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## High Expectations and Teacher Implicit Biases in a Culture of Care

Jacqueline K. Haynes  
*University of South Florida*, [jkhaynes@verizon.net](mailto:jkhaynes@verizon.net)

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High Expectations and Teacher Implicit Biases in a Culture of Care

by

Jacqueline K. Haynes

A graduate project report submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Department of Leadership, Counseling, Adult, Career and Higher Education  
College of Education  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Judith A. Ponticell, Ph.D.

Co-Major Professor: John Mann, Ed.D.

Vonzell Agosto, Ph.D.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This graduate project was part of a group project completed by five school and district administrators in Hillsborough County, Florida. The project began because of our passion for teachers who are able to establish a culture of care in their classrooms that support students academically but transform their learning through experiences that enable them to be more highly engaged and productive students, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived academic abilities, and backgrounds.

My project component looked at research on teacher expectations and their effects on student success. Why does the color of a child's skin tone trigger lower expectations by some teachers? Why does this occur? How can school leaders and teachers confront preconceived notions that create barriers for high expectations for marginalized students?

Selected literature was reviewed that concentrated on perspectives on teacher attitudes, systemic biases, and teacher expectations. I applied what I learned to exploring gaps in district emphasis on diversity and equity and potential approaches to engaging teachers and school leaders in collaborative and challenging conversation.

In an examination of four major district documents, the terms 'diversity of students', 'cultural diversity', 'high expectations for all students', 'multicultural awareness and equity' each appeared only once. Professional development for teachers and school leaders was needed to focus on inquiry, self-reflection, curriculum development, and instructional approaches to surface and address implicit biases that contribute to low expectations for marginalized students.

## **SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION**

This final project report was completed as part of a group project examining the concept of a ‘culture of care’. Turnaround schools are plagued by cycles of poor academic achievement and high referral and discipline rates. Barriers to success can include high levels of poverty, teacher apathy, low teacher retention, poor student achievement, and weak leadership. These barriers can be overcome and must be overcome if we are to truly turn schools around.

Our group believes that students at turnaround schools need the best teachers - teachers who care about them, believe in them, and will not give up on them. They need teachers who will understand where they are coming from and differentiate their learning experiences to meet their needs. They need teachers who understand that the culture and climate in their classrooms is just as important as the academic lessons being taught. We believe these “superstar” teachers exist—teachers who have high levels of student achievement and whose classrooms are warm, inviting communities for learning.

We believe these teachers are able to establish a culture of care in their classrooms that support students academically but transform their learning through experiences that enable them to be more highly engaged and productive students, regardless of students’ ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived academic abilities, and backgrounds.

### **School District Context**

Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) currently serves over 210,000 students, with over 15,000 certified teachers and 25,000 full-time staff. HCPS is the eighth-largest school district in the country with over 250 schools. The enrollment by race/ethnicity is approximately 40%

white, 29% Hispanic, 21% Black, and 3% Asian. Fifty-seven percent of all students are on free and reduced-priced lunch. Roughly 12% of all students are English Language Learners (ELL), and the district graduation rate for 2015 was 76% with over 14,000 students graduating.

**Social service in the community.** Hillsborough County, Florida has comprehensive social services. The Social Services Department “provides comprehensive case management programs as well as stabilization services to low-income residents of Hillsborough County. The Social Services Department's mission is to improve the quality of life of Hillsborough County's most vulnerable citizens by promoting self-sufficiency through interactive service delivery and strategic partnerships” (see <http://www.hillsboroughcounty.org/index.aspx?nid=281>).

To better guide parents of HCPS students to community support services, Hillsborough County Schools have an entire Student Services Department which includes: Attendance, Exceptional Student Education (Special Education), Guidance Services, Health Services, Multi-Tiered System of Supports, Non-Traditional Programs K-12, Professional Development, Psychological Services, and Social Work Services.

**School choice.** HCPS School Choice provides parents and legal guardians with options such as Magnet schools, Career & Technical Education programs, School Choice (parents may choose from a list of schools with space available), Out of County options, and options for military families. School Choice has become increasingly popular in HCPS with several options available:

- *Charter schools* – independent public schools operated by a non-profit organization.

According to a report printed February 29, 2016 by the HCPS Charter Office, 16,620 students are currently enrolled in Charter schools.

- *Home education* – defined by Florida Statute 1003.01 as "sequentially progressive instruction of a student directed by his or her parent in order to satisfy the attendance requirements of SS.1002.41, 1003.01 (4), and 1003.21 (1)."
- *John M. McKay Scholarship* – additional Choice options to students with an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan.
- *Partnership schools* – schools that have developed an innovative partnership between the public and private sector. Proof of employment in the partnership area is a requirement.
- *Hillsborough Virtual School (HVS)* – a school choice option for students entering grades K-12. HVS students are served by Highly Qualified Hillsborough County teachers for each class online.

### **Turnaround Schools**

Our group's sense of the need for a *culture of care* in our schools and classrooms came from our observations of a historical and prevailing misconception in our society that many of our most poverty stricken and underperforming students cannot learn. This mentality of inability pervades our educational world and includes a subversive belief which asserts that it is okay to allow students of color and low socio-economic status to fail. It was our group's profound sense of purpose that drove our discussion to delve deeper into the context of how care, compassion, and commitment to our students might truly thwart the ills that society has constructed and allow *all* students, in *all* schools to succeed.

We derived this concept of a *culture of care* from a variety of combined resources. Utilizing the newly formulated "HCPS Octagon" that represents the eight essential tenets of a culturally positive organization, as well as embracing the Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) that our district leaders outlined as priorities, our team formulated the notion that care pervaded and



necessitated all these initiatives. Furthermore, our perspective was informed by an extensive exposure to a variety of educational reform literature that discussed the “ethic of care” and “building relationships,” along with “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Gorski, 2013; Guajardo & Guajardo with Casaperalta, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995). In addition, “appreciative organizing in education” (Barrett & Fry, 2008; Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) helped us to conceptualize the need for defining, understating, and realizing that a *culture of care* in our schools and with our teachers, administrators, and most importantly students, is necessary.

The notion of “culturally appropriate” (Au & Jordan, 1981, p. 139) pedagogy began over 35 years ago and suggested that teachers in a Hawaiian school incorporate aspects of students’ cultural backgrounds into their reading instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995). However, today’s context magnifies the importance of providing culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995) instruction and curriculum for our students of other backgrounds, creating a sense of purpose for our black and brown children and allowing them to be reflected in the body of work that is read and studied in schools. By truly allowing our traditionally underrepresented ethnic groups the opportunity to study literature and engage in resources that mirror their population in schools, we can emphasize just how untrue the idea is that Black people don’t value education (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Moreover, as HCPS administrators and researchers, we are committed to overcoming the institutional limitations that disproportionately affect our low income students. Despite the literature that suggests schools cannot overcome the societal barriers that students bring with them every day (Berliner & Glass, 2014), we were convinced that there are teachers who are capable of excellent teaching for all struggling students (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

With our already defined understanding of the importance of “organizational culture” through both the literature and HCPS Octagon model, focusing on the shared “beliefs, values, artifacts, and underlying assumptions of groups of people” (Schein, 1999), the logical extension was to examine connections between a strong climate and culture in the classrooms and the positive impact on students’ performance.

### **Personal Focus**

I am currently serving as a principal coach. I was principal at a high school where I worked to overcome equity issues and provide students with opportunities for success, utilizing a focus on high expectations to help our students achieve. How can school leaders help teachers confront preconceived notions that create barriers for high expectations for marginalized students?

**District challenge.** HCPS is currently under investigation by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights. In the complaint, the OCR alleged discrimination against black students, stating they are subjected to harsher punishment than white students and denied access to certified teachers in Title I schools. Community leaders, such as Saba Baptiste, education chair of the Hillsborough branch of the NAACP, have been at board meetings. The Superintendent wrote a 17-page letter to the Office of Civil Rights, noting all of the steps HCPS has taken since receiving the OCR complaint.

In an article on February 12, 2016, *The Tampa Tribune* published Ms. Baptiste’s response to Mr. Eakins’ letter:

I am a supporter of the school district, but it is segregated.

