

## **Belonging through a Culture of Dignity**

By Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple

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### *Instead, Equity Has Focused on Access*

This “achievement era” intensified the focus on access the critical issue in the work of creating fair and just schools. That’s because access to rigorous coursework and specialized programming is among the most predictive factors in creating performance gaps on standardized tests (Carter & Welner, 2013; Cobb, 2012; Cobb & Russell, 2015; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Students who gain access always outperform the students who don’t. This is because standardized tests measure content learned and not intelligence. Hence, the “achievement gap” (as it is commonly known) is, in fact, a mislabeled phenomenon because it presumes that all students learn the same content at the same time and attain different results when tested on what they have learned.

The truth of the matter is that students don’t learn the same content because they don’t have equal access to the same content. Schools routinely offer our students on the margins (e.g., impoverished and minoritized) inferior academic experiences to students of affluence and cultural dominance. This holds true even when they attend the same school (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). The so-called “achievement gap” is more accurately a “curricular gap.” We must use more precise language. While the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision mandated equal access to the physical buildings we call school, it did not require that people inside the schools ensure that all students received the same minimal level of instruction. Nor did it require educators to prioritize a sense of belonging for students racialized as Black (or otherwise) who were displaced and had to leave the safety and belonging of home schools and move into often unwelcoming school cultures that were exclusively White. Thus, a “belonging gap” emerged within racially integrated schools.

Make no mistake, access matters, but research shows that belonging matters just as much (Allen et al., 2016). Access and belonging are two sides of the same coin of educational equity. To bring about full equity, we must create and maintain environments where all students feel they belong, not just have access. We must prioritize belonging. This will be challenging because we need to discover, recognize, and jettison what we’ve been doing wrong. But when we know better, we do better, right? The new knowledge that we now know is that belonging is just as important as access.