Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., America’s Non-White Youth, and the Triple Whammy of Geographic Disadvantage

James H. Johnson Jr., Ph.D.
William Rand Kenan, Jr. Distinguished Professor
Kenan-Flagler Business School
Frank Hawkins Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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1.0 Preamble and Purpose

Thank you very much for that most kind introduction. I consider it both a high honor and a blessing to have the opportunity to share a few thoughts with all of you this morning on the occasion of the 2015 Triangle MLK Interfaith Breakfast.

After accepting the planning committee’s invitation to serve as the keynote speaker this morning, I immediately asked myself the following questions: What would keep Dr. King up at night were he alive today on this occasion of his 86th birthday? That is, what pressing issue or set of issues would take priority on Dr. King’s agenda for justice and fairness in America?

I am certain—and sure most of you would agree—he would be deeply troubled by the very tenuous at best, and extremely volatile at worst, state of relations between the police and the African American community in America today. I think Dr. King would be particularly aggrieved by the events surrounding the untimely and tragic deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice. And, as a staunch advocate for non-violent protest, I also firmly believe Dr. King would be equally troubled by the senseless acts of violence that snuffed out the lives of the two New York City police officers this past December.

Undoubtedly all of you can come up with a litany of other contemporary issues that you think would probably preoccupy Dr. King’s attention. But for me, as demographer, I firmly believe what I have come to call the triple whammy of geographic disadvantage—a circumstance that limits educational and economic opportunities of mainly America’s non-white youth (see Ross, 2014; Cohen, 2014)—would be near, if not at, the top of Dr. King’s social justice agenda were he alive today.

Having studied inequality in American society for more than 30 years (see Appold and Johnson, 2012; Bobo, Oliver, Valenzuela, & Johnson, 2000; Johnson, Oliver, & Bobo, 1994), I am convinced the recent egregious acts of violence and our justice system’s responses to them are deeply rooted in the hyper-segregation, educational disenfranchisement, and economic marginalization that continue to characterize non-white residential life in America today (Sharkey, 2013). My assertion here is rooted, at least in part, in my experiences as an expert witness in the penalty phase of more than 50 capital murder cases involving males of color over the past quarter century (see Johnson, Farrell, & Sapp, 1997a,b).

Against this backdrop, I respectfully ask for your indulgence as I first, briefly describe the two colorful demographic processes that undergird the triple whammy of geographic disadvantage for young people of color; second, graphically illustrate the nature, magnitude, and geographic scope of the three dimensions of the problem; and third, conclude with an overview of the ameliorative strategies I believe Dr. King would embrace if he were still with us.

2.0 Critical Background and Context

Two colorful demographic trends are dramatically reshaping U.S. communities today. Immi-
The Triple Whammy of Geographic Disadvantage

Migration, mainly from Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, is contributing to the “browning” of America, while the aging of the U.S. native born population is contributing to the “graying” of America (Frey, 2010; Johnson, 2006, 2009; Johnson and Kasarda, 2011; Pew Hispanic Center, 2013).

Emblematic of the “browning” trend, according to U.S. census data, people of color—Hispanics (15.2 million), Blacks (3.7 million), Asians (4.3 million) and other non-white groups composed mostly of people self-identifying as biracial or multiracial (1.4 million)—accounted for 92 percent of U.S. net population growth during the first decade of the new millennium (27 million) (Johnson and Kasarda, 2011; Pew Hispanic Center, 2013).

The “graying” of the American population is driven principally by the aging of Baby Boomers—the 80 million people born between 1946 and 1964. On January 1, 2011, America’s first Baby Boomer reached the age of 65 and became eligible for a host of governmental benefits. Over the next 20 years, Boomers will continue to turn 65 at the rate of 8,000 per day and are projected to live on average another 18.7 years. Because fertility rates

Figure 1

RACIAL TYPOLOGY OF U.S. COUNTIES

Source: U.S. Decennial Census, 2010
dropped sharply following the post-WWII baby boom (especially among non-Hispanic whites), this increased longevity—absent a continuous flow of prime working age immigrants to support the system—will severely challenge the nation’s ability to sustain Social Security and other governmental social “safety net” programs (Johnson, 2013).

