

The 2013 Charles H. Thompson Lecture-Colloquium Presentation

Elements of a 21st Century Movement for Excellence with Equity

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This article asserts the necessity of a twenty-first century movement for achieving excellence with equity. For most of our nation's history, it was taken for granted that academic skill levels among some groups would be lower, on average, than for others. Indeed, a culture of White supremacy maintained a division of labor that relegated people of color disproportionately to jobs in which academic skill was not a requirement. Now, several contemporary trends warrant birth-to-career changes in how the nation prepares all children for life in the twenty-first century. I describe those trends and propose key elements of a movement befitting this moment in history.

Keywords: racial equity, achievement gap, economic growth, achievement, diversity

The first major trend is that many Asian and European nations have surpassed the U.S. on both achievement and years of schooling. Not one racial group in the U.S. ranks among the top dozen nations on math problem solving for fifteen year olds (OECD, 2012). Second, twenty-first century jobs will require academic skills in a way that 20th century jobs did not. Standard predictions are that most jobs will require postsecondary preparation, built on a foundation of basic skills developed during childhood and adolescence (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2010; Symonds, Schwartz & Ferguson, 2011). Third, huge numbers of poorly educated young people are going to prison instead of work or college. Among incarcerated males aged 20-34 in 2010, 52.7 percent of Whites and 61.8 percent of Blacks were high school dropouts (Ewert, Sykes & Pettit, 2013). And fourth, the nation's racial identity is changing. People of color are swiftly becoming the majority. The U.S. Census reports that 50.4 percent of children younger than one-year old were people of color as of July 1, 2011 (U.S. Census, 2013). There is no turning back. Only among the very old do Whites remain the vast majority. Therefore, as never before, there are grounds for a shared national interest in academic excellence with racial, ethnic and socioeconomic equity. A national movement for excellence with equity will focus on providing high quality learning experiences from birth through early adulthood for children from every background. First, however, a few words about the personal significance of Howard University and how it relates to the broader theme of this article.

LEGACY AND RESPONSIBILITY

I vividly recall a moment one Saturday afternoon. I was twelve years old, riding my bicycle on route to collecting payments for the Cleveland Plain Dealer newspaper that I delivered seven days a week between the hours of 5:30 and 7:00 a.m. That afternoon—and that moment—was the first time it ever occurred to me that I might someday teach at a university. I was wearing a Howard University sweatshirt. It was such a big idea! I was thinking, “What do I want to be when I grow up?” And I thought, “Well, I like school, so maybe I'll be a teacher.” First, I thought about high school. But then I thought, “Why not college?” For a Black kid in 1962 whose father was a bus driver and house painter—a child who had never set foot on a college

campus—teaching at a college was a jolting thought. I remember standing still, staring at that Howard sweatshirt. Somehow that shirt made it seem like a real possibility. But it was not just the sweatshirt. I had teachers and relatives who encouraged and believed in me. My grandmother Nana taught special education in elementary school and was truly a master teacher. She used to say, “You want to be somebody!” with an emphasis on be. She lived to be 100 years old, one year less than her own mother, who we called Little Mother. Little Mother’s third husband was Mr. Freeman. A conversation with Mr. Freeman inspired me to write the following poem, “Sacred Words from a Great-Grandfather.” It was 1975. I was 25-years old and studying for my PhD in economics at MIT. He was 94 at the time, born in 1881. Almost literally, what he said was,

When I was in my twenties
Like you,
There was a lot’a things
They wouldn’t let a black man do.
Now that things have changed,
My life is nearly over.
But I’m not sad about it.

Your soul and mine are one.
And we’re still gonna make it.
I want the best for you;
And I want you
To want the best for yourself.

Don’t stop tryin’.
Don’t stop believin’ in yourself.
Don’t stop scratchin’ and clawin’
And pullin’ and sweat’n
And above all
Don’t stop
Don’t stop rememberin’—
That I love you.
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So, when I think about why we are here today and what the agenda is, I am aware that it’s not just about us. We are carrying on a legacy that Charles H. Thompson and generations of ancestors started long before you and I were born.

Nana’s father disappeared in 1920 when she was 14 years old. They told the family that they found his car and his tools but never found him. He was a skilled craftsman—a proud Negro who dressed sharp and carried a gun while he traveled the South fixing machinery, sometimes supervising all-White crews. I believe they found him, but chose not to tell his wife and daughter the condition he was in. It was better to just say he disappeared. Again, we owe it to all who came before us to carry on.

Many challenges remain. I suspect that in most of your families, like mine, there are members who are struggling. These are branches of the family where kids are not finishing high school; where parents are having a hard time paying the rent; where there is drug addiction and alcohol abuse, and so on. My parents had five boys; three of us did well, two of us did not. One still struggles with addiction; one died at age 39 of problems associated with drug and alcohol abuse. One is a medical doctor caring for a whole community of folks in rural North Carolina. And one is an accomplished athlete who was on the U.S. Karate team for many years and is currently an entrepreneur and civic leader in the neighborhood where we grew up. Your relatives and mine are real people, living real lives, embedded in real families and communities.

Maybe each of us can think of one child that we really love, or one branch of the family that we really worry about, that we want to help prosper and thrive or to do better in life than they are doing right now. Generally, let us think about what it would take to help far more of our children experience full and rewarding futures.

My focus is going to be on the lived experiences that we want our children to have and what we need to do in order to produce those experiences. I begin by introducing a few numbers and presenting a few major patterns. In general, the big idea is that it is social movement time again. This time—in this movement—we need to focus on both *structural and cultural* impediments to achieving excellence with equity on a national scale.

