaps in equity in schools and the zip code

re-segregation. Unfortunately, the increase in family income continues to widen the education inequality gap as it relates to access to resources and more exposure to other activities (Duncan & Murnane, 2014).

As researchers, our interests in gentrification and school choice options have peaked even further with this study of equity with respect to these two schools. Sattin-Bajaj and Roda (2018) align with the data related to these two schools and the social and economic capital of the neighborhoods they serve. Pikes Middle School has low social and economic capital and the communities it serves has a transfer out rate of 170 students and a transfer rate of 8 students for the 2019-2020 school year. While the median income for Cameron Middle School communities has a higher social and economic capital, they have a transfer out rate of 248 students and a transfer in rate of 315 students. This data shows the inequity in school choice options for neighborhoods with lower social and economic capital. Walker (1978) says urban spatial differentiation is accentuated in the United States. Walker goes on to say urban spatial differentiation continues to grow as a part of the urbanization process and a byproduct of that is an uneven development across geographic spaces and economic activity is not evenly distributed. Economic activity includes goods, services, resources, production and consumption. These resources are significantly concentrated in some spaces and not so much in others. This is also seen in the data related to this case study. Finally, the issues of education currently focus on housing (zip codes) or education and not the relationship of both as they relate to each other (Nancy A. Denton, 1996).

## **Limitations**

A limitation of this research is that we were unable to get information on how Cameron

Middle School prioritized technology distribution. Although this case study involved two schools, the limitation is not being able to analyze the data from other schools with varying demographics to define equity or lack of across a district or area. However, this case study opens the door to a more detailed analysis of equity across schools and districts during COVID-19.



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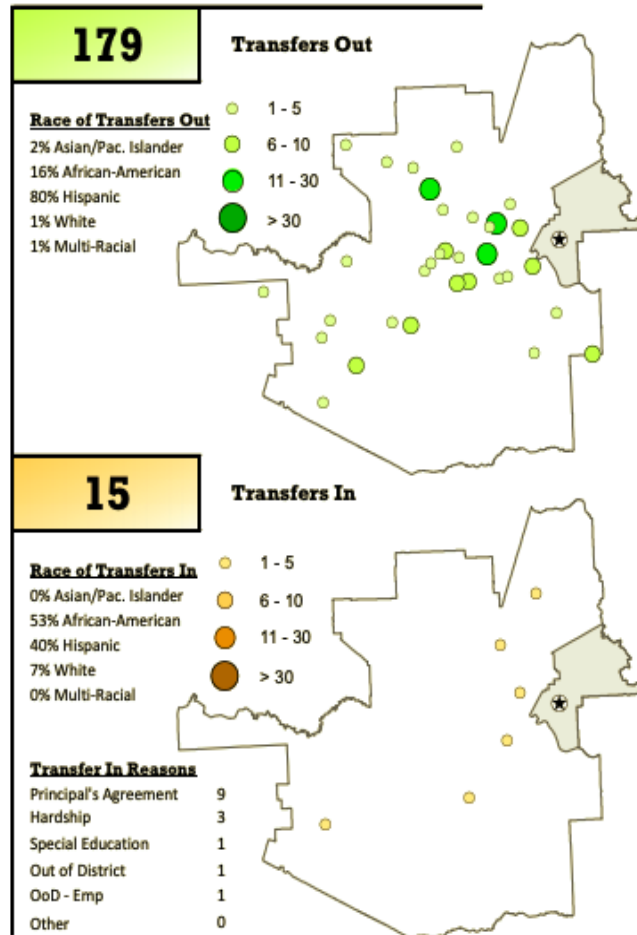
## Pikes Middle School

| Campus Enrollment    |          |         |
|----------------------|----------|---------|
| Snapshot 2018        | Students | Share   |
| Living in Zone       | 661      | 98%     |
| Transfers In         | 15       | 2%      |
| Membership           | 676      |         |
| Facility Capacity    | 1,167    |         |
| Facility Utilization | 58%      |         |
| Group                | Students | % Total |
| American Indian      | 0        | 0%      |
| Asian/Pac. Islander  | 2        | 0%      |
| African-American     | 142      | 21%     |
| Hispanic             | 515      | 76%     |
| Multi-Racial         | 2        | 0%      |
| White                | 15       | 2%      |
| Econ. Disadvantaged  | 598      | 88%     |
| Recent Immigrant     | 37       | 5%      |

| Schools the Zone Population Attend |             |          |
|------------------------------------|-------------|----------|
| Campus                             | Type        | Students |
| Holland                            | Zone        | 661      |
| Leland College Prep                | HISD        | 30       |
| BCM Biotech Academy at Ru          | HISD        | 25       |
| Hamilton                           | HISD        | 13       |
| Edison                             | HISD        | 10       |
| Young Women's College Pre          | HISD        | 10       |
| Baylor Academy                     | HISD        | 10       |
| Rice                               | HISD        | 8        |
| All Other Schools                  | HISD        | 73       |
| Total in HISD                      |             | 840      |
| Campus                             | Type        | Students |
| Yes Prep 5th Ward                  | Charter     | 193      |
| Ripley House                       | Charter     | 5        |
| Cunningham MS                      | Traditional | 5        |
| Galena Park HS                     | Traditional | 5        |
| Other Public School                |             | 120      |
| Total in Charters/Other Districts  |             | 328      |
| Not in Public School (estimate)    |             | 369      |
| Census Estimate (Fall 2013)        |             | 1,537    |

| Transfers In Campus of Residence |          |
|----------------------------------|----------|
| Campus                           | Students |
| Key                              | 4        |
| Forest Brook                     | 4        |
| McReynolds                       | 2        |
| Out Of Dist                      | 2        |
| Cullen                           | 1        |
| All Other Schools                | 2        |

| Zone Population Enrolled in HISD Schools |      |     |      |     |      |
|--|------|-----|------|-----|------|
| Grades 6-8                               | 2016 |     | 2017 |     | 2018 |
| American Indian                          | 3    | 0%  | 1    | 0%  | 0    |
| Asian/Pac. Islander                      | 3    | 0%  | 5    | 1%  | 5    |
| African-American                         | 200  | 24% | 173  | 20% | 163  |
| Hispanic                                 | 617  | 73% | 654  | 77% | 653  |
| Multi-Racial                             | 3    | 0%  | 2    | 0%  | 4    |
| White                                    | 16   | 2%  | 12   | 1%  | 15   |
| Total                                    | 842  |     | 847  |     | 840  |
| Econ. Disadvantaged                      | 617  | 73% | 656  | 77% | 729  |
| Recent Immigrant                         | 45   | 5%  | 39   | 5%  | 38   |



## Appendix B



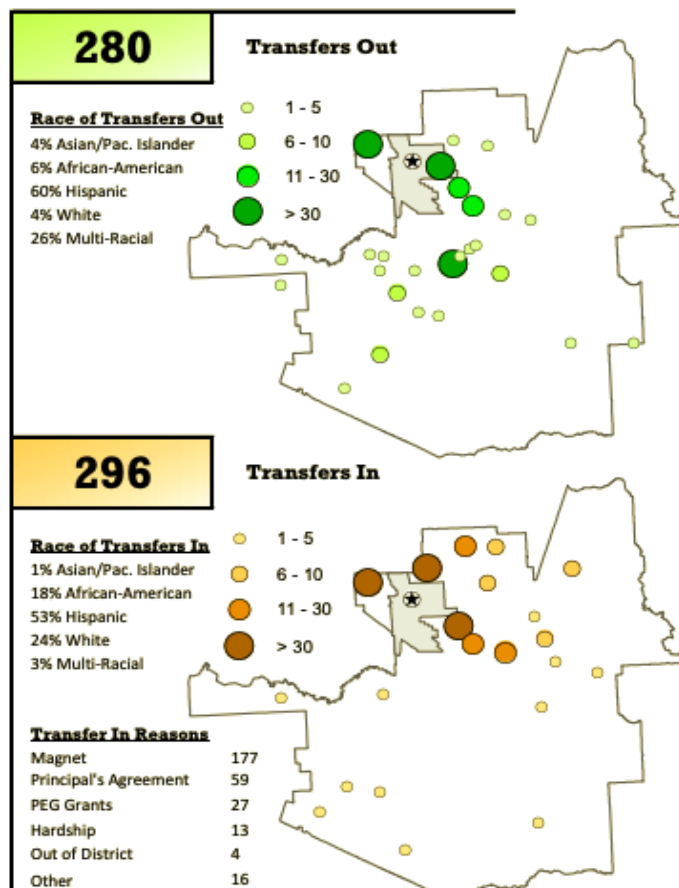
### Cameron Middle School

| Campus Enrollment    |          |         |
|----------------------|----------|---------|
| Snapshot 2018        | Students | Share   |
| Living in Zone       | 937      | 76%     |
| Transfers In         | 296      | 24%     |
| Membership           | 1,233    |         |
| Facility Capacity    | 1,380    |         |
| Facility Utilization | 89%      |         |
| Group                | Students | % Total |
| American Indian      | 2        | 0%      |
| Asian/Pac. Islander  | 13       | 1%      |
| African-American     | 188      | 15%     |
| Hispanic             | 730      | 59%     |
| Multi-Racial         | 33       | 3%      |
| White                | 267      | 22%     |
| Econ. Disadvantaged  | 694      | 56%     |
| Recent Immigrant     | 25       | 2%      |

| Schools the Zone Population Attend |             |          |
|------------------------------------|-------------|----------|
| Campus                             | Type        | Students |
| Black                              | Zone        | 937      |
| Garden Oaks                        | HISD        | 96       |
| Lanier                             | HISD        | 33       |
| Clifton                            | HISD        | 33       |
| Hamilton                           | HISD        | 26       |
| Hogg                               | HISD        | 26       |
| Pin Oak                            | HISD        | 8        |
| Baylor Academy                     | HISD        | 6        |
| All Other Schools                  | HISD        | 52       |
| Total in HISD                      |             | 1,217    |
| Campus                             | Type        | Students |
| Yes Prep White Oak                 | Charter     | 93       |
| Salyards MS                        | Traditional | 5        |
| Harmony Adv                        | Charter     | 5        |
| Aristol Upper                      | Charter     | 5        |
| Other Public School                |             | 85       |
| Total in Charters/Other Districts  |             | 193      |
| Not in Public School (estimate)    |             | 0        |
| Census Estimate (Fall 2013)        |             | 1,410    |

| Transfers In Campus of Residence |          |
|----------------------------------|----------|
| Campus                           | Students |
| Clifton                          | 71       |
| Williams                         | 60       |
| Hamilton                         | 38       |
| Hogg                             | 27       |
| Fonville                         | 20       |
| All Other Schools                | 80       |

| Zone Population Enrolled in HISD Schools |       |     |       |     |       |     |
|--|-------|-----|-------|-----|-------|-----|
| Grades 6-8                               | 2016  |     | 2017  |     | 2018  |     |
| American Indian                          | 3     | 0%  | 4     | 0%  | 3     | 0%  |
| Asian/Pac. Islander                      | 11    | 1%  | 13    | 1%  | 21    | 2%  |
| African-American                         | 138   | 13% | 151   | 14% | 150   | 12% |
| Hispanic                                 | 677   | 64% | 665   | 60% | 741   | 61% |
| Multi-Racial                             | 20    | 2%  | 26    | 2%  | 35    | 3%  |
| White                                    | 207   | 20% | 242   | 22% | 267   | 22% |
| Total                                    | 1,056 |     | 1,101 |     | 1,217 |     |
| Econ. Disadvantaged                      | 648   | 61% | 649   | 59% | 691   | 57% |
| Recent Immigrant                         | 38    | 4%  | 30    | 3%  | 25    | 2%  |



**Generation Z and Millennials as Activists in the Digital Age:  
How They Affect Society with Their Transformative Approach to Education**

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## **Generation Z and Millennials as Activists in the Digital Age: How They Affect Society with Their Transformative Approach to Education**

### **Abstract**

This literature review is focused on the Millennial and Generation Z students in a digital age and their role as social activists. Additionally, we will provide a summary of the literature which analyzes social media's influence on young students, and its impact on the evolving paradigm shift of teaching and learning, and technology. Numerous social issues have prompted the younger generations to take an active role as activists in current political issues that affect them directly or indirectly, and education happens to be one of those issues. One would ask, is it more useful to stand in front of a building to protest a company's environmental policy or debate a school's dress code, or lounge in bed and tweet about it? Gone are the days of massive sit-ins and letter-writing campaigns championed by older activists (Vasi, and King, 2012). Younger generations say today's social activism incorporates social responsibility into everyday behaviors at school and society. Research illustrates that 44% of millennials and post-millennials try to practice being green in their daily lives (Vasi and King, 2012). Thomas and McGarty (2009) state, "younger generations view social activism more as it relates to their overall persona than the generations before them," which indicates they are significantly engaged but are less active in individual actions. Social activism has implications in every aspect of the younger generations' lives, including education (Vasi and King, 2012). For example, generations addressed in this article do not feel the need to show up to a one day rally to protect the spotted owl, because they regularly volunteer at animal shelters, purchase eco-friendly products, and

have been fans of the Save the Spotted Owl Facebook group for ten years. Plus, they are involved in daily conversations and blogs about owls daily, which contributes to their ongoing involvement.

Millennials' awareness relies heavily on digital technology. Altimeter's Group with Brian Solis (2017) advocates that one in three Millennials initially become involved in philanthropic endeavors via the internet. Two in three believe a person on a computer spreading a word can create more change than a person on the street, in a rally or in a protest. Millennials actualize their most important values and stand behind them with everything they do to bring about change. During the digital age, especially in the field of education, pedagogy delivery in a learning environment compared to traditional methods needs to change to be more inclusive of the younger generations.



## **Introduction**

The rise of social media has brought about countless positives for connecting and engaging society in all aspects of life. The portrayal of social media is as a collection of digital platforms that work to help others connect and share ideas, and in addition, connect with friends and family. Others use digital platforms to promote businesses, share political views, give opinions/ comments on a cause, or write a review, be it good or bad. What are digital platforms? The digital platforms addressed in this article are Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Communication and interaction online via digital platforms have an impact, but these platforms are not without critics. Although this is not the case in most instances, there are numerous ways digital platforms have brought about positive changes. Some of those changes have included but are not limited to, gun violence, sexual assault, removal of leaders in position, positive change on university campuses, to name a few, and recently, The Crown Act. Our society has been and will continue to be a technically savvy one, engaging in new technology daily. This trend will only grow, causing young people to participate in digital platforms on an even higher and more advanced level. Statista's (2018) projection is that social media will have more than 3 billion monthly users by 2021. Statista also reveals that the highest penetration of social media users comes from North America, where almost 70 percent of the population has at least one social media account.

## **Statement of the Problem**

The problem this literature review is focusing on is the activism of Millennials and Gen Z, and the changes that have occurred through specific social and educational issues addressed via social media platforms. Let us look at some of the concerns addressed: 1) matters that affect

students in marginalized groups such as minorities, 2) police brutality, 3) immigrants and border concerns, 4) matters affecting students in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community, 5) gender biases, 6) marginalized education in urban schools, and 7) hair discrimination. This literature review sheds light on these negative issues and highlights ways in which young, social activists are making a robust stand against these inequalities through social media. A common concern with the younger generations is that many feel they are self-involved and do not care about matters beyond themselves. With new controversies surrounding issues in America such as deferred action for early childhood education, Black Lives Matter, gun reform efforts, the Crown Act, and the lack of literacy in homes of poverty, it is hard for young people to look away and turn a blind eye to these issues.

Criticism of social media use has often given the platforms a negative reputation. The notion of ‘slacktivism’ raises concerns when debating whether real activism can take place through social media. The definition of slacktivism is a “low-risk, low-cost activity via social media whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity” (Rotman et al., 2011, p.3). In order to create real change, social media use must be a way to draw attention to the topic or issue, learn and research the issue, and create a system to make necessary changes.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The Millennial Generation has a noticeable presence in the university setting. Even though they have their different expectations that are in many ways aligned with constructivist propositions of learning, their expectations necessitate changes in instructional approaches used in the university environment (Carter, 2009). Research suggests that the current Millennial

Generation's expectations of learning align with the tenets of constructivist methodology, and constructivist expectations should broadly affect educational practices in universities and public-school settings. Let us take a look at Vygotsky's theories and focus on his sociocultural approach to cognitive development. In Vygotsky's theory, language development and social interaction are supported and enhanced by others through social interactions (Powell & Kalina, 2009). This theory is essential in connecting to social media use, as it shows the need and desire for social interactions. The major theme of Vygotsky's theoretical framework is social interaction as instrumental in the fundamental role of the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky (1978) states, "every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level." The second aspect of Vygotsky's theory is the idea that the potential for cognitive development depends upon the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD): a level of development attained when children engage in social behavior. The full development of ZPD depends upon full social interaction. The range of skills developed with adult guidance or peer collaboration exceeds what alone is attain. Therefore, when it comes to communicating via social media, as Millennials use their devices to communicate with others, they are participating in a social community of language and social development. Vygotsky believed strongly that the community plays a central role in the process of "making meaning." Even though people are not communicating face to face while using digital platforms, they still connect on causes that are important to them. Vygotsky's theory helps us understand the trend we often see with social media as to why the use of hashtags and specific issues garner the attention. As humans who are always learning and ever-evolving, social interactions are crucial in development. This theory is essential to remember as we dive into the nature surrounding millennials, social media, activism, and education.