Moreover, the “browning” and “graying” of America are ushering in dramatic shifts in the geographic distribution of the U.S. population, as well as major changes in marriage patterns, living arrangements, and family and household composition (Taylor, et. al, 2010; Livingston and Parker, 2010; Tavernise, 2011; Krivickas and Lofquist, 2011). These shifts create both opportunities and challenges for our nation (Johnson, et. al., 2015).

3.0 The Triple Whammy of Geographic Disadvantage

In part as a consequence of the residential settlement patterns that undergird these two colorful processes, our nation’s nonwhite youth are increasingly concentrated in U.S. counties, cities and towns, communities and neighborhoods characterized by enormous cultural generation gaps (whammy #1), high levels of race/ethnic re-segregation (whammy #2), and extreme concentrations of poverty (whammy #3) (Craig and Richeson, 2014; Besl, 2011; Wiltz, 2014; Frey, 2011; Mather, 2007; Johnson and Lichter, 2010). Owing to this state of affairs, I contend, and believe Dr. King would concur, our nation’s nonwhite youth—the new majority that will have to propel our nation forward in the years ahead--are at substantial risks of falling through the cracks of our nation’s K-12 education system and failing to acquire the requisite advanced skills through post-secondary education to compete in the unsparing global economy of the 21st century (Johnson, 2006; Johnson and Parnell, 2012; Johnson, et. al., 2015). In defense of my assertion here, allow me to describe the three types of geographical sorting of the U.S. population that have created this situation.

3.1 The First Whammy

Figure 1 portrays the nature and geographical extent of the problem as manifested at the county level in America. It highlights four different county types which are a product of the nation’s shifting demography.

Areas colored red in this map are “racial generation gap” counties. They form an elongated, curvilinear cluster extending from roughly Washington, DC southward along the South Atlantic Seaboard to South Florida and then turn westward winding through the Deep South and the Southwest all the way to California. There are also a few isolated clusters in the upper Midwest and the Pacific Northwest (Figure 1). In these counties, the <18 population is predominantly nonwhite, while the over 65 population is predominantly white. Prior research has shown that huge cultural/racial gaps exist in these counties (Frey, 2011; Roberts, 2007; Maher, 2007; Blackwell, 2011; Wiltz, 2014). In fiscal matters, the whites, who are mostly empty nesters, are more likely to advocate
for property tax cuts and retirement amenities than to lobby for additional resources for public education and other child and youth development activities (Maher, 2007; Frey, 2011; Blackwell, 2011). Because these aging empty nesters make up a majority of the voters, only limited financial support exists at the local level for the education of the predominantly minority youth in these “racial generation gap” counties.

Areas highlighted in orange in Figure 1, which cluster along with the geographical distribution of the “racial generation gap” counties, are “majority-minority” counties. In contrast to the “racial generation gap” counties, the adult population (18+) and the youth population (<18) are both predominantly nonwhite in these counties. Only 17% of the youth in these counties are non-Hispanic white. As the voting age majority, nonwhite adults are more likely than resident whites to lobby for greater support for public education. But these are mostly low-wealth counties and therefore the local tax base is often too small to ensure the predominantly non-white youth a high-quality education.

Areas highlighted in white in Figure 1, which are more widely dispersed throughout the U.S. than the “racial generation gap” and “majority-minority” counties, are “majority-majority” counties. The adult population and the youth population are both predominantly white in these counties. But roughly one-quarter of the youth in these counties are non-white. What distinguishes these counties is the level of support for education; it is much stronger, especially among whites, than in the other two types of counties. But many of the minority youth in these counties, not unlike their counterparts in the “racial generation gap” and “majority-minority” counties, attend schools that are undergoing re-segregation and thus do not fully benefit from the rich educational resources—financial and otherwise—that exist in these “majority-majority” counties. And the non-white youth who manage to attend resource-rich schools in these “majority-majority” counties typically are under-represented in the college preparatory tracks or curriculums (i.e., Honors, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate programs) (CollegeBoard, 2014; Theokas and Saaris, 2013).

Of the 3,144 U.S. counties and county equivalents, only five did not fit into one of the previous three county types. Both the total and <18 populations in these five counties are small, accounting for 0.0002% and 0.02% of the respective totals. I have classified these five counties in the “other” category in Figure 1.

