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# Culture, Inner-city Education and Improving Economic Growth In Birmingham, Alabama

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**Leroy Abrahams**  
**05/25/2017**

**Culture, Inner-city Education and Improving Economic Growth  
In Birmingham, Alabama**

**SIT Graduate Institute PIM 74**  
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## **I. Introduction**

By August of 2016, Birmingham's Board of Education had voted out the city's 8<sup>th</sup> school superintendent, who was hailed as a paragon of change among students, non-profit entities and business stakeholders. This came after a year of mixed results – demonstrated by increased non-profit involvement, high graduation rates (later found to be inflated), yet stubbornly low test scores in every proficiency category (Alabama State Department of Education).

It is tempting to attribute the negative aspects of the results listed above to only 1 or 2 driving forces such as incompetency or lack of school funding. However, the historical backdrop of these realities reveals that these issues are much deeper and much more complicated.

Birmingham's was the site of some of the nation's most vivid and telling struggles for equality, yet the aftermath of the struggle 50+ years later illustrates a reality of persistent economic, health, educational inequities that often result in the same segregation barriers that the Civil Rights movement strove to abolish. The Civil Rights movement resulted in integration of the schools (Lewis, 2016). However, white families, followed by middle and upper middle class blacks fled the inner-city out into the suburbs. This left the Birmingham City School (BCS) system with a heavy concentration of poor African-American students with limited resources due to the flight of talent and resources to the suburbs. Today, Birmingham, a 74% African American and, arguably, the heart of the Civil Rights movement lacks proportionate Black representation in high paying jobs in the city. It's poverty rate parallels that of developing countries and it's life expectancy is lower than that of some war-torn countries in the Middle East (Index Mundi), while neighboring suburbs have life expectancies rivaling Japan. as shown in Figure 1 (Jefferson County Department of Health).

| Jurisdiction        | Black | White | Average Income | Life Expectancy |
|---------------------|-------|-------|----------------|-----------------|
| Hoover City         | 15%   | 75%   | \$ 40,000      | 81              |
| Mountain Brook City | 1%    | 97%   | \$ 67,000      | 83              |
| Vestavia City       | 4%    | 90%   | \$ 52,600      | 83              |
| Birmingham City     | 74%   | 22%   | \$ 19,000      | 70              |
| Japan               | n/a   | n/a   | n/a            | 83              |
| Syria               | n/a   | n/a   | n/a            | 70              |

Figure 1. Comparing Life and Economic Outcomes for Jurisdictions ( U.S Census)

When BCS proficiency scores are compared to those in the neighboring suburbs the results are staggering. The large majority of BCS students fall below the competency mark. While students in neighboring suburbs, meet or exceed standards an overwhelming majority (see Figure 2).

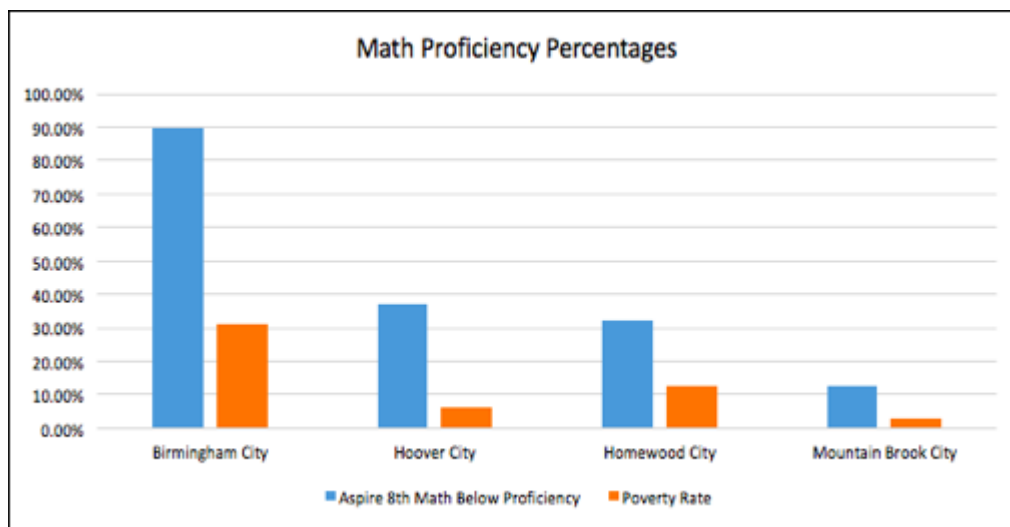


Figure 2. Alabama State Department of Education Aspire Math Proficiency Percentages (2016)

During my practicum I had the opportunity to partner with a Birmingham City School educator to teach Biology and Environmental science. I soon realized that my best attempts at teaching were met by the cold reality of student failure. There are only so many F's you can give on tests,

however, before you begin to interrogate your teaching abilities. I realized that it was easy to blame parents for being disengaged, students for deciding to fall asleep during an intriguing, discussion on oxidative phosphorylation (\*sarcastic eye roll\*), and the school for constantly hijacking the schedule. Any honest and sincere educator, however, cannot help but wonder if drastic fail rates, contradicted by increasing graduation percentages yet cancelled out by dismal ACT scores are not so much the fault of parents and students as much as an indictment of an educational ecosystem that has failed its students (Alabama State Department of Education).

