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SCHOOLS OF EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY? USING EQUITY AUDITS AS A TOOL TO EXPOSE A FLAWED SYSTEM OF RECOGNITION

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The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how equity audits can be used as a tool to expose disparate achievement in schools that, on the surface and to the public, appear quite similar. To that end, the researcher probed beyond surface-level performance composite scores into deeper, more hidden data associated with state-recognized "Honor Schools of Excellence." How is "excellence" defined and operationalized in these schools? Are these schools "excellent" for all students? Can a school really be classified by the state as "excellent" and yet still have significant "gaps" and disparities? If so, is the state's formula used to identify exemplary schools too simple, dogmatic, and institutionally flawed? Through the use of equity audits, quantitative data were collected to scan for systemic patterns of equity and inequity across multiple domains of student learning and activities within 24 elementary schools. The intent was to document and distinguish between schools that are promoting and supporting both academic excellence and systemic equity (small gap schools; SGS) and schools that are not (large gap schools; LGS). Results reveal that although demographic, teacher quality, and programmatic audits all indicated a fair amount of equity between SGS and LGS, the achievement audit between both types of schools indicated great disparities. By controlling for or eliminating some of the external variables and internal factors often cited for the achievement gaps between white middle-class children and children of color or children from low-income families, the findings from this study raise more questions than answers. Results do indicate that equity audits are a practical, easy-to-apply tool that educators can use to identify inequalities objectively.

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Introduction

Leading discussions in public education today are focused on improving teacher quality and closing academic achievement gaps. This discourse is politically bathed in the language of excellence and equity. The standards-based movement, along with the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, proposes criteria for increasing the number of "highly qualified" teachers while simultaneously eliminating the achievement gap between minority students and their peers (Vaughan, 2002). According to Darling-Hammond, Kohn, Meier, Sizer, and Wood (2004),

"The broad goal of NCLB is to raise the achievement levels of all students, especially underperforming groups, and to close the achievement gap that parallels race and class distinctions" (p. 3). In doing this, school systems across the United States are now required to publish "report cards" that convey disaggregated data regarding student results on standardized tests. This information is then used either to recognize the academic performance of students and the quality of teaching within a school or, in some cases, to initiate the involvement of a team of people who take over the school to ensure excellence and equity. Unfortunately such language often fails to address blatant, disturbing systemic inequalities re-

garding the provision of education (offered and defined broadly) to the public at large.

The purpose of this empirical inquiry of state-recognized “Honor Schools of Excellence” was to explore how these schools of distinction are (or are not) promoting and supporting both academic excellence *and* systemic equity for all students. By definition, Honor Schools of Excellence in North Carolina have at least 90 percent of their students performing at or above grade level, and the school meets expected growth and federal NCLB requirements for adequate yearly progress (AYP). In many ways, this system of recognition, marked solely by students’ attainment of a target score on a standardized test as defined and measured by NCLB, actually conflates excellence and equity, therefore offering a narrow definition of student achievement and perpetuating the current achievement gap that separates many minorities from their white counterparts.

The research questions for this study were modified from goal four of Scott’s (2001) equity audit, which deals with more equitable opportunities to learn. Its objective is to create “challenging learning opportunities such that every child, regardless of characteristics and educational needs, is given the requisite pedagogical, social, emotional, psychological and material supports to achieve the high academic standards of excellence that are established” (p. 3). Consequently, quantitative data were collected through the use of equity audits to scan for and then document what Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, and Nolly (2004) referred to as systemic patterns of equity and inequity internal to the school (i.e., patterns embedded within the many assumptions, beliefs, practices, procedures, and policies of schools themselves that promote, prevent, or form barriers to schools’ equal success with all student groups). All of the data collected for these audits were public knowledge provided by the state department of instruction and posted on the district’s Web site.