Figure 2 displays how the U.S. <18 population is distributed by race and ethnicity across these four county types. Among the nation’s 74.2 million youth, 56% reside in “majority-majority” counties—arguably the most advantageous situation—while nearly all of the balance (43%) live and attend school in either “racial generation gap” (33%) or “majority-minority” counties (10%)—arguably the least advantageous situations. The remainder of the <18 population resided in the “other” counties in this typology.

Looking at the distribution of youth by race/ethnicity across these four county types reveals the
magnitude and depth of the disparities in the K-12 education opportunity structure in the U.S. While only one-quarter of non-Hispanic white youth (24.6%) live in either “racial generation gap” or “majority minority” counties, 62% of black youth, 73% of Hispanic or Latino youth, 63% of Asian youth, 50% of other race youth, and 49% of mixed race youth reside in these types of counties. Only 38% of America’s black youth, 27% of Hispanic youth, and 36% of Asian youth attend school in “majority-majority” counties. Youth of other races and mixed races attend schools in “majority-majority” counties at higher rates—47% and 51%, respectively—but their absolute numbers are much smaller (1.0 million and 4.2 million, respectively) than those of Black (10.4 million), Hispanic (17.1 million), and Asian (3.2 million) youth.

3.2 The Second Whammy

Making matters worse, a significant share of America’s youth is growing up in neighborhoods that are hyper-segregated -- that is, separate and unequal (Massey and Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987; Massey, 2007; Sharkey, 2013). To illustrate the impact of this demographic dynamic on the nation’s <18 population, I classified U.S. census tracts—census bureau-defined geographic units that approximate residential neighborhoods—by levels of segregation.

Building on prior research, I classified census tracts that were 60% or more white and census tracts that were 60% or more non-white as hyper-segregated (Massey and Denton, 1993). Census tracts falling in
Figure 3
U.S. RACIAL SEGREGATION BY CENSUS TRACT, 2010

Figure 4
RACE/ETHNIC SEGREGATION OF NEIGHBORHOODS BY LEVEL OF SEGREGATION

Source: U.S. Decennial Census, 2010
between these two extremes were classified as racially/ethnically mixed or transitional neighborhoods.

Figure 3 illustrates the level of racial segregation that exists in the U.S. Paralleling the distribution of “majority/majority” counties in Figure 1, large swaths of the nation are made up of predominantly white neighborhoods. The predominantly non-white and mixed neighborhoods in Figure 3 parallel the distribution of “racial generation gap” and “majority/minority” counties in Figure 1.

Looking at all youth, about sixty percent live in predominantly white neighborhoods, about 28% live in predominantly non-white neighborhoods, and 12% reside in mixed neighborhoods—as displayed in Figure 4. Disaggregating the data by race/ethnicity revealed the extent to which hyper-segregation is experienced by our youth. In comparison to their distribution nationally, white children are grossly over-represented in predominantly white neighborhoods and grossly under-represented in predominantly non-white and mixed neighborhoods. The opposite is true for non-white children: they are over-represented in non-white and mixed neighborhoods and under-represented in predominantly white neighborhoods.

Black and Latino youth, as Figure 5 shows, are more likely than other youth to live in hyper-segregated minority neighborhoods. Nearly sixty percent of Black and Latino children reside in neighborhoods that are sixty percent of more non-white. Asian and other race children are more evenly distributed between predominantly white and predomin-

![Figure 5](source: U.S. Decennial Census, 2010)
nantly non-white neighborhoods. And mixed race children are more likely to live in predominantly white than either predominantly non-white or mixed neighborhoods—not surprising given the high rates of out-marriage among Hispanics and whites and among Asians and whites (Taylor, et al., 2010).

3.3 The Third Whammy

Further complicating matters, America’s non-white youth also are increasingly isolated in neighborhoods characterized by extreme and high poverty—that is, economically marginalized. I employed a three-tier classification to assess U.S. youth exposure to poverty: census tracts in which 40% or more of the <18 population lived in households with incomes below the poverty level were labeled as extreme-poverty neighborhoods. Those with youth poverty rates in the 25% to 39% range were labeled high-poverty neighborhoods. And those with youth poverty rates below 25% were labeled as low-poverty neighborhoods (Wilson, 1987). The resulting geographical distribution appears in Figure 6 and the racial/ethnic composition of these three types of neighborhoods is illustrated in Figure 7.