A MOVEMENT FOR EXCELLENCE WITH EQUITY

After World War II—in the middle of the twentieth century—two major sparks gave the period energy. One was the Civil Rights Movement and the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by the Supreme Court in 1954 and 1955. The other was in 1957, when the Soviet Union put a satellite into space to orbit around the earth before the U.S. did. Named Sputnik, that satellite gave credence to the Soviet Union's boastful leader Nikita Khrushchev, who promised to someday dominate the U.S. on the world scene. Because of Sputnik, there was a burst of energy and commitment to improve educational attainment and bolster the quality of schooling. Sputnik ignited a sense of urgency. It motivated a great deal of scientific and educational progress. It was surely a major impetus for John F. Kennedy's commitment to put a man on the moon.

What our nation needs today is to expand the commitment to equity for which leaders of the Civil Rights Movement struggled as well as our commitment to excellence that was heightened by the launch of Sputnik. We need to continue that work in a manner that fits our own times and challenges.

A major challenge in these times is that the payoff to academic achievement is often delayed because of the economy. Teen employment rates are at historic lows across all racial groups, and especially among people of color. Because demand for teen and young adult labor is at depression levels, millions of young people are missing out on key formative experiences associated with school-to-career transitions. Unfortunately, there is not much we can do through policy to bring about rapid changes in labor demand. But we *can* do something about the quality of skills that our youth are prepared to supply to the economy when it finally needs them; we can do something about the quality of the lives they are prepared to live as parents and citizens. My generation—the baby boom generation—is entering an historic wave of retirements. So, there are going to be jobs. This is a reason that business leaders across the nation have become interested as never before in the quality of education. Their interest is welcome. But we need leadership from every segment of the society, including you, to make sure we maintain the energy and strike the right balances in how we move forward.

We need to improve the quality of young people's lived experiences in all of the places and spaces where they spend their time. In order to achieve this, there are things that each of us could do better. To help us understand what those are, there is a great deal of communication to do—many interesting and useful examples to share. There is also a need for personal support and positive reinforcement to help all of us live up to the lifestyles and ways of interacting with one another that are going to help us do better for our own and other people's children. There is talent waiting to be cultivated and harvested. Reverend Robert Schuller used to say "*Any fool can count the seeds in an apple. But only God can count the apples in one seed*" (Schuller, n.d.). Metaphorically, we can harvest more apples from the seed by more effectively cultivating human potential. I express this thought to teachers in the following poem.

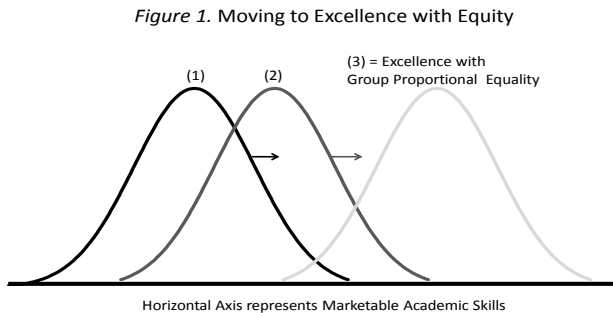
Sure as Sunlight

There's a child here in your caring
Who may someday cure all cancer
But you've got to lay the groundwork
So that it can come to pass.

She's a child who hasn't blossomed
So you cannot see her brilliance
But as sure as there is sunlight,
She's here. Now. In your class.

I can't tell you what her name is
Nor her height, nor weight, nor color,
Only that she is potentially
A history-making lass.
© 2000, Ronald F. Ferguson

To more clearly understand the goal of excellence with group proportional equality, consider Figure 1. Measures of achievement tend to fall along a bell shaped curve for any given group. Currently in the U.S., Blacks and Latinos tend to have scores on one distribution (#1) and Whites tend to have scores on another distribution (#2) that is further to right. There is a lot of overlap in the distributions—meaning that many Blacks and Latinos have higher scores than a lot of whites. But generally, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), the average White student scores about three years ahead of the average Black or Hispanic student by age seventeen.



Closing the Black-White and Latino-White achievement gaps would mean closing the gap between the curve for Blacks and Hispanics and that for Whites. But that alone might not represent excellence. It might leave the U.S. still lagging behind other nations. White Americans are not the international standard for excellence. Fifteen-year olds in more than a dozen other nations score higher on math problem-solving compared to U.S. Whites. The excellence-with-equity goal should be to have all groups in the U.S. represented by the curve (#3) in Figure 1 that is furthest to the right. Along that curve, knowing a person's racial or ethnic background provides no information at all about their likely achievement. Each group is equally represented under each section of the curve. The curve is at a level of international preeminence, representing excellence with group-proportional equality.

Another important fact is that our nation's racial and ethnic composition is rapidly changing. The result may be falling average attainment (i.e., years of schooling) and academic achievement (i.e., skills) in the not too distant future, simply because high-achieving groups are

shrinking as a fraction of the population, and lower-achieving groups are growing. Among people aged 80 and over in the 2010 U.S. Census, more than 80 percent were White. But only 52 percent were White among those aged five or younger. For the past several years, the majority of newborns in the United States have been babies of color. Very soon the majority of school-aged children will be of color and then the majority of our entry-level workforce, and so on. We will be a nation with no majority racial group. If we fail to raise the achievement levels across the entire population—particularly among Latinos and African Americans—we will continue sliding backward in the community of nations with regard to academic skill levels and perhaps also in our capacity to compete.

Progress will not happen by accident, but I am hopeful. There are people stepping up to be a part of the answer. It is important to understand that all of our collective endeavors are part of a shared sense of purpose; that we are not just miscellaneous people trying to do good; that we are actually a movement trying to shape our destiny for this century.

WHY BELIEVE GROUP PROPORTIONAL EQUALITY IS POSSIBLE?

There are several reasons to believe that group proportionality is possible. First, there are not many differences between groups at the age of one. Therefore, we start life with group proportional equality and then gaps open by the age of two. The reasons that gaps open by the age of two are becoming clear and do not seem insurmountable. (See the discussion associated with later figures.)