Based on the content in the letter there is no reason OCR should deter from coming to the Hillsborough County Public Schools and conduct an investigation. The investigation

from the OCR will result in recommendations that will underscore best practice strategies for educating such a diverse student body.

The school district is segregated and that creates an unnatural inequity problem for a large majority of students of color, especially, African Americans. The document do not fully explain methodologies in the areas of: Collaboration with outside consultant; Engage in deliberate efforts to create positive school climates; Preventive strategies to Promote Positive student behavior; Specific Roles and responsibilities related to school discipline; and Title I Schools.

A major concern is the fidelity of programs and OCR cannot assess that unless they are here. The Hillsborough County Public Schools is an urban school district and therefore, spending must reflect the trends and issues of managing a district of such nature. Urban and rural elementary and middle schools are under performing on a constant historical level.

**Teacher expectations.** Teacher expectations about the scholastic ability of students, choice of instructional pedagogy, and opportunities students are given to enhance learning can impact marginalized student engagement and high academic achievement. Institutionalized biases and low expectations affect the attitude and performance of those students. In other words, teacher expectations play a critical role in learning outcomes and motivation of students. Closing the achievement gap can only occur if teachers are committed to high expectations for all.

*High expectations* can be defined in various ways, ranging from teacher care, instructional pedagogy that is challenging, supports provided for student success, the forecast of teacher attitudes, dismissal of any biases and non-judgmental behaviors, and the list continues. For me

*high expectations* means that every teacher teaches to the smartest student and offers supports for all students to reach and master identified standards.

**Implicit biases.** I hypothesize that teachers have implicit biases and beliefs that impact student success and hinder teachers' believing that marginalized students can achieve and master any subject matter presented. Teachers bring biases into the classroom, one being lower expectations for black and brown students.

My project component looked at research on teacher expectations and their effects on student success. Why does the color of a child's skin tone trigger lower expectations by some teachers? Why does this occur? How can school leaders and teachers confront preconceived notions that create barriers for high expectations for marginalized students?

## SECTION 2. PERSPECTIVES FROM SELECTED LITERATURE

A review of selected literature was guided by the question, in what ways might teachers' implicit biases and beliefs hinder teachers' expectations for marginalized students and impact student success? Teacher expectations about the scholastic ability of students, choice of instructional pedagogy, and opportunities students are given to enhance learning can impact marginalized student engagement and high academic achievement. Institutionalized biases and low expectations for marginalized students affect the attitude and performance of those students. In other words, teacher expectations play a critical role in learning outcomes and motivation of students. Closing the achievement gap can only occur if teachers are committed to high expectations for all. Three major themes emerged from this review of selected literature: teacher attitudes, systemic barriers for students of color, and teacher expectations for student success.

**Methods used to conduct the review.** To prepare this literature review, the University of South Florida Libraries general keyword, title, and abstract searches were used to search a variety of databases including: Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, SAGE, and Web of Science. Searches included the following keywords: teacher attitudes, systemic biases in education, teacher expectations for students of color, teacher expectations and student success. Sources within selected texts were cross-referenced, resulting in additional searches by author or source. Sources were limited to the last 10 years, and the primary focus was on studies conducted in the United States.

## **Teacher Attitudes**

Teacher attitudes about their students' ability may play a role in students' capacity to learn (Halvorsen, Lee, & Andrade, 2009). Patton (2002) conducted a qualitative study with 18 black and brown, economically disadvantaged students in the Crawford City School District. Students were asked questions that related to their high school experience and changes they would make to improve that experience. The question that yielded the most response was, "If you could change anything about your school, what would it be?" The responses related to teacher attitudes and expectations. Students noticed when teachers did not believe in them. Students could identify uncaring and disinterested teachers.

The study further revealed that students did experience a lack of care, concern, and dedication to their success. However, all of the students expressed the desire to continue their education and to become successful. Responses from the students included changing the people in their schools such as the teachers and administrators. One student stated, "I would actually change the teachers; get teachers that really care about getting what's being taught to the students, getting it through their heads, and they won't move on until the majority of the students get it." Students felt that teachers were going through the routine and the pressures of meeting chapter deadlines set by the district. Other students felt that teachers did not value their jobs and were there just to receive a paycheck.

## **Systemic Barriers for Students of Color**

Students of color experience systemic barriers that contribute to the risk of students not succeeding at higher rates than other demographic groups. Many of the research articles that focus on teacher expectations and teacher perceptions of marginalized students suggest that teacher biases are based on the teacher being white. Information retrieved from Kidsdata.org shows that

41.1% of students enrolled in public schools in 2015 are black and brown. Based on 2012 data received from the National Center for Education Statistics, White teachers make up 80% of the teaching population in grades K-12, Hispanics 7.8%, and Black 6.8%.

Carol Gilligan (1982) discusses the "ethic of care":

Contains the ideals of human relationship, the vision that the self and the other will be treated as of equal worth, that despite differences in power, things will be fair; the vision that everyone will be responded to and included, that no one will be left alone or hurt.

(p 63)

Noddings (1992) notes that caring is a reciprocal relationship. She states, "Two students in the same class are roughly in the same situation, but they may need very different forms of care from their teacher" (p. 20). She proceeds to state that a dominant group in society could hold power over a marginalized group of people. Teachers that show care to their students show improvement in academic performance, attendance, self-worth, effort, and feeling embraced by the school community.

In a study of the definition of care for African-American students from African-American teachers, three questions were asked: (1) how do successful African American secondary teachers define teacher care for their African American students? (2) what specific behavior/attitudes/critical incidents do successful African American secondary teachers perceive as examples of their care for African American students (if any)? (3) what explanations do African American teachers provide for their reported caring behavior? Although this study provides valuable information about the care exhibited by African-American teachers, it does not include white teachers that the community considers being successful teachers. If the study included white

teachers, this would give insight into when white privilege is acknowledged and recognized and how it plays into a caring environment for students of color.

The findings were extensive. However, they chose to focus on only two areas. One of those areas was Color Talk, which occurs when marginalized teachers inform marginalized students of their same culture about the challenges students will face as they navigate living in a society where they are the minority. Secondly, political clarity, which describes conversations that may be held between student and teacher in which a teacher acknowledges that race does make a difference in the realities that are experienced in everyday life and critiques racialized assumptions based on that difference (Rolón-Dow, 2005; Thompson, 2004).

Teacher conversations with students focused on the importance of having an education and how that education would assist in providing them with equality. Students were taught to code switch and the importance of doing so to obtain post-secondary educational opportunities and employment. Students were also educated on how to combat racism. The table that follows shows some of the political clarity/color talk used with students. Teachers that interacted with students in these ways were identified by the parents, students, and principals as teachers that helped students achieve academically. These were the teachers that exhibited high expectations and showing care.

According to Gershenson, Holt, and Papageorge (2015), non-black teachers of black students have significantly lower expectations than do black teachers. Their findings indicated that this contributes to the perpetuation of the educational gap between black and white students. An Education Longitudinal Study was conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The study was of 10th-grade students and teachers of reading and math. Teacher data



Table 1

*Relationship between Individual Themes and Thematic Categories: Care for African American Students*

Political Clarity	Addressing Future Concerns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We're going to build a better life. I've got to be passionate about this.</li> <li>• I talk about the negative images created by BET.</li> <li>• I always tell them, what kills Africans is that we don't have a family structure.</li> <li>• I tell them—the bottom line is you have to work harder.</li> <li>• I encourage my students to learn how to code switch.</li> <li>• I have to tell students about racism because sometimes they forget.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I help students understand life in the real world.</li> <li>• I talk to them about economic equality.</li> <li>• I bring my daughter around a lot so they can see...</li> <li>• I try to discount the BET achievement mentality.</li> <li>• I try to eliminate test phobias for Black students.</li> <li>• I tell them, you've got to work harder. Society's already written you off.</li> </ul>

were based on several factors, teachers of the same race and gender of students, and other race and gender of students. A mismatch of teacher and students was used to determine if white and black teachers had the same expectations of white male and female students and black male and female students. The research revealed that a continued systemic bias exists in white teachers about the success of black students, regardless of gender. Although their findings were not surprising, continued research is needed in this area, to determine why biases continue to exist, and what can be done in the field of teacher training and professional development to ensure that teachers provide high expectations to all students.