Concentrated-poverty neighborhoods (i.e., extreme- and high-poverty areas) cluster mainly in states experiencing the most rapid population growth since 2000. For the most part, those states are in the South and West regions (see Johnson, et.al., 2015). Moreover, as Figure 7 shows, these areas of concentrated poverty tend to be disproportionately Black and Latino. Low-poverty areas are over-
Figure 7
RACE/ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF NEIGHBORHOODS BY <18 POPULATION POVERTY STATUS

Source: U.S. Decennial Census, 2010

Figure 8
DISTRIBUTION OF <18 POPULATION BY RACE/ETHNICITY AND NEIGHBORHOOD POVERTY STATUS

Source: U.S. Decennial Census, 2010
whelmingly non-Hispanic white with above average concentrations of Asian and mixed race youth.

Examining the poverty problem from the youth as opposed to the neighborhood perspective, as is done in Figure 8, the majority of our nation’s <18 population (70 percent) live in areas with low rates of child and adolescent poverty. Only 13% live in extreme poverty and 17% lived in high poverty areas. However, these aggregate statistics mask a pernicious race/ethnic divide in the economic wellbeing of our youth.

While 85% of Asian, 82% of White, and 71% of mixed race children live in low poverty areas (many of these areas are actually neighborhoods of concentrated affluence), 52% of Black, 44% of Latino, and 43% of other race children live in areas of either extreme poverty or high poverty—areas that research has shown typically lack the requisite resources and supports for healthy child and youth development (Wilson, 1987; Massey and Denton, 1993; Sharkey, 2013). These are, for example, neighborhoods where food deserts—areas where residents have no car and no supermarket within a mile of where they live—are prevalent and food insecurity is all too common (American Nutrition Association, 2011), as shown in Figure 9.

Consistent with my notion of the triple whammy of geographic disadvantage, there is a high degree of overlap in the geographical distributions of the “racial generation gap” and “majority minority” counties in Figure 1, the hyper-segregated, predominantly nonwhite neighborhoods in Figure 3, and the extreme and high-poverty neighborhoods in Figure 6. The visual correlations across these three geographical contexts are abundantly clear in Figure 10.
In Table 1, I have classified America’s youth from the most vulnerable to the least vulnerable across these three geographical contexts. Color-coded red, the most vulnerable youth—an estimated 9.8 million—are exposed to all three levels of the triple whammy of geographic disadvantage. Colored coded orange, an estimated 12.2 million youth are exposed to two out of the three levels of geographical disadvantage. Color-coded yellow, 20.0 million youth are exposed to only one out of the three levels of geographical disadvantage. Color-coded light gray, the least vulnerable youth—an estimated 34.1 million—do not reside in any of these three disadvantaged geographical situations. Rather, they reside in more prosperous counties and neighborhoods with not only the financial resources but also the diverse personal and institutional networks that are keys to ascertaining a high quality education. This latter group, it might be argued, benefits from the triple whammy of geographical advantage.

How would Dr. King likely respond to these demographically driven education challenges. I think he would draw heavily from the following research findings, which are taken from a forthcoming paper prepared by my research colleagues and I (Johnson, et al., 2015), to frame his response.

4.0 Responding to Demographically-Driven K-12 Education Challenges

Recent research conducted by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities revealed that 35 states
Table 1
DISTRIBUTION OF <18 POPULATION BY COMMUNITY TYPE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Racial Generation Gap Counties</th>
<th>Majority Minority Counties</th>
<th>Majority Majority Counties</th>
<th>Other Counties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Poverty</td>
<td>High Poverty</td>
<td>Extreme Poverty</td>
<td>Low Poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White Neighborhoods</td>
<td>5,061,464</td>
<td>3,113,679</td>
<td>3,384,090</td>
<td>2,874,007</td>
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<tr>
<td>White Neighborhoods</td>
<td>7,242,297</td>
<td>606,365</td>
<td>231,210</td>
<td>689,821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Neighborhoods</td>
<td>3,721,016</td>
<td>875,258</td>
<td>445,370</td>
<td>580,448</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Least Vulnerable</th>
<th>Most Vulnerable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32,142,685</td>
<td>19,973,443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed (2 or more)</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Decennial Census, 2010
are providing less funding for K-12 education today (2013-14) than they were six years ago prior to onset of the Great Recession in 2008 (Leachman and Mai, 2014). Based on the data compiled in Figures 1, 3, and 6 and summarized in Figure 10, fifteen of the states cutting funding for K-12 education have significant concentrations of young people who are facing one or more levels of geographic disadvantage. Since 2008, the funding cuts have exceeded 20% in two of these states (OK & AL), 10% to 17% in nine of the states (AZ, KS, SC, GA, CA, MS, VA, NM, TX), and between 4% and 9% in the remaining four states (LA, AR, NC, CO) (Figure 11). These cuts are especially challenging because nationally on average about 44% of total education spending comes from the states (actual percentages vary from state to state).