It is by reflecting on the challenges I observed in my relatively brief yet rich foray into Birmingham's educational that I was led to as the following research question **Is a culturally and experientially insensitive approach to the education of black students in Birmingham's low-income communities impeding economic progress in Birmingham as a whole?** By exploring this question, I hoped to contribute to the discussion of how to equip the predominantly African-American student population in Birmingham City Schools with the abilities needed to drive their own, and the city's, economic growth. It was in the exploration of this question that I realized that the problem poor student outcomes in Birmingham's city school are a reflection deep and disturbing community and suburb-wide issues. These issues must be confronted by all stakeholders including suburbians, city-dwellers, media entities, businesses, non-profits and city government in order for Birmingham's students to succeed en-mass and realize the City's potential for strong Business and, consequently, economic growth.

## **II.Literature Review**

The first step to answering the question seeking to connect educational culture and experience to economic growth was to explore literature on pedagogy. The intent of this literature review was to get a sense of the material that was out there concerning educational irrelevancy and interracial disparities in learning outcomes and economic success. For the most part, the content I have reviewed is based on national data or experience. I approach this with the intent of using this data as a rough proxy for the educational and economic realities in Birmingham.

My inquiry started by surveying literature questioning the current approach applied in many urban communities. The first work I examined was Christopher Emdin's "For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood: and the Rest of Y'all Too". In this book, Emdin draws from his urban upbringing and decade of experience in the education system to deliver a stinging indictment of the prevailing educational approach to inner-city black students. In this seminal work, Emdin discusses how a Eurocentric approach to education is grounded in preconceived stereotypes, fear and beliefs of cultural superiority. This approach, he argues, alienates students from the culture in which they are enmeshed.

The corroborate and expound upon the critiques Emdin give on the deficiencies in the Urban Education system, I examined the works of other authors on this particular topic. Lisa Delpit in her book "Multiplication is For White People", writes on how the implementation of education in Urban Communities is permeated with deeply ingrained ideas of black inferiority. This assumption of inferiority, she argues is then reflected in the underestimation and devaluing of student intelligence and perspective (2016). In Karen Teel et. al's work entitled: Teaching strategies that honor and motivate inner-city African-American students: A school/university collaboration, her team adds posits that the tendency of education system to favor students with innate reading and writing abilities, while labeling students without these abilities as "underperforming" results in decreased self-esteem followed by disengagement (1998).

After examining literature on education deficiencies, I then sought to examine data connecting educational disparities to economic disparities. Deirdre Child's piece, A Mixed Methods Study Identifying Antecedents to the Later Disengagement of African American Males in Public Schools by Examining Attitudes and Behaviors of Students and Teachers at the Elementary School she writes: "The economic impact to the nation caused by student dropouts is reflected in higher unemployment rates and more intensive reliance on cash and non-cash government income transfer" (2016). In fact, data pulled from U.S. census data supports corroborates the economic aspect of Child's argument. On a national level, 22.7% of non-Hispanic whites hold bachelor's degrees as compared to just 11% for blacks (U.S Census, 2014). Drawing from U.S census data Alabama Possible shows us that, for Alabama, poverty rate for blacks is nearly a third compared to 13.8% for white Americans (2016). The median white household income is nearly \$50,000 while the black household income is \$29,000 - about \$5,000 above the poverty line for a family of four (2016). The qualitative and quantitative data

summarized suggest a strong connection in educational deficiencies and the impact they have on economic development.

In addition to examining the problem, I also consulted materials which demonstrated success. In the same work mentioned above, Christopher Emdin bemoans the culture of alienation and Eurocentric-based labeling that characterizes the school system but also speaks of innovative approaches to mitigating this problem. He suggests that by adopting the interactive pedagogical approach of Black barbers and Pastors, the material teachers present to students will be made more relevant and palatable. Other authors such as Daryl Bryant Stone and Gloria Ladson-Billings call for teachers embrace and integration of African American culture in the educational experience (2009)..

The information surveyed in the literature review revealed key disparities in educational and economic outcomes between Black American and White Americans, particularly as it pertains to Alabamians. The Literature also suggests that this gap stems from a culturally irrelevant and stereotyped-driven approach to education, while suggesting that these disparities can be addressed by adopting a more relevant pedagogy.

### **III. Methