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Diversity and Cultural Setting: Contextual Issues in Student Achievement

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I'm really happy to be here to talk with you about what I think are some very important issues—engaging parents in the context of schools and issues of student achievement as they relate to parent engagement. As was mentioned, I'm a sociologist by training, so I think a lot about structural issues as they relate to educational issues. I spent several years studying the Comer School Development process in Chicago, working with Charles Payne and Tom Cook on an evaluation of the Comer School Development Process, which clearly has a parent component and helps give me some perspective on the issues that I'm talking about today. I spent several years also studying school leadership in Chicago with the focus on trying to understand how leadership is distributed across adults in the organizational context, how it's distributed across people, and how it's distributed across the context - in other words, the racial and ethnic composition of the schools, as well as people, in the communities and the community context. We thought about how we can make educational change and how we can affect issues of inequality through the work that we do as school leaders and as change agents in the context of schools. I also worked on student achievement in suburban schools as the research director for an organization called the Minority Student Achievement Network. That research network was primarily focused on issues of the gap in achievement between African-American and Latino students on the one hand, and white and Asian students on the other. We were trying to understand those gaps and trying to connect research, policy, and practice in ways that could reduce the gaps and ultimately eliminate those gaps in the context of schools. I've been working on these issues for some time with the real focus on what happens in schools, how communities connect to schools, and addressing issues of student achievement.

Before I get started talking about the specifics of parent involvement, which I see as a very important component of making school change, I want to say a few other things about the structural limitations to what we can do with parent involvement. The reason I say that is that oftentimes we talk about parent involvement, and parents can get scapegoated for some of the structural inequalities and resource inequalities that we see across our schools. Teachers can get scapegoated for not involving parents. So, it's really important to think about some of the structural challenges that exist. I'll say a few things specifically about school-based challenges for students. I think before we talk about parent engagement, we need to be thinking about and have in our minds and be conscious of some of these other challenges that exist for students.

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One is student achievement. Students of color often find themselves with teachers who are less well-trained, potentially less well-prepared for teaching them in the context of their schools, and less experienced. So they often are in classrooms with teachers who have been teaching for less time and have less subject matter specialization. The issue of certification is a complicated one, but they are less likely to be taught by teachers who are certified. So, one big issue is the quality of teachers that are in front of students in the context of the classroom. A second issue is that race impacts track placement, where students wind up in educational tracks. And educational tracks are important because they impact teacher quality. If you're in a lower educational track, you have teachers who are typically less qualified. They impact the kind of work you get, the rigor of the work that you're assigned by your teachers. And they ultimately impact how much you learn. If you put students in lower educational tracks, they are more likely to learn less. African-American students and Hispanic students, often find themselves concentrated in lower educational tracks. These are things that parents may marginally be able to affect, but these are structural issues that it's really hard to affect as a parent.

Another issue is teachers' expectations. Teachers tend to have lower expectations of African-American and Latino students. And those expectations, again, have powerful implications, particularly for African-American students in comparison to white students. African-American students respond more to teachers' expectations than white students do. Ron Ferguson at the Kennedy School has done some work that sort of summarizes a lot of the research on this issue. And that's an important thing to consider.

There are some broader issues that are also very important. Gary Orfield at the Harvard Civil Rights Project has done a lot to document the resegregation of schools in recent years, documenting how schools are segregated by race and social class. And we'll see that that becomes a critical issue for where students wind up, based on what family they're born into. So the accident of the family that you're born into, the race and class of that family, has a lot to do with the school you attend. As schools become more and more segregated by race and social class, we need to pay attention to that as we're thinking about these issues of parent engagement.

Finally, the issue of resource disparities that exist between schools. I was talking to an Australian educator who was a principal from a school in Tasmania and was telling me about his experience. He was here in the States trying to learn from some effective programs that exist here, to take back the information to Australia and share it with people at his school and a broader set of folks. His government paid for him to come here and spend some time in the States. We talked about school leadership. We had about an hour scheduled. About 20 minutes into our conversation, he stopped me, and he said, "We can talk about connecting leadership to school or classroom practices, we can talk about all of these other issues around school leadership, but, you know, I've been in schools in Boston and I've been in schools in the Boston suburbs, and the resource differences between those two schools are so dramatic that I can't understand why people talk about achievement gaps and don't talk about resource gaps." We need to pay attention to the disparities of resources that exist across our schools. I think it's critical for us to really pay close attention to all the resource differences, whether or not we believe they matter, because there's a lot of research out there that says funding doesn't matter for student achievement. But everybody's clamoring to get in the schools with the higher per-pupil expenditures.