## **Definition of Millennials and Generation Z**

Now, let us define and identify the generations of Millennials and Generation Z.

Penn and Anderson (2019) state that for decades, the Pew Research Center has been committed to measuring public attitudes on key issues and documenting those differences and attitudes across demographic groups. One lens often employed by researchers at the Center to understand these differences is that of generations. Anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (ages 23-38 in 2019) is considered a Millennial, and anyone born from 1997 onward is part of Generation Z. Since the oldest among this rising generation is just turning 22 this year, and most are still in their teens or younger, identifying them as a specific group has been trying (Pew Research Center, 2019). However, names that have come to mind are Generation Z, iGeneration, or Homelanders. In this article, they are referred to as Generation Z as well. For analytical purposes, The Pew Research Center (2019) believed 1996 was a meaningful cut off between Millennials and Gen Z for several reasons, including political, economic, and social factors that defined the generations formative years.

## **Millennials as Activists**

Achieve, in partnership with the Case Foundation, released the final *2016 Millennial Impact Report: Cause Engagement during a US Presidential Election Year*. Data from this report finds that millennials are actively moving away from traditional forms of cause engagement while taking consistent action related to the causes to which they are associated. The report reveals that while Millennials remain passionately interested in improving the world, many base their political decisions on causes that each candidate shows his or her support and passion; they

no longer primarily look to traditional institutions to effect societal changes (Achieve, 2016). Millennials are quickly normalizing the change-making lifestyles—one in which because engagement is embedded in their everyday lives and identity—while at the same time losing faith in government and other established groups to make a meaningful impact. As activists, Millennials see “making a difference” as personally gratifying, yet they are engaging with causes in ways that redefine traditional labels. Most notably, Millennials are reshaping what it means to be an activist. Though many are actively involved in causes, just slightly over half (52.5 percent) identified themselves as activists. Achieve’s research suggests Millennials equate “activist” with someone who participates in protests or some similar form of publicly noticeable action—and they primarily want to avoid conflict. Seelig’s (2018) research states that while digital media environments immerse participants in mediated experiences that merge both the off-line and online worlds, and has a strong effect on a person’s influence to do something, unclear is the extent to which social media and social interactions influence Millennials’ willingness to engage both online and in person. Even so, the results of Seelig’s study indicate that millennials are open to using social media for social causes, and perhaps increasing engagement off-line too. Masuda (2017) found that millennials are interested in specific social issues at the macro level, consistently identifying education, wages, health care, employment, and the economy as the areas of most concern to them. Millennials act at the micro-level, getting engaged primarily with issues that are or have been close to their personal lives. For example, the top issues of concern for high school/non-degreed participants include crime/criminal justice, arts and culture, and employment and wages. Millennials across the board still reported responding to disaster relief needs the most.

## **Educational Importance**

This literature review calls attention to methods in which Millennials and Generation Z are using social media and digital platforms to spark change in society regarding issues they deem relevant, such as social activism, teaching and learning. As defined earlier, Millennials are the ones born after 1985 and have grown up with the internet, mobile technology and social media at a pace and depth that Baby Boomers simply do not match (Charrier, 2016). For example, they are the first to grow up surrounded by digital technologies like broadband internet, home computers, video games, and smartphones. They will order anything and everything from Amazon. On-demand is a way of life for Millennials. Mobile apps are used for transferring money, checking balances, getting loan approvals, calling Uber or Lyft, and streaming movies they enjoy. They believe in and use all of the mobile payment apps, like Samsung Pay, Apple Pay, Google Wallet, more than cash. They want all their problems solved immediately - digitally (Raut, 2018). Therefore, as we enter a time where Millennials begin to dominate the workforce, and Gen Z is entering college and some high school, it is essential to acknowledge how they learn, what they are bringing to the table, how times have changed and how they will soon dominate the workforce.

Millennials are the most diverse generation we have had to teach; thus, our approaches to teaching must be diverse. They expect to be engaged in their learning; they do not do well being passive learners. If a teacher or professor at a university or public school does not have or use technology as a part of learning, this generation will go somewhere where they can be engaged and interact with technology. Traditional approaches to teaching may not address the learning preferences of the Millennial student (Salazar and Diego-Medrano, 2019). It is not necessary to

abandon traditional lecture or other tried and actual instructional strategies but adapting them to suit the Millennial and Gen Z student is crucial for effective teaching and learning. It provides background information into activism through social media, highlights activist groups making change, and gives recommendations for future research and implementation.

Millennials were the first major users of online education programs, and they continue to shape e-learning daily. Computers became popular with the average consumer in the mid-90s, which was the early era of Millennial childhood. This generation grew up with computers, and most owned a cell phone or smartphone by their teens. Thus, Millennials became the first generation of digital natives, who are comfortable with technology and capable of making technology work for them as activists and in learning environments. To this generation, advanced tech is essential; Millennials operate best when equipped with some type of technology device, regardless of the environment or objectives. Perhaps this is why, as more significant portions of the Millennial generation migrate into the workforce, the rates of self-employed and telecommuting workers have skyrocketed—and why e-learning and technology have become so integral to the education system and activism of Millennials and Gen Z. Let us discuss social media, society, and this group of activists.

### **Social Media, Society, and Millennials**

Without a doubt, millennials are a societal force that today comprise the largest segment of the workforce. Social networks are an extraordinarily important part of Millennials' digital lives, in part because social networks have become much more than a way to connect about personal matters; they have become platforms for activism and social causes and change. As mentioned previously, society today has evolved into one that relies heavily on social media. The

American Press Institute (API) reported that in 2015, 88 percent of Millennials get news from Facebook, 83 percent from YouTube, and 50 percent from Instagram. Additionally, API stated that although Facebook is popular among all adults under age 35, younger Millennials are more likely to use a mix of social networks for news than older members of this generation. While social networks may be a place that people bump into news, many Millennials engage more actively with the news once there. Therefore, with this reliance comes a popular way of communicating, which occurs through popular digital platforms. While there are many platforms one can use through social media, as mentioned, the most common sources are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr. Facebook is used for social networking; Twitter's use is for microblogging services; YouTube and Flickr are content-sharing sites. The number one reason Millennials use Twitter is to learn what's "trending" and what people are talking about in the news. The study by API also discovered that one-third of Millennials that participated in the study stated they mainly go to Twitter to look for interesting articles or links that friends or organizations post, to share content, or get more information on something they heard about on social media or in the news. Through social media, Millennials have introduced the opportunity for wide-scale online social participation and social activism. Lee and Hsieh (2013) established in their research that visibility of national and international priorities such as public health, political unrest, disaster relief, and climate change has increased. Nevertheless, we know little about the benefits and possible costs of engaging in social activism via social media.

One-way young people are becoming activists is by using hashtags to garner attention to their specific causes. Hashtags on social media initially were used through Twitter. While hashtags have been part of computer technology since the 1980s, they first appeared on Twitter in 2007. Initially, it was a way for Twitter users to follow and contribute to conversations on



topics of interest. As this awareness has risen, young people have joined in on efforts to raise awareness on issues that face them as well (Steinberg, 2016).

A prominent reason social media is a gateway for youth to become activists is because of its collective nature which leaves out traditional routes for sharing knowledge such as librarians and teachers (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). Carney (2006) shared that in just the first hour following the news of the non-indictment of Eric Garner's death, tweets using the hashtag *#BlackLivesMatter* soared to over 13,000 (Carney, 2006).

The night George Zimmerman was acquitted after killing Trayvon Martin was a somber night for many, especially African Americans. Three black women activists, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, were soon prompted to start the Black Lives Matter movement. The goal of the Black Lives Matter movement is to seek justice through action in response to state-sanctioned violence and anti-black racism (Black Lives Matter: What We Believe, 2018). Many young people have been just as outraged by this brutality against often unarmed black men and women. These young people have shown up to protests and been present at demonstrations to let their voices be heard regarding this treatment.

A school shooting is another issue affecting young people. The hashtags *#marchforourlives* and *#neveragain* were created to take a stand and fight for gun control. This hashtag and movement became important for preventing gun violence following the 2018 school shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida. According to Gifford's Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence (2018), 67 gun-safety bills were signed into law in 26 states. On February 6th, March for Our Lives founders joined the parents of slain Stoneman Douglas students at the first house hearings on gun violence in eight years. Social media was the catalyst to get the discussion going. However, the students did not stop at social media; they used the attention they

were getting online to start demanding that changes were implemented with gun laws.

In addition to Black Lives Matter and gun control movements, young people are also involved in efforts to spread awareness and create protection for young people under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). DACA came into existence during President Obama's administration in 2012. The goal of DACA is to provide protection from deportation for young people who came to the United States as children. Currently, DACA covers almost 700,000 young people (United We Dream, 2018). United We Dream is a youth-led network that consists of about 400,000 members. These young people post updates through Twitter, use hashtags, and get the word out about volunteer opportunities for those willing to help in the cause.

### **Benefits of Social Media Activism**

Social media activism has many benefits. It is widely accessible, gets conversations started, sustains momentum, and helps empower people who may have never thought of themselves as activists (Leary, 2018). For example, in 2014, Marley Dias created a hashtag #WeNeedMoreDiverseBooks. She started this campaign because she noticed there were not enough books of characters of color who looked like her. From there, Dias launched a non-profit and now provides grants and awards for authors of diverse books (Leary, 2018). Sidney Caldwell, a 13-year-old Gen Z, created Books and Bros for African American boys, ages 7-13. Through Facebook and Instagram, Sidney is encouraging reading and empowering African American males through social media and literacy. In addition to Marley Dias and Sidney Caldwell, the ALS ice bucket challenge also saw positive responses from those on social media. The ice bucket challenge was designed as a means to raise money for those who have Lou

Gehrig's disease. In less than three weeks, the activists raised over 15 million dollars for ALS research (Steinberg, 2016).

### **How Educators Can Educate and Support Communities**

This review sheds light on some of the issues in American society and how young people use social media to start a dialogue and take action as a result of these issues. There are many ways in which educators, parents, and community members can support the causes and the activists.

One of the first ways to get involved is to choose a cause aligned with passion from within. Marley Dias (2018) shares that one must have the enthusiasm and be fully committed to the cause. Adequate time should be devoted to researching the issue at hand. Another way to get involved in activism online is to take advantage of the online communities and know how they can be beneficial in spreading the word for the cause (Leary, 2018). Remember that small steps toward the goal are just as necessary as significant milestones. Small steps may seem to go unnoticed, but they are more likely to succeed. Offer opportunities for open dialogue in safe settings. Often, young people are yearning to let their feelings out and speak candidly about an issue that affects them, but they do not have the space to do it. When educators and community members help to support these efforts, new ideas and changes come about. Jean Case, CEO of the Case Foundation, expressed, "Millennials seek out possibilities across all aspects of their lives to have a positive impact on society and question norms that might pose barriers to implementing their ideas for social impact." The takeaways in this literature review are:

- Millennials are everyday change-makers; they exhibit social good in small acts they perform daily.

- Millennials believe in activism; seventy-one percent consider voting as activism. Self-identified activists were more likely to contact their representatives with the intent to take part in marches/rallies and use social media to spread the message of the cause.
- Millennials care about social issues, to a degree not seen in any previous generation. Additionally, Millennials see themselves in the shoes of others who do not look like them, speak the same language, have the same education, or come from the same background—perhaps because of their high level of diversity.
- Millennials are passionate about issues, not institutions; trust keeps them pure to an institution addressing their issue.
- Millennials value collective action and networks; education has remained a priority for Millennials throughout the decade. They have found their collective voice and use it to address social ills. These ills affect areas such as civil rights and education.
- Millennials support the great good, not partisan politics. Their impatience with bipartisanship politics is a significant reason why they are developing ways to inspire and affect changes in public policy.
- Millennials are sector agnostic and everyday do-gooders.
- Millennials take an innovative approach to creating change.
- Millennials believe all actions matter, big and small.
- Millennials are influenced by their peers.

Young people are experiencing life just as much as adults. They are aware of the societal issues and problems. While many already have causes they are passionate about, gathering supporters and developing a thoughtful plan to enact change is just as important as the initial idea. In developing a measured approach to budding activists, the timeline below provides steps

in achieving those goals. Thompson (2019) outlines a plan with steps that include: 1) pinpoint your passion; the most passionate student activists have identified a cause that makes them get up each morning believing they can make things better, 2) educate yourself, be fully informed: find position papers from other viewpoints, visit websites, find out if others are fighting for the same causes, have a firm grip on the issue, 3) determine your goals; listing short and long term goals keeps you organized and show supporters you have thought things out, 4) tap into resources: resources come in many forms, contact national groups, many have toolkits filled with media strategies and organizational plans, 5) create an action plan: develop detailed action steps to complete the objectives and meet your goals, and 6) go: having identified your passion, educated yourself on it, set goals, found resources, and created a plan for success, the final step is to bring awareness to the cause. This process is considered nontraditional education via action research in the purest form. Finally, the society supports Millennials as activists in their efforts to ignite changes for not only a better life for them but for generations to come.

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**Information Literacy Skills Proficiency and Academic Achievement of Select 12th-Grade  
Students at a High-Minority High Poverty School: A Mixed Methods Study**

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## **Information Literacy Skills Proficiency and Academic Achievement of Select 12th-Grade Students at a High-Minority High Poverty School: A Mixed Methods Study**

In 2008, as indicated in the Texas Education Association ([TEA], n.d.) TEKS, secondary students are required to produce research projects in most core subject areas. According to the Texas College and Career Readiness Standards adopted by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2009), producing academically acceptable research projects entails utilizing information literacy skills. Therefore, students must: (a) recognize what information is needed; (b) locate the necessary information; (c) evaluate its credibility and reliability; and (d) employ the information within their project in an ethical manner. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board considers the utilization of these standards as an indicator of problem-solving and critical thinking skills for college and career readiness (EPIC, 2008). However, the problem is determining the proficiency level that has been attained by graduating 12th-grade students, to ascertain job market or college and career readiness. According to Gross and Latham (2012), “many students come to college without proficient information literacy skills” (p. 574).

The 21st century has seen the evolution from a predominantly agricultural and industrial-based economy to an information and service-based economy (Toffler, 1990), which requires employees with elevated skills (Hedrick, Homan, & Dick, 2015). According to Hedrick et al. (2015), over fifty-percent of students entering the workforce directly from high school are lacking skills in oral and written communication and critical thinking and problem solving, thus indicating young adults are ill-prepared to be successful in the labor market (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). Information literacy skills are required for various jobs (Weiner, 2011); and

employees who become proficient in information literacy skills are vital to companies hiring them (Salehudin, 2016).

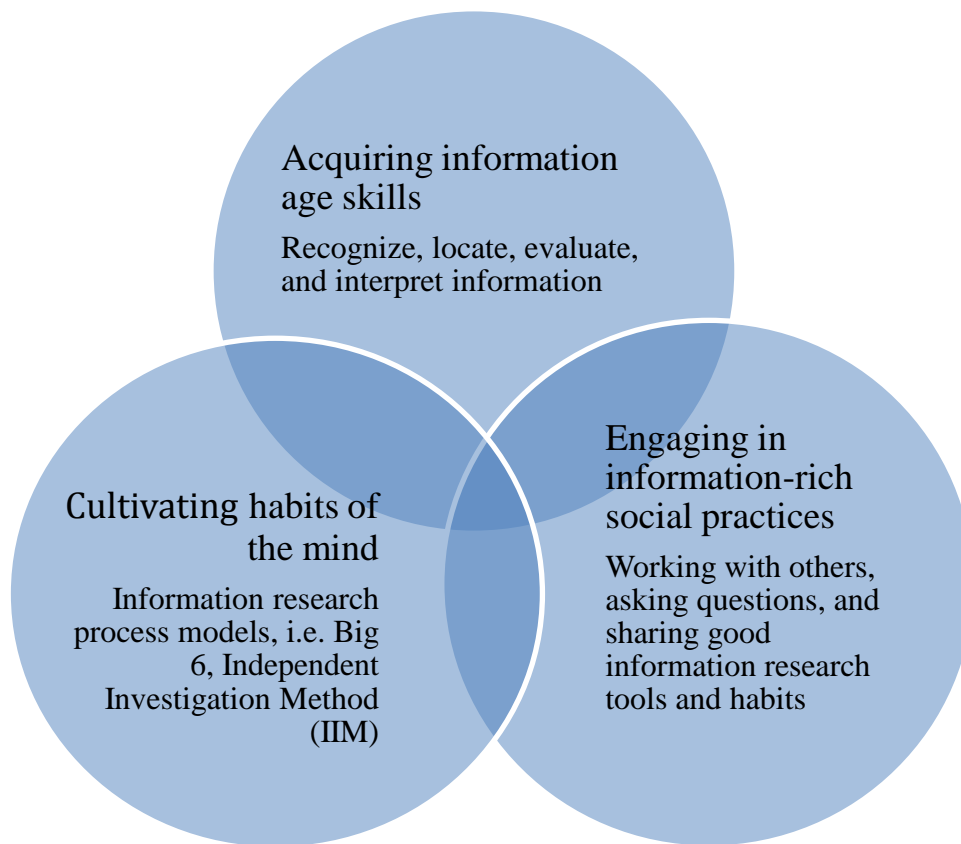
However, scant research is available on information literacy skills proficiency at the secondary level, preparing students for the job market or college and career readiness (Kovalik, Yutzey, & Piazza, 2013). For students entering the workforce after graduation, information literacy skills are required for researching job openings and business-related information for employment seekers (Inskip, 2015). As students enter college, they will most likely be faced with mining information sources for research projects and will generally need a good foundation to accomplish these tasks successfully.

The purpose of this mixed method study was two-fold. The first purpose was to explore and to compare the information literacy skills knowledge and proficiency of 12th-grade students to their academic achievement. The second purpose was to ascertain perceptions of 12th-grade students' knowledge of information literacy skills for job market and college and career readiness; and how their viewpoints regarding social, cultural, and familial factors influence their academic achievement.

### **Conceptual Framework**

As formulated by Addison and Meyers (2013), utilizing synthesized historical information literacy and library science literature, the conceptual framework of information literacy used in this study is characterized by three pillars: (a) information literacy as acquiring information age skills, (b) information literacy as cultivating thinking skills, and (c) information literacy as engaging in information as a social construct. The first concept implies 21st century learners have an abundance of digital sources available via the ubiquitous nature of electronic

devices and myriad information sources (Eisenberg, Lowe, & Spitzer, 2004) supporting advancement in information literacy skills (Addison & Meyers, 2013). The second conceptualization emphasizes information literacy cognitively for problem-solving, critical thinking, and other intellectual skills. The third concept conveys general individual experiences of “living, learning, and working in an information-rich society,” in which technology frequently changes and expectations continuously evolve (Addison & Meyers, 2013, p. 7).



*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework of concept connections for Information Literacy.

## **Methods**

### **Quantitative**

Tool for Real-time Assessment of Information Literacy Skills [(TRAILS, 2016)], is the

quantitative instrument in this study to answer the quantitative research question: What is the relationship between knowledge of information literacy skills and academic achievement among 12th-grade students in a traditional comprehensive school? TRAILS is a 45-question online multiple-choice information literacy assessment created by faculty at Kent State University using the American Association of School Librarians' (AASL) Standards for the 21st-Century Learner (TRAILS, 2016). According to Schloman and Gedeon (2007), TRAILS was “designed as a classroom tool that enables a library media specialist to easily obtain a snapshot of skill levels in order to better tailor instruction efforts (p. 45). The online assessment evaluated the following five information literacy research categories: (a) developing the research topic; (b) identifying possible sources; (c) developing, using, and revising strategic searches; (d) evaluating sources and information; and (e) recognizing responsible use of information ethically and legally (TRAILS, 2016).

One hundred-twenty-nine 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students, enrolled in a large Title I high school located in an urban district, volunteered through their English class to be assessed on their information literacy skills. Using results of the score of total correct responses from each TRAILS assessment, a comparison was made to each student's collegiate and weighted GPAs to determine if there was a correlation. The Pearson correlation was performed, answering research questions to determine if: (a) a relationship existed between knowledge of information literacy skills and academic achievement among 12th-grade school and (b) a difference existed in information literacy knowledge between higher-achieving and lower-achieving 12th-grade students on an information literacy assessment.

## **Qualitative**

Following the quantitative phase, participants in the qualitative phase were selected, employing extreme-case sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2013) via the findings from the quantitative assessment data portion. Two students were selected from each of two TRAILS categories, scores over 70% and scores under 30%, to participate in a 30-minute interview. The four individual semi-structured interviews sought to answer the following qualitative questions:

1. What are the perceptions of 12th-grade students in a traditional comprehensive school regarding obtaining information literacy skills for job market or for college and career readiness?
2. How have sociocultural (e.g., family, social, cultural) factors influenced the perceptions of information literacy skills needed for job market or for college and career readiness?

## **Mixed Method**

The mixed analysis of the TRAILS assessment and interviews from the four participants supported the mixed methods research question: What is the relationship between perceptions of two groups of students; specifically, 12th-grade higher-achieving and 12th-grade lower-achieving students' information literacy skills and their information literacy assessment proficiency, integrating to Bandura's (1971) three key concepts, children learn by observing, children need a sense of accomplishment, and children's behavior change is not an indicator of learning?

## **Findings**

### **Quantitative**

Findings indicate there was a correlation between the TRAILS scores and academic achievement based on collegiate and weighted GPAs. Most students who achieved higher TRAILS scores also earned a higher GPA, and the majority of students receiving the lowest TRAILS scores similarly were associated with lower grade point averages. Males scored higher for total correct answers, while having a slightly lower GPA. The female highest collegiate/weighted GPA was 3.98/7.76, respectively; however, the participant's TRAILS score, while at the higher end of correct score percentages, was slightly lower amongst male and female students. Overall, male and female participants demonstrated a positive relationship between the degree of the TRAILS score percentage and collegiate/weighted GPA ranking. The English or Spanish home language indicators for each participant revealed a correlation between level of the TRAILS score and collegiate/weighted GPA scales; however, there was no substantial difference between the level of correlation among the two home languages.

Analysis of each of the five sub-assessments examined corresponded to the total score findings, validating a relationship between information literacy skills and academic achievement. Nine questions were included in each sub-assessment category. All findings substantiated the hypotheses that a relationship exists between knowledge of information literacy skills and academic achievement among 12th-grade students in a traditional comprehensive school, and that a difference exists in information literacy knowledge between higher-achieving and lower-achieving 12th-grade students in a traditional comprehensive high school on an information literacy assessment.

Means and standard deviations were initially examined for each of the following pairs of

variables: (a) percentage score of total correct answers on TRAILS online assessment and collegiate GPA and (b) percentage score of total correct answers on TRAILS online assessment and weighted GPA. Examination of scatterplots depicting the relationship between total correct and collegiate GPA and total correct and weighted GPA illustrated a positive linear relationship. The assessment included five areas of evaluation on the research process. In Table 1, Means and Standard Deviations are displayed for TRAILS Total Score and each sub assessment. Table 2 depicts the means and standard deviations of male and female for each of the variables.

Table 1

*Descriptive Statistics for Means and Standard Deviations of Category Variables*

|                             | N=129    |           |
|-----------------------------|----------|-----------|
| Variable Name               | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
| TRAILS Total Score          | 51.7364  | 12.71596  |
| Develop Topic               | 58.2745  | 18.35605  |
| Identify Sources            | 40.3101  | 19.99758  |
| Search Strategies           | 49.0853  | 17.68740  |
| Evaluate Resources          | 58.6667  | 20.19334  |
| Use Information Responsibly | 54.9147  | 17.78080  |



Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for Means and Standard Deviations for Gender Variables*

| Variable Name                       | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|-------------------------------------|----------|-----------|
| TRAILS Total Score ( <i>N</i> =129) | 51.74    | 12.72     |
| Male ( <i>n</i> =51)                | 51.14    | 12.66     |
| Female ( <i>n</i> =78)              | 52.13    | 12.81     |

Means and standard deviations for the variables examined, specifically, TRAILS score for the five TRAILS sub assessment research categories by gender are presented in Tables 3 and 4. Examination of a series of scatterplots illustrated a positive linear relationship between TRAILS score and weighted GPA, as well as weighted GPA with each of the five TRAILS research categories.

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics for Means and Standard Deviations of Male Group for Category Variables*

|                             | <i>n</i> = 51 |           |
|-----------------------------|---------------|-----------|
| Variable Name               | <i>M</i>      | <i>SD</i> |
| TRAILS Score                | 51.1373       | 12.66494  |
| Develop Topic               | 58.2745       | 20.24755  |
| Identify Sources            | 38.6275       | 19.90172  |
| Search Strategies           | 49.9020       | 17.67400  |
| Evaluate Resources          | 60.5294       | 20.72520  |
| Use Information Responsibly | 51.4118       | 15.95892  |

Table 4

*Descriptive Statistics for TRAILS Assessment Scores and Reported GPA for Female Participants*

|               | <i>n</i> = 78 |           |
|---------------|---------------|-----------|
| Variable Name | <i>M</i>      | <i>SD</i> |
| TRAILS Score  | 52.1282       | 12.81574  |
| Develop Topic | 58.1154       | 17.14338  |

|                             |         |          |
|-----------------------------|---------|----------|
| Identify Sources            | 41.4103 | 20.11166 |
| Search Strategies           | 48.5513 | 17.79001 |
| Evaluate Resources          | 57.4487 | 19.87797 |
| Use Information Responsibly | 57.2051 | 18.62086 |

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Figure 2 below demonstrates scores in the five sub-assessment areas by gender and home language. Home Language and Gender *SD* are displayed for each sub-assessment area. Figure 3 depicts scores in each of the sub-assessment areas on the TRAILS according to higher- versus lower- achieving students, based on collegiate GPA. Lower-achieving students are designated as those with collegiate GPAs below 2.5 on a 4.0 scale.

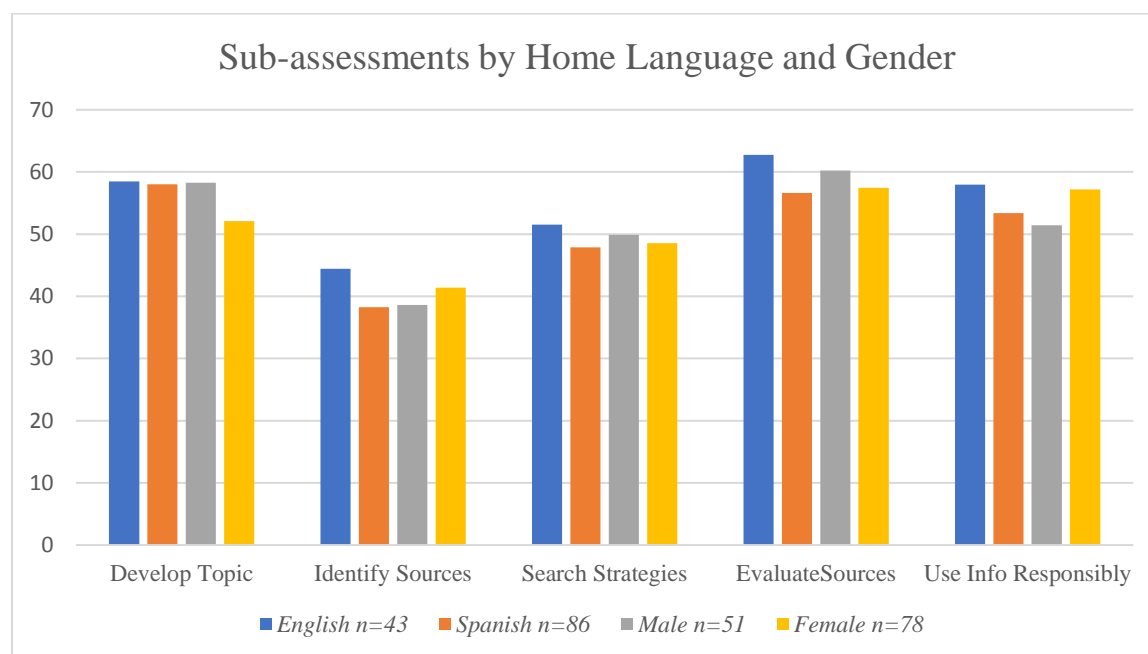


Figure 2. Sub-assessments categorized by home language and by gender.

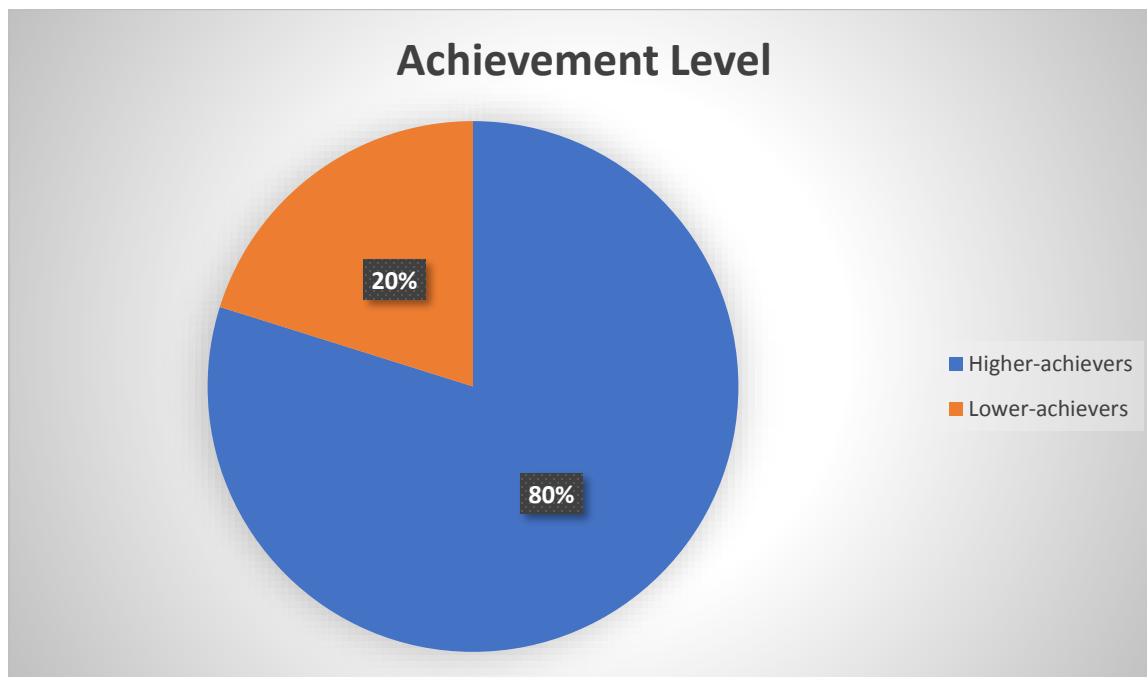


Figure 3. Division of higher-achieving and lower-achieving participants.

## Qualitative

Addressing the first research question, themes revealed from interview data were: (a) comprehending information literacy; (b) utilizing research process; (c) instructional and collaborative influencers; and (d) life after graduation. First, each participant was asked to define the term *Information Literacy*. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all participant names.

***Comprehending information literacy.*** Michael, a male of Hispanic ethnicity whose home language was Spanish, was the first participant interviewed. Michael had a collegiate GPA of 3.16 and a weighted GPA of 5.86 and scored 78% on the TRAILS assessment, answering 35 of the 45 questions correctly. When addressing the first theme of comprehending information

literacy, Michael shared a rudimentary understanding of information literacy as, “Well, it's basically like being able to read. So, you read information and you understand what it means.” Michael’s highest score on the sub-assessment was evaluating resources, with 88% of that category’s questions answered correctly

Darius, an African American male, scored 22%, answering 10 questions correctly. At the lowest end of the TRAILS score, Darius has a 2.40 and 4.64 collegiate/weighted GPA, respectively. His definition of information literacy was:

“When I hear the word "information," I think about school. I think about me doing a research or a paper. I think about English class, to be specific.” Darius scored lowest in develop topic at 11% correct of the 9 questions for that category.

Diana was the next interviewee. Diana held a 3.98/7.76 collegiate/weighted GPA and answered 73% of the 45 TRAILS questions correctly. Diana’s definition of information literacy revealed:

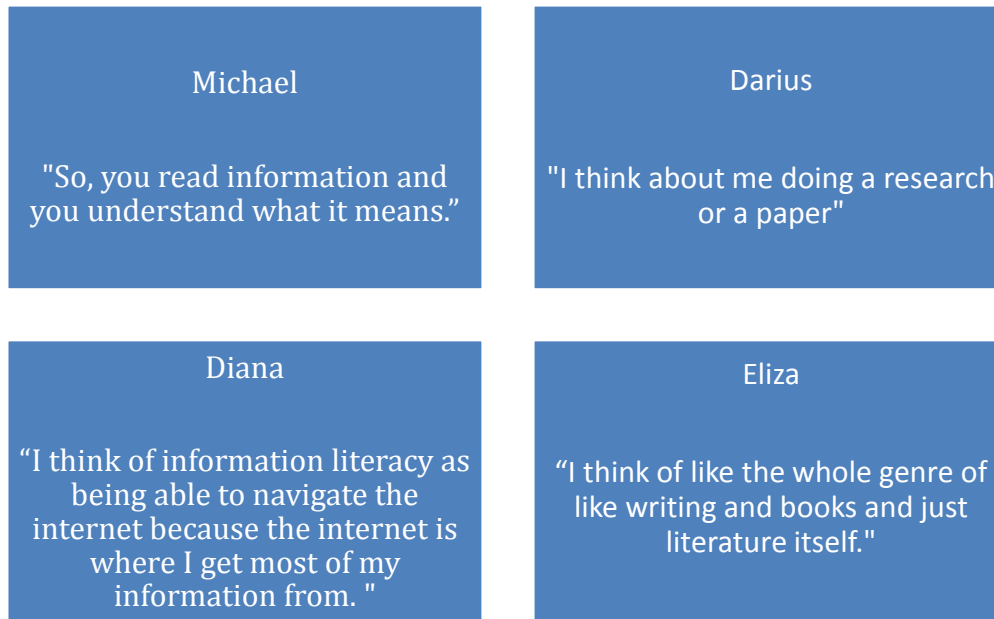
“I think of information literacy as being able to navigate the Internet because the Internet is where I get most of my information from. It's the easiest, fastest, I think the most reliable way to get as many sources as I feel like I need to from different perspectives.”

Eliza scored 27% on the TRAILS assessment and carried at 2.24 GPA; at the time of the assessment, there was no weighted GPA recorded for her. Eliza had recently returned to school after dropping out the previous year. When asked to define information literacy Eliza stated:

“I think of like the whole genre of like writing and books and just literature itself.”

When probed again, asking what the word ‘information’ meant to her, Eliza responded, “Like data or surveys, kind of.” At that point in the interview, I explained that information literacy related to constructing research. Eliza’s lowest score was 11% for develop topic. Figure 6

represents key responses among the four participants regarding comprehending information literacy.



*Figure 1.* Key responses from interviewees when asked to define the term information literacy.

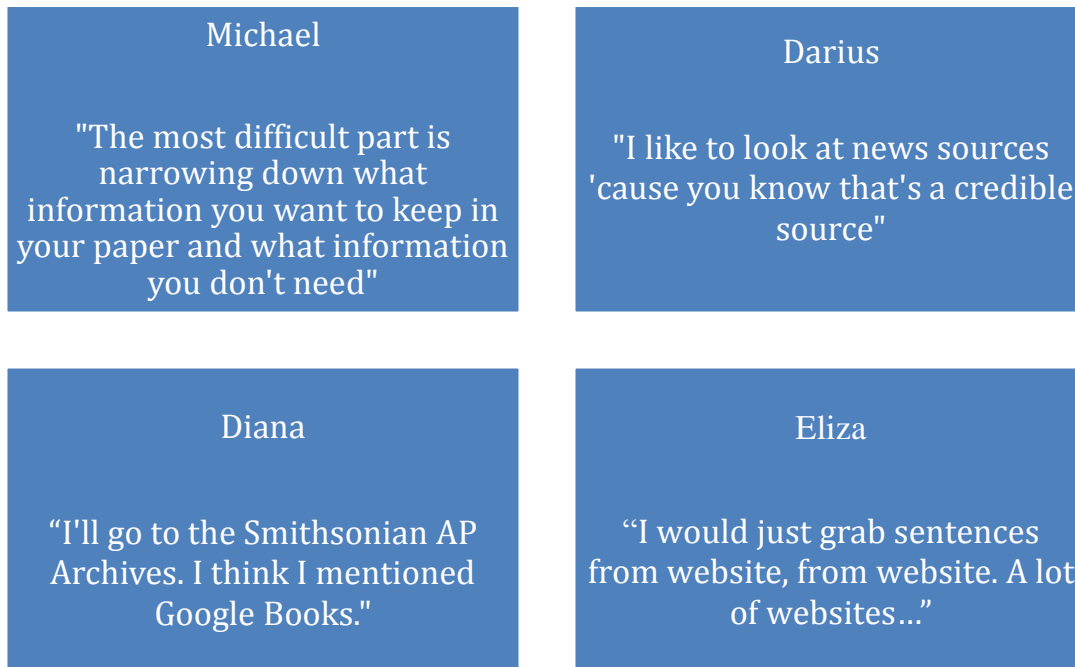
***Utilizing the research process.*** The second theme is utilizing the research process. Michael stated he uses the internet, and he finds it is “a really powerful tool to find information, and not just find it, but find it quicker.” Michael also stated, “I use the information that I find and I find a way to apply it to my like paper, and I try to credit them, as well because you don't want to be plagiarizing.” This statement corresponds to Michael’s score of 78% for using information ethically and responsibly.

Darius revealed when utilizing the research process for finding credible sources and understanding reliability and credibility of sources: “I like to look at news sources cause you know that's a credible source....So, with Trump ... Everyone hates Trump, but I don't really speak

on it because I don't know. I feel like you should do your research.” Darius substantiates understanding credible resources with his highest score of 38% for evaluating sources and information.

Diana described part of her search strategies: “the first thing that I do is, I usually go to Wikipedia. I'll read it for an overview, and I'll go down to the bottom of the page and there's a lot of sources there. A lot of them are primary and they're linked online, so I can just go ahead and click them.” Diana's highest score of 89% was in develop, use, and revise search strategies, consistent with the category of develop topic.

Eliza recalled instances where she was required to do a research project, and her process consisted of, “...just looking online. We would go to like computer labs, and we'd just go online to like ... I would just grab sentences from website, from website. A lot of websites...” When asked how comfortable she was searching for information on the internet, she responded, “I feel confident sometimes, but over the years, I know some websites were not as good as others and some are not as accurate or recent...” Eliza scored highest at 44% for using information responsibly, ethically, and legally, and second highest for evaluating sources and information.



*Figure 2.* Responses from participants about utilizing information literacy. This graphic illustrates interviewees' key responses to questions on how they use information literacy skills.

***Instructional and collaborative influencers.*** This theme indicated educators, such as History Fair/Science Fair sponsors/teachers, or close friends influencing skills participants used when researching. Michael shared, "I've taken dual credit classes, and at colleges, and what I find is that the professors, they give you the work, and they expect you to finish it, and understand it." Darius stated his English teacher was instrumental in teaching him research skills, and Diana's support stemmed from her History Fair sponsor. Eliza also indicated, "Culinary was the reason why I went to school. It was my favorite. My chef, she was awesome. She made me want to be a chef...I was actually researching salaries and where they would be located best and like how to start off..." Despite the dichotomous scores between higher- and lower-achievers, there was an attachment to an educator, perhaps indicative of opportunities to make a difference.



*Job market or college and career readiness.* The last theme explored answered the first research question: What are the perceptions of 12th-grade students in a traditional comprehensive school regarding obtaining information literacy skills for job market or for college and career readiness? The students' responses centered on the perceptions of their readiness for college and career as related to their information literacy skills. When responding to the question of being adequately prepared for college research, Michael ascribed his readiness to taking dual credit courses at a community college. Darius responded that he intends to continue to post-secondary: "I'm a smart student, but I'm a horrible test taker... I was like, 'I ain't gon' make it. My SAT scores.' But going more into depth about this school and what they do and find out that helps me now." Darius was specifically referring to a university that has a program for students not scoring well overall on SAT.

Diana answered, "I definitely do think so. I would say that it is entirely because of History Fair. I have done personal interviews with people. I have gone to museums...I have met with people who are from Russia or the Soviet Union era. I've talked to them about what their experiences were like...I definitely do think that I am prepared to either find people who can help me, find sources or locations where I can go to." (Since this interview, Diana has been accepted to attend Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT], Columbia, Harvard, and Yale, and now attends Harvard).

Eliza revealed during the interview that she had dropped out the previous year, and stated she plans to stay in school, and when asked about graduation she replied, "Yes. I'm going to be ... I'm excited. I am. I'm going to be ready. I'm going to be prepared." Since the interview, Eliza has increased her collegiate GPA to 3.37 and has established a weighted GPA of 5.63.



*Figure 3.* Responses from participants about college and career readiness. This figure illustrates responses from qualitative participants when asked if they were ready to transition to the job market or to college and career.

**Significance.** Three of Gee’s (2005) seven building tasks were used to analyze discourse from the four participants for the second qualitative research question: How have sociocultural (e.g., family, social, cultural) factors influenced the perceptions of information literacy skills needed for the job market or for college and career readiness? For *significance* — how did the participants’ language connote important matters? Interviewees articulated motivating forces, internal and external, playing a consequential role in their employing information literacy skills. Michael stated that what was important to him was, “to make computers more accessible to people.” Darius started researching cities “to see if there's a lot of racism... You need to know about that stuff...”

Diana voiced significance surrounding an incident that affected her during 7th-grade. Diana was selected to attend a camp based on SAT scores. She reflected, “that definitely made

me realize who it was that I was competing with to get into college. There were people there who had their parents pay for a tutor to have them study for the SAT that they took to get in. Their parents were engineers and they spoke English and they were American. That really kind of shaped me.

The significance of Eliza's motivating force was expressed as, "I'd say my sophomore year; I was really bad. I messed up my whole high school experience, basically. ... I wish myself now could tell myself back then what to do and not to do."

As demonstrated via each respondent's verbiage, significance was connoted through language of what mattered to them.

**Activities.** Gee's (2005) second task was analyzed through the lens of activities or practices that implied important matters. When asked how participating in Science Fair helped with research skills, Michael responded, "It's helped a lot. ...it teaches us I think researching. It teaches us more than what teachers would teach us in their classroom." Darius participated in History Fair in middle school but discontinued during his high school years. However, he also verbalized activities that mattered stating, "When I did the History Fair, I did a website on Civil Rights, and I did it individually on Martin Luther King. Everyone knows about Martin Luther King, but my teacher taught me to research, go into depth, you know, more specific information." Diana stated, "I started researching for competitions in sixth grade and continued participating in History Fair throughout high school."

**Relationships.** Relationships was the last building task analyzed examining language, signifying the importance of family, social, and cultural influences. Michael noted the importance of his parents when he stated:

Well, both of my parents are Hispanic, and they don't know much about computers, and

all that...like my parents depend on me, to help them understand like different question that they have... Well, my family, they always push me. Like to be a better person, and to like be better than them.

Darius also expressed a strong connection with the relationship between him and culture. Darius shared:

My culture. I think my culture, the African culture, it helps me a lot. When we have Black History Month, they say all the facts on the announcements about what we have achieved, what we have done. That's very motivational as well. It's like, oh, I come from a culture that's so brilliant and creative and things like that. So, it gives me motivation, and again, if they can do it ... especially back then. There wasn't computers. You had to go look in the book and everything. If they can do anything like that, then I most definitely can...

During the interview, Diana shared that she was a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) student. Articulating the relationship shared with her parents, Diana expressed:

Okay, my first language is Spanish. My parents only went to grade school. At some point, maybe 7th grade when I was taking ... Or 8th grade when I was taking Algebra and I needed help on it, I realized that I couldn't anymore ask my parents for help. I never really could because they only speak Spanish. I guess from an early age I had to learn to be independent. I think that, that has ... I think the fact that my parents didn't go to high school and they don't speak English has definitely made me ... Or forced me to be independent.

Eliza expressed how her sociocultural relationships have shaped her, as well. Eliza revealed the following:

I actually, I enrolled myself here, so I'm my own guardian. I don't live with my family currently. I haven't lived with them in a few years actually, since my dad, since I was a sophomore, and then my mom since like eighth grade. I'd say my sophomore year

I was really bad. They weren't very much a part of my schooling, I'd say. They weren't a part of my ... They weren't involved much.

As demonstrated by participant responses, family, social and cultural influences impacted Michael, Darius, Diana, and Eliza during their secondary years of learning. According to Welton and Martinez (2014), “for a majority of students, family members, many of who lacked a college education themselves, were driving forces behind students’ college aspirations” (p. 213).



*Figure 4.* Responses from participants on the significance of their relationships. This figure illustrates the relationships that were instrumental in shaping the participants.

## **Mixed Method**

Michael, Darius, and Diana have each participated in History Fair and/or Science Fair throughout their secondary education. Perhaps their participation accounts for understanding the basics of completing the research process based on Bandura's concepts. Michael, Darius, and Diana each would have had opportunities to observe from their History Fair/Science Fair sponsor or teacher, and could have received a sense of accomplishment from participating and earning awards; however, participatory behavior was not an indicator of their learning. Eliza noted she learned best one-on-one, she felt accomplished when she was accepted into culinary school, and behavior of dropping out of school was not a learning indicator for her. Nevertheless, proficiency levels exist between each of them, as indicated by their TRAILS assessment score. Although each interviewee indicated they "looked-up" information on the internet, both Michael and Diana expressed the most details in their process.

When information literacy scores were compared to perceptions of information literacy skills, the higher-achieving participants expressed their process in a more informative manner and delivered more information than the lower-achieving students.

## **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Findings from this study can be examined to assess information literacy instruction opportunities within the district. Moreover, findings can be used to discuss the possibility of developing a sociocultural information literacy assessment that is relevant to the district's student population. By developing a more sociocultural assessment of information literacy skills based on cultural experiences of students, results might ascertain skill deficiencies more accurately. Thus, targeting instruction to guarantee students are more information literate for job market and

college and career readiness. However, before determining the necessity of a socio-culturally relevant information literacy assessment, districts must decide how information literacy skills are to be included within curriculum and instruction. Throughout each of the participants' responses, no student indicated instruction from their teacher or librarian on learning information literacy skills.

In addition, if students are to have a more streamlined transition from secondary to postsecondary education, significant collaborations should be established. Hull and Taylor (2003) proposed changes in information literacy skills instruction and additional communication between secondary and higher education schools. The American Association of School Librarians and the ACRL each have standards illustrating the capabilities of an information literate person; however, according to Callan and Kirst (2008), "perhaps one of the reasons for the skills gap between high school and college is the fact that student standards are established in separate orbits. K-16 faculty members rarely work together on standards, curricula or assessment" (p. 3). Establishing strong K-16 collaborations between local schools and universities might result in stronger information literacy skills of incoming college freshmen or for individuals going directly into the workforce.

## **Summary**

As educators we must instruct students how to recognize the significance of understanding what information literacy entails. The American Association of School Librarians (2011) asserted, "urban school librarians serve a disproportionately high number of minority students" (p. 2). According to Palardy, Rumberger, and Butler (2015), "American high schools are highly segregated by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and English language status" (p.

1). Due to these factors, minority and low socioeconomic students' actions and academic performances are adversely affected because of the tendency for poor Hispanic students and poor Black students to attend segregated schools (Palardy et al., 2015). As a librarian teaching at a high-poverty, high-minority school, ensuring students are information literate is fundamental because, as Owens (1976) declared:

beyond information literacy for greater work effectiveness and efficiency, information literacy is needed to guarantee the survival of democratic institutions. All men are created equal but voters with information resources are in a position to make more intelligent decisions than citizens who are information illiterates. (p. 27)

By becoming more sociocultural-minded teachers, perhaps educators can build stronger relationships in low-socioeconomic, urban school districts. Stronger relationships may help produce critical thinkers who will, in turn, be able to make connections with information via inquiry and investigation. Thus, forging stronger information literacy skills to ensure job market and college and career readiness; consequently, generating an information literate citizenry.



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**Using Cooperative Learning to enhance Multicultural Classrooms through Remote  
Learning in Unprecedented Times**

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## **Using Cooperative Learning to Enhance Multicultural Classrooms Through Remote Learning in Unprecedented Times**

### **Abstract**

Cooperative learning is a popular educational approach to create communities of caring and support to transform classrooms, schools, and, ultimately, society. Cooperative learning could help to build a culturally sensitive cooperative learning classroom by building a bridge between cooperative learning and cultural diversity. This teaching strategy is especially appropriate for multicultural classrooms. Students from different cultural backgrounds have different needs, which correspondingly requires the teacher to have self-consciousness for the difference and apply specific teaching strategies to cater to the needs of diverse student groups. The multicultural classroom provides students from different ethnic-cultural groups the opportunity to communicate, interact, and cultivate acceptance and tolerance with other students who come from a different cultural backgrounds and ethnic groups. Students learn better in a cooperative learning environment. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is very "challenging" for students to work in cooperative groups while being taught remotely, especially those with limited access to technology. This paper is to inquire into the contributions of cooperative learning in the multicultural classroom through remote learning during and after COVID-19, and thus search for effective ways to apply the cooperative learning strategies.

### **Key Words:**

cooperative learning; multicultural classroom; remote learning

## **Introduction**

We live in an increasingly diverse society; what exactly is a "diverse society"? A diverse society encompasses acceptance and respect, where citizens understand that every individual is unique, and recognize individual differences. These differences can be along with the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious and political beliefs, or other ideologies. It involves the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment, and understanding individuals and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within every individual. "Diversity in education" means more than just acknowledging and tolerating differences. Diversity in education is a set of conscious practices that involve:

- Understanding and appreciating interdependence of humanity, cultures, and the natural environment.
- Practicing mutual respect for qualities and experiences that are different from one's own.
- Understanding that diversity includes not only ways of being but also ways of knowing.
- Recognizing that personal, cultural and institutionalized discrimination creates and sustains privileges for some while creating and sustaining disadvantages for others.
- Building alliances across differences to help eradicate all forms of discrimination.

According to Vespa, Armstrong, & Medina (2020), the year 2030 and beyond marks a demographic turning point for the United States. The report discusses how the U.S. population is projected to grow slowly, age considerably, and become more racially and ethnically diverse.

Correspondingly, the classroom is becoming increasingly multicultural and diverse in

ethnicity, religion, language, and cultural traditions (Ben-Peretz, Eilam, and Yankelevitch 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2003). Diversity in the classrooms requires teachers to apply their attitude, knowledge, and teaching competency to cope with the challenges emerging in the diverse contexts to stimulate students with gender differences, ethnicity, and social-economic status. Having compassion and patience cannot be as authentic as it is now. COVID-19 has changed the world, and that includes the school and working environments. Students from different backgrounds have different needs which require teachers to have a humble attitude for the differences observed (den Brok, Hajer, and van Eerde, 2010) and the challenges students are experiencing through this pandemic. During this time, teachers should possess the professionalism and empathy to deal with unique situations, pay attention to the individual needs of students from different cultures, and apply specific teaching strategies to cater to the needs of diverse students they are teaching (Wubbels et al., 2006). That is why cooperative learning has been identified as a successful educational approach to create communities of caring and support to transform classrooms, schools, and ultimately society (Millis, 1998) during such a difficult time.

### **Why Cooperative Learning**

According to the Office of Research Education Consumer Guide (1992), cooperative learning is a successful teaching strategy in which students are divided into small teams with students from diverse backgrounds in each team, includes but not limited to levels of ability, ethnicity, gender, and physical abilities. This strategy uses a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of the subject taught. Each member of the team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an

atmosphere of achievement. Cooperative learning is recognized as a useful teaching tool where students work together in small groups with a preset common goal. This teaching strategy, when taught effectively, offers a structured and systematic instructional strategy so that students work effectively in groups. The graph below by Ariza (2016) illustrates the main components involved in cooperative learning methodology.

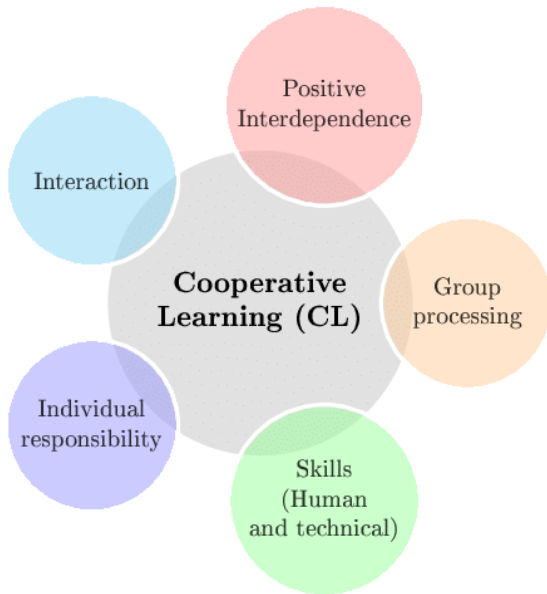


Figure 1. Graph of main components involved in the cooperative learning methodology. Adapted from "*Design of Open Source Platform for Automatic Control Systems Education Based on Cooperative Learning*," by J. A. Ariza, 2016, doi:10.1109/FIE.2016.7757605

### Explanation of Graph

According to Ariza (2016), the main components of cooperative learning include elements and characteristics. The elements are the main components of cooperative learning, which include: 1) positive interdependence, 2) individual accountability, 3) group processing, 4) social skills, and 5) promotive interaction. The characteristics are: 1) building relationships, 2) contribution of group members, 3) individual participation, 4) performance dependent on all



group members, 5) functioning, 6) clear goals and processing events, 7) communication, 8) clarification, paraphrasing praising, and 9) encouragement and facilitated communication. The table below illustrates the elements and characteristics defined by the different elements.

| Elements                  | Characteristics  |
|---------------------------|--|
| Positive Interdependence  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships</li> <li>• Contribution of group members</li> </ul>                         |
| Individual Accountability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual participation</li> <li>• Performance dependent on all group members</li> </ul> |
| Group Processing          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Functioning</li> <li>• Clear goals, processing events</li> </ul>                          |
| Social Skills             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Clarification, paraphrasing, praising</li> </ul>                 |
| Promotive Interaction     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouragement</li> <li>• Facilitated communication</li> </ul>                             |

The five essential elements that constitute cooperative learning are explained in detail below (John and John, 1999):

**Individual Accountability:** In cooperative learning, each group member should be individually accountable for their part. Students are encouraged to "learn together but perform alone." No one will stay in the "safe corner" and "hitch-hike" on the work of others. A group goal should set up clearly to measure whether both the group and the group members could successfully achieve the goal.

Positive interdependence: in cooperative learning, students should feel responsible both for their tasks and the group's effort. Students should "sink or swim together" in group work. Proper mutual goal setting, proper division of labor, reasonable dividing of materials, appropriate assignment of roles and relevant interest from students' won performance with the benefit of the group could be set up to achieve the goal. Efforts of a group member benefit not only him or herself but also all group members as well.

Face-to-Face interaction: in cooperative learning, students should encourage and support each other; eye contact and face-to-face interaction are encouraged to become personally committed to each other and the common goals. Effective ways could be oral explanations, discussion of the concepts, relation from present learning to prior knowledge.

Interpersonal and Small Group Social Skills: in cooperative learning, while learning the academic task, interpersonal and small group social skills are also attained during the process. Skills such as effective communication, decision-making, trust-building, and conflict management are necessary.

Group Processing: After finishing the task, students should analyze the performance of their groups and how well social skills are employed.

Cooperative learning has been around for years, but it never received the same prominence as blended learning or differentiated instruction (Zook, 2018). While it is debatable as to why cooperative learning flew under the radar for so long, it is undeniable it is a powerful and effective teaching strategy. Nevertheless, what are the details behind this teaching strategy, and how does it work in the classroom, especially now? Most importantly, does cooperative learning work in a diverse classroom in a remote environment? The key to cooperative learning while being in a remote environment is keeping students on task.

According to Slavin (1989), cooperative learning is a set of alternatives to traditional instructional systems, or more specific, techniques in which students work in heterogeneous groups and earn recognition, rewards, and group approval based on the academic performance of the whole group. Time is spent in workgroups, either in-class or out-of-class. Classroom discussions, short lectures and presentations are forms of cooperative learning. Students are encouraged to discuss, debate, disagree and learn from each other. This strategy emphasizes thinking skills, increased higher-order learning, improved race relations, and acceptance of mainstream students. Cooperative learning supplements the teacher's instruction and allows students to discuss the topic or practice skills and discover their information through the cooperative learning process. So, what is the role of the teacher?

The role of the teacher in cooperative learning in a multicultural class is fundamental. The color blindness theory advocated by Sleeter (1991) suggests that teachers disregard students' ethnicity in the education context. The educator's expectations of a student's performance influence that student's success (Rist, 2000). Cooperative learning helps to build a culturally sensitive, cooperative learning classroom by building a bridge between cooperative learning and cultural diversity (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sharan, 2010). During the process, the teacher develops a better understanding of students' cultural traditions, linguistic backgrounds and learning styles. Meanwhile, the teacher is improving their teaching techniques.

### **Cooperative Learning in Multicultural Classrooms**

A multicultural classroom is one that embraces diversity and incorporates ideas, beliefs, or people from different races, cultures, and religions. In a multicultural classroom, students are encouraged to learn about the cultural backgrounds of their classmates and accept all races,

cultures, and religions. Textbooks read, activities carried out, and lessons taught are all evidence of this acceptance.

Classrooms in a multicultural environment require teachers to take more effort, have more diligence, and exhibit the courage to discover, recognize, and embrace diversity. Teachers should regard diversity as a foundation for class development and building relationships with students. Being open, understanding, and compassionate should be the primary consideration for all teachers. A teacher should take an interest in all students, know their backgrounds and interests. Teachers should develop a culture where students have opportunities to discuss and share their cultural information without being judged by their classmates or the teacher. As the professional in the classroom, teachers should address any differences discussed and plan lessons from the curriculum by creating a multicultural classroom culture. The teacher's understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity and their realization of the need to promote an interpersonal relationship between students are key factors that decide how much cooperative learning strategies promote a multicultural relationship.

Cooperative learning is especially appropriate for multicultural classrooms (Coelho, 1994). Students with diverse backgrounds learn better in a cooperative learning environment. The diverse classroom provides students from different ethnic-cultural groups the opportunity to communicate, interact, and cultivate acceptance and tolerance with other students who come from different cultural backgrounds and ethnic groups. Groups are formed by those who share similar backgrounds and interests (Coelho, 1998). In the classroom, students from different cultures are encouraged to form working groups to equalize the richness of cultural groups in the classroom environment (Allport, 1954). With the common goals set previously, the group members gradually develop a sense of identity and purpose and constitute the group's interaction

and final study results. This has become challenging through remote teaching and learning.

Before organizing a multicultural classroom, the teacher should first examine their cultural baggage and identify their own cultural bias. The biases include their stereotypes, racist beliefs, and opinions that are deeply rooted in their mind from childhood. Before engaging in cooperative learning strategies, the teacher should fully perceive cultural differences, recognize the cultural differences, and accept the cultural differences of learners in the classroom. In doing so, the teacher's stereotypical perceptions of the students' differences should be removed, and learners' self-esteem respected.

When implementing cooperative learning, either face-to-face or remotely, fairness and consistency should be the core beliefs when engaging with students of different races, religions, and ethnic groups. All students in a culturally diverse environment should practice equal identity, and students should be encouraged to work toward a common goal - acceptance. Effective communication is crucial to experiencing positive results especially during such a critical time.

## **Contributions to Multicultural Classrooms**

### **1. Cooperative learning contributes to improved interpersonal and multicultural relationships.**

In cooperative learning programs, students of different ethnic backgrounds work toward a common goal and develop positive feelings between each other. Studies show that Anglo and Asian Americans who are working cooperatively toward learning goals showed more positive attitudes to Mexican Americans than did learners in competitive classrooms (Gonzales, 1979; Slavin, 1983). Research also showed that European and West Indian immigrants and Anglo Canadians who are engaged in cooperative groups tend to develop more cross-ethnic friendships

than those who worked in competitive groups (Slavin, 1983). Other studies found that the students who work cooperatively toward established learning goals tend to develop more social relationships among different ethnic groups (Zahn et al., 1986). According to Sharan et al., students' attitudes and behaviors to classmates of different ethnic backgrounds tend to improve to classmates of different groups (1984). When learning cooperatively instead of individually, greater student friendship across racial lines developed (Cooper et al., 1980). Other studies show that African and Anglo-American learners determine social interaction in out-of-class settings. For the groups who are engaged in cooperative learning activities, students tend to interact more frequently in free-time activities than those who worked individually in competitive situations.

## **2. Cooperative learning helps to build up culturally diverse students' self-esteem and self-identities.**

Students' self-esteem includes feelings of being well-liked and feelings of doing well academically. In cooperative learning, students should be held responsible for their tasks and have a sense of achievement of contribution to the group goal (Slavin, 1983). According to Kagan, Zahn, Widaman, Schwarzwald, and Tyrrel (1985), lower self-esteem tends to arise among culturally diverse students in competitive classes. Generally speaking, minority students tend to adopt the majority view and feel less worthy when their core values are compared to the majority culture. According to a study by Towson (1985) about cooperative learning and intercultural relations, learners could become "winners" or "losers" in competitive classrooms. Negative intercultural attitudes and behaviors might happen when most of the "winners" come from a specific cultural group, and "losers" come from another. Then negative self-esteem might be developed among learners, and then failures on the cultural background could be blamed.

According to Towson (1985), learners tend to have more opportunities when they work cooperatively in an equal atmosphere where they can perceive themselves and others as competent, both academically and socially. The interpersonal relationship might be promoted for the recognition of mutual interdependence and increase of self-esteem.

### **3. Cooperative learning contributes to increased academic achievement for culturally diverse learners.**

Research shows that cooperative learning increases the academic achievement of culturally diverse students (Slavin, 1985, 1987; Kagan et al., 1985). Two reasons might account for this phenomenon. When learners are in a cooperative learning environment, they are more likely to motivate and encourage each other. Studies also show that culturally diverse students suffer academically from the traditional classroom instructions and show dramatically more exceptional performance in cooperative learning classrooms.

According to Slavin (1985), for African and Hispanic American students, cooperative learning strategies are especially useful in their academic achievement (1987). Other researches show that Mexican American learners have higher achievement in cooperative learning classes while Anglo Americans demonstrate equally well in both cooperative learning and competitive classes. Other research shows that African American learners have a dramatic improvement in academic performance in cooperative programs, and African American students gained more than twice as many other groups.

### **Remote Learning**

In an article written by Shonagh Rae for The New York Times (2020), the author focused

on the challenges of online education during the coronavirus outbreak. She wrote from the voice of the teachers, and quotes from a few are shared. Ms. Burke from PA. expressed that "so much of what we do in classrooms is driven by student responses and reactions. I would give anything to watch their faces light up, their hands in the air, their smiles and fist pumps when they share a new learning or big idea with me." Mrs. Kass from NY, a first-grade teacher said, "one year within full retirement and having to learn how to use Google Classroom with 35 first graders of different cognitive abilities... I feel as though I am attempting to drive on a road that I am simultaneously paving while also following a paper map!" Kaitlin Barnes teaches fourth grade in Baltimore; 80 percent of the students at her school come from low-income families, and only a quarter of the students have a computer at home. She states, "for the population of students I teach, this outbreak means they will fall even further behind their wealthier peers." All of these teachers are engaged in remote teaching and learning.

What is remote learning? According to Tech and Learning (2020), remote learning is something a district should be able to switch off and on based on need; however, the efficiency of transitioning to remote learning is dependent on preparedness, technology tools by teacher and students, and overall student support infrastructure. Remote learning provides an opportunity for students and teachers to remain connected and engaged with the content while working from their homes. Opportunities for remote learning are typically linked to emergencies that pose a threat to student safety. The threat at this time is a virus, COVID-19. Transitioning to remote learning can keep students on track so that when they return to physical school environments they will not need to complete a lot of makeup work to be ready for any scheduled assessments; however, those students with limited technology access are not as fortunate.

Most importantly, many of the requirements in a traditional classroom environment will



be in play for remote learning environments, and the goal is to adhere to as many state and local requirements as possible. This is where cooperative and remote learning in a diverse classroom emerges. We have witnessed the delivery of education change before our eyes in a matter of 24 hours! The delivery of instruction has changed, and it continues to change daily. However, despite the uncertainty, our diverse communities are showing tremendous resilience by rallying in support of each other, especially when it comes to educating our nation's children. Sandelius (2020) states that transitioning to remote instruction with little training and no plan is hard work, both for seasoned educators and parents turned first-time "homeschoolers". She continues to comment that nevertheless, it is critical now to do what we can to provide consistency and structure for all students (diverse learners, those with disabilities, gifted, special needs, and regular) amidst other challenges.