**Teacher Expectations**

Teachers likely play an important role in shaping students' beliefs about their academic prospects (Burgess & Greaves, 2013), particularly among relatively disadvantaged students who

rarely interact with college-educated adults outside of school settings (Jussim & Harber, 2005; Lareau, 2011; Lareau & Weininger, 2008). Sparks (2010) noted that teacher expectations can and do impact the performance of students and their success.

The "Pygmalion" experiment led by Robert Rosenthal (1968), a psychology professor at the University of California, added an important focus on teacher expectations of students. Rosenthal found that four factors contributed to student improvement when teachers were told misleading information (to the student's advantage) about their performance levels. The results showed (1) teachers created a warm climate within the classroom; (2) the input factor - teachers taught more material to students to enhance learning; (3) the response opportunity factor - students were given appropriate wait time; and (4) differentiated feedback was provided to students. Although student information shared with the teachers was misleading, the marginalized students performed better than other groups of students, based on the fact that the teachers' expectations were higher for these groups of students. This research supports the hypothesis that biases occur with marginalized students or students of color. Teachers hold beliefs about the students' will, skill, and capacity; and those beliefs prevent teacher preparation of rigorous lessons or going the extra mile. In essence, teachers forecast the academic success of students based on their beliefs in the population they are serving.

Jackson, Moore, and Leon (2010) asserted that low teacher expectations "are part of a cycle of disengagement where teachers' low expectations will diminish student involvement that further causes teachers to have even lower expectations regarding the student's ability creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure" (p. 842). Teacher perceptions dictate the performance and commitment students will have to excel in any given course. Teachers are motivators, which

encourages students to perform academically. If a teacher doesn't believe in students, then students will internalize those feelings of incapability or unworthiness as learners.

### SECTION 3. PROJECT REPORT

Appreciative Inquiry and Organizing (AOE) is a theoretical approach (Barrett & Fry, 2008; Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) that allows individuals to reject the deficit model and harness “students’ cultural strengths” into the learning environment and organizational design (Azano, 2014, p. 62).

Instead of teaching the “decontextualized stuff” (Theobald, 1997), education might instead attend to context and offer “place conscious instruction” (Azano, 2014, p. 62), given the “power of place” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2015) to provide students with an opportunity to take ownership in their own learning. In addition to context is the concept of culture in teaching and learning, from *culturally relevant pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 2009) to *culturally responsive teaching* (Gay, 2010) or *funds of knowledge* (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). All set the stage to identify assets and resources within our marginalized students, families, and communities, providing them hope, instead of assuming our struggling students are a burden and liability (Guajardo et al., 2008; Trueba, 1999; Wyatt, 2014) as in the traditional problem-solving, deficit model.

Appreciative Inquiry, then, is based on the assumption that finding what works right in an organization helps it focus on what is important, effective, and successful. Focusing on this positive core helps an organization think about ways to sharpen its vision, leverage its energy, and take action for change. It is strengths-based rather than deficit thinking.

#### **Project Purpose**

This capstone project was part of a group project completed by five school and district administrators in Hillsborough County, Florida. The project began because of our passion for

teachers who are able to establish a culture of care in their classrooms that support students academically but transform their learning through experiences that enable them to be more highly engaged and productive students, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived academic abilities, and backgrounds.

**Individual Focus.** My project component looked at research on teacher expectations and their effects on student success. Why does the color of a child's skin tone trigger lower expectations by some teachers? Why does this occur? How can school leaders and teachers confront preconceived notions that create barriers for high expectations for marginalized students?

### **Reflecting on Diversity**

When charged with improving the culture of a school, it is often left to a principal to search for ideas and find ways to improve school culture on her own with minimal support from the district. In order to improve the culture of our organization, principals, teachers, and other leaders need development and support in various areas of diversity such as cultural competence.

As a principal, I eventually realized that our teachers, the key contributors to culture change, were not diverse in their thinking or teaching. They did not know how to, or chose not to, communicate with students from different social classes, races, genders and were never exposed to sensitivity training. If training in any of these areas was to be offered in order to educate all of our students without teacher biases, I would have to do it. However, I was limited in the resources available for an administrator to train staff. Other options such as outside consultants with an expensive price tag were not feasible at the time, so my last option was to do research to develop and deliver the training myself.