There are some societal challenges that I want to talk about, and I don't want to spend too much time on this, but my sociological background forces me to try to contextualize these issues of parent involvement a bit. Race, class, and wealth. People have started talking about the relative importance of race and class, particularly in the African-American community, and have focused on whether race or class is more important, and they more and more often are making comparisons of African-Americans and whites in social class. What they often forget is that wealth is very important, and wealth differences still exist and are still dramatic. I'll give you an

example. Dalton Connelly, who's a sociologist, studied the wealth of people at different income levels, comparing blacks and whites. If you look at folks who earn \$15,000 a year, Whites have about \$10,000 in assets, African-Americans have no assets. If you look at folks who earn \$75,000 a year, African-Americans have median assets of about \$114,000, which sounds pretty good. Whites have median assets of about \$389,000. So, same income level, potentially same job, potentially same education, but the wealth disparities are very dramatic. Those wealth disparities mean that people can be more flexible in the kind of home-based-education investments they make. They can be more flexible in paying tuition for their children to go to certain schools. They have a lot more flexibility in how they use the money that they do have, more flexibility in how they use their income. Paying attention to the issues of wealth disparities and thinking about the ways in which those came about and how they're maintained by contemporary policy and practices, for example, loan rejection and other issues for African-Americans, is important. Residential segregation is, again, another important consideration.

The final thing that I'll say before I move forward is that there are beliefs about race and intelligence that permeate our society but that we don't talk about very much. Having said all these other things to make people uncomfortable, I'll get to the most uncomfortable piece: that beliefs about race and intelligence have been with us for a long time and they still permeate our society. And I don't think necessarily that people who connect race and intelligence and suggest that African-Americans and Hispanic students can't learn as well as whites and Asians are bad people, but it's important to recognize that all of us internalize these ideas, and they affect what we do in terms of engaging parents, in terms of teaching in classrooms, in terms of making educational changes, in terms of selecting our children's schools. We need to pay attention to the idea that black kids and Latino kids can't learn. I think that's an important thing to keep in mind, and it's something that will keep coming up. Connecting back to this last point, I think the lessons learned from the work that I've done with that particular group can translate into lessons for other races and ethnic groups.

There are a set of assumptions about African-American parent involvement. They've come to light recently in the comments that Dr. Bill Cosby made related to low-income African-American parents and the inability of that group to hold up its end of the bargain, so to speak. The idea that African-American parents are somehow disengaged from the educational process is a popular conception, and it is held by people across different groups. It's also a scholarly argument that has been made recently. Dr. John Ogbu, who unfortunately recently passed away, wrote a book on Shaker Heights, Ohio, which is a Cleveland suburb with a set of high-achieving students on the one hand and a real big racial achievement gap on the other. It's one of the districts that was part of the Minority Student Achievement Network that I work with. The arguments that he made in that book suggested that African-American students and their parents are largely disengaged from the educational process. I think what we wind up doing is talking about parents' educational orientations and thinking of them as separate from the schools that the children attend, the context of educational involvement, and the educational terrain that parents navigate. Different ways that people talk about parents' orientations include basic values, aspirations, and expectations. So the idea of disengagement falls in there. There are also distinctions between home- versus school-based involvement. Do parents involve themselves at school, do they involve themselves at home, or in what ways do they do that? There's work that looks at how parents try to customize the experiences of their children. By customize, I mean, how do they marshal their students through the educational process by doing things like influencing what courses they're placed in, managing transitions between different levels, compensating for weak teachers or supporting strong teachers, and choosing schools and selecting where they live or which school they go to.

A final piece centers around supportive or confrontational orientations towards being involved. The two narratives about African-American parent involvement that I think are most popular, and in some ways contradictory, are that African-Americans are either seen as disengaged, as I was talking about before, or overly engaged and too confrontational when they get involved in schools. Again, thinking about orientations in a more creative way will help us more effectively think about how these orientations might come about. First of all, this is how people usually think about orientations: that people's race and social class has a direct influence on their educational orientations and that your race dictates how you orient toward education, how you think about your role, how you see yourself being involved, how you actually get involved. I've done work with a colleague at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Kimberly Gomez, and we've looked at trying to think of an alternative model. This model suggests that race and class influence the educational context that people find themselves in and that race and class influence the educational resources that people have. I talk about these as forms of capital. Human capital is your educational background, how much education you have and your knowledge base. Financial capital is the amount of money you have to bring to the table. Social capital is who you're connected to and how you can get resources from those people. People in this room may be connected to people at different locations who know things about parent involvement and can help you do your work. Cultural capital is the cultural style of interaction that is present in the home and the extent to which that maps on to the context of what happens in schools. I argue that the educational context matters and the resources that you bring to bear within that context as a parent matter. This whole educational terrain really is shaped by the interaction between these things, rather than by a direct link between race, class, and parents' educational orientations.

What I think often winds up happening in the context of schools is that people talk about parents' educational orientations as if the things that schools do don't matter. The things that schools do actually do matter. It's also not just that schools have the structural components that make it look like they support parent involvement; it's also about the more nuanced look at what kind of environment is created for parent involvement in the context of school. I want to talk a little bit about some data from the distributive leadership study that I talked about before, a four-year study of leadership in Chicago. I make the argument that we need to think about this educational terrain that parents navigate. With regard to the stratification of schools, based on race and class, parents wind up in different kinds of schools. Typically, African-American and low-income folks wind up in lower quality schools with lower outcomes on things like standardized tests. We also need to think about the environment within those schools, something that I call organizational habitus, which is a complicated way of saying that the expectations that teachers hold of parents and students in the context of schools are really shaped in a lot of ways by the ethnic composition of people who go to those schools. People talk about this as organizational culture. I talk about it as organizational habitus because it connects the racial and ethnic and social class composition of schools to teachers' beliefs and expectations in the context of those schools.

Finally, the micropolitical context of parent involvement, suggesting that the symbolic meaning of race and class is ever-present. One of my colleagues at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Amanda Lewis, has written a book called *Race in the Schoolyard* in which she talks about the symbolic meaning of race. We see people, we make attributions based on their race, we make assumptions about them based on their race. Let me give you an example. There are two contexts in a school. One is picking study groups and one is picking people for a basketball team. An African-American man walks into the room and they tell people to go to one side of the room or the other. Even if this person doesn't even look like he has any basketball talent, they send him over to the athletic side, and they don't send him over to the study group side. People have some ideas in their heads that really shape how they see people, how they make attributions about people, and how they think about what race really means.

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With regard to this institutional stratification piece, I looked at the data from Chicago about where students wind up based on their racial background. In my estimation there are really four types of schools. One was probation schools, where achievement was really very low. Second, neighborhood schools, which were broken down into two categories: high-achieving and low-achieving. And then the magnet schools; in most urban contexts, you think of the magnet schools as where the high fliers go, the most desired educational context in terms of student outcomes. Looking across the district as a whole, what we see is that African-Americans make up a little over 50 percent of the population; Latino, 34; Asians, 3 percent, and Caucasians, 10 percent. But looking at the educational contexts that found themselves on probation, there's a dramatic shift. African-Americans make up 90 percent of the students in those probation schools, Latinos make up 10 percent, and Caucasians make up less one percent. So as people are distributed across these contexts, if they're African-American - you can do the same thing for income level, if they're African-American and low income - they often find themselves in schools that aren't very successful. The Caucasian population, even though they make up about 10 percent of the population as a whole, makes up a large percentage of the students who find themselves in higher performing contexts.

I want to talk a little bit about teachers' expectations of parents in the context of some schools that I've studied in Chicago as part of the distributed leadership study. It's ethnographic research, and we engaged in participant observation work across the 10 schools. The data that I'll talk about is primarily from interviews with teachers and administrators. We focused on second- and fifth-grade teachers and school leaders, both positional leaders and leaders who emerged from our interviews with teachers as people who influenced them. We analyzed the data. I wanted to look at whether they think of parents as possessing assets or primarily deficits, or whether they were neutral in how they talked about parents. I wanted to also look at two sub-dimensions of teachers' ideas about parents. The first was the material or objective resources that parents had. What kinds of educational backgrounds do they have? What kind of resources might they have in their homes? What kind of time do they have to be involved? But I also wanted to look at cultural characterizations. Are they invested in education? Do they have a high work ethic? Do they have the sort of values that are in line with what most of us think of as mainstream values in the U.S. context?