Systemic Equity

The evidence is clear, and alarming, that various segments of our public school population experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999). When compared to their white, middle-class counterparts,

students of color, of low socioeconomic status, who speak languages other than English, and with disabilities consistently experience significantly lower achievement test scores, teacher expectations, and allocation of resources (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen, 2001; Banks, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Ortiz, 1997). According to Oakes, Quartz, Ryan, and Lipton (2000), one reason that the gaps are so persistent, pervasive, and significantly disparate is that “American schools have been pressured to preserve the status quo” (p. 573). The historic marginalization of underprivileged students and the perpetuation of the status quo have served to benefit the same students and families for hundreds of years while simultaneously ignoring the needs of low-income, black, brown, native, and multiracial students and their families (Apple, 1993; Larson & Ovando, 2001). As a result, these students, without realizing it, often fall into a predetermined mold designed for school failure and social inequity. They are “left behind” without hope, without vision, and without equal access to the excellent education to which *all* children are entitled.

Freire (1990) proposed that the purpose of our educational system is to make bold possibilities happen for these students. He stated that it is the work, in fact the duty, of public education to end the oppression of these students. Moses and Cobb (2002) agreed, suggesting that educators today are actually frontline civil rights workers in a long-term struggle for greater educational equity across racial and socioeconomic levels. Although many schools are failing to fulfill this duty, others are meeting the challenge of serving each and every student really well (Oakes et al., 2000; Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002). In striving for excellence *and* equity, students from varied racial, socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds in these schools are learning at high academic levels. There are “no persistent patterns of differences in academic success or treatment among students grouped by race, ethnicity, culture, neighborhood, income of parents, or home language” (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003, p. 2).

Designed to deepen the contextualization of schools that are truly excellent *and* equitable, this study was theoretically driven by the conceptual framework of “systemic equity.” According to Scott (2001), “Systemic equity is defined as the trans-

formed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner—in whatever learning environment that learner is found—has the greatest opportunity to learn enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and for life” (p. 6). Scott’s framework focuses on the ways that systems work to ensure all students are successful, including: (a) comparably high achievement and other student outcomes; (b) equitable opportunity to learn; (c) resource distribution equity; and (d) treatment equity. If even one aspect of the system is inequitable, a school cannot have systemic equity. For example, offering a high-quality and challenging curriculum is not effective if the staff does not have high expectations that all students will be successful with that curriculum.

Student Achievement Variables

Given the goal of excellence and equity for all, questions of causality persist. What variables (external demographic-related and internal education-related) actually influence student achievement, and how can schools capitalize on these to narrow the gaps? The quest for more effective forms of schooling has traditionally been synonymous with the quest for greater educational equity across racial and socioeconomic levels. Beginning with the Coleman report in the mid-1960s (Coleman et al., 1966), the past 40 years have witnessed a growing number of research studies aimed at reducing the gap in quality between the school experiences of disadvantaged and more affluent youth. Concluding that the strongest predictors of achievement across all racial groups were social characteristics of the student’s home environment (e.g., ethnicity, parents’ education, income), Coleman proposed that children from poor families and homes, lacking the prime conditions or values to support education, could not learn regardless of what the school did—in essence, absolving schools of any accountability for inequities among student subgroups. As a result of Coleman’s statement that “schools bring little influence to bear upon a child’s achievement that is independent of his background and general social context” (p. 325), many people (including educators), still believe that demographic

factors are the most reliable predictors of school achievement.

Through the “effective schools research,” Edmunds, Brookover, Lezzotte, and others (Rosenholtz, 1985) set out to find schools where children from low-income families were highly successful, thereby demonstrating that schools can and do make a difference and that children from high-poverty backgrounds can learn at high levels. Many of these process-product studies identified samples of high-performing schools, documenting certain school, classroom, and leadership practices that are critical to enhanced student achievement and school productivity, regardless of family background. Although the effective schools movement has been influential, questions remain regarding its various recommendations, particularly the direction of causal effect (Rowan, Bossert, & Dwyer, 1983). In other words, although certain characteristics might produce higher-achieving students, the reverse might also be the case; that is, schools may maintain these characteristics because they are fortunate enough to have greater numbers of high-achieving students. That some schools identified as effective at one point were found not to be so a few years later might, for example, suggest the latter possibility. Thus, although “effective schools” clearly share important practices, it has never been consistently established that ineffective schools could become more effective by adopting these practices.

In continuing the search for a reliable set of techniques for transforming ineffective schools into effective ones, various researchers suggested that other internal factors such as school size (Haller, Monk, & Tien, 1993), class size (Mosteller, 1995), pupil-teacher ratios, special education assignment (Artiles, 1998), placement in gifted and talented programs (Ford & Harmon, 2001), the number of discipline referrals, and other school-related variables may also play an important role in what students learn. Incidentally, this same body of research also repeatedly indicated that students of color and students of poverty received a highly disproportionate share of negative consequences and an inexplicably low share of positive resources. According to McKenzie and Scheurich (2004), research on the achievement gap today reveals similar findings:

There is an abundance of data and research that show that students of color not only are performing at lower achievement levels than their White counterparts but, also, are overrepresented in special education and lower level classes, dropping out of school at higher numbers, frequently educated by teachers who do not believe they can learn or who are actively negative in their attitude toward these students, underrepresented in gifted and talented and higher level classes, often times educated in schools with less resources and with the least experienced teachers, and more likely to be suspended or expelled. (p. 602)

Current research indicates that access to effective teaching is correlated with high and equitable levels of learning for all students (Ferguson, 1998; Goldhaber, 2002; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2002). More so than any other home or school-level factor, statistics show that teacher quality actually has the greatest impact on student achievement (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996). Simply put, skilled teachers produce better student results. As such, the NCLB teacher-quality provisions are driven by this research documenting the importance of teacher quality on student achievement and in closing achievement gaps between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students (Carey, 2004).

Although most researchers agree that teachers matter, these same researchers tend to disagree on how "teacher quality" should be defined and then measured. Although some argue that some measures are better predictors of teacher effectiveness than others (Rowan, Correnti, & Miller, 2002), attributes such as teacher subject specialty, degree level, certification type, years of teaching experience, general academic proficiency as measured by standardized test scores (e.g., SAT, ACT, Praxis), and the selectivity of a teacher's alma mater are often used as proxies for teacher quality. Regardless of how it is technically defined and measured, teacher quality is extremely important. Unfortunately, like so many of the other resources, the pool of high-quality teachers is not distributed equitably across schools and districts. The fact that the less socially advantaged the students, the less likely teachers are to hold full certifi-

cation and a degree in their field and the more likely they are to be inexperienced and have entered teaching without certification is itself a major contributor to the achievement gap (Darling-Hammond, 1999). In an effort to combine these factors and begin resolving this issue, Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, and Nolly (2004) proposed this simple formula: teacher quality equity plus programmatic equity equals achievement equity. In part, the researchers involved in the current study begin to test that assumption.

Method

Participants

According to Patton (1990), "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth" (p. 169). Through purposeful sampling, 24 elementary schools were eventually selected from a list of 61 "honor" schools in one large school district in a southeastern U.S. state using the following predetermined criteria:

- K–5 Honor School of Excellence during the 2004–05 school year (no middle schools or high schools included),
- Regular, traditional-calendar school (no magnet, charter, or year-round schools included),
- Principal has been in place for at least three years (no school with a new principal included), and
- A critical mass of student diversity (at least 18 percent of the total school population is minority students). For this study, "minority" is defined as students who fall under the NCLB subgroups of African American students, Hispanic American students, Native American students, and multiracial students.

All 24 traditional K–5 Honor Schools of Excellence identified during the 2004–05 academic year recorded proficiency rates of achievement (i.e., scoring at or above a Level 3 on the state's end-of-grade test) of 95 percent or above for all of their white and Asian American students. The proficiency rates for minority students in these same schools ranged from 64.6 to 87.1 percent. Based solely on minority achievement, the 24 schools were rank ordered and

then separated into two types of schools. The 12 more equitable schools that recorded achievement gaps of less than 15 percent between their white students and their minority students were labeled SGS for “small gap schools.” The 12 less equitable schools that recorded achievement gaps of 15 percent or more between their white students and their minority students were labeled LGS for “larger gap schools.” Any gap, especially a gap of 15 percent, indicates inequity and illustrates the need for this research and the importance of learning from and building on the success of the more equitable schools in the district.

The district involved in this study is unique in its focus on keeping most schools balanced by subgroups of students identified under NCLB. Around 20 years ago, the school board modified its racial desegregation plan by replacing racial considerations with a new student assignment plan based on a combination of socioeconomic status and academic performance. Accordingly, no school may have more than 40 percent of its children eligible for subsidized lunches or more than 25 percent of its students scoring below grade level on standardized tests. This approach actively resists the demographic trends toward high-poverty and low-performing schools by making decisions based on students’ need rather than their race. As a result, the schools in this study have a population of minority students that ranges from 18 to 60 percent of the total school population. Although this demographic trend is not representative of many districts or schools in districts that essentially remain segregated, it does provide a unique opportunity to study and compare what is actually happening (or not happening) in schools that are similar demographically (i.e., to compare apples to apples and oranges to oranges, not apples to oranges).

Instrumentation: Equity Audits

Equity audits are a leadership tool that can be used to guide schools in working toward equity and excellence; they involve the use of district, school, and classroom data to identify, address, and remove systemic patterns of inequality that come from inside the school. Equity auditing is a concept with a respected history in civil rights, in curriculum audit-

ing, and in some state accountability systems (English & Steffy, 2001). In this study, I took Skrla et al.’s (2004) advice and began “with a manageable set of demographic, teacher quality, programmatic, and student achievement indicators that together form a straightforward, delimited audit of equity” (p. 141).

Procedures

Demographic equity for each of the SGS and LGS was explored by means of the following descriptive statistics: (a) number of students; (b) number of 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders who took the reading and math tests; (c) percentage of minority students (defined for this study as African American, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial students); (d) percentage of economically disadvantaged students (defined for this study as students eligible for free or reduced lunch); (e) percentage of limited-English-proficient (LEP) students; (f) percentage of students with disabilities (tested and labeled); (g) number of AYP goals (subgroups identified under the federal NCLB Act); and (h) actual geographic location.

Because high-quality teachers are key determinants of students’ opportunities to be academically successful, evidence of teacher quality equity in each of the SGS and LGS involved four variables: (a) teacher education (percentage of teachers holding an advanced degree at the master’s or doctoral level); (b) teacher credentials (percentage of fully licensed teachers, percentage of classes taught by highly qualified teachers, and percentage of teachers with National Board certification); (c) teacher experience (number of years as a teacher); and (d) teacher mobility (percentage of teachers leaving or not leaving a campus annually).

According to Skrla et al. (2004), “Equally as important as teacher quality is the quality of the programs in which students are placed (or from which they are excluded) and in which teachers work” (p. 145). Because quality varies largely among different placements and working conditions within schools and school districts, indicators of programmatic equity for this study involved data gathered on the following resources: (a) student space (percentage of school crowding and number of mobile units); (b) student discipline (number of acts of violence and number of student suspensions per 100 students per

school year); (c) student access to books and technology (number of library books per student, number of students per computer, and number of students per Internet connection); (d) teachers' time; (e) facilities and resources; (f) teachers' empowerment; (g) school leadership; and (h) opportunities for professional development.

Indicators of achievement equity in each of the SGS and LGS expanded the traditional attention on nationally normed achievement test results and included such evidence of student attainment as growth rates, academic levels, parent education, and AYP goals met. Adequate yearly progress standards are used to determine success under the federal NCLB legislation involving incremental growth from certain starting points in reading and mathematics. With a goal of closing achievement gaps, there are nine categories of students that are potentially identified as subgroups. They are: (1) white, (2) black, (3) Hispanic, (4) Native American, (5) Asian/Pacific

Islander, (6) multiracial, (7) economically disadvantaged, (8) limited English proficient, and (9) students with disabilities. A school must achieve 100 percent of its targets (subgroups) in order to be deemed to have made adequate yearly progress. In each of the 24 schools, 95 percent or more of the white and Asian/Pacific Islander students were proficient on the end-of-grade reading and mathematics tests. The achievement audit for this study disaggregated the following available data based on the NCLB subgroups: (a) state achievement test results (from a state accountability program, focused primarily on average growth, designed to improve student achievement, reward excellence, and provide assistance to schools that need extra help); (b) growth rates; (c) academic levels; (d) parent education (proficiency rate of students whose parents do not have a college education); and (e) number of AYP goals met.

Table 1: Demographic Data for Smaller Gap Schools (SGS) and Larger Gap Schools (LGS): Average Data Set for 2004–05

	# of students	# of tests taken by 3rd, 4th, & 5th grade students	% of minority students	% of F & R students	% of L.E.P. students	% of students w/disability*	# of AYP Goals (100% met)
SGS	728	336	37%	30%	8%	16%	20
Range	549–1061	242–528	18–60	13–49	4–13	10–23	17–25
LGS	716	313	33%	29%	6%	17%	20
Range	561–921	191–416	18–52	14–42	5–9	14–24	15–25
District	656	295	38%	31%	6%	NA	80%

*Note: National experts report that about 10–12 percent of a school's student population probably requires special education designations. Both types of schools in this study report higher than average classifications resulting in over assignment (Artiles, 1998).

Results

Audit of Demographics in Smaller Gap Schools (SGS) and Larger Gap Schools (LGS)

Demographically speaking, the schools involved in this research study are very similar. All 24 are regular K–5, traditional-calendar Honor Schools of Excellence in the same large school district of over 135,000 students. All 24 schools are located within a 12-mile radius of one another, house an average of

722 students, and boast an average daily attendance figure of 95 to 97 percent. Approximately one-third of the student population in both the SGS and LGS is comprised of minority students. The SGS and LGS also both serve approximately the same number of economically disadvantaged students (~ 29.5 percent who qualify for free or reduced lunch [F&R] for SGS and LGS), same number of limited-English-proficient students (~ 7 percent for SGS and LGS), and same percentage of students with disabilities (~ 16.5 percent for SGS and LGS). As a result, both sets of schools also have the same number of AYP goals

to meet (20). See Table 1 for a snapshot of the demographic data for SGS and LGS.

Audit of Teacher Quality in SGS and LGS

Although defining and measuring teacher quality is a complicated task (Rowan, Correnti, & Miller, 2002), it is vitally important in raising student achievement. Researchers indicated that having a critical mass of licensed, experienced teachers with advanced degrees is directly correlated with students’ academic success (Darling-Hammond, 1999). An audit of teacher quality revealed that teachers’ credentials, education, experience, and mobility are very similar in both the SGS and the LGS. For this study, percentage of fully licensed teachers refers to the percentage of classroom teachers with clear initial or clear continuing licenses in all license areas (≈ 90 percent for SGS and LGS). Percentage of classes taught by highly qualified teachers includes classes taught by highly qualified teachers as defined by federal law (≈ 89.5 percent for SGS and LGS). Percentage of teachers with advanced degrees includes teachers who have completed an advanced college

degree, including a master’s or doctoral degree (≈ 25 percent for SGS and LGS). National Board–certified teachers refers to the percentage of school staff, including teachers, administrators and guidance counselors, who have received National Board certification (≈ 8.5 percent for SGS and LGS). The years of teaching experience measure was broken into three categories: 0–3 years, 4–10 years, and 10+ years. Although small, an interesting difference was noted in that half (51 percent) of the teachers in the SGS had 10+ years of experience compared to 43 percent of the teachers in the LGS. The LGS schools seem to employ more teachers in the 4–9 year range of experience (34 percent) compared to the SGS (29 percent). Overall, both types of schools seem to employ an appropriate balance of new teachers, midcareer teachers, and very experienced veteran teachers. Lastly, teacher turnover rate is defined as the percentage of classroom teachers who left their school staff from the start of the prior year to the start of the current year (≈ 19 percent for SGS and LGS). See Table 2 for a snapshot of the teacher quality data for SGS and LGS.

Table 2: Teacher Quality Data for Smaller Gap Schools (SGS) and Larger Gap Schools (LGS): Average Data Set for 2004–05

	# of teachers	% of teachers fully licensed	% of classes taught by highly qualified	% of teachers with advanced degree	% of teachers with National Board certif.	% of teachers with 0–3 years’ exper.	% of teachers with 4–9 years’ exper.	% of teachers with 10+ years’ exper.	% of teachers who turn over
SGS	50	91%	87%	26%	8%	20%	29%	51%	19%
Range	42–66	85–98	72–97	17–38	2–21	6–32	21–41	33–71	6–26
LGS	49	89%	92%	24%	9%	23%	34%	43%	19%
Range	38–66	87–94	77–100	7–38	3–28	9–37	26–45	24–56	7–26
District	49	95%	88%	27%	10%	25%	31%	44%	23%

Audit of Programmatic Issues in Smaller Gap Schools (SGS) and Larger Gap Schools (LGS)

Programmatic issues involve a number of concerns including resources, physical space, student discipline, and access to books and technology. Once

again, an audit of the SGS and LGS revealed some striking similarities. For example, even though the SGS are 5 percent over capacity and the LGS are 10 percent over capacity with regard to school crowding and both sets of schools have approximately seven mobile units on their properties, the average class size for all 24 schools involved is still 21 students.

School safety issues involve the number of acts of crime or violence per 100 students, which includes all acts occurring in school, at a bus stop, on a school bus, on school grounds, or during off-campus school-sponsored activities. Although the LGS reported one more act per 100 students than the SGS, the SGS reported one more short-term (10 days or less) or long-term (more than 10 days) out-of-school suspension or expulsion per 100 students than the LGS. Students in both the SGS and LGS have access to approximately the same number of library and media center books (≈ 17 books) and the same number of Internet-connected computers (≈ 4 to 1 student/computer ratio).

Another way to assess programmatic equity is to examine the results of a statewide survey about teacher working conditions in the state in which my research was conducted (Center for Teaching Quality, 2006). The goals of the survey were to (a) hear from teachers and administrators about what they identify as areas in need of improvement, (b) understand what school characteristics appear to affect those perceptions, and (c) provide data on working conditions to local school leaders and state policymakers. Research and focus groups with teachers were conducted to develop 30 statistically sound working conditions standards for schools in five broad categories—time, empowerment, professional development, leadership, and facilities and resources. The online survey sent to every licensed public educator in the state solicits responses on 72 statements regarding working conditions in these five domains. Educators are asked to respond to each of the statements with a value of 1 through 6, with 1 representing “Strongly Disagree” and 6 representing “Strongly Agree.” All statements are written to indicate a positive description of the school environment (e.g., “The principal is a strong, supportive leader” and “Adequate and appropriate time is provided for professional development”). Therefore, higher scores always indicate a more positive opinion of the school environment. In 2004–05, surveys were completed and returned voluntarily by 42,209 educators from 1,471 schools in 115 of the state’s 117 school districts. Seventy-six percent of the schools had a response rate of 50 percent or higher.

The domain of time addressed in the survey ensures that teachers can work collaboratively and fo-

cus on teaching all students. Empowerment is meant to ensure that those who are closest to students are involved in making decisions that affect them. Facilities and resources ensure teachers have the resources to help all children learn. Leadership ensures schools have strong leaders who support teaching and learning. And opportunities for professional development ensure teachers can continually enhance their knowledge and skills. The Southeast Center for Teacher Quality (Jacobson, 2005) found all five variables to be statistically significant and meaningful predictors of student achievement.

Interesting findings emerged regarding the return rate, range of returns, and actual ratings on the surveys. First, 20 percent more teachers in the SGS actually completed the survey (total of 88 percent) than in the LGS (total of 68 percent). Second, the range of returns for the SGS was considerably smaller (29, or between 71 and 100 percent) than for the LGS (65, or between 35 and 100 percent). And third, the teachers in the LGS actually rated each of their working conditions slightly higher than the teachers in the SGS. (The SGS responses were more aligned with the district average.) See Tables 3 and 4 (page 9) for a snapshot of the programmatic data for SGS and LGS. These differences certainly speak to different cultures within each of the schools and may be explained in a variety of ways (positive and negative). Unfortunately, without more data (qualitative and/or quantitative), it is difficult to identify precise reasons for these results (e.g., culture of nonparticipation in some schools, pressure from the leadership to close gaps in other schools, only contented teachers completed the survey). Similarly, information needed to disaggregate the exceptional children’s classifications, including cognitive and behavioral disabilities and gifted and talented, by race and income was not readily available. I intend to continue to mine for this data and the possibility of unequal representation in certain programs.

Audit of Achievement in Smaller Gap Schools (SGS) and Larger Gap Schools (LGS)

According to Scott (2001) achievement equity means having comparably high performance for all groups of learners when academic achievement data are dis-

aggregated and analyzed. Although demographic, teacher quality, and programmatic audits all indicated a fair amount of equity between SGS and LGS, the achievement audit between both types of schools indicated great disparities. Across the board, at-risk students in the SGS outperformed their LGS counterparts (and the district, for that matter). The 11.2 percent difference in minority student proficiency between the two types of schools was used to separate the schools initially. Interestingly, SGS continued to outpace LGS in achievement among economically disadvantaged students (9.4 percent difference), limited-English-proficiency students (7.2 percent differ-

ence), students with disabilities (4.9 percent), and students of parents with no college education (13.3 percent). Even though 95 percent of all students were tested in all 24 schools and each school noted some growth, a six-year analysis of growth indicated a greater difference of 6.3 percentage points for students in the SGS versus the LGS. Nine percent of the students in the LGS scored below proficiency at a Level 1 or 2, whereas only six percent of the students in the SGS scored at a Level 1 or 2. See Table 5 (page 10) for a snapshot of the achievement data for SGS and LGS.

Table 3: Programmatic Data for Smaller Gap Schools (SGS) and Larger Gap Schools (LGS): Average Data Set for 2004–05

	% of crowding	# of mobile units	# of acts of violence (per 100 students)	# of student suspensions (per 100 students)	# of books per student	# of students per computer	# of students per Internet connection
SGS	105%	7.0	1.4	6.8	16.78	3.82	3.89
Range	92–132	0–21	0–5	0–17	8.94–27.77	2.09–6.89	2.33–6.89
LGS	110%	6.5	2.3	5.3	17.65	4.01	4.21
Range	90–132	0–16	0–9	0–12	11.28–23.28	2.31–6.54	2.31–8.24
District	105%	NA	0	6.0	14.47	3.09	3.15

Note: Average class size for K–5 is 21 students for both SGS and LGS.

Table 4: Working Condition Data for Smaller Gap Schools (SGS) and Larger Gap Schools (LGS): Average Data Set for 2004–05

	# of surveys completed	% of surveys completed	Time (avg. rating)	Facilities and resources (avg. rating)	Empowerment (avg. rating)	Leadership (avg. rating)	Professional development (avg. rating)
SGS	50	88%	2.92	3.69	3.45	3.59	3.33
Range	30–74	71–100	2.5–3.18	3.18–4.27	2.68–4.09	2.66–4.33	2.79–4.03
LGS	33	68%	3.22	3.94	3.73	3.90	3.51
Range	19–51	35–100	2.83–3.55	3.38–4.53	3.3–4.21	3.58–4.22	3.26–3.88
District	NA	76%	3.05	3.74	3.45	3.58	3.36

Discussion

Many people, including some educators, still believe that factors such as genetic deficiency, class differences, families, and access to learning opportunities at home are the most reliable predictors of school achievement (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). With this

view, schools excuse themselves from any responsibility for inequities and gaps between student subgroups. However, with this study of Honor Schools of Excellence that teach similar populations of students from similar geographical regions with similar resources but yield different academic results, results indicate that it is impossible to ignore the importance and the impact of schools. By controlling for

or eliminating some of the external variables (e.g., demographics) and internal factors (e.g., teacher quality and programmatic issues) often cited for the achievement gaps between white middle-class children and children of color or from low-income families, the findings from this study raise more questions than answers. Do the principals and teachers who work in LGS truly believe that all students can

be successful? If so, why do equity audits in these schools reveal significant achievement gaps across multiple subgroups of students? If not, what are the reasons behind or the causes of this lack of belief? Conversely, do the principals and teachers who work in SGS truly believe that all students can be successful? If so, what are the reasons behind or the causes of these beliefs?