As I worked to gather my resources, I often wondered, why aren't district leaders, principals, and teachers exposed to the topic of diversity? Why is this topic not offered in great

quantity in workshops, meetings, etc. throughout the year, and why does our district not focus and celebrate the diversity within our district beyond the typical Hispanic Heritage and African American History months? Why are some schools not as diverse as others, and how have we allowed this to occur?

In order to enhance the culture of any organization, the organization must embrace and acknowledge the needs of the customer and identify where the organization is falling short in creating the desired culture. In my opinion, it is challenging to change the culture of this district without taking a deep dive to discuss diversity.

**A curiosity.** The more I thought, the more curious I became about how diversity and expectations are talked about, written about, or even mentioned in our district. I gathered four key district documents: the Strategic Plan, the Instructional Evaluation System Template, the Teacher Evaluation Handbook, and the Master Inservice Plan. I conducted a basic content analysis, using a key word search looking for the terms *diversity*, *equity*, and *expectations* in these documents. Table 2 indicates what I found.

*Diversity* appeared 9 times, with four of the incidents speaking to workforce diversity. *Diversity of students* and *cultural diversity* each appeared only once. *Expectations* appeared 13 times, with high expectations appearing three times. *Equity* appeared six times, with only one reference to multicultural awareness. Across four major district documents, I would have expected to see more. Most interesting, in relation to highly effective teachers, the 1,300 page district Master Inservice Plan, references high expectations for all students only once.

### **Case Narrative**

Being an instructional leader in this district has been rewarding and fulfilling. For the past 12 years, I have been the Principal at a comprehensive high school, grades 9-12, with a fine arts, visual and communication arts magnet component.

Table 2

*Incidents of Key Words in District Documents*

2015-2016 District Documents	Key Word Incidents
Strategic Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 instances of the use of <i>diversity</i> – all pertain to workforce diversity</li> </ul>
Instructional Evaluation System Template	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 instance of the use of <i>diversity</i> – pertaining to adaptation of the learning environment to accommodate the differing needs and <i>diversity</i> of students</li> <li>• 2 instances of the use of <i>expectations</i> – pertaining to conveying high <i>expectations</i> to all students and addressing <i>expectations</i> for learning and achievement</li> </ul>
Teacher Evaluation Handbook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 instances of the use of <i>expectations</i> – pertaining to expectations for learning (3) and asking questions that reflect <i>high expectations</i> (1)</li> <li>• 1 instance of the use of <i>equity</i> – in relation to mentoring for <i>equity</i></li> </ul>
Master Inservice Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4 courses pertaining to <i>diversity</i> (3) and cultural diversity (1)</li> <li>• 5 courses pertaining to <i>equity</i> in relation to access and equity for all students (2), multicultural awareness (2), and instructional materials (1)</li> <li>• 7 courses pertaining to teacher <i>expectations</i> in relation to cultural sensitivity (1), motivation (1), data use and interpretation (1), continuous improvement (1), whole school effectiveness (2), and high expectations for all students (1)</li> </ul>

In the 1940’s the school was attended by many African-American students to receive career and vocational training. The school was eventually closed to make room for a comprehensive high school. In 1956, the school opened its doors to educate African-American students grades 10-12

from neighboring communities. During that time, the school was segregated, and many students of color were educated and matriculated to college becoming notable contributors to society. The integration of schools in 1972 resulted in the school becoming a junior high school. The community fought to keep the high school; however, their voices were not heard. The school closed its doors, and students were bused to another high school, in a predominantly white area.

After 224 years, the community rallied to reestablish the high school. After many community meetings, court hearings, and school board meetings, the was reopened in 1996, as a traditional high school, grades 9-12, with a fine arts magnet component. The school was designed by an African-American architect and is the most expensively built school in the county, costing \$57 million dollars.

I was appointed the principal of the school in August of 2003. The first African-American female high school principal and the first ever African-American female high school principal in Hillsborough county, of course I was proud and honored. Because my father was a member of the first graduating class of the high school, I felt a divine connection. However, to be in a school district of this size, why would it take so long to have a female high school principal of color?