Leachman and Mai (2014) have articulated in a succinct and sobering way the options local school districts with significant concentrations of vulnerable young people have in addressing state level budget cuts. They note that: “[c]uts at the state level mean that local school districts have to either scale back the educational services they provide, raise more local tax revenue to cover the gap, or both.” However, they go on to assert that “[l]ocal school districts typically have little ability to replace lost state aid on their own.”

This is especially the case in the communities where the 9.8 million young people face the triple whammy of geographic disadvantage. I compare the characteristics of communities in which youth have the triple whammy of geographical advantage and two instances in which youth have the triple whammy of geographical disadvantage in Table 2 to illustrate the point.

Major disparities exist in educational attainment, labor force participation, mean usual hours worked, unemployment rates, median income, homeownership rates, and home values across these three types of communities. As a consequence, the real estate taxes paid--typically the primary source of funding for public education--are much lower in the two triple whammy geographically disadvantaged communities ($1,240 and $1,955, respectively) than they are in the triple whammy geographically advantaged community ($2,218).

Moreover, as Leachman and Mai (2014) point out,

Given the still weak state of many of the nation’s real estate markets, many school districts struggle to raise more money from the property tax without raising rates, and rate increases are politically very difficult [especially in “racial generation gap” and “majority/minority” communities]. In addition, owing to higher levels of adult educational attainment and employment, triple whammy geographically advantaged communities are better positioned than their more geographically disadvantaged counterparts to leverage personal, private, and/or philanthropic sources of capital to fill school-based funding gaps (Nelson and Grazley, 2014).

It is against this backdrop that K-12 school leaders, especially those in districts where young people are constrained by the triple whammy of geographical disadvantage, must be able to make both the demographic case and the business case for continuing support for K-12 education. That

1 Leachman and Mai note further that “Localities collected 2.1 percent less in property tax revenue in the 12 month period ending in March 2013 than in the previous year, after adjusting for inflating.”

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is, they have to help policymakers and other key stakeholders understand the link between societal aging on the one hand and the browning of the school-age population on the other (Johnson, 2013).

Arguing that this is the human capital asset base that will have to propel our nation forward in the coming decades, I have asserted elsewhere that the specific pitch must go something like this (Johnson, 2013):

Because of the huge wave of boomers who will be exiting the labor market over the next 20 years, we simply cannot thrive and prosper as a nation in the hyper-competitive global economy of the 21st century if we do not embrace immigrant newcomers and continue to invest in our increasingly more diverse school age population. And if we are not globally competitive as a nation, we will not be able to build the economy that will help to sustain the social safety net programs that serve sen-

Figure 11
PERCENT CHANGE IN SPENDING PER STUDENT, INFLATION-ADJUSTED, 2008-2014

Sources: CBPP budget analysis and National Center for Education Statistics enrollment estimates
iors and other vulnerable populations. In other words, school leaders must convince policymakers and foundation executives as well as the general public that it is a form of enlightened self-interest for us—all of us—to invest in our young people.