To help educators support students in multicultural classrooms with different learning needs (including those with disabilities) via remote instruction and at-home learning, Sandelius (2020) suggests ten considerations that will guide planning the delivery of instruction remotely. The graph below illustrates how teachers and parents can deliver successful remote and cooperative learning in a multicultural setting during these challenging times.

| IDEAS FOR KEEPING DIVERSE STUDENTS ENGAGED DURING REMOTE LEARNING | WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO<br>(Action)  | WHAT PARENTS CAN DO<br>(Action)  |
|---|---|--|
| Know your students' access to technology.                         | Keep a running list of what tools each child is using to ensure you are planning accordingly. Include notes about the level of knowledge family members have about how to use technology. As the teacher, you might want to offer it to family members. | Parents may want to keep track of each child's use of technology during the day in order to moderate potential challenges that arise with too much screen time.  |
| Provide low- or no-tech alternatives                              | Consider providing phone-in options for lessons or using everyday household items for learning activities when it is appropriate. For example, ask students to complete puzzles or use dice to create their math games.                                 | Take inventory of games, cards, and puzzles. Monopoly teaches math, and card games teach strategic thinking. Cooking with a recipe teaches math and science. Embedding small reading tasks into daily activities or asking comprehension questions can |

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
|  |   | also build literacy skills.   |
| Provide instruction multiple times and in multiple modalities.         | Consider chunking assignments and asking students to hand in smaller tasks in sequence in order to scaffold learning in ways that provide more access to students. Record short videos and model assignments so students can watch and rewatch tasks as needed. | Create "to do" lists as well as visual schedules for students who may need additional scaffolds and support. Engage children in creating schedules- you might be surprised in the outcome.  |
| Deliver content in different ways, which includes cooperative grouping | Try switching between video instruction/content, worksheets, independent reading, and learning through hands-on projects via groups to maximize engagement and provide unique entry points for students with diverse learning needs.                            | Parents might try a virtual field trip to a historical building followed by creating diorama- representations with legos, cardboard, or magazine cut-outs. Students can present what they have created to their teacher and group members in a photo or via web conference. |
| Let students work in groups and decide what to work on                 | Allowing students opportunities to select topics to study or methods for demonstrating knowledge can help students  | Leverage loved ones or other community members as a part of the learning process. Distance learning allows  |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
|  | from diverse backgrounds play to their strengths and feel more confident.  | people who are not close to engage in a student's education in ways that traditional classroom learning does not.  |
| Know your students' strengths and teach them | As you develop materials and content, take advantage of student's diverse needs to connect with their strengths.   | Know your child. Take this opportunity to further communicate with teachers about your child's strengths and interests, especially those children from diverse cultures. |
| Establish routines and communicate regularly | Try having a regular time to respond to emails and daily video conference office hours.<br><br>Make it a rule of thumb to check in on each student at least once a week by phone.                                    | Connect with teachers to find out how consistency and routines can be reinforced at home.  |
| Build-in downtime                            | Encouraging partner work or cooperative learning over email or phone, either semi-structured or unstructured, provides students with opportunities for communication and social skills development in a lower-stakes | Parents should provide opportunities for unstructured downtime to keep spirits high.   |

|                    |  |   |
|--------------------|--|---|
|                    | environment.   |   |
| Practice self-care | Be kind to your students and yourself. Create wellness check-ins for students through Google Docs, form, or other platforms, asking them to let you know how they are doing. Consider doing something similar for peers or colleagues to support each other. | Make time for your child to participate in his/her/their teachers' virtual office hours or organize virtual happy hours for children and adults to check in with one another. |
| Keep learning      | Do not forget to reflect on your practice routinely. Asking yourself what went well, what could have been better, and what needs to happen next time after each lesson can go a long way to getting the results desired with remote instruction.             | Being a first-time "teacher" parents will have a steep learning curve, especially if they are juggling a full-time job.   |

## Summary

Cooperative learning is an educational approach that aims to organize classroom activities into academic and social learning experiences (Gillies, 2016). However, there is much more to cooperative learning than merely arranging students in groups, identified as "structuring

positive interdependence" (Team Game Tournament, 2012). For remote and cooperative learning, this is especially true; each modality of instruction has created a sense of community during a time of extreme isolation. As a practical educational approach, the pedagogy for each strategy is especially useful when putting in the context of multicultural education. Cooperative learning fosters acceptance and tolerance in the traditional learning environment, and remote learning provides the vehicle to stay connected while learning content, cultures, and establishing relationships with those who do not "look or act, like you or me." The multicultural classroom, whether in the traditional setting or remotely, allows students from different cultures to bring information, perspective, and insights from their culture while cultivating and developing critical thinking skills for the students involved.

Cooperative learning has and does transform classrooms, schools, and ultimately society by creating communities of caring and support, which, in turn, bring about higher levels of achievement in many domains (Millis, 1998). This modality of learning has become more and more popular within the American education system (Wooley, 2008). It is almost uncommon not to have some cooperative learning elements within a college class. Blackboard is designed to assign students to groups within the class randomly. This type of selection allows students to work with other students enrolled in the class who they do not know. Since most instruction has gone to remote learning, group assignments have worked very effectively for the instructor, a faculty member, with the undergraduate students enrolled in the class. We have found with cooperative learning as with remote learning, they both have to be structured, facilitated, and monitored by the instructor. Any course work or assignment is adapted to each modality of teaching. Teachers have to accept the differences of students and adjust instruction accordingly. In examining cooperative and remote learning contributions in multicultural situations, this

article has suggested ways educators can reap the benefits of effective teaching during such a difficult transition period.

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**Overidentification of African American students in special education:**

**The impact of an inadequate referral process**

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## **Abstract**

The inequities within the educational structure have prevailed despite advancements in education reform efforts resulting from the existing programming and instructional practices that negatively influence students of color, especially African American students (Bollard et al., 2018; Daniels, 1998). Many legal judgments such as *Brown v. Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education* (1954) have ruled in favor of the reform in educational policies and practices that limit educational inequity for students of color (Daniels, 1998). A significant amount of research shows that the use of prevention and early intervention methods can prevent and reduce overrepresentation of African American students in the special education categories such as intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, and specific learning disabilities (Green, 2005). And yet, there still haven't been any real solutions presented either in research, policies, or practice to remedy. Policy makers, school leaders, parents, and researchers continue to search for answers to this critical issue. The purpose of this literature review is to determine if the significantly large numbers of African American students are referred to special education programs because of inadequate school referral processes. In addition, this review identifies why African American students are referred, but also determines how to reduce the number by facilitating an adequate school referral process.

**Key words:** Inequities, Special Education, Overrepresentation, Referral Process

## **Over Identification of African American Students in Special Education: Results of an Inadequate School Referral Process**

### **Background**

The disproportionate representation of African American students in special education has elicited frequent discussion among groups including the education community, parents, and researchers in higher education. The inequities within the educational structure have prevailed despite advancements in education reform efforts resulting from the existing programming and instructional practices that negatively influence students of color, especially African American, students (Bollard et al., 2018; Daniels, 1998). Many legal judgments such as *Brown v. Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education* (1954) have ruled in favor of the reform in educational policies and practices that limit educational inequity for students of color (Daniels, 1998).

A significant amount of research shows that the use of prevention and early intervention methods can prevent and reduce overrepresentation of African American students in the special education categories such as intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, and specific learning disabilities (Green, 2005). Effective prevention and early intervention methods can easily thwart the labeling and identification of African American students in special education programs through variables that affect referral, identification, and placement processes (Valles, 1998). Therefore, there is a need to explore why and how there is an over identification and disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs.

The purpose of this literature review is to determine if the significantly large numbers of African American students are referred to special education programs because of an inadequate school referral process. In addition, this review identifies why African American students are

referred, but also determines how to reduce the number by facilitating an adequate school referral process. Harris-Murri, King and Rostenberg (2006) argue that clear discussion and appropriate development of culturally relevant techniques that intervene for students who exhibit social, emotional, and behaviorally difficulties, and disproportionate representation and assumption of child deficits can be effectively addressed and remedied. Dunn (1968) and Morgan, Farkas, Cook, Strassfeld, Hillemeier, Pun, and Schussler (2017) argued that the identification and placement in special education of socio-culturally deprived children (often students of color) with mild learning disabilities was of great concern because of the placement of these children into segregated settings with questionable benefits of these placements, and the detrimental effects of labeling students with special education.

Moreover, additional studies have shown the link between socioeconomic status, ethnic or racial status, achievement, and disability (as cited in Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002, p. 2). Therefore, much research, which leads to reform, is needed to make changes in the special education identification and referral process to improve the quality of life for African American students who may be considered emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, or intellectually disabled (Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, & Harry, 2016). Consequently, the never-ending question that researchers continue to search for an answer to is: “Is the over identification and disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs a result of an inadequate school referral process?”

The results of an inadequate school referral process show an over identification and disproportionate representation of African American students enrolled in special education programs. To prevent this phenomenon, better and more efficient school referral processes should be implemented to reduce the inequities among students, especially African American

students, in special education programs. In addition, African American students who exhibit behavioral issues are referred to special education programs more than White students; however, behavioral issues are often misdiagnosed as special education issues.

The over identification of African American students in special education can be traced back to several variables. Students of color are disproportionately referred, identified, placed, and labeled as special education students, as opposed to White students. A few of the reasons that this phenomenon occurs can be derived from teacher bias during the referral process, the lack of teacher preparation when dealing with diverse ethnic students of color populations, an ineffective special education program in public schools, the lack of preventive instructional programs, and an inappropriate response to intervention. Research shows that the over identification can be prevented if special education programs are regularly monitored and regular education teachers receive proper training and staff development (Mitchell, Hirn, & Lewis, 2017).

### **Diversity in Public Schools**

Additional research contends that there will probably be the undying concern to determine the effects of ethnic or students of color achievement in less diverse or predominately White schools. Researchers report that students at all levels find greater motivation and perform at higher academic levels when instructional methods are similar to student learning characteristics. However, some teachers are unable to identify distinctive traits among students of color that require a unique content of instructional strategies (Vasquez, 1990, p. 299). Culturally competent school leaders and teachers are needed to help understand the unique characteristics of students of color (Jones & Nichols, 2013; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).



Although there is no clear debate, we can agree that students differ in character, cultural traits, and competition.

For example, Hispanic students have a sense of loyalty and honor to the family (Vasquez, 1990). Therefore, the family is the basic support group throughout their lives. There is an individual sense of motivation directed by the family and this leads to a high need of competition. On the other hand, African American students are more person-centered, which is directed toward a person, specifically, a role model. African American students are taught to concentrate on more than one stimulus at one time in comparison to the mainstream classroom in which instruction is provided with a single or limited stimulus (Ransaw, 2016; Vasquez, 1990). Stimuli may include choral reading (reading while other students are reading), multitasking an assignment, or working with groups of students. Multiple stimuli can be distracting and may be even frustrating for some students, which may cause students to react differently than others in a multisensory environment.

Generally, teachers are not familiar with the cultures of ethnic minorities enough to identify procedures they should adapt in their instructional strategies that could assure effective teaching. Therefore, teachers should be responsive to student characteristics by seeking to implement culturally appropriate instructional strategies in the shape of content, context, and mode of instruction that ensure the students strengths are brought into the classroom (Ransaw, 2016; Vasquez, 1990).

So, in response to the question, “Does a predominately white or less diverse school environment affect the learning achievements of students of color?” we can assume there is a problem. Research shows that there is insufficient knowledge by teachers to the distinctive learning characteristics of students of color in predominately white schools (Ransaw, 2016;

Vasquez, 1990). To resolve the problem, teachers should be observant of students' behaviors and should cater the learning in the classrooms to address the observations and practices based on research to meet the needs of the changing nature of students in the classrooms year by year.

Visiting scholars' goal, while gathered together at a conference sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), was to strengthen the relationship between academia and government (Hill, 2003). Research presentations were made addressing the issue of urban education and cultural diversity. After the conference, Hill shared his reviews of several of the articles that discussed the main concerns regarding the primary focus of the conference. Since the 1990 census, the levels of racial integration have remained relatively stable and the Black population remains the least integrated (Hill, 2003). In addition, the same research indicates that as of 2000: the typical Black student lives in a neighborhood that is 54% Black and is 33.2% White; the typical Hispanic student lives in a neighborhood that is 42.1% Hispanic and 40% White; the typical Asian student lives in a neighborhood that is 19.3% Asian and 58% White (Hill, 2003 p. 184).

Consequently, there is a growing concern for the need of preparing educators to work effectively with culturally diverse children in urban settings (Hill, 2003). Moreover, educator programs that prepare teachers should be research based and identify a relevant number of findings such as teacher attitudes towards working with culturally diverse children in various educational settings, specifically urban settings, and culturally mismatched teacher-student groups. It is not suggested that culturally appropriate instruction be provided by teachers who are minorities themselves (Ransaw, 2016; Vasquez, 1990). Moreover, when teachers focus on understanding the various ways of thinking that culturally diverse children bring to the classroom, they themselves can become better teachers who should reexamine what they know,

how they teach what they know, and how their own practice determines their growth as teachers (Brownell, Sindelar, Keily, & Danielson, 2010; Hill, 2003).

Educators should be encouraged to be sensitive to the range of cognitive and affective styles that are available to students who belong to a particular ethnocultural group (Brownell et al., 2010; Hill, 2003). Nonetheless, Hill wanted to remind educators that cultural diversity often looks like many other kinds of diversity that educators should be sensitive to (p. 185). Because of some issues involving racial integration in less diverse school populations, educators should embrace student diversity and facilitate student differences to improve the quality and effectiveness of instruction in their classrooms as well as personal and professional growth. As our demographics continue to rapidly change, education and teachers must be prepared for the events that follow the increase in both students of color and White student groups.

### **Special Education**

The increasing number of legal ramifications is continually forcing society to look at how we deal with both students of color and special education students. Research shows that there is a growing concern that students with physical, emotional, and learning disabilities need protection that is implemented and enforced by the law (Welner, 2006). Therefore, the question at hand is whether or not individuals who have physical, emotional, and/or learning disabilities need special protection in order to receive an equitable quality education. Consequently, several statutes and regulations have been implemented over the years to address the needs of special education students (p. 61).

A free and appropriate public education for all children is covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), passed in 1975 as the Education for All Children

Handicapped Act (P.L. 94-142); before its implementation, students with disabilities were turned away and sent to special schools (Welner, 2006; IDEA, 1997). In addition to IDEA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 assures that students with disabilities are educated in the least restricted environment when appropriate, and prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in any program or activity receiving or benefiting from federal financial assistance which includes public schools (Losen & Welner, 2001). Title II of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) applies the same regulations as Section 504 with the inclusion of state and local government agencies, even if they do not accept federal financial assistance (ADA, 1990). The passing of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) and the renewed mandate of this law known as Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) has brought a revolutionary change in special education. Learning disabled students were no longer being educated in a self-contained classroom separate from their age appropriate peers, but rather alongside them in general education classrooms. Moreover, there are laws that protect individuals from racial and language discrimination: Title VI and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) (Welner, 2006). Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (1964), an anti-discrimination statute, is focused on race, ethnicity, and national origin, not disability. It is similar to Section 504 and prevents school districts from assigning students to special education programs entirely based on the student's inability to speak English. Also, Title VI looks at the fact that overrepresentation implicates issues of racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity as well as disability status (Welner, 2006).

Many regulations are already in place to assist students with intellectual, physical, and learning disabilities to ensure a quality education. In addition, public schools should be aware of all of the laws and the consequences that might occur in the event these laws are not adhered to.

Compliance is the key in ensuring that all students' needs are met and addressed appropriately without bias.

Because of the expectations in public schools of accountability and “excellence”, special education must be reformed to meet the need of services provided to children with disabilities. These expectations lead to the ultimate question of whether we will initiate change or will the victims that are affected be changed. According to McLeskey, Skiba, and Wilcox (1990), a safe assertion is that the education of students served by special education programs, just like the educational programs for all others in the system, is a legitimate target of reform. The main discussion in education includes the issues such as the appropriateness of the metaphor used to describe change in services to students currently supported by special education, the importance of integration and a values-based approach to research and the redesign of services, and the importance of special education's participation in the mainstream of education reform (McLeskey et. al, 1990; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

Research shows that the interests of students with disabilities must be brought to the forefront in public discussion of school reform (Ransaw, 2016; Soodak & Podell, 1993). A student's interests can be viewed as predictors of his or her learning as well as his or her behavior problems (Vasquez, 1990; Woodson & Harris, 2018). As the representation of students of color in special education continues to increase, there should also be a shift in the relationship between regular and special education. Without educational reform, specifically with regard to special education, we will ultimately leave students behind with the demanding requirements in education of high student expectations and “excellence” (McLeskey et.al, 1990). Therefore, where desegregation has failed, courts have mandated the needs of appropriate student learning for all students. In addition, special education reform can help monitor the process in which

students may or may not be authentic candidates for special education programs.

James O. Tate (2000) reviews court decisions and compliance issues of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) 1997, which has had an impact on rural public-school special education programs. Unlike urban school districts, rural districts do not receive special compliance exemptions under IDEA (Tate, 2000). Reflections on the Court decision in *Honig v. Doe* (1988) held that disabled students hold enforceable substantive rights to public education (Tate, 2000). In addition, the Court conditioned federal financial assistance upon states' compliance with substantive and procedural goals of IDEA. Ultimately, the state is responsible for ensuring the appropriate use of state and federal special education funding, whether the school district is rural or urban.

According to IDEA Regulations, 34 C.F.R. section 300.600(c), school districts are granted the authority under IDEA to use other sources of funding to pay for special education services. Moreover, the courts have addressed the issue of when a school's obligation to educate a disabled student ends. According to IDEA (1997), the school's obligation to a special education student ends when the student graduates with a diploma, successfully completes an appropriate IEP or voluntarily drops out of school (Scheffel, Rude, & Bole, 2005; Tate, 2000).

## **Teacher Referrals**

Teacher referrals play a crucial role in determining if students are placed in special education programs. Several factors have been identified by researchers that influence teacher referral judgments (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Elder, Figlio, Imberman, & Persico, 2019). Research shows that academic-related problems, student misbehavior, gender, ethnicity, and teacher bias may determine student referral for psychological assessments (Fish, 2019; Lloyd,

Kauffman, Landrum, & Roe, 1991; Mitchell, Hirn, & Lewis, 2017). Furthermore, this is just one more variable that can contribute to the over identification of students of color in special education programs.