Being a principal is a rewarding job; however, you quickly realize that your work is never ending, and often finding solutions to improve instruction, school climate, community relations, and all of the other tasks can be extremely complex if a school district does not have the resources to support your efforts. Throughout my twelve years as principal, many strategies were implemented; however, realizing that my teachers did not have true relationships with students that were not like them was unsettling. Students of color, students that were challenged with gender identification, students of different religions, or students that didn't fit the notion of the typical American family were the subject of many disturbing conversations and unnecessary parent



conferences. And, most of those conversations were very concerning to me, not just from white teachers, but teachers of color as well, male and female. Maybe that is one reason our strategies were not being as effective and why students were not achieving to their full potential.

I began to research professional development opportunities within the district that could lead to assisting the faculty and staff in addressing diversity concerns in a meaningful and non-offensive way. To my dismay, I found limited options. The work of Ruby Payne was at the forefront, and a few more courses assisted with the topics that may address the problem, but nothing was available to me as a principal on how to begin discussions with my faculty on an ongoing basis and how to challenge their beliefs in an appreciative approach.

As my research continued, I noticed that other districts had offices of diversity that kept the topic in the forefront of their work within the district. Diversity was celebrated; it was incorporated in every division. Equity statements and expectations of teachers were visibly displayed. Parent and community conversations about diversity were held. Diversity awareness and training of educators was evident. Conversations about perceptions of minority students and staff, LGBTQ concerns, women's concerns, and other concerns of diversity were discussed. In fact, an entire division in one school district was dedicated to being appreciative about the topic instead of reactive. This particular district offered staff development to assist administrators in having difficult conversations about race within the school, examples of inclusion in the curriculum were evident, and professional development in diversity was a mandate.

I became overwhelmed with the resources that were made available in other large districts. Diversity was at the forefront, and everyone in their district and visitors to the website obviously saw the importance and commitment the district was giving to the topic. As the search continued, large districts were doing the same. Offices of Equity and Access, Equity and Diversity, and other

district divisions with similar names had been established. So, how is Hillsborough County addressing diversity? Who oversees curriculum integration, training, and the other aspects of diversity?

As I began to develop training at the high school, I thought it would not be as complicated as it turned out to be to have conversations and training about such a sensitive topic. Teachers were somewhat receptive, but not truly honest about their feelings. Many emotions began to erupt, and individual attacks on others' beliefs or disbelief began to occur. It was amazing to see that in this day and age, teachers were not able to have conversations about diversity without emotions escalating. As the staff development continued, the topic became a little easier to approach, and eventually we survived the storm. But, if I was bold enough, as well as nervous and hesitant to have these conversations for the purpose of improving our culture, decreasing suspensions, and teachers and students building stronger relationships, what were other principals within our district doing to breach this topic?

### **Effective Practices**

School districts throughout the country are facing dilemmas in tackling challenging conversations around diversity, but they are finding ways to combat the stereotypes and problems with care. In "Bridging the Widest Gap" (2005), Varlas notes that schools have a perception of not caring for African American students which can be devastating to their success in high school. Polite and Davis (1999) recommend that principals and administrators hire teachers that are able to relate and care for students from various ethnic groups and backgrounds. He also advocates for professional development for teacher training to focus on their inquiry, self-reflection, and curriculum development to meet the needs of minority students.

In “As Diversity Grows, So Must We” (Howard, 2005), Gary Howard speaks of suburban schools becoming increasingly diverse and educators perceiving that as a problem rather than an opportunity. For example, in a school district the number of Latino students had quadrupled in the past 10 years, and teachers were making statements such as, “Why are they sending these kids to our school?” and “These kids don’t value education, and their parents aren’t helping either. They don’t care about their children’s future.” It is evident that when schools experience a change in demographics, the teachers that are experiencing the transition are the ones that are the most uneasy.