Second, IQ gaps have diminished over time. People often speak of IQ scores as if they are biologic constants. Well, 30 percent of the Black-White IQ gap disappeared between 1971 and 2000. To repeat, over a 30-year period, 30 percent of something that people said was immutably—predetermined in DNA—went away (Dickens, 2005; Dickens & Flynn, 2006). There is no credible evidence that genetic differences are the source of racial gaps in achievement. People generate skills—including those that IQ tests measure—through their life experiences. If beginning at birth, we gave all of our kids the types of learning experiences necessary to equip them with the skills and dispositions we want them to have racial IQ and academic achievement gaps would almost surely disappear.

A third piece of evidence supporting the proposition that success is possible, is that our best national data source on long-term trends in achievement shows dramatic progress during some time periods (and stagnation during others). Specifically, the NAEP Long-Term Trend series shows that the reading score gap between 17-year-old Blacks and Whites diminished by 62 percent from 1971 through 1988 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Again, 62 percent of a gap that people thought was written in stone was gone in less than two decades. Between a quarter and a third of the math gap disappeared over the same period. We should be concerned that very little progress has occurred among teenagers since 1990. Nonetheless, progress during the 1970s and 1980s demonstrates clearly that the numbers can rise. There is debate on why progress for Blacks 17-year olds in the NAEP stopped at the end of the 1980s, but the fact that we made so much progress during the 70s and 80s shows it can be done.

Among younger children—specifically, nine-year-olds—there have been starts and stops, but both Black and Latino children have progressed more over the last 30 years than Whites, even though Whites' have improved. This is the type of progress we need for moving toward group-proportional equality with excellence.

Finally, exemplary schools are showing the way. There are unusually effective schools around the nation that have both raised scores and narrowed gaps (Ferguson, Hackman, Hanna, & Ballantine, 2010). We need to study how they do it so that we can share the knowledge.

One often hears that a particular period of childhood or adolescence is more significant than others. People emphasize ages zero to three for early brain development; three to five for school readiness; five to nine for learning to read and compute; nine to fourteen for identity consolidation; fourteen to eighteen for preparing for adulthood; and eighteen to twenty-

something for school-to-career transitions. There is important developmental work during every period. Moreover, there are different domains in which the work needs to happen. Therefore, we need high quality supports for child and youth covering each domain and every period.

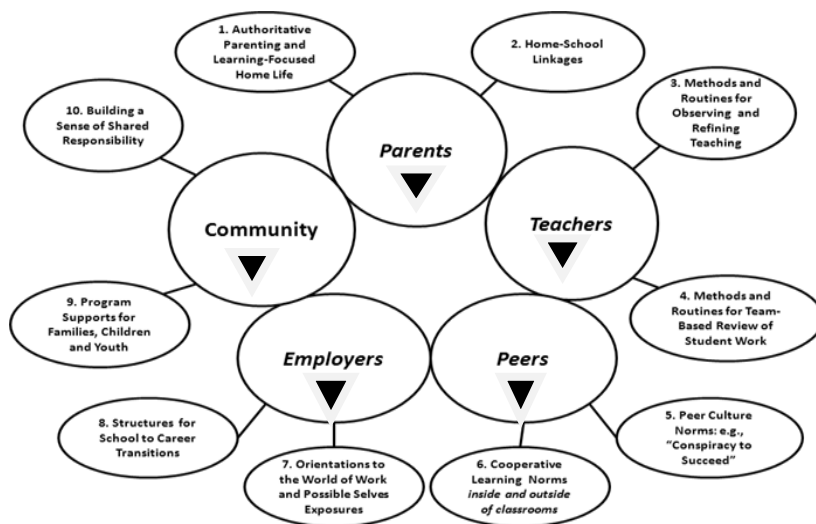
COMPONENTS OF THE MOVEMENT

The movement for excellence with equity has goals, strategies, policies, projects, programs, principles and practices. We need to recognize and work to understand them. There are *goals* concerning the developmental experiences and outcomes that we want for children and youth. For any given goal, we need feasible *strategies* or recipes. Governmental, institutional and even family *policies* provide the authorizations and resources that enable us to carry out strategies. And then the work to implement strategies actually happens at the level of *programs* and *projects*, supported by the resources that policies make available to implement the strategies. The forms that work entail the application of *principles* and associated *practices*.

As we try to be systematic in our thinking about a movement for excellence with equity there are questions and answers to generate at every level of this picture—goals, strategies, policies, projects, programs, principles, and practices—should be for each age, stage, and social context.

With a focus on young people’s lived experiences, there should be parents, teachers, peers, employers and community. If you put them all together, you get a picture that looks like Figure 2. It has five inner and ten outer circles. The small upside-down triangles inside each circle represent the goals, strategies, policies, projects, programs, principles and practices associated with that circle.

Figure 2. Socio-ecological elements of a Movement for Excellence with Equity



Parents

The first circle is “Authoritative Parenting and Learning-Focused Home Life,” while the second is “Effective Home/School Linkages,” or what is often called parental engagement with schools. The latter could also include links with other institutions that support families in children’s development.

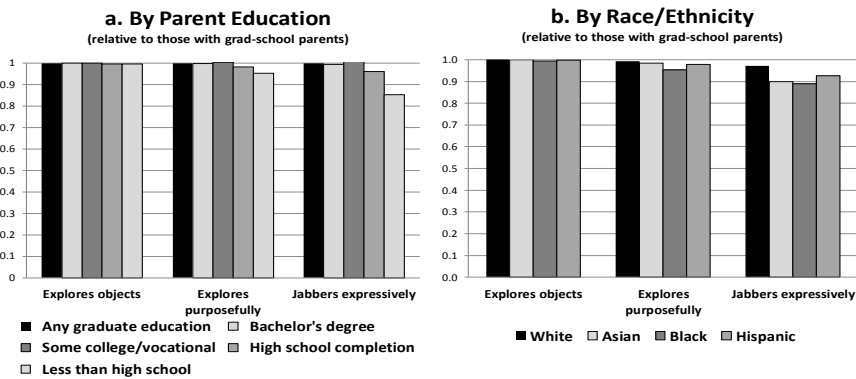
Sometimes because of our desire to be respectful, we avoid the issue of parenting because we say it is only the family’s business what they do at home. Well, parenting makes a huge difference. I think it would be irresponsible not to address it in a movement for excellence with

equity. People talk about having courage. We need to have courage to talk about the things that need to be talked about, even if it is awkward.