Teachers initiate the vast majority of referrals to special education and sometimes the referral invariably leads to placement. However, efforts to prevent the inappropriate placement of students are the main focus of teacher referrals (Podell & Soodak, 1993). One link to a number of teacher behaviors is the teacher's belief about him- or herself and his or her perceptions of students (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Elder et al., 2019). It has been shown that teachers do not treat students in the classrooms the same and their actions are based on their perceptions of the individual child. In some instances, teachers might even respond to the same student differently based on their perceptions of the student behavior instead of the observable quality of the student's behavior (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Elder et al., 2019).

Consequently, some teachers are willing to work with more difficult students if they believe that they could make change (Podell & Soodak, 1993). Regular and special education teachers have a unique role to play in the teaching and learning processes for all students. Along with that role, educators must be willing to look at their positions, look at their bias, and look at ways in which they can improve the services and instructional strategies that educators provide. Several researchers have shown that student gender also has an impact on referrals in that males are referred to special education more than females (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Elder et al., 2019). Teachers report that African American males are referred more than White males. And White teachers refer more African American students than Hispanic or African American teachers. Consequently, African American and White teachers referred more male students, whereas Hispanic teachers referred more female students (Podell & Soodak, 1993).

Other variables indicate that given the historically disproportionate numbers of students of color in special education, race is indeed a factor of teacher referrals. When researchers studied the impact of a student's race on teacher referral, they have found that teachers more frequently referred African American males to educable intellectual disability classes, even though these students had comparable IQ and achievement scores (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Elder et al., 2019). Additional research is needed to validate and support the degree of racial differences where other variables are present. Students from both culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds appear to be at greater risk for identification and placement in special education programs (Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, & Harry, 2016; Valles, 1998). Identified improvement in general education can better prepare regular school programs to meet the individual differences in students as the number of students from diverse backgrounds continues to increase in the public schools, so that special education can be better prepared to serve this diversity (Valles, 1998).

The role of a student's socioeconomic status (SES) has also been investigated in relation to the referral judgments of teachers for special education (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Elder et al., 2019). Podell and Soodak's (1993) research shows teacher bias toward students based on SES as one explanation for inappropriate referrals and one more indicator that students from low-SES families are overrepresented in special education. In comparison, teachers often provide positive reinforcement to students from middle-class families. But they tend to overlook and misunderstand students from lower-class families (Mitchell, Hirn, & Lewis, 2017; Podell & Soodak, 1993). However, studies have shown that poverty, not ethnicity, is an important factor in influencing the disproportionate representation of students of color groups in special education (Connor, 2017; Dever et al., 2016).



Academic-related problems are the most common reasons for special education referrals by teachers (Fish, 2019; Lloyd, Kauffman, Landrum, & Roe, 1991). Sometimes a child's age could determine whether or not instruction is academically appropriate. An increasing body of research shows that a child's age in overall development in relation to other classmates affects teacher referrals (Abidin & Robinson, 2002). Research shows that younger students in a classroom are more likely referred for special education assessments than older students in the classroom (2002).

Another area of concern with regard to academic referrals is the misunderstanding of the identification of gifted students with learning disabilities. The main function of schools is to develop student academic potential; but in rare instances, a child's giftedness, which may encompass a preponderance of talent areas, can be ignored because of improper testing that fails to identify specific talents because of low IQ scores. Therefore, understanding learning disabilities which states the level of performance in a particular academic area may differ from a student's intellectual giftedness or ability.

The main concern of researchers is whether a teacher's referral decision is impacted by academic, socioeconomic, behavioral, or subjective response to a particular student. Furthermore, the prevailing issue of today is why these inequities, including the disproportionate representation of students of color, particularly, African American in gifted and special education programs exist (Bollard, et al., 2018; Daniels, 1998). As we continue to analyze data to either support or negate research studies, the over identification of African American students is still a reality.

Court cases such as *Brown v. Topeka, Kansas, Board of Education* (1954) focus on the experiences that culturally and linguistically diverse students may have due to bias during the

assessment and observation processes of special education referrals. So, there are laws that protect individuals with disabilities such as IDEA, which include rules for how culturally and linguistically diverse students should be assessed for possible special education placement. The law states that all students should have the right to be tested in ways that are free from racial or cultural bias (Welner, 2006). Federal guidelines specify that evaluations should meet the following three criteria to be considered fair and nonbiased: the assessment should be conducted in the student's native language, an evaluation material or test should be used for the specific purpose for which it was validated, and tests should be administered by a professional with the appropriate training and expertise (Welner, 2006).

The main difference between IDEA and Section 504 with regard to overrepresentation of students of color is that IDEA applies only to students who because of their disability need special education and related services. For example, if a culturally and linguistically diverse student was identified as intellectually disabled but did not have a disability, that student would not need special education services and IDEA would not apply. However, Section 504's definition of "qualified handicapped" includes people misclassified as possessing an intellectual or physical impairment that substantially limits one or more life activities (Welner, 2006). If the student were harmed by the wrongful placement, that student would be eligible for a free and appropriate public education under Section 504.

### **Referral Process**

Special education placement usually begins with a referral that can be made by anyone, including the child's parents and the child's general education teacher. According to Welner (2006), the general education teacher should refer students based on observed special needs. If

the special education referral does result in special education placement, the general education teacher is required to participate in the development and compliance of the child's individual education program (IEP) and that IEP should mainstream the child into the general education classroom (2006).

Initially the school must secure permission from the child's parents to evaluate the child for special education (Dever, Raines, Dowdy, E., & Hostutler, 2016; Nowell, & Salem, 2007). Parents can refuse the evaluation or choose an alternative evaluation outside the school in which they will have to pay. Throughout the entire referral process, parents have the right to be extensively involved in that they are able to raise the question of whether the child's race or language proficiency status may have influenced the placement (Welner, 2006). Parents and/or community organizations (on behalf of the parents) can file complaints of parents in a given school district (Burke & Goldman, 2018; Haley & Allsopp, 2019). In reality, a school policy that may initially appear to be nondiscriminatory may actually be discriminatory and disproportionate against particular student groups (e.g., students of color, students from lower socioeconomic student groups, students with disabilities); but that disproportionate school policy burdens a protected, culturally and linguistically diverse group of students even though the district may not have intended to discriminate against these groups. Special education and related services programs are required under IDEA for all eligible students with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21. In addition, states are required to identify and evaluate the education of children from birth to age 21 (IDEA, 1997).

Questions about the eligibility process and the limitations in how students are served has led to numerous researchers and educators coming together in an attempt to find better methods of assessment in special education that will lead to the improvements for students (Barton, Holt,

& Thompson, 2020; Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2005). Since the introduction of the category of learning disabled in 1977, students diagnosed with learning disabilities have increased by 200%. Therefore, several bills have been put into place in which response-to-intervention models indicate that students should receive effective instruction with progress monitoring before being considered for special education (Barton et al., 2020; Bradley et. al, 2005).

### **Prevention and Early Intervention Methods**

Response to intervention (RTI) is described as a process in which students are provided quality instruction and their progress is continuously monitored; those who do not initially respond to additional instruction will then be referred to special education. A successful model should be based on structured, data-based problem solving, flexible instructional delivery and regular monitoring of student progress with valid outcome measures (Barton et al., 2020; Bradley et. al, 2005). The basic RTI model consists of three-tiered prevention levels with primary intervention consisting of a general education program; secondary intervention consisting of fixed duration, targeted, evidence-based small group interventions; and tertiary intervention involving intensive and individualized instruction that may not be similar to the traditional special education instruction (Barton et al., 2020; Bradley et. al, 2005).

Curriculum and instructional strategies can promote timely and effective general education supports that improve academic performance for struggling learners and reduce inappropriate special education referrals (Green, 2005; Toms, Campbell-Whatley, & Schultz, ). According to researchers, educators should be introduced to diverse student and special educator staff development and training through effective in school professional development and in-

service training (Green, 2005; Woodson & Harris, 2018; Yocom & Cossairt, 1996). Following national initiatives and best practices, colleges and universities have implemented instruction in a wider range of models that may be emphasized in the training of future special education teachers (Green, 2005; Woodson & Harris, 2018; Yocom & Cossairt, 1996). Moreover, effective integration of general and special education courses and resources for collaboration to deal with behavioral infractions that leads to special education referrals (Gottlieb & Polirstok, 2005). The National Research Council (2002) reports the three possible variables of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education are social and environmental factors that impact the school readiness, contributions of general education, and implications of the special education referral process. A common conversation regarding education, specifically special education programs, is the over representation of African American students and why there is a disproportionality to begin with (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, & Wu, 2006). Educators, including special education teachers, should reflect on and discuss the developments in both quantitative and qualitative methodologies and the type of data used to gain insight on how students perceive the world and process information (Skiba, Artiles, Kozleski, Losen, & Harry, 2016; Valles, 1998).

Daniels (1998) confirms the need to clarify the educational goals and practices; educators should look at the structure of the educational system that lends to educational equity for all students, regardless of ethnicity, cultural background, socioeconomic status, or ability level. On one hand, as we continue to review and understand research in the area of the over identification of African American students, the number of students affected continues to increase. On the other hand, there is an increase in research studies that attempt to identify the true variables that may cause the disproportionate number of students of color in special education programs and

students of color who are not in gifted and talented programs (Bollard, Tomek, Besnoy, & Bollard, 2018).

## **Summary**

The educational structures in schools continue to perpetuate the inequities in special education programs particularly related to African American student disproportionate referrals. The lack of sufficient reform in support of equitable educational policies and practices could limit educational inequities for students of color. Issues of improper prevention and intervention models, the lack of culturally competent school leaders and teachers in diverse school contents, and inappropriate teacher bias continues to negatively impact the referral of African American students at a disproportionate rate. Scholars continue to study what ways in which policies, practices, and research can provide the necessary answers to how the school referral process and school reform should properly address and remedy the overrepresentation of African American students in special education programs.

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**Pathways and Perseverance: Exploring the Underrepresentation of African American  
Women Superintendents**

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## **Abstract**

For years, research has revealed the ongoing underrepresentation of African American women superintendents throughout the United States. And yet, the gap continues to spread in comparison to Anglo men and women, as well as African American male superintendents. This wide-spread occurrence could be perceived as a silent epidemic. Many African American women apply for the position of chief executive officer of public schools; however, very few are successful in attaining the position. The purpose of this qualitative, narrative study was to examine perceptions of three individuals well-respected in their field: African American women superintendents of different experiences and school districts, their ascension to and their resiliency in the superintendency. Resiliency and Women of Color Framework were utilized as the theoretical lens. The analysis of the interviews revealed the following themes: using traditional pathways; being the first African-American appointed as public school superintendents for their districts; being hired by school boards made-up of majority Anglo males; having support systems such as family and friends, mentors, professional organizations, spirituality; and having perseverance – all which played an intricate role towards their ascension to the superintendency.

**Keywords:** African American women, superintendents, underrepresentation, resiliency, women of color framework

## Introduction

The superintendency, mainly held by men, is the most prestigious position one can hold in Pre-K-12 education. Public school districts have increasingly become more ethnically and culturally diverse; however, public school district superintendents do not reflect the increase in the growing demographics of minority students being serviced in their districts. According to Catalyst (2011), women represented 2.2% of Fortune 500 CEOs, and of the 2.2%, yet only three were women of color. Similar representation is found among African American women superintendents. Comparable statistics continue to reflect the disparity regarding African American women in leadership positions throughout the United States and with very little change.

A small body of research focuses specifically on African American women in school administration (Allen, 1995). As a result, African American women aspiring to become superintendents may be at a disadvantage as they attempt to successfully and strategically maneuver their way to achieve their goal. The extremely low number of African American women school superintendents throughout the county is cause for concern (Tillman & Cochran, 2000). African American women are more underrepresented in leadership positions than any group or ethnicity (Crawford & Smith, 2005). The possible shortage in the pool of superintendent candidates is more than certain when one considers the number of minority individuals who enter the superintendency (Harris, Lowery, Hopson, & Marshall, 2004).

Hunter and Donahoo (2005) indicated many school board members and politicians do not trust African American superintendents to lead their school districts. Unfortunately, board members' lack of confidence in African Americans to lead districts is one of many examples of oppression. Young (2011) used the term *oppression* to describe the injustices of a person or

group's situation. Without more equitable representation of African American women superintendents, districts will lack the change agents needed and may result in the continuous inequities in schools and low expectations of students of poverty and of color. Although oppression seemed inevitable and barricades tried to prevent them from forging ahead, the resiliency of some African American women caused them to persevere towards their goal of superintendency - giving voice to the silent epidemic. The women in this study shared their lived experiences and struggles throughout their journeys.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Resiliency theory, grounded with Women of Color theory, served as the theoretical frameworks for this study. These theories are essential in understanding the ways in which committed African American women superintendents established themselves as leaders and speaks to their lives and experiences. Taylor (2013) explains, "Black feminist thought supports African-American woman's standpoint and assumes that African women have a unique perspective of their experiences with certain commonalities shared by other African-American women" (p. 4).

### **Resiliency Theory**

Resiliency is the ability to recover from or adjust to problems, adversities, and stresses in life, ask questions pertaining to motivation and the persistence of individuals (Evans-Winters, 2007). Chelsey (2005) states resilience is the force that overcomes or opposes feelings of alienation and resilient people are not governed by powerlessness and meaninglessness. Chelsey states resiliency is the "ability to thrive, mature, and increase competence with adverse



circumstances, whether biological or environmental” (p. 1). Studying resiliency in context of relationships highlights how people overcome barriers (Lawson, 1999).

Resiliency is needed in order for African American women or minority women to be successful in attaining and remaining in the chief position of a public-school district. Even though adversity is an inevitable part of the job, “most superintendents do not have formal professional development training in the area of overcoming adversity” (Reed & Patterson, 2007, p. 89).

### **Women of Color Theory**

Women of Color or black feminist theory is a by-product of the feminist theory and movement. According to Patterson (2012), the Women of Color/black feminist theory grew out of the racism experienced in the feminist movement. This theory “illustrates the ways in which women’s experiences of subordination and oppression are informed by a matrix of race, class, and gender rooted in legacies of slavery and colonialism” (Patterson, 2012, p.108). Growing tired of being outsiders and overlooked, according to Patterson (2012), “Black feminist theory challenges the “gatekeepers” of theory production-white, middle-class women and men-by writing into existence the stories, histories, and experiences of black women and women of color” (p. 109). This theory challenges the “gatekeepers”, “headhunters”, search firms, or school board members who are unethical in their recruiting and hiring practices regarding minorities. Rodriguez (2011) suggests, “writing about our experiences in the margins, we provide rich insight as to our roles as faculty, researchers, and mentors” (p. 590). By hearing the lived experiences of the successful superintendents in this study, it is my hope to empower others to take the necessary steps needed to become superintendents.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review situates the study of African-American women superintendents in public schools, revealing the multiplicity of factors contributing to the lack of African American women leaders, and how resiliency can help change this trend for African American women superintendents.

## **Historical Roles of Superintendents**

By the early 1890s, all major cities in the United States had superintendents providing expert knowledge to schools and challenging the foundational notion of school board authority, according to Alsbury (2008). During the 1890s to 2018, school boards and their superintendents have been in a battle over control, lines often blurred, regarding the role and responsibilities of both the superintendent and their school boards. Because of the micro-politics, superintendents have served in five various roles throughout the time span of 127 years.

Alsbury (2008) explains, “these roles may be interchangeable.” The responsibilities of the superintendent have been identified as *teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator*.

Superintendents as teacher-scholars were the trend from 1865 to 1910. During this era, superintendents were seen as teacher-of-teachers or trainer-of- trainers. Due to the growth of the industrial revolution during the early 1900s, schools and school districts continued to grow. As a result, the superintendent’s role changed to that of being a manager from 1910 to 1930. Due to the consequences of the Great Depression, resulting in a shortage of funding and resources, superintendents were “forced to engage with their communities” stated Alsbury (2008), this era

lasting until the mid-1950s. From the mid-1950s to the 1980s, superintendents had the task of dealing with the societal problems that burdened society as well as implementing the current educational reform governed by the federal and state entities.

### **Historical Trend of Women Superintendents in the United States**

Blount (1998) found that many women served as superintendents after the Civil War and proved that they could excel in positions of public responsibility. However, many voters regarded women superintendents as a temporary solution or an experiment. The trend of underrepresented women superintendents has been no mystery due to the belief that women are not as qualified as more men are hired to serve in this prestigious position of education. It appears not much has changed since the Civil War, in regard to the mindset of some school board members and others when it comes to hiring women superintendents. Women have made great strides in the workplace, but inequality still exists when it comes to hiring women, and in particular, women of color superintendents.

Blount (1998) explained that by forming associations amongst themselves and linking with academia, superintendents worked on promoting themselves, omitting the presence of women in the field of education. Blount (1998) suggests by doing so, the superintendency became a formalized position that was increasingly male-defined and male-occupied, while being distanced from and firmly in control of the work of teachers, most of whom were women. Phebe Sudlow became the first female superintendent in the United States in 1874, successfully serving in the position for four years, while also successfully demanding that she received equal pay as men (Murkami-Ramvalho & Pankake, 2012). Phebe Sudlow was a trailblazer for women to become superintendents, but there is still underrepresentation of them over 143 years later.