The final thing is that I wanted to look at how the racial and ethnic composition of schools seemed to map onto the ideas that people carry about either material resources or cultural characteristics of parents. So I asked a basic question. We went into the interviews and talked to people about their own background. Then we asked them to tell us about the parents in this context. What emerged was pretty striking. This was across 10 schools in Chicago. Nearly 70 percent of the teachers talked about parents' deficits. So there was a focus on the lack of resources that parents had. Only about six percent talked about parents' assets. So there was a sense that parents didn't have much to offer in terms of what they could bring to the table, as far as being involved with schools. What I then did was look across schools with different racial compositions. So there were six African-American schools—they were 100 percent African-American. There were two schools that were racially mixed. Those schools had at least 40 percent white students, and they also had large immigrant Asian populations. There were two schools that were predominantly Mexican-American. All of these schools were at least 60 percent low income. Most of them were more in the range of 80-90 percent. The district average was 84 percent low-income families. What I wanted to do was see if there were differences across these school contexts, getting back to that idea that the racial and ethnic composition can influence how people think about and see and interpret parent engagement. What was interesting is that we looked at the material resources that people saw existent in the communities. In terms of education, there was a negative perception of what the parents had to bring to the table, that they had limited education and educational skills and background to

contribute. Language skills, particularly for the schools where there was a large Mexican-American population and racially mixed population, became something that people saw as limited. Household education or resources, limited. People thought that time for involvement was a problem and that monetary resources were a problem. And so people were recognizing these material resources, and that the material resources were limiting the amount of parent engagement in the context of the schools.

I also wanted to look at the way that people talked about culture in these contexts, the culture of the parents. What were they saying about the parents that was not about the material resources and things outside them, but about them as people? In the low-income African-American context, there was a real sense that there was a lack of investment in education, a limited work ethic, that the traditional family composition was not there and therefore couldn't support education, and that traditional morality was lacking. Across the other contexts, there was a sense that the cultural issues that people perceived among African-Americans were not there, that the cultural investment in education, work ethic, traditional family composition, and traditional morality were all there in the other school contexts. So there was something particular about African-American low-income parents that was influencing the way that people saw them. I make the argument that people were seeing them based on a larger cultural narrative about African-Americans less so than about anything that was actually existent in the environment.

Just very quickly, to give you some sense of how people talked about this, in the racially mixed schools, there was a sense that there was a high level of educational investment. "The parents were really concerned. It's hard to get them involved because of language. They don't feel comfortable. A lot of them are new immigrants and they don't have time to participate, but they have the desire." This is an Asian-American administrator in the context of a racially mixed school. Similarly, "We need more parent involvement, but the immigrant families work a lot." So, again, there's the sense that the work ethic is there. People want to be involved, they would if they had more time. In the Mexican-American school context, again, there was the sense that there was a high level of educational investment. "Parents are very cooperative, they want to help but have no time. At home the students get very little supervision. Mom and dad are at work, so the TV goes on. Not a lot of time is devoted to reading and homework in general." This is a fifth-grade white teacher who talks about moms and dads at work, so what's getting in the way of their being actively engaged in the educational process is the desire to work and the need to work rather than some sort of cultural attribute that's outside the mainstream.

At these places parents were defined as "people like us." They were defined as people who were like the teachers culturally, and teachers thought that the resource disparities and other things were getting in the way of their involvement. "We don't have the kind of parent involvement in this school that I would hope for, but at the same time I'm sympathetic to why that might be. I don't classify it as apathetic or indifferent, I see they're just busy. We're all busy. I mean, ultimately I'm responsible for teaching these children the skills, not the parents. A lot of these parents don't have the time. We don't live in a world where mom stays at home and dad works, and mom has all this free time. She doesn't have the time. So it's our responsibility." And notice, "I'm sympathetic to why that might be." It's not apathy or indifference. We are all busy, we don't have the time, we don't live in that kind of world. So it's connecting to parents being people like us. And this is in the context of these Mexican-American schools and schools that were racially mixed with a large percentage of white students.

In the African-American schools there was a different sort of sense. First there was an argument that there was a lack of educational investment. "If the parents don't talk about graduating from high school, then the student doesn't see it as significant. That type of home involvement, or influence, is what I'm talking about." This was

a white fifth-grade teacher at one of the low-income African-American schools. There was also a sense that traditional morality was lacking within the context of these communities. “We have problems with children because they have such young parents. Most of them are single parents and they don’t have strong discipline that older and more mature parents would have because they are still out sowing their wild oats. Some of these children are practically raising themselves.” So this is, again, a cultural attribution about violations of traditional morality that defines parents as outside of the cultural norms that people see associated with themselves. So they’re defined as “people unlike us.” “There is no traditional morality, no traditional family who is supporting education the way most of our parents did.” Notice that this administrator not only talked about people as being unlike her, but—I was also the interviewer—it was also as if they were unlike me. She’s including me in this cultural understanding, this cultural background, and saying that the parents are outside of that. My argument is that once people get defined as “other” in the context of these schools, once people get defined as culturally outside the mainstream, once people get defined as lacking investment in education, it’s much harder to find ways to involve them in education because it’s much easier to say [as a teacher] it’s not my responsibility.