Table 5: Proficiency Data for Smaller Gap Schools (SGS) and Larger Gap Schools (LGS): Average Data Set for 2004–05

	% of minority students	% of F & R students	% of L.E.P. students	% of students w/disab	% of students w/parent w/no college	% of all students in 2000	% of all students in 2005	Growth 2000–05 (6 years)
SGS	83.2%	80.1%	72.1%	72.8%	75.1%	82.3%	94.1%	+ 11.8
Range	80.5-87.1	65.0-85.7	42.9-91.7	54.3-91.8	57.1-90.0	70.5-89.4	91.3-96.8	4.1-21.7
LGS	72.0%	70.7%	64.9%	67.9%	61.8%	86.6%	92.1%	+ 5.5
Range	64.6-78.4	59.2-82.2	28.6-93.2	59.0-79.1	42.9-93.3	80.5-91.5	90.3-94.1	0.7-11.8
Gaps	11.2%	9.4%	7.2%	4.9%	13.3%	NA	NA	+ 6.3
District	76.9%	68.8%	56.2%	61.1%	NA	NA	90.4%	NA

Note: Ninety-five percent of all students in all 24 schools were tested.

Although improving teacher quality continues to be a leading national priority, “the fact that, broadly speaking, our children experience differential levels of success in school that is distributed along race and social class lines continues to be the overriding central problem of education” (Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, & Koschoreck, 2001, p. 239). Changing demographics of the student population in the nation’s schools, the stable demographics of the teaching force (i.e., white, middle-class females), and the growing contrast between these two sets of demographics support the need for all educators to increase their knowledge of and social responsibility toward diversity- and equity-related issues. In serving increasingly diverse student populations from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, many of whom experience poverty, neglect, or other negative situations that can seriously affect their physical, cognitive, and emotional development, Villegas (1992) argued that educators in a multicultural society need the following: (1) an attitude of respect for

cultural differences; (2) knowledge of the cultural resources their students possess, and skills in tapping these resources in the teaching-learning process; (3) a belief that all students are capable of learning, evidenced in an enriched curriculum for all pupils; and (4) a strong sense of professional efficacy when evaluating students. Unfortunately, beliefs, attitudes, and mind-sets do not lend themselves easily to empirical investigation (Pajares, 1992).

As the results from this research indicate, equity audits are a practical, easy-to-apply tool that educators can use to identify educational inequalities objectively. Studying schools that teach similar populations of students from the same geographical region shows that it is impossible to ignore the role that schools play in the achievement of all students. Data are powerful; they separate personal agendas from organizational necessities. When data are collected, analyzed, and exhibited in a transparent way, it is difficult for teachers, parents, and even school board

members to deny certain disparities in practices, deficiencies in systems, and gaps in outcomes.

Actually addressing and then removing such systemic patterns of inequity requires more than awareness, though; it requires action. Igniting reform for true excellence requires the will to reform, as well as a close examination of personal beliefs coupled with a critical analysis of professional behavior. Even though convincing research suggests that beliefs are the best predictors of individual behavior and that educators' beliefs influence their perceptions, judgments, and practices, research also states that beliefs are hardy and highly resistant to change (Bandura, 1986; Dewey, 1933; Pajares, 1992; Rokeach, 1968). Understanding the nature of beliefs, attitudes, and values is essential to understanding educators' choices, decisions, and effectiveness regarding issues of diversity, social justice, and equity. Assessing beliefs in an effort to make them known and subject to critical analysis is an important initial step in the process. (See Brown, 2004, for a review of measures, instruments, inventories, and studies that assess educators' personal and professional beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and preconceptions.) We can assume that the more critically conscious educators become, the more prone they are to behave appropriately and constructively in actual educational situations involving students of diverse cultures, ethnic groups, backgrounds, abilities, economic levels, and so forth, and the more attentive they will become to redressing social injustices and developing enduring educational practices embodying equity.

According to Scheurich and Skrla (2003), "The success of our society will soon be directly dependent on our ability as educators to be successful with children of color, with whom we have not been very successful in the past" (p. 5). These alarming gaps challenge us to dig deeper inside the schools for more subtle causes. Scott (2001) called these internal causes of inequity "systemic inequities" because they are built systematically into the processes and procedures of the system that is the school. A school culture that perpetuates the status quo and turns a blind eye to the social injustices that permeate our schools is not really "excellent" (i.e., the state's formula used to identify exemplary schools is in fact institutionally flawed). As such, excellence and eq-

uity must be pursued concurrently to assure that all students are served well and that all are encouraged to perform at their highest level. Excellence without equity is not excellence—it is hypocrisy. Further research is needed to document the specific strategies that principals of "excellent, equitable schools" use to confront and change past practices anchored in open and residual racism and class discrimination.

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