16.2: Privilege as Practice Framework

There should be the goal of enhancing our collective ability to engage with difference to strengthen relationships and improve the health of the systems that we inhabit. The following framework outlines an analytical system and a form of practice that we are calling Privilege as Practice. The specific goals of this framework include:

- Deepening and expanding our capacity for self-awareness
- Furthering our ability to understand our own particular uniqueness to better understand how we each flourish and thrive
- Learning to recognize how systemic structures, norms, and processes preference certain differences over others
- Learning to identify degrees of privilege and recognize how multiple identities interact (intersectionality) in different social systems
- Building capacity to use our privilege and power to benefit the health and well-being of the systems that we inhabit
- Tending to the impacts of historical and present day forms of oppression and trauma

The Systemic Progression

As described throughout this book, diversity is a simple fact-of-life. Difference exists in all systems and has the capacity to be the raw material for adaptation, creativity, and resilience. Yet in many social systems, we find that accrued power is used to oppress, homogenize, and assimilate expressions of difference that do not fit with the dominant perspective or ideology. This pattern causes harm, limits the potential of individuals in the system, and consequently diminishes the wisdom and creativity of the group. Understanding the primary dynamics and processes associated with this pattern can be helpful in building our capacity to engage with difference with well-being in mind. Figure X.X below illustrates the common pattern and progression by which certain differences accrue power in social systems.
Figure 16.1: The green circle in this diagram represents any social system (an organization, community, school, family, etc.). The progression shown in the circle begins with difference and illustrates a common pattern by which power is accrued by individuals who embody certain characteristics. [255]

This progression can be used to track a variety of differences (internal, external, socially constructed, etc.) as they play out in a variety of different social systems across different scales. Like any conceptual framework, the patterns illuminated by this progression can be helpful in understanding power and privilege dynamics, and it is important to remember that this representation is a simplified interpretation of complex system dynamics. [256]

An example of systemic oppression and privilege can be found among young Black [257] * boys. The following describes information about how oppression and privilege have impacted the lives of children gathered by the Office of Head Start.

Figure 16.2: There are troubling education disparities for Black boys. [258]

Quality programming in early childhood programs incorporates knowledge of and respect for families’ cultures and implementation of best practices including quality learning environments, intentional teaching, and family engagement strategies. When these program pieces are in place, they best support the development and learning of young children.
However, these program pieces are not always in place for ALL children. Evidence has been growing about the educational disparities facing Black boys. Many have not benefited from what is known about the connection between culturally responsive programming and child development. There have been reports on their disproportionately high suspension and expulsion rates from preschool. Educators and policy makers have made negative comments about the school readiness of young Black boys.

Awareness also has been growing about the societal context in which Black males live. News media and government reports have documented the gap between the realities of their daily lives and the American dream. The facts are stunning: in comparison to White Americans, Black males are more likely to live in poverty, live with only one parent, drop out of high school, and be unemployed (My Brothers Keeper Task Force, 2015). Taken together, these facts attest to the persistent challenges Black males face, starting at an early age.

Neither zip code nor skin tone should predetermine the quality of a child’s opportunities; however, too many children from low-income families, and [Black] students in particular, are without access to high-quality early education, which can make them less likely to enter elementary school prepared for success.

— David J. Johns, Executive Director, White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans citing research findings (Ackerman & Barnett, 2007)

The research has highlighted an educational opportunity gap. Human potential is realized when strengths are built on, and the job of early childhood education is to do just that. But for many children, their potential is not realized starting at an early age. And the problem is not with them; their potential is untapped because, in the words of many educators and policy makers, there is an “opportunity gap” (Duncan, 2014). Some say the opportunity gap develops as early as 9 months of age, especially for Black males (Aratani, Wight, & Cooper, 2011 as cited in Iruka, 2013), and the gap is well-documented in the preschool years, when these disparities play out in the arena of school readiness.

The term opportunity gap refers to the well-documented disparities in educational opportunity associated with race, ethnicity, class, community wealth, and other factors.


The term “achievement gap” is widely used to refer to disparities in the educational performance of Black or other minority children. It is often cited in regard to test scores in reading and math for older children and in vocabulary knowledge for preschoolers. Often the reasons behind an achievement gap are erroneously cited to be inadequate home environments or children unable to learn basic skills who fall further and further behind. Such reasoning seems to “blame the victim,” and is based on deficit thinking. The term opportunity gap clearly places responsibility on those entities, such as early childhood and school settings that are responsible for providing equal learning opportunities.

Admittedly, there are many populations of children who experience an opportunity gap — often they are referred to in the aggregate as minority children or children of color. Along with increasing public awareness of the negative societal context affecting Black Americans, the project focus was triggered by reports on the disproportionate expulsion and
suspension rates of preschool boys, and Black boys in particular.

- Black children were expelled from preschool at twice the rate of whites according to national data from 2005. Boys made up 91% of those expelled, and preschoolers were expelled at three times the rate of children in kindergarten through 12th grade (Gilliam, 2005).
- In 2011, national data indicated that Black children made up 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschool children were suspended more than once. Boys received more than three out of four out-of-school preschool suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2014).

To say the least, these data were shocking to the public, educators, and policy makers. When preschoolers are expelled or suspended, the consequences are great. They are missing out on learning opportunities that would prepare them for success in school. Also, their self-esteem and self-efficacy are compromised, which affects their learning.

What is behind these statistics? Research (Gilliam, 2005) identified factors that predicted child expulsion, including an extended school day and high teacher-child ratio. Specific classroom factors associated with high expulsion rates are:

- Teacher job stress as reported by staff, such as “This child’s classroom behaviors…
- interfere with my ability to teach effectively.”
- may result in someone getting hurt or property damage.”
- are not likely to improve significantly.”

- Developmentally appropriate practices were infrequent
- Daily use of worksheets and flashcards
- Dramatic play once a month or never

The researcher concluded that teachers needed help managing challenging behaviors and that a mental health consultation intervention would be particularly promising and cost-effective.

Another perspective might be taken to interpret the challenging behaviors from a strength-based perspective — this would be in line with some of the current thinking about developmental research (Cabrera, 2013 a). It is also important that the field of early childhood education recognizes the importance of teachers to being deeply ingrained in understanding how children grow and develop and educated and trained to effectively guide children’s behaviors. One tool teachers can use is the Culturally Responsive Strength-Based (CRSB) Framework, described later in this chapter.

Several questions emerged from the research findings. When Black boys are enrolled in preschool, what are their experiences like? Are they of high quality? The answers were not very encouraging and helped explain the opportunity gap. Although positive outcomes for children are rooted in respect for their culture and in implementation of developmentally appropriate practices, these elements are often missing or diminished in the preschool settings of Black boys (Barnett, Carolan, & Johns, 2013).
Asa Hilliard, Black professor of educational psychology, framed the opportunity gap in a somewhat different way in his work (2003). “There is another gap [besides the achievement gap], one that is rarely acknowledged. It is a gap that has been submerged in the dialogue about intelligence and achievement because of the paradigm of human incapacity, especially pessimistic with respect to African students. This gap is the quality-of-service gap.”

Think About It…

Can you think of other examples of privilege and oppression? If so, what are they? If not, what might that mean?