A few comments about why I think this picture is off. First of all, much of the research demonstrates that parents’ investment in education is consistently high across racial groups, that parents are invested in education, and that there are not major differences in the education investment across racial groups or social class groups. Secondly, black parents are no less involved and no less effective as parents than parents from other groups. In fact, African-American and Latino parents are more involved in contacting the schools and participating in parent-teacher organizations than white parents of the same social class. So this narrative about disengagement is not supported by much of the research that looks broadly at parent involvement across the entire United States. Finally, all parents have some resources with which to be involved.

Some of our research looks specifically at low-income African-American parents and low-income and middle-income Chinese-American parents. There are many kinds of resources that exist in these communities that we can miss. Another thing that I would say is the group that is typically culturally most invested in education in this context are Asian-Americans. People argue that the reason Asian students do so well is that they work harder and their parents are more invested in education. But if you look at the traditional measures of educational participation, the group that is usually least engaged at the school site in the traditional way that we think about it are those Asian-American parents. They have a different model for how to be involved in education, so they make substantial investments in education in the home context, and they make substantial investments in education using their social networks outside of school. But we can’t go in with this single vision and single model of what parent involvement looks like or we miss the fact that all parents want to be involved, there just may be a different script for how they do it. Finally, as people talked about these issues, the burden of parent involvement is placed on parents rather than on schools. We need to make sure that what we are always doing is recognizing and building on the fact that parents are invested in education, that there may be differences in resources that people possess to be involved, but the fact that they want to be involved means that we can be involved and leverage that as educators, as policymakers, as teachers, to address that issue.

I think we really need to pay attention to the educational terrain that parents navigate. We need to think about the educational context that they find themselves in. We need to think about the resources that they have for involvement when we talk about the orientation. I spent time studying African-American middle and working class parents engaging with schools, and one of the things that I found is that because middle class African-American parents were selecting their schools and they were pretty happy with what was going on in their schools, they took a stance that was very supportive of what was happening. They just supported what was

going on in schools at home. They were typically less likely to feel like they had to intervene in the school context. Whereas working class parents who were not choosing their schools but were going to schools in a neighborhood context found that the schools were not serving their children well and that the schools were not receptive to their participation. And so their involvement was more reform-oriented. They were pushing for changes in the context of schools. Sometimes those reform orientations get defined not as reform orientations, but as confrontation, and you can understand why. I mean, everyone wants their kids to be educated. You're in an educational context that isn't working, you try to go in and make a change, and people are telling you that you don't belong here. So I think that's an important thing to consider.

Just to give you a sense of how people were experiencing this context, the middle-class parent said that teachers seem to be very caring, to be so caring about the children and the students, the well-being of the students, and they're interested in the students' learning, they are not just there because it's a job. An example is, "Phillip was out of school for 10 days. After it got to be over five or six, the teacher actually called me and initiated coming to my home to bring the work to me. So that was very impressive to me." They talked about teachers getting into the neighborhood, getting into the community, getting into the home. A working class black mother had this to say about what kind of reception she was getting in the context of schools: "One teacher made the newspaper saying, how can you let these less-educated people who can't barely complete high school, or not complete high school, can't read or write, tell me how to effectively do my job?" There was a sense that there was a different context, a different perception of how receptive schools are, depending on the social class background of these African-American parents who are trying to navigate this educational terrain and get a good education for their children.

I talk about this as the added burden of involvement for working class parents. We need to respect parents' culture, resources and involvement styles. They may be different, they may come with different ideas, different resources, but there are resources present. The culture should be respected, and the involvement styles, though they may be distinct, may also lead to better outcomes for students. We need to critically examine our common sense notions about parents' investment in education and parenting styles. Getting back to that idea that black parents disengage or black parents are confrontational, or Asian students care more, we need to critically examine those ideas and look at what the research tells us. We need to acknowledge the structural realities faced by parents and understand their frustrations. We need to create school environments that embrace all parents. And we need to provide explicit information to parents about how to support their children's education.

One of the things that struck me in interviews that I've done in two suburban school districts was that all the parents—I looked at African-American, white, and Latino parents across these suburban contexts—were invested in education, but they had vastly different amounts of information about what it takes or what needed to happen for their children. Particularly if you're looking at mathematics placement, white parents had a great deal of knowledge and information that Hispanic and black parents did not have. Part of that was because of the social networks they were embedded in. Part of that was because the parent-teacher associations were dominated by affluent whites. We need to make sure that parents' investment in education is built upon and that we provide them with the information they need to actually work well with their children at home, be engaged at school, and enhance student achievement, rather than assuming that parents don't want to be involved in education.