Since its inception, public education has been hailed as this society’s great equalizer—leveling the playing field for students of color and low-income students by providing academic skills needed for full participation of all students in the economic and democratic system. The “great equalizer” myth results in millions of parents believing that school or academic failure was their fault or the fault of their child and not a systematic miseducation that intentionally or unintentionally prevented many of these students from attaining success. The education system has not yet provided equitable access and opportunity for the admittance of low-income students and students of color to move through the filter.

Efforts to raise achievement among low achieving, low-income students and students of color date back to the mid 1960s when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act first provided funds to schools educating large percentages of students from low income families. The policies broadened to include students with disabilities and students whose first language was not English. However, it was not until 2002, when the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) was reauthorized that accountability for results was added to this equation. This new accountability system in the law known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires states, districts and schools to publicly report disaggregated academic achievement data. For the first time, the public has access to data that shows the progress groups are making toward meeting the academic content standards set by the states in which they live.

With the advent of the standards-based movement over the last decade, education policy has undergone a major transformation. This transformation reflects a policy shift from holding only some students to high standards to holding all students to high standards and holding school systems and school leaders accountable for the progress all students make toward academic proficiency. Simultaneously, with the standards-based movement came cultural competency. Cultural competence efforts were developed parallel to the standards-based reform instead of an integral part of it. This paper makes the case for the vital relationship between standards-based and cultural competent reforms.

Cultural Competence in the school setting is a process based on a clearly defined set of core values and principles that support policies, practices, behaviors, attitudes and structures that enable educators to work effectively across the cultures their students represent. The system must develop the capacity not only to value diversity, but to manage the dynamics of diversity. A second element of cultural competence is to acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge and adapt to diversity in the contexts of the communities being served.

While standards-based reform was growing, some educators were developing the concept of cultural competence as central to successfully educating students of color and students from low income families. Proponents of cultural competence implied school success but did not include direct academic
outcomes as part of their definition. Using cultural competence to raise and sustain high student achievement has presented a challenge over the years. Although the intent has been diligently sought after, the results have been dismal and unauthentic—from cultural celebrations to cultural inclusion.

Culturally competent leaders must be able to gather, analyze and report disaggregated student achievement data in such a manner as to not alienate teachers and parent groups – nor inadvertently undermine the reason it is required that may result in “confirming” racist and stereotypical attitudes that they are meant to dispel. It does require school leaders to examine the academic and cultural implications of the data. This allows educators to apply the body of research on cultural competence and achievement to policy and practice.

The term cultural competence as described in this brief offers a foundation to enable a system to function in an optimally effective way in a twenty-first century education system. Cultural competence is necessary, but not sufficient. For true success, cultural competence cannot be separated from achievement. The discussion about cultural competence has to occur within the framework of a standards-based accountability system of education.

Culturally Competent leaders use achievement data to break the cycle of academic failure. The data, then points to the systemic failures – those that we as educators have some control over and can therefore claim as targets of reform to improve academic outcomes for all students, but especially for students from low income families and students of color. Sustainable implementation of cultural competence with genuine measures of accountability then occurs once:

- Cultural Competency is reflected in and aligned with Board Policies related to high levels of achievement for all students; and
- Achievement Policies demonstrate evidence of cultural competence across racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds with the intention that all:
  - Students have access to rigorous curriculum,
  - Students have access to placement in high level courses,
  - Students have access to comprehensive support services,
  - Students have access to well-trained teachers with deep content knowledge,
  - School leaders have access to pertinent data,
  - School leaders have knowledge of how to use data to improve student achievement,
  - Teachers have access to high quality professional development,
  - Teachers are provided the support structures which facilitate their work.

In summary, cultural competence is necessary, but not sufficient in raising achievement for students of color and other cultures, as well as low-income students. School leaders must use their attendant skills to ensure increased equity and high level academic outcomes for all students.

References


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