I mentioned earlier that we see very few skill differences by race, ethnicity or socio-economic status at the age of one. See Figures 3a and b. Both show data from the nationally representative Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Figure 3a shows differences by parental education level, while Figure 3b reveals differences by race and ethnicity. The 1.0 level on the vertical axis of each exhibit corresponds to score levels for children whose parents have some post-graduate education beyond a four-year college degree. At age one, the figures show that there is not much difference between groups. By age two, the differences are stark (see Figure 4.)

Figure 3.

Skills among young children, around the age of 1.



Source: Author's calculations using U.S. Department of Education (2007). National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort 9-month-Kindergarten 2007 Restricted-Use Data File and Electronic Codebook. Table 118.

Research is accumulating concerning the ways that early childhood experiences differ for children with different family backgrounds (Brooks-Gunn, & Markman, 2005; Jarrett, 1999; Lareau, 2002). Some of these differences correlate strongly with the types of skill differences that are shown on Figures 3 and 4. My view is that if we help equip parents with ideas and encouragement associated with what my colleagues and I call the *Fundamental Five Early-Childhood Caregiving* behaviors, then we will have a better chance of sustaining group proportional equality as children approach school age (Friedlander, 2013).

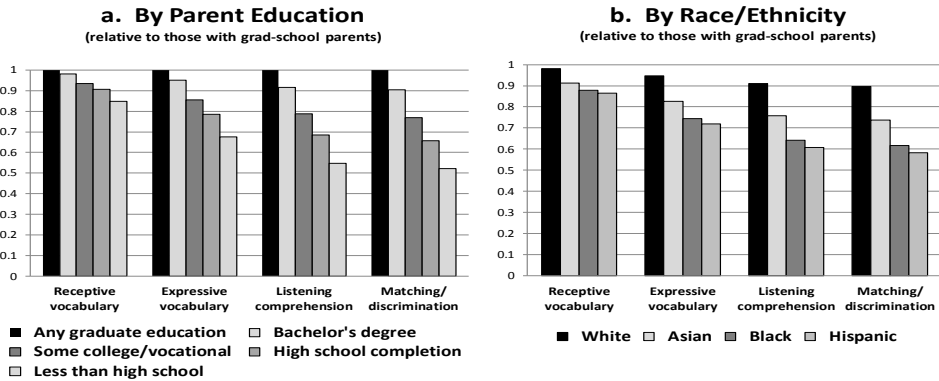
There is a project at the Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI) at Harvard that we call *Seeding Success*. The idea is to saturate neighborhoods with messages on the Fundamental Five caregiving practices for age birth to three.

The first is to *maximize love and minimize stress*, beginning at birth. The idea is to familiarize caregivers, not just parents but all caregivers, with what stress entails for an infant and the effect that “toxic stress” can have on brain development. There is a huge amount of brain development during those first three years of life. We need to raise consciousness about the importance of not only cultivating a sense of being loved, but also shielding children from stress.

The second of the Fundamental Five is to *talk, sing and point* to communicate with infants. Babies are encoding language patterns from the very beginning. It would be a mistake to think, “Why should I talk regular talk to the baby? He doesn’t understand what I’m talking about!” It does not matter that he or she does not know what you are talking about. One expert in the AGI’s summer 2011 conference on parenting said, “Just narrate life, no matter what you’re doing. Just talk about it” (Goldin-Meadow, 2011).

Figure 4.

Skills among young children, around the age of 2.



Source: Author's calculations using U.S. Department of Education (2007). National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort 9-month-Kindergarten 2007 Restricted-Use Data File and Electronic Codebook. Table 119.

It turns out that infants are learning language even before they are born. For example, there is evidence that newborn babies are more responsive to speaking and singing in their mother's native tongue (May, Byers-Heinlein, Gervain, & Werker, 2011; McElroy, 2013). Medical anthropologist Birgit Mampe and her colleagues have found that newborns tend to cry in the rhythm of the mother's native language (Mampe, Friederici, Christophe, & Wermke, 2009). They report,

We analyzed the crying patterns of 30 French and 30 German newborns with respect to their melody and intensity contours. The French group preferentially produced cries with a rising melody contour, whereas the German group preferentially produced falling contours. (Mampe et al., 2009, p. 1994)

An implication of this and related research is that speaking to babies in standard language—albeit in the high-pitched tones that babies seem to like—can support brain development and probably accelerates language acquisition.

Advice to caregivers should be to speak directly to the infant with eye contact while pointing to specific objects that you are talking about. There is solid research on how pointing to what you are talking about helps develop comprehension and language. Many infants learn to point before they learn to talk (Goldin-Meadow, 2011). Researcher George Butterworth asserted, "Pointing is the royal road from pre-verbal communication into spoken language" (Butterworth, 2013, p. 171).

The third of the Fundamental Five is to count, compare and group in using number games and rhythms with toddlers to build foundations for math. By compare, we mean doing things that help toddlers develop a sense of magnitude: near versus far; high versus low; long versus short; light versus heavy; and so on. Using words like high, low, light, heavy, long, short in association with vivid examples can be very instructive. In addition, one of the big breakthroughs for toddlers is when they realize that numbers represent groups. Four, five and six represent numbers of objects in groups, not just words that you say one after the other (Jordon & Levine, 2009; Levine et al., 2010).

The fourth of the Fundamental Five is to help toddlers explore spaces and objects. This refers to activities that develop the "mind's eye" and the ability to move around and comprehend in three-dimensional space. Imagine a 14-month old crawling around a crowded room imagining in her mind's eye what is on the other side of the furniture that she is about to crawl around. She is building neural networks for mental mapping and spatial reasoning that

may later enhance her capacity to do geometry in math class or to run the hurdles in track and field. Even handwriting requires coordination between sight and movement.

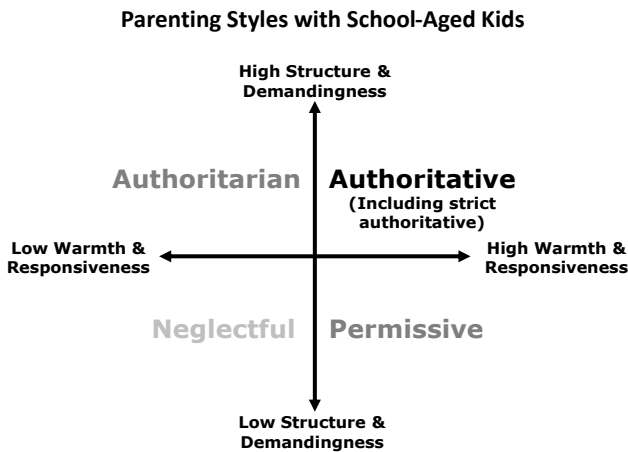
Finally, the fifth of the Fundamental Five is to read and discuss. Caregivers should invite toddlers to express their thoughts about things that they see and read. Everyone knows that reading to toddlers is important. However, less appreciated is the importance of discussion once the child can verbally respond. Lower-order reasoning is descriptive: “What’s that?” “Oh, that’s a doggie.” But you could also ask, “If you were going to finish the story, how would you tell it?” Or, “What do you think would happen if George opened the other door?” The idea is to encourage toddlers to remember, explain, and anticipate and then to praise their effort not their smarts. When caregivers praise effort and not smarts, children learn to persist in the face of difficulty, not to conclude that they lack the smarts to succeed when a task is difficult.

The aim is to prevent skill gaps from opening. Not only parents, but also grandparents and older siblings should know the Fundamental Five then family members can remind one another to use them. Fundamental Five caregiving behaviors can become the norm in families that might not otherwise practice them. They can also become more routinely practiced in families that already know them, but have a knowing–doing gap.

Let me emphasize that the Fundamental Five apply to every racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic background and have rigorous science supporting them. No child should miss out since our children’s abilities can be molded. Just like an athlete can exercise for years to build muscles to get stronger, the more we exercise our brains the more powerful they get, even from the very beginning.

Since I have focused so much on infants and toddlers, let me take a moment to say a few things about parenting older children. There are several ways to think about this, but one is to consider two primary dimensions of parenting. One concerns having structure and clear rules. The other relates to expressing love, warmth and responsiveness (see Figure 5). Children tend to achieve best when there is both structure and warmth in the parent–child relationship. In other words, there are clear boundaries, but within those boundaries, parents regularly express their love. They listen respectfully and responsively and supply lots of positive reinforcement.

Figure 5.



Professor Jelani Mandara, an African American psychologist at Northwestern University, points out that no one chooses to be low on both dimensions, a parenting style called “neglectful.” He notes that when parents enact this latter style it is because they are overwhelmed and need support. At the same time, Mandara suggests that other parenting styles are by choice—parents regard them as best or normal (Mandara, 2007; Mandara, et al., 2009). When White folks are not high on both structure and warmth, they tend to be high on warmth

and responsiveness, but low on structure—a parenting style called “permissive.” When Black folks are not high on both structure and warmth, we tend to be high on structure, but not express a lot of warmth or appear very responsive—a parenting style called “authoritarian.” We tend to order our kids around: “I’m the grownup. I told you what to do. Just do it and don’t talk back.”

Being high on both warmth and structure is called “authoritative.” This style correlates with (and I think helps cause) the best child and youth development outcomes for all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Mandara, who set out to discover what parenting styles were best for African Americans, reports in personal conversation that he was surprised—we might even say disappointed—when he found no essential differences in which styles were best for African Americans and Whites. However, he did identify a style common among African Americans that he calls “strict authoritative” (Mandara, 2007). Brooks-Gunn and Markman (2005) report a similar finding. Strict authoritative parents have a communication style that may appear harsh when viewed from a European-American perspective, but the essential features of the style are authoritative because there is warmth and responsiveness.

Families can also be mixed, where one parent is authoritarian while the other is permissive. In the household where I grew up in, my father tended to be authoritarian while my mother tended to be permissive. My siblings and I also spent a lot of time at Nana’s house. She was authoritative and my grandfather was permissive. I think Nana’s style was the most effective. My brother used to say that “Nana can whip you by just talking in a whisper,” about her disappointment at your behavior.

When our parenting style is authoritarian and our response to children is just, “Because I said so,” we are teaching our young to accept disrespect from people in authority. They learn that trying to advocate for themselves is unlikely to pay off and that they should simply obey. A hundred years ago it was common, especially in the American South, that questioning an authority figure for a Black person could result in personal injury. Telling children: “Don’t ask why! Just do what I said to do!” was survival training. These days, however, it’s just training to be subordinate. Of course, there are moments such as encounters with police, where “Just do what you’re told” still applies. We need to make sure our children know how to behave at such times. But that is different from being authoritarian. After one presentation in which I mentioned the value of authoritative parenting—high on both warmth and structure—a parent approached and said, “What you said sounded right, but I don’t even know what it looks like. I need somebody to show me.” We do need to give examples. It is not about casting blame or about coercing parents to do what they choose not to. It is just about giving everybody the information they need to make well-informed choices. My experience is that parents appreciate the information.