## **Career Pathways of African American Women Superintendents in the United States**

In the late 1800s through the mid-1900s, the major focus in African American education was access (Thomas & Jackson, 2007, p. 365). According to Thomas and Jackson (2007), after the Civil War, freed African Americans vehemently demanded schools for themselves and their children. African Americans continued to experience backlash and discrimination such as public funding being reduced, which resulted in their schools being closed and the implementation of segregation. Early advocates of education for African American girls and women generally argued that elevating the Black women's position in society would uplift the entire race (Thomas & Jackson, 2007, p. 360).

According to Thomas and Jackson (2007), issues related to the education of African-American girls and women shifted tremendously in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in terms of postsecondary education, African-American women have made tremendous strides in attainment of postsecondary degrees since 1862. Although African Americans have been awarded undergraduate, masters and doctorate degrees, there is a decrease in the number of African American teachers in the classrooms.

As more women rise to the appointment of superintendency, minority women are still struggling to achieve such accomplishment and gaining access has not been easy. The persistent shortages of African American women at the highest levels of a field otherwise dominated by women as teachers and principals, is one of the most troubling leadership issues in public education. African American women's promotion beyond principalship is very limited.

## **Ascension and Lived Experiences**

Ascension to the superintendency has not been easy for African American women seeking the position. Blount (1998) argues, “White males tend to receive the most effective mentoring, which allows them to move ahead in their careers, while persons of color and women are slotted into relatively difficult assignments, which often turn into long-term positions with little chance of promotion” (p. 139). Both Brown (2014) and Blount (1998) explain that African American women experience double jeopardy of racism and sexism, which makes it difficult for them to ascend to the superintendency. Blount (1998) explains that a large number of superintendents of color are appointed to superintendency of large urban schools with many of them being economically distressed and plagued with a host of problems, which makes their work exceedingly difficult.

The superintendents in Wiley’s (2014) study indicated that their pathway and success to ascending to the superintendency involved the following: they shared the importance of having the knowledge regarding the position and having experiences that effectively prepared them for the position. It is important to hear the lived experiences of women leaders in order for others to grasp an understanding of what it is like to be in the position or what to expect in the position. Shakeshaft (1989) explains, “interviews with women will help to understand the way they think and speak about their worlds” (p.336).

Women superintendents should not be afraid to share the difficulties of the superintendency with others, especially with researchers where it is documented and shared to help others aspiring towards ascension. Shakeshaft (1989) explains, “by looking at the world as females experience it and trying to document those perspectives will help to expand the knowledge base of practice in educational administration” (p.335). Continued documentation and

discussions will hopefully help with the representation of more women of color in the superintendent position.

## **Method**

Using narrative inquiry, the primary focus of this study was to examine perceptions of three current or retired African American women superintendents, all well-respected in their field. Creswell's (2013) approach to qualitative research is to empower individuals to share their stories and hear their voices. Richards (2011) suggests, "narrative provides a framework to capture human experiences in all its complexities and richness (p. 785)." Narrative inquiry research design has often been misunderstood (Thomas, 2012). Taylor (2013) explains, "narrative research is shaped by broad social and historical occurrences" (p. 5). Clandinin, Pushor, and Murray Orr (2007) states:

Narrative inquirers are concerned with both personal and social conditions. I was interested in interviewing the participants to find out their experiences and perceptions of underrepresentation, while providing insight on strategies to increase African American women superintendents in public school districts.

Researchers have to be careful when analyzing narrative inquiry as it pertains to hearing of participants' stories. Richards (2011) suggests, "the researcher's role is to interpret the stories in order to analyze the underlying narrative that the storytellers may not be able to give voice to themselves" (p. 787).

## **Procedure**

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research involves finding individuals who can

provide access to the research site and facilitate the collection of data. The research site for this study involved three public school districts in a southern state. The school districts ranged from 1,927 to 22,511 students. Due to the very small sample of individuals to choose from, two current and one retired superintendent from the same state were selected to conduct my study.

## **Participants**

The participant selection criteria for this study included two current and one recently retired African American women superintendents with various years' experience as superintendents in the public school system of rural or urban districts. A purposive sample of African American women superintendents who were successful in their craft and highly respected was selected for this study in order to learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the study.

## **Instrument**

Data was collected through observations and face-to-face interviews. The researcher conducted all data collection using an interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions to guide the participants' interviews and narratives regarding their perceptions for the reason for the underrepresentation of African-American women superintendents, their resiliency and ascension to the superintendency. The superintendents for this study were able to share guidelines on how their skills of resiliency and support systems were valuable towards their ascension. The interview protocol contained questions within the following sections: (a) establishing rapport; (b) ascension to the superintendency and factors contributing to resiliency; (c) formal and informal preparation; (d) challenges; and (e) having mentors. Each superintendent was interviewed three

times at their preferred location; two of the locations were at the superintendents' district offices and one of the superintendents wanted to meet at a country-style restaurant. The interviews were conducted using an audio recorder with each interview lasting one hour.

## **Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed immediately after each meeting to ensure accuracy of the data. The coding and data analysis process began with the first interview and continued through the ninth interview, which concluded the interviews of the participants. In order to have a clear focus, the data from the research was analyzed continuously while keeping the research questions in mind. During the analysis process, coding, synthesizing, and searching for patterns took place in order to identify themes, findings, and interpretations. Each narrative was shared through the lens of African American women superintendents. Participants' experiences were examined, specifically, how they were influenced through internal/external variables and/or perceptions impeding their attainment of superintendency. The internal/external variables would possibly include any self-imposed barriers exhibited such as fear and/or lack of willingness to relocate, as well as how the superintendents' previous leaders acted as mentors and sponsors, and how school board members assisted or hindered their ascension to the superintendency.

According to Creswell (2013), the process of coding involves aggregating the text into small categories. Theron (2015) indicates that the nature of the research and personality of the researcher influences the codes and links data to an idea. There are cycles to coding and these cycles allow for richer meaning and theme development. According to Saldaña (2013), first cycle methods happen during the initial or open coding process. Saldaña (2013) indicates this cycle of coding is very simple and the second cycle of coding is more challenging because of the



analytical skills needed to capture the rich data. This second cycle of coding was conducted by rereading the transcripts in order to identify patterns and themes throughout the data and developing findings. By analyzing the data and using the second cycle of coding, the five common themes discussed by the superintendents in this study were identified.

## **Limitations**

As with any research, there are limitations. In this particular qualitative narrative inquiry study, one possible limitation would be that of the participants' memory regarding their ascension to the superintendency. Due to the timeframe of my interviewing the participants and their actual journey to superintendency, there could be possible memory lapses from some or all of the participants regarding particular events leading up to their superintendency, resulting in the possibility of not giving accurate information on events that occurred as they share remarkable stories. Another limitation was if the researcher did not find the right balance when writing the findings, while allowing personal thoughts and beliefs to get intertwined with the participants' stories. Therefore, the researcher understood throughout the interview process, analyzing the data, and writing the findings that the stories shared by the participants were theirs alone.

## **Findings**

The data collected and shared with the reader/s provide stories of the lived experiences of these individuals, their ups, downs, and challenges, as well as their perseverance towards their plight to accomplish their goal of becoming a superintendent. The themes identified in this section are as follows: (a) using a traditional career path; (b) being the first African-American

appointed in their district; (c) being hired by majority Anglo male board; (d) having support systems; and (e) having perseverance. The first three themes identified how the superintendents ascended to the superintendency, while themes four and five addressed their resiliency, which were the bases for the study.

### **Traditional Career Path**

The traditional career path to the superintendency has been teacher, principal, central office administration, and then the superintendent. Boyland (2013) confirms that the majority of superintendents follow the traditional pathway to the superintendency, which is teacher, then building administrator to central office administrator. Sampson, Gresham, Applewhite, Roberts, and Kerry (2016) state, “oftentimes a direct career pathway to the superintendency is a central office position; when women are not afforded an opportunity to work in a central office position, they may lack mentors and role models to help in their career development and advancement” (p.1). The participants in this study were middle aged and all had central office experience prior to becoming superintendents. Only one of the participants had two superintendencies, while the other two participants were in their first superintendency. The average age of the participants securing their first superintendency was 53 years of age.

### **First African American Appointed in Their District**

Walker (2014) states, “a common theme that echoed across studies regarding African-American women is often they are the first or only African-American woman to acquire the superintendent position in their districts and feel the added pressure of performing well to pave the pathway for someone to follow in their footsteps” (p. 81). Walker (2014) continues, “this

expectation of paving the way for others is synonymous with historical African-American female educational leaders who experienced the same sense of responsibility, which has the propensity to impact African-American women's superintendent career path and accessibility" (p. 81).

The participants in this study were also the first African American superintendents for their districts. They have felt the pressure of being the first African American, the expectations for being the first, and knowledge that all eyes were on them. However, these individuals remained humble. They shared how it felt being the first African American superintendent, as well as the excitement and pressures felt with being the first and why they chose to remain humble. Dr. Anderson believed she was simply doing her job and that her dream had come true. She described her experiences of being the first African American leading her district:

I feel like I'm just doing my job, (laughs) my dream has come true...to become a superintendent...because I didn't know if it would ever happen...in each spot along the way...you learn and there are blessings in each thing that you learn, and...when it's time for you to be who the Lord wants you to be, then everything is just smooth, it just lands the way it's supposed to when you least expect it. (Dr. Anderson, 6/1/18)

Dr. Anderson felt the pressure and a lot of work, but remained humble because she knew that the position could be taken away at any moment.

Dr. Bailey is used to being "first" and has made history in several districts because of it. She was the first African American superintendent of two districts, and principal in another, and has felt the pressure of being the "first". She shared her journey on being first:

Yes (laughs). Yes. I, um, went into Phenomenal (district) being the first African-American woman superintendent. Um, and the first African American superintendent. Same thing in, um, Johnson. In the other district (laughs) I was the first African-

American and the first African American female. Even in some of the principal jobs I had; it was the same, same way. (Dr. Bailey, 6/4/18)

Although the participants in this study understood the importance of being “first”, they were all humbled and dedicated to their task of putting students first and being focused instructional leaders for their district.

### **Hired by Majority Anglo Male Board**

Quilantán and Menchaca-Ochoa (2004) believe that school board members must be trained and educated to understand the importance of ethnically diversifying the position of the superintendency. Sharp, Malone, Walter and Supley (2004) state, “some suggest that where females are in a majority on the board of education, female superintendents tend to be hired more often” (p. 28). Sharp et al. (2004) further explain, “the fact that men may outnumber women on the boards does not automatically mean that the female superintendents are discriminated against by the men on the board” (p. 28).

Such was the case for the participants in this study; the majority of the board members that hired these individuals were male and did not show discrimination against them. Dr. Anderson did not believe the make-up made a difference in her hiring, because they were looking for the most qualified person after going through 68 applicants. She responded: “They were looking to hear and see something that they needed at the time. So, I think that they were open to either male or female” (Dr. Anderson, 5/11/18).

Dr. Anderson did not believe the board make-up had any effect on her being hired; she believed they only wanted the best person to serve in the position. Dr. Bailey’s interview panel for her first superintendency was similar to Dr. Anderson’s board; she too, had a majority of

Anglo males. She recalled her board make-up:

When I was hired at the first district, the makeup was, um, six white, one black. And the other district when I was hired, it was four black...No. Four women, two men and three of the women were black. And over time, in both districts, the dynamics changed...

(Dr. Bailey, /21/18)

Dr. Bailey's first board was majority of white males and for her second superintendency, she had a majority of women board members, with the dynamics later changing for both. She was hired for her second superintendency by a women majority board and two men. She believed that board make-up makes a difference in the hiring process. She responded:

The whole board knew that it was time for a change from a relaxed atmosphere to let us get down to business and get these scores up...let's find somebody who's a change agent and a transformational type leader. (Dr. Bailey, 5/21/18)

## **Support Systems**

Daye (2007) acknowledges, "resilient adults develop positive relationships and are motivated for self-improvement" (p. 32). Referencing Richardson's (2002) work on resiliency theory, Daye (2007) explains, "increased energy to grow and improve is a requisite for resilient integration and that increased energy is innate resilience" (p. 33). The participants in this study strived to be their very best and were proactive in their matriculation. Dr. Anderson credited both her friends and family, especially her sister and husband with being her rocks during challenging times. Dr. Anderson's sister, who suffered from cancer, was her motivator to finally pursue the superintendency by telling her to take risks and not to have any regrets. Dr. Anderson's husband was supportive of her prior to the superintendency; he encouraged her to not give up and to

continue to apply after being rejected. She responded with various examples:

My life is surrounded by family, friends, and loved ones. So I'm very blessed.

When I was down about not getting a superintendent position, my husband told me, "You didn't get this position, it's time for you to pick yourself up and start back putting applications out there." (Dr. Anderson, 5/11/18)

If it were not for Dr. Anderson's sister and husband pushing, encouraging her to step out to not only apply, but to also not give up during the process of the journey, Dr. Anderson may not be a superintendent now. Dr. Bailey believed in having accountability partners, mentors, and close friends to confide in, ones who knows what it is like to be in the position. She explained:

You have your accountability partners, people you can call and just talk to, um ... talking to friends, you're already at the top by yourself. You have to have a group of mentors and, uh, study buddies, you know, partners-in-crime who you can rely on, who understands where you're going. (Dr. Bailey, 6/4/18)

Having someone close to confide in, one who knows and has experienced the superintendency, will help one to get through the obstacles. Dr. Carter's son gave her a reality check when she applied and did not get the superintendency the first time; it was tough love and in the end, she gave him credit for sound advice. She recalled how her son was right: "I reflected back to what my son told me, he said, 'you never apply for a job behind a winning head coach' ... And he was right" (Dr. Carter, 5/18/18).

The superintendents in this study realized the importance of having the support system of family, friends, and other superintendents standing by them and giving advice through the good and bad times. The superintendents also acknowledged that they would not be where they are today if it were not for these individuals in their lives.

## **Perseverance**

Guajardo (2015) stated that the common theme in her study of women superintendents was their perseverance with moving beyond barriers. It appears that perseverance does pay off in the end and the superintendents in this current study show how they were able to overcome difficulties. Dr. Anderson is a strong, confident, fighter who does not give up. Dr. Anderson shared her experience of perseverance applying for the superintendency:

It's not in me to give up...if I'd listened to that, then you can fall into defeatism...And so I think it's really important if you are qualified for the position, and you feel that you have the right skillset, I am not saying take anything, you need to really be selective, because you might get the job in the end. And if you don't want it, it's not going to be a good experience...I got to the point where I was thinking, you know I was getting too old to be a superintendent. (Dr. Anderson, 5/11/18)

Dr. Anderson spoke on how a person can let defeatism seep in if one allows the negative talk of failure from others and from oneself. By having confidence and believing in herself, Dr. Anderson knew she could not give up and if she kept trying, the right position would come along. Dr. Bailey knew this all too well and she also knew perseverance is key while pursuing the superintendency. She explained the process of seeking a superintendency: “Um, perseverance. You gotta have it...There's a district with your name on it, and it's gonna fall in your lap when it's your time. When it's not, it won't happen” (Dr. Bailey, 5/21/18).

Dr. Bailey did not give up after being denied a superintendent position. Dr. Carter showed perseverance when she did not get the superintendency job after being in the district

after many years.

## **Discussion**

In this study on African-American women superintendents' ascension and their resiliency, the following themes were identified: following traditional pathways; being the first African-American appointed as public school superintendents for their districts; being hired by school board members' made-up of majority Anglo males; having support systems such as family and friends, mentors, networking, spirituality; and having perseverance. Based on the findings of the study of African American women superintendents' ascension and their resiliency, a growth conceptual model emerged using the themes found in the study, as they all interconnect.

The Baker's Growth Model (2018) is a conceptual framework comprised of the themes that emerged from the research study on the African American women superintendents' ascension and resiliency. Imagining concentric circles for this conceptual model, the small outer circles would represent examples of the superintendents' support systems or themes emerged from the study. The superintendents mentioned several times throughout the study how their support systems of a) family/friends; (b) spirituality; (c) perseverance; (d) professional organizations; and (e) mentors were influential in their success throughout life and the superintendency. The large inner circle would represent resiliency and if the above support systems are in place then growth, whether personal or professional, will always emerge. This conceptual model thus shows a continuous cycle, which represents any aspect of an individual's life. Therefore, if the outer circles (support systems) are in place, along with the skill of resiliency being applied in one's life, then the outcome is one of achieving results. There is no



guarantee that if the above concepts are always in place and if the individual is doing everything that the participants in this study did, that the outcome will be ascension to superintendency. However, it will guarantee some type of growth of the individual, whether personal, professional or perhaps both, which is what life is all about - living, learning, and growing.

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