Chapter 1

African American Students, Racism, and Academic Injustice: Igniting a FUSE

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ABSTRACT

In effort to align academic achievement for all students, this chapter offers Fostering Urban Student Excellence (FUSE) as an instructional strategy to curtail not-learning and evoke academic improvement among African American students, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition to introducing FUSE, this chapter outlines the achievement gap, along with the factors that impact it, and reveals the academic position imposed upon African American students by social injustices. The chapter also establishes the critical need for FUSE as a specific instructional strategy to combat the impact of racial injustice.

INTRODUCTION

But justice is a funny thing. . . justice isn’t blind. She knows the color of your skin, your education level, and how much money you have in the bank. --Anthony Ray Hinton

Racism and the social history of the subjugated African American is neither popular in discussion nor in framing a transformative approach to education. Many people, African and White American, tend to ignore racism and the outcomes of discrimination. Among the outcomes are racial tension, perpetuation of stereotypes, socioeconomic disparities, and inequality. These inequities, which include measures of
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academic achievement, exist as a microcosm of the larger macrostructure of discrimination and racial prejudice in American society. Consequently, structural inequity has been imposed upon African Americans from slavery.

Academic injustice, along with not-learning, is, therefore, an inherent legacy passed down from enslaved Africans to present day African Americans. The term not-learning, which developed from Herbet Kohl’s 1990s studies, refers to students’ resistance to learning, be it conscious or unconscious, not their inability to learn (Kohl, 1994). Not learning is often perceived as common among underserved students and underscores the situation many African American students find themselves in today.

Probably the most popular race-centered theoretical framework, critical race theory, emerged in the 1980s to promote racial awareness and consciousness, along with acknowledgment of racial dominance, to address disparities and inequality (Harris, Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Though some dismiss the validity of critical race theory and its prevalence in the 21st century, the American achievement gap is the academic product of generations of racial, along with related socioeconomic, injustices (Howard, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Critical race theory is explored in more detail in a subsequent section of this chapter.

The root of the academic disparity lies in the 400-year head start afforded to White Americans. White Americans, therefore, have a longer positive relationship with literacy, as well as wealth and social status while descendants of enslaved Africans struggle to acquire literacy. Torn from their native languages, customs, and land, Africans were forced into slavery for the financial gain of European Americans. Enslaved Africans were denied education, access to wealth, and opportunity for improved life conditions, and as their ancestors, African Americans continue to navigate through unequal social, political, and economic environments (Lawrence, 2016). And scholars and educators work to mitigate achievement differences all while ignoring how such disparity came to be.

As Hinton (2018) noted, justice, and by association injustice, is not blind, and as suggested in this chapter, race and racism continue to negatively impact equality, student learning, access, and measures of student achievement among African American students. The achievement gap, therefore, demands an overt acknowledgement of historical subjugation and continuing racial injustices as a foundation for the distinctions in test scores, discipline, special education enrollment, and high school graduation rates. Examination of academic statistics and the achievement gap warrant a human context (Toldson, 2018); race and racism are related human constructs that cannot be ignored in offered solutions.

Roy Wilkins, the Civil Rights activist, said, “Nothing should be overlooked in fighting for better education. Be persistent and ornery; this will be good for the lethargic educational establishment and will aid the whole cause of public education.” Nothing means nothing, not even the memories of a violent past that continue to impact education in ways that are experienced by many but acknowledged by few. For some, any discussion of racism as an underpinning for racial differences in achievement is, indeed, ill-tempered and stroppy. However, diverging from conversations about racism does not eradicate its existence and certainly does not offer solution. Discussions about racism and racial discrimination have become unwelcome topics in America.

Legacy, according to most definitions, refers to anything that continues in the present having an origin in the past. Centuries after the abolition of slavery, over 50 years after the Brown v Board of education decision, 20 years after the emergence of critical race theory, and a decade after the election of the first African American President in America, educational inequity persists in American society and has become a perennial issue of debate. Educational inequality is an American legacy, and the fight regarding