Schools and Teachers

Excellence in academic outcomes requires great teaching. Excellence with equity requires great teaching for everyone. Teachers in K-12 classrooms are not the root source of achievement gaps. As I have indicated already, skill gaps by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background are present by the age of two and are already present on the first day of kindergarten. But whether these gaps widen or narrow depends importantly on the quality of teaching that students receive.

Much of my recent work has used surveys to measure student perceptions of teaching quality as part of the Tripod Project for School Improvement that I initiated more than a decade ago. There are multiple-item survey measures for what is called the 7Cs of Effective Teaching: Care, Confer, Captivate, Clarify, Consolidate, Challenge, and Control (Ferguson, 2012). Student feedback is collected classroom-by-classroom and then summaries are provided to each teacher, school, and district to help them improve. The surveys also cover student engagement and school culture.

The 7Cs items from Tripod surveys provided the student-voice component of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Project on Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) that was completed in 2013 (Kane, McCaffrey, & Staiger, 2010; 2012). Using value-added measures from standardized tests, classroom observations, and student perceptions for about 3,000 classrooms across five districts, MET is the largest study ever conducted of teaching quality.

Two of the 7Cs—specifically, Challenge and Control—are the strongest predictors of value-added learning gains. Teachers that students rate high on Challenge push them to really understand their lessons and to persist in the face of difficulty. A teacher who rates high on Control knows how to maintain an orderly classroom where students are mostly on-task, while doing what the teacher intends. Classroom-to-classroom differences in time on-task can account for a few months per year in teaching and learning.

Clarify tends to be the third most important predictor of learning, behind Control and Challenge. No matter what the initial skill level may be in a classroom, if a teacher knows how to help students stay on-task, persist in the face of difficulty and eventually understand things that may initially be confusing, then students learn more than in classrooms where teachers lack this knowhow.

The other Cs—Care, Confer, Captivate and Consolidate—are much stronger predictors than Control, Challenge and Clarify for how happy students feel in the classroom and how strongly they say the teacher inspires them to attend college. Therefore, if we care about happiness, college attendance and life-long learning in addition to year-to-year gains on standardized tests, then we need high quality teaching on all of the 7Cs components.

To examine how strongly student perceptions of teaching predict gains on standardized test scores, MET researchers rank-ordered teachers in the study from the lowest to the highest using the composite 7Cs measure of student perceptions. Researchers compared achievement gains produced by teachers at the 25th versus the 75th percentile positions in the ranking. Comparing these two positions, the MET study found a difference of almost five months per year in middle-school mathematics and between two to three months in English language arts. This difference would be even greater if a composite of only Control, Challenge and Clarify was used—the components that actually account for most of the gains.

I am sometimes asked to compare the 7Cs with a culturally responsive approach to instruction. A set of culturally responsive teaching practices scaffold on the 7Cs might be the following:

- Care: I express caring to every student, being especially sure to not neglect students from any racial, ethnic or social class background. I try to be conscious of my biases and to avoid allowing them to affect my interaction with students.
- Confer: I elicit and value the classroom contributions of students from all racial, ethnic, social class and cultural backgrounds.
- Captivate: I make an effort to use curriculum materials and to design lessons that will be interesting and relevant to students from a variety of backgrounds. I make a special effort to pay homage in my lessons and curriculum to the contributions of people from the groups represented in my class.
- Clarify: I try to understand and respond to any systematic patterns of misunderstanding characteristic of students who have had particular life experiences.
- Consolidate: I help my students to build integrated understandings of the material that we cover in my class. I am conscious of the fact that my students are building their individual identities and life strategies and I help them to integrate our lessons with their own ideas so that they come away with more complete and coherent understandings of their current and future selves and the contributions they may make to their families, community and society.
- Challenge: I challenge all students to think rigorously and to persist in the face of difficulty; I don't give up on my students and I don't let them give up on themselves.
- Control: I try to understand students' interpretations of the actions that I take for classroom management and I use disciplinary practices that fit and make sense to them.

MET and other studies are providing new evidence of just how much teaching matters. Furthermore, we are learning more and more about *which components* of teaching matter and in what ways. Teacher professional learning communities need encouragement and support to use this growing body of knowledge for achieving excellence with equity.

Youth Culture and Peer Supports

As individuals, children and youth have very little control over the peer cultures in which they are embedded. Of course, individuals can make decisions, but they cannot control the social rewards or penalties that follow. Beginning as early as kindergarten, children must learn to survive in school-based social ecologies. While some of the interactions in these ecologies are positive or harmless, some—especially teasing for making mistakes—is hurtful. Such teasing and the associated fear of being bullied are quite common. It can discourage adult assistance and make classrooms dreaded places. In one northern U.S. urban district where the Tripod Project recently polled kindergarten students, twenty-two percent agreed that “The way kids in this class treat me makes me feel sad.” Among those who agreed with the statement “Learning is often hard for me,” the percentage who felt sad because of how they were treated was even higher, at 36 percent. Because social acceptance is so important, achieving excellence with equity will require more supportive peer cultures from kindergarten onward.

For the same northern school district, Tables 1 and 2 show patterns for secondary school students. Based on surveys conducted in the fall of 2013, Table 1 has responses to the following item concerning peer pressure: “*I do things I don’t want to because of pressure from other students.*” It reveals that among White students, 16 percent of females and 21 percent of males responded that they “sometimes,” “usually” or “always” do things they don’t want to because of peer pressures. Among Students of Color, 23 percent of females and 34 percent of males report the same.

Table 1

*Responses from Secondary School Students in an Urban School District to the Tripod Survey Item: “I do things I don’t want to because of pressure from other students.”**

	Responses		Row Total
	<i>Usually Not or Never</i>	<i>Sometimes, Usually or Always</i>	
	Row Percentages for Females		
Students of Color	77	23	100
Whites	84	16	100
	Row Percentages for Males		
Students of Color	66	34	100
Whites	79	21	100

Note. *Secondary school students’ responses in an urban school district, fall 2013; N = 7800 males and 9000 females; 70 percent students of color.

Many self-destructive behaviors are actions that young people would prefer to avoid. However, because they want acceptance from their peers, they will violate their own best judgments. Table 2 displays results for two groups of students: those answering “Never” or “Almost Never” regarding doing things they do not want to do, versus those answering “Sometimes,” “Usually” or “Always.” Among both Students of Color and Whites, those who allow peers to pressure them are prone to behaviors—holding back, hiding effort, avoiding help, misbehaving—that interfere with achieving excellence. Notice that the racial differences in these propensities have implications for racial equity.

Table 2

*How Holding Back, Hiding Effort, Avoiding Help, and Misbehavior vary Depending upon Responses to: "I do things I don't want to because of pressure from other students." ***

	Among students responding "Usually Not" or "Never" to "I do things I don't want ..."		Among students responding "Sometimes," "Usually" or "Always" to "I do things I don't want ..."	
	Females	Males	Females	Males
Percentages that Hold Back*				
Students of Color	16	21	59	65
White Students	10	14	52	56
Percentages that Hide Effort*				
Students of Color	24	33	62	71
White Students	15	22	58	63
Percentages that Avoid Help*				
Students of Color	27	35	51	57
White Students	24	32	49	49
Percentages that Misbehave*				
Students of Color	12	19	42	48
White Students	5	10	26	35
*Corresponding items--				
<i>Holding back:</i>	"I hold back from doing my best in this class, because of what others might say or think."			
<i>Hiding effort:</i>	"Sometimes I pretend I'm not working hard in this class, when I really am."			
<i>Avoiding help:</i>	"If I were confused in this class, I would handle it by myself, not ask for help."			
<i>Misbehavior:</i>	"My behavior is a problem for the teacher in this class."			

Note. **Secondary school students' responses in an urban school district fall 2013; $N = 7800$ males and 9000 females; 70 percent were students of color.

The patterns in Tables 1 and 2 have appeared regularly in Tripod data from every region of the nation for more than a decade. To understand them more thoroughly, I invited a number of secondary schools in 2009 to administer a survey that included several open-ended items. Using a representative sample of 1,400 respondents, student responses were coded into categories.

One of the open-ended survey items was, "Please list some things that students at your school do so that other students will like them." Students could write anything they wanted. Panel A of Table 3 reveals that students identified antisocial behavior, such as fighting, cursing, indifference toward other people; academically disruptive behavior such as acting out, skipping class, cheating, pulling stunts, acting like you don't care about school; things related to dress and looks; copying other people; being peer pressured; and sucking up to other people.

Another item asked students to identify what they would make popular if they could set the roles for what is considered cool. Panel B of Table 3 shows that they identified having a strong work ethic, trying hard in school, going to class, being responsible, following rules, achieving your goals, being nice, respecting others, being fun, caring about family and friends,

and being interesting, making friends. The only negative entry in Panel B is “drugs/drinking/smoking,” where only one-half of one percent listed it, versus the almost ten percent that listed it in Panel A.

Table 3

*Percentage of Responses from Secondary Schools Students in an Urban School District
(N = 1400)*

<i>Panel A: Please list some things that students at your school do so that other students will like them.</i>		Percent
1.	Antisocial behavior (fighting, cursing, mistreating people, talking back)	24.7
2.	Academically disruptive behavior (acting out, skipping, cheating, stunts)	19.2
3.	Related to dress/looks	17.5
4.	Copying others, being peer pressured, sucking up (giving money, food)	12.8
5.	Social behavior (outgoing, nice, friendly)	12.7
6.	Drugs/alcohol/smoking	9.6
7.	Being involved (sports, clubs)	7.6
8.	Not being you (changing yourself, ignoring your friends)	5.4
9.	Being funny/joking (non-disruptive)	5.2
10.	Sex/dating/flirting	3.9
11.	Working hard, trying in school, caring about school	3.0
12.	Dangerous/illegal things	2.7
13.	Partying/going out	1.5
14.	Being yourself	0.8
15.	Responses that were unique, noncommittal or too vague to interpret.	27.4
<i>Panel B: If you could set the rules for what is considered cool, what behaviors would you make cool?</i>		
		Percent
1.	Work ethic/trying in school/going to class/following rules/achieving goals	26.8
2.	Social qualities: being nice/respecting others/caring/making friends	15.8
3.	Respecting yourself: being who you want to/liking people for who they are	12.8
4.	Sports/being involved/school spirit	4.2
5.	Having a lot of friends/going to parties/being with popular kids/having fun	3.3
6.	Looks/clothes	2.9
7.	Funny (not disruptive)	2.2
8.	Being relaxed/just hanging out	1.2
9.	Drugs/drinking/smoking	0.5
10.	Responses that were unique, noncommittal or too vague to interpret.	30.1
		100.0

Putting Tables 1, 2, and 3 together, reveals evidence that students need help. There are aspects of peer culture that many would surely reject if there were no possibility of social repercussion. Comparing Panels A and B of Table 3 shows evidence of a phenomenon called *pluralistic ignorance* (Berkowitz, 2005). It is concerning when people misread one another’s values and preferences, then conform their own behavior to fit what they mistakenly believe others prefer. Often, individuals enforce on others the very behaviors that they privately dislike. Because of this, a whole community of young people can be stuck in a peer culture that the vast majority would prefer to change. The problem is that without assistance, young people have very little way of detecting what others truly value and prefer.