Howard identified five phases that will assist in this transition:

- *Phase - Building Trust.* The educators in one suburban community established a climate of collaboration and modeled the practice of developing trust and creating a climate of openness. Teams of principals, teacher leaders, union representatives, parents, business leaders, and community activists from the NAACP and other organizations implemented an intensive 4-day training as a team. The team established that racial, cultural, and economic differences are real and that they make a difference in education outcomes. The team felt they had to build a positive climate before moving to the harder questions of action.
- *Phase 2 – Engaging Personal Culture.* Howard states that change has to start with educators before making a difference with students. Educators must become culturally competent about the students they teach. In other words, educators must make the effort to get to know the students and develop trusting relationships. Students must feel that they belong and can trust the teacher. Students want to know that teachers believe in their intellectual competence. One school district engaged teachers and staff

in a multiyear program of shared reading, reflective conversations, and staff development activities in order to increase their levels of cultural competence. They designed their own Socratic seminars using the book *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* (Howard, 2006). This activity allowed educators to talk about things that they were afraid to talk about before – like their own prejudices and biases in some of the curriculum.

- Phase 3 - Confronting Social Dominance and Social Justice. This phase encourages school districts to focus on crafting an equity vision statement for the district that guides the work of the educators. The vision should encourage educators to work towards social justice for everyone; teachers should not just be compliant in educating students. Schools have formed Equity Teams and Equity Parent Groups where they are working to be inclusive in broadening the enrollment in Advanced Placement courses for students of color and aiding teachers in not being gatekeepers for the privileged only.
- Phase 4 - Transforming Instructional Practices. This phase includes examining pedagogy and curriculum and honestly looking at outcome data and creating new strategies to serve students when the current instruction is not reaching them. This phase stresses that the educator becomes the co-learner with other teachers to find ways to transform classroom practices. The culturally responsive teacher uses curriculum that honors each student's culture and life experience, instilling instructional strategies to meet the diverse learning needs of students and holding consistent and high expectations for all learners.
- Phase 5 - Engaging the Entire School Community. Employees from all levels, directors to bus drivers, are taught how to develop relationships with students, how to create an

environment that is welcoming and supportive, and how to vocalize high expectations for all students.

The Oregon Leadership Network (OLN) is the nation's only comprehensive education leadership development network with equity at its core (<http://oln.educationnorthwest.org/>) (Larson & Barton, 2003). Efforts in addressing equity must begin with education leaders, and they must exert their influence to change areas such as curricula, instructional practices, and community involvement. Teacher leaders are used to design and mobilize staff members for equity. And, school boards members create policy structures to support implementation of equitable practices by creating, modeling, and setting policy through a lens of equity.

Once again, OLN acknowledges that educators do not have the training or background in conducting conversations that are essential to making real progress. The organization will assist districts in a year-long process that equips leaders to understand the difference between equal and equitable and to develop a racial consciousness. The process is intense and requires bold and intentional conversations about the structures that a district has in place.

Hillsborough County is such a large district, and a change of this magnitude takes time. It will require boldness from the Office of Diversity to look at district divisions and examine the practices of each to make a determination of how that division will support or lead our district to greater improvements for student success, through the lens of equity.

## **Summary**

A review of key terms in major district documents suggests that the district has work to do to develop a professional learning environment that results in teachers having high expectations for their students. The district strategic plan does not address at all teachers' expectations, equity, or diversity in relation to student learning and achievement.

The current teacher evaluation system somewhat addresses teachers' expectations for students but only addresses diversity once and only addresses equity in relation to mentoring. And, in the 1,300 page document that is the district's Master In-service Plan, diversity is addressed four times, equity five times, and teacher expectations 7 times, with "high expectations for all students" only referenced once.

We need to focus on increased leadership and teacher professional development in the areas of cultural competence and high expectations for black and brown students. We need to implement equity walks and student voice, so that the profession at-large begins to see the value in varying cultures and practices. Furthermore, some work should be applied to the teacher evaluation rubric language to include cultural competence and high expectations for historically marginalized students, calling out behaviors and strategies that would reinforce a more positive, strength-based appreciative organizing approach to learning.

As educators, we recognize that our responsibility is to look at disaggregated data and determine how the achievement gap can be closed. However, leading such an initiative brings the challenge of changing mindsets and building a culture where marginalized students are provided and supported in rigorous learning. It sets high expectations for teachers to believe that black and brown students are learners with the capacity to perform at a high level with supports that are made available to them. Students can identify great teachers who care and who have high expectations for their success.

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