In attempting to successfully educate the increasingly demographically diverse clientele of students described above, K-12 education institutions are typically long on mission and vision but short on strategy. And most interventions that are designed to improve educational and other outcomes for our most vulnerable or disadvantaged youth typically operate on an “everything is wrong with you and I am going to fix it” deficit model (Glazer and Moynihan, 1963; Kunjufu, 1990; Anderson, 1990; Miller, 1996; Jackson and Moore, 2008). As Noguera (1997) points out, this approach treats race and gender as explanatory factors, “resulting in an explanation of the crisis facing [disadvantaged youth] which focuses almost exclusively on cultural rather than structural factors.” He goes on to note that by focusing almost exclusively on race and gender, other factors which may be relevant to understanding the causes of social problems like . . . [poor] student performance . . . often go ignored. Most important among the omitted factors are the influence of class and geographic location. Other research has demonstrated that deficit-based solutions typically involve punitive strategies (e.g., get tough on crime and education policies) that in retrospect have been shown to have a disparate impact on disadvantaged youth, especially males of color (Grant and Johnson, 1995; Miller, 1996; Johnson and McDaniel, 2011).

To effectively address the triple whammy of geographic disadvantage, K-12 education leaders must eschew the deficit model and embrace instead an education intervention model anchored in research on successful pathways in children’s development (Weisner, 2005; Cooper, et. al., 2005). Acknowledging that not all children who grow up in dysfunctional families and economically distressed environments fail academically and in other walks of life (Jarrett, 1995), this body of research strives to identify the culturally-specific, social and environmental determinants or pathways to success. Two particularly salient findings have emerged from the successful pathways research.

The first is that disadvantaged youth whose daily routines involve sustained engagement in activities in a mediating institution in their local environment, such as the YMCA, YWCA, and the Boys and Girls Club, are far more likely to be successful than their counterparts who are not involved in such institutions (Jarrett, 1995; Putnam, 2004). Such entities are called “mediating institutions” because they discourage disadvantaged youth from engaging in dysfunctional or anti-social behaviors and encourage them to pursue mainstream avenues of social and economic mobility (Johnson and Oliver, 1992; Jarrett, 1995; Fernandez-Kelly, 1995).

The second is that disadvantaged youth who are embedded in personal networks outside their local neighborhoods—often characterized as connected youth—are far more likely to succeed academically and in other walks of life than youth
whose networks are limited to the local neighborhood environments—often referred to as isolated youth. Connected youth are able to draw upon what is referred to as “bridging” social capital—a geographically, racially or ethnically, and economically diverse set of ties which enhance their knowledge base and opportunities for upward mobility. Isolated youth, such as those identified above as growing up in racial generation gap and majority/minority counties as well as neighborhoods characterized by hyper-segregation and concentrated poverty (see Figure 10), have to rely primarily on what is known as “bonding” social capital—a geographically and otherwise limiting network of individuals who share similar characteristics and circumstances and thus do not significantly enhance their knowledge or opportunities for advancement (Coleman, 1988; Fernandez-Kelly, 1995; Jarrett, 1995; Putnam, 2004).

In short, success-based approaches, in contrast to deficit-based interventions, focus on constructive strategies that can be employed to help vulnerable youth navigate or overcome structural constraints they face in their daily lives (Johnson, Farrell, and Stoloff, 2000). Building upon this body of research, it is therefore essential that K-12 leaders transform schools from educational to mediating institutions, especially in communities that lack youth serving organizations, and develop effective strategies to create bridging social capital for children growing up in racially or ethnically and economically isolated environments. While it is very difficult, if not impossible, to socially engineer integration in our public schools, creating diverse and globe-spanning networks for all, and especially our most vulnerable, youth are eminently achievable in the current digital age. Before constructive education strategies can be developed at the school district level, I believe pre-k through grade 12 teacher education and professional development programs must be re-engineered to reflect the changing demography, cultural backgrounds, and living arrangements of the school age population (Bevan, 2013; Krivickas and Lofquist, 2011; Hutchinson, 1999; Fraser, 1998; Huston, McLoyd, and Coll, 1994; Heath and McLaughlin, 1993). Currently, the problem, at the most basic level, is a fundamental lack of teacher knowledge and understanding of the critical risk factors that students from increasingly diverse backgrounds face at various stages of the life course between birth and late adolescence. More specifically, problems arise when teachers do not understand and appreciate the cultural background, language, values, and home environments of their students. Without the benefit of this crucial information and a portfolio of strategies to capitalize on their students’ strengths and address known risk factors, teachers, not unlike hiring agencies and prospective employers, often view their students, especially students of color, through negative stereotypical lenses (Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991). Among both educators and employers, research shows, for example, that black males are often viewed categorically as lazy, inarticulate, uneducable, un-trainable, and most importantly, dangerous—and therefore unworthy of substantial investments of time and energy to develop and/or hone their skills (Wilson, 1987; Johnson, Farrell, and Stoloff, 2000; Moss and Tilly, 1996; Miller, 1996).

Addressing the crisis in American education, especially the racial achievement gaps, requires a radical restructuring of the content of both higher
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education programs for aspiring teachers and in service professional development programs for existing teachers. Building a bridge to success for an increasingly diverse student clientele, I contend, requires greater emphasis in teacher education and professional development programs in six disparate but related theoretical domains and research paradigms—successful pathways theory, critical race theory, emotional regulation theory, race/cultural identity theory, resiliency theory, and oppositional culture theory—which are summarized in Table 3 (Johnson and McDaniel, 2011). These theories underscore the resiliency and strengths that our increasingly diverse student body possess which need to be incorporated in classroom instruction and teachers’ interactions and relationships (or lack thereof) with various subgroups of the school age population (e.g., black males).

Training and professional development can lead to effective intervention models and curricular strategies and innovations to overcome achievement gaps that exist across the multiple geopolitical contexts and settings that America’s youth, as described earlier, live and attend school in today. We—my research colleagues and I—have developed a prototype professional development program for the key influencers in the lives of school age children (see Figure 12) and a school-based successful pathways to opti-
Figure 12
A PROTOTYPE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Figure 13
SUCCESSFUL PATHWAYS TO OPTIMAL DEVELOPMENT FOR MALES OF COLOR GRADES K-12

Source: Authors
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Domains</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Resiliency Theory</strong></td>
<td>Underscores the ability of students to bounce back despite negative environmental influences. To develop resilient students, schools must provide care and support, opportunities for meaningful participation, and set and communicate high expectations. They must also help students mitigate or navigate risk factors in the local environment, including increasing pro-social bonding, setting clear and consistent boundaries and teaching life skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Critical Race Theory</strong></td>
<td>Recognizes that race is a central component and racism is an ingrained or institutionalized feature of social organizations and systems, which can be reproduced through social practices, including teaching methods and practices in public schools.</td>
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<td><strong>Oppositional Culture Theory</strong></td>
<td>Focuses on attempts on the part of youth to preserve peer relationships by distancing themselves from or resisting academic success. Specifically with regard to black youth and especially black males, the theory posits that studying hard and excelling in school are perceived as “acting white” and compared to whites, peer groups have a far greater counter-educational culture impact. Since black children, and especially black boys, exhibit greater resistance to school than their white counterparts, the challenge for educators is how to create greater affect in black children toward school, which in turn will lead to improved academic outcomes and opportunities for upward mobility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Successful Pathways Theory</strong></td>
<td>Emphasizes constructive strategies that can help vulnerable youth navigate or overcome structural constraints in daily life. Emphasis placed on “mediating institutions” that discourage youth from engaging in dysfunctional behaviors; and diverse personal and institutional networks that serve as bridges to the education and economic mainstream.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Cultural Identity Theory</strong></td>
<td>Posits that an Afrocentric worldview—a worldview of African origins—can foster feelings of wellbeing and thereby facilitate psychological adjustments to some of the unique emotional stressors and behavioral challenges that black children generally, and black boys in particular, face in schools and other institutional settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotion Regulation Theory</strong></td>
<td>Argues that racial socialization—implicit and explicit messages black children receive from their parents and other adults about their race—has enormous implications for development outcomes, such as academic motivation, particularly in the face of racial bias and adversity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Johnson and McDaniel (2011)*
mal child development logic model (see Figure 13).

Both models are evidence based, that is, theoretically grounded and empirically anchored in the latest research on how multiple and overlapping ecological factors and environmental stressors can impede learning. Both models build bridges to the educational mainstream through interventions and operating principles which are anchored in four core values—affection, protection, correction, and connections—that research suggests are critical to optimal development for all, but especially our most vulnerable, children. And both models are being beta-tested in a lab school—Global Scholars Academy—we have created for vulnerable children in an impoverished section of Durham, North Carolina.²

In order for models such as the ones we have developed to succeed, school leaders, to paraphrase Good to Great author Jim Collins (2001), will have to ensure that all school personnel are metaphorically on the bus, in the right seat, headed in the right direction with the interventions and strategies that undergird the models. Here school leaders can potentially benefit from the power of collective ambition approach that some private sector corporations used to weather uncertainty and continued to perform profitably during the economic downturn of the late 2000s (Ready and Truelove, 2011).