Young people need information on the basis of which they could launch a mass *conspiracy to succeed*. It would be an organized conspiracy to undermine aspects of their peer culture that they would prefer to reject—elements such as those in Panel A of Table 3 that interfere with healthy development and life success. However, overcoming pluralist ignorance may be an insufficient motivation for participating in a conspiracy to succeed. For a young person to participate in a conspiracy to succeed, he or she may also need a sense of purpose.

CULTIVATING A SENSE OF PURPOSE

From where does this sense of purpose come? I was eight years old when I looked around our four-unit apartment building at the corner of East 118th Street in Cleveland, Ohio. I noticed that my family was better-off than others in the building. We seemed to have more and were happier. I also noticed that houses in the neighborhood had peeling paint and were in disrepair. I probably described those conditions to the adult I was speaking with when I asked, “What kind of job does a person do as an adult to make things better for people?”

I do not recall who it was, but the answer given was “city planning.” So, I grew up expecting to be a city planner. I worked really hard in high school and went to Cornell University, mostly because of encouragement from my grandfather’s boss who had attended there and the fact that two classmates had older siblings there. I discovered economics as an undergraduate, during my sophomore year. Later, after earning a PhD in economics from MIT, I was teaching state, local and community economic development at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government when I discovered that measurable skill gaps predicted most of the Black–White hourly earnings gap. Specifically, the Armed Forces Qualifications Test in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1979) predicted the majority of the hourly earnings gaps between Whites and Blacks (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2011; Ferguson, 1995). Few things can be more important to economic well-being than equipping people with marketable skills. Helping to do so is my current purpose. It is the same purpose as when I asked that question many years ago as an eight-year old. It keeps me going.

One of our most important responsibilities as adults is to help children find their own unique purposes and prepare to achieve them. The exact nature of the preparation will vary. Some will require four-year college degrees and some will not. Certainly, most will require preparation beyond high school. We should begin as early as middle school to make young people aware that there is a broad and exciting range of options for how they might contribute to the world. Then, having made them aware, we should let them choose for themselves and support them as effectively as we can.

Every segment of the community can help. There is a program in Boston named “They Made it, So Can I.” Founder Patricia Spence has a roster of more than one hundred adult volunteers who visit 5th grade classrooms to tell their life stories beginning from the 5th grade. Spence has recruited people representing many different lifestyles and careers: truck drivers, mail carriers, business owners, and brain surgeons, to name a few. In these people, ten-year olds see a broad range of possible future selves (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). The essays that students write after the visits are testaments to the inspiration that they receive. I know of others such as Ms. Spence who making similar efforts in many communities around the nation.

CONCLUSION

The movement for excellence with equity needs to engage every segment of the society—every income level, every racial and ethnic group, every family type. Even in well-to-do communities, there are too many schools where neither the administrators nor the teachers have ever seen great teaching and learning. There are too many families unaware of what they could do differently to improve their children’s life chances. There are millions of school-aged children and youth who do not understand the fundamentally important impacts that their behaviors have on younger siblings, friends, and classmates. The vast majority of these people

would welcome new, research-based insights, conveniently and respectfully delivered, and geared to help enrich both their own lives and those of the children that they love.

Many of us were young during the 1950s, '60s and '70s, during the heart of the Civil Rights Movement. Certainly, there is a sense in which the Movement continues. But the steps for achieving excellence with equity go beyond those on which civil rights leaders focused. Recall the ten outer circles on Figure 2. The circles are connected. The Movement has coherence. We need to encourage and support one another in doing this work, with the purpose of giving young people from every background lived experiences to equip them with the skills and dispositions to thrive in this century.

I wrote a poem ten years ago to help high school teachers become more patient and empathetic with struggling students. The poem is titled *Hardships and Distractions*. It asks that we become the answers to their prayers.

Hardships and Distractions

*I'm going to have my dinner
At my grandma's house today.
My mom is stayin' late for work
To make some extra pay.*

*I've got a lot' a homework
But I'm worried 'bout my mom.
So that makes it hard to concentrate.
My mind feels like a bomb!*

*I've also got to make sure
That I wash some clothes to wear
And I've got to get the stuff I need
To tame my crazy hair.*

*And while I'm doin' that,
I'll use the phone to make some calls
To tell my friends the time and place
For Friday at the mall.*

*And sometime between now and then
I've got to get some dough(\$).
'Cause I ain't going to the mall
All destitute and po'.*

*I know that I should focus
On that test I've got in math,
But my English paper's due soon too.
I need some help real bad!*

*Some teachers think I just don't care
And some think I'm not tryin'.
I think I'm caught in a trap –
Sometimes I just start cryin'.*

*But no one ever sees my tears.
'Cause I just show the tough side.
I like to seem real in control –
If not book-smart, then street-wise.*

*I wish my teachers understood
What it's like to be me.
To see my life the way I do –
The whole complexity.*

*They'd see how hard it is to keep
So many things in focus.
They'd see how blurry things can get –
How stuff can seem so hopeless.*

*My teacher said I best be ready
When I take that test in math.
But I ain't got no help at home.
I never knew my dad.*

*I want to go to college.
But for that I need good grades,
Based on what my grades are now,
There may not be a way.*

*I don't know what I'm gonna do.
I need someone who's wise
To help me figure out which way to turn –
To empathize.*

*But let me stop daydreamin',
'Cause I got a lot to do.
If I don't start my homework soon,
I never will get through.*

*If I try and still can't do it
Then I just won't hand it in.
But if I don't try, I'll never know.
So here goes, I'll begin.*

*Every day I pray
To find someone to guide me and to care.
Is there any chance that you could be
An answer to my prayer?*

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RONALD F. FERGUSON, Faculty Director, the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University, was the guest lecturer of the 34th Annual Charles H. Thompson Lecture-Colloquium series that was held November 6, 2013. He presented his lecture, "Elements of a 21st Century Movement for Excellence with Equity," which is provided here in expository format for *The Journal of Negro Education*.

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