Collective ambition, according to Ready and Truelove (2011, pp. 4-5), is a term used to summarize “...how leaders and employees think about why they exist, what they hope to accomplish, how they will collaborate to achieve their ambition, and how their brand promise aligns with their core values.” Ready and Truelove (2011, p. 5) note further that companies that embrace this paradigm “don’t fall into the trap of pursuing a single ambition, such as profits; instead, their employees collaborate to shape a collective ambition that supersedes individual goals and takes into account the key elements required to achieve and sustain excellence.”

There are, according to Ready and Truelove (2011, p. 5), seven elements to an organization’s collective ambition, which can be summarized as follows:

1. **Purpose**: the organization’s reason for being or core mission.

2. **Vision**: the status the organization aspires to achieve within a reasonable or specified timeframe.

3. **Targets and Milestones**: metrics used to assess progress toward vision.

4. **Strategic and Operational Priorities**: actions taken or not taken in pursuit of the organization’s vision.

5. **Brand Promise**: commitments to stakeholders regarding the experience the organization will provide.

6. **Core Values**: the organization’s guiding principles, which dictate what it stands for in good time and bad.

7. **Leader Behaviors**: how leaders act on a daily basis as they seek to implement the organization’s vision and strategic priorities, strive to fulfill the

² Information about Global Scholars Academy (GSA), our laboratory school, can be accessed at www.globalscholarsacademy.org. GSA is part of a much broader set of initiatives we have designed to address child and youth development challenges throughout the life course. Information about the broader set of activities and initiatives is available at www.bridge2success.org.
brand promise, and live up to its core values.

To achieve collective ambition, companies typically focus on two priorities: collaborative engagement of all key stakeholders and disciplined execution of the strategic roadmap for change (Ready and Truelove, 2011). The former is the glue and the latter is the grease that leads to successful outcomes. My research colleagues and I think this is the ideal framework for K-12 education leaders to embrace in their efforts to weather funding uncertainties, disruptive demographic trends, and political gridlock at various levels of government.

5.0 Conclusion

Based on the evidence I have marshalled here, I believe Dr. King would conclude that the vision of America he articulated ever so eloquently in his “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial during the 1963 March on Washington remains elusive—a dream deferred. With so many mainly non-white youth who, through no fault of their own, are denied access to a well-funded, high quality, world class education, Dr. King would probably repeat one of the most powerful and memorable themes in his “I Have a Dream” speech: Our children should not be judged by the color of their skin, but, rather, by the content of their character. Notwithstanding the well documented uneasiness that exists among non-Hispanic whites about the disruptive demographic trends that undergird the “browning” of America (Craig and Richeson, 2014), Dr. King probably would assert that educating the next generation of young people who will have to propel our nation in the international marketplace is indeed a mission that is possible. But, in all likelihood, he also would hasten to add that, given existing political realities, it is important to frame these education challenges not solely as social or moral imperatives; but, also, and perhaps more importantly, as competitiveness issues for our nation in the highly volatile global economy of the 21st century (Johnson and Appold, 2014). Finally, in a gallant effort to mobilize the U.S. citizenry around these issues, he would say enhancing educational outcomes for our most vulnerable youth will not only improve the attractive of our nation as a place to live and do business; it also will go a long way toward ensuring that all of God’s children have equal access to opportunity in America.
6.0 References Cited


Johnson, J.H., Jr., et. al., 2015. “Disruptive Demographics, the Triple Whammy of Geographic Disadvantage, and Future of K-12 Education in America,” in Educational Leadership Where We’ve Been, Where We’re Going: Dimensions of Research, Policy, and Practice, edited by Bruce A. Jones and R. Anthony Rolle, forthcoming.


The Triple Whammy of Geographic Disadvantage


sites/edtrust.org/files/Missing_Students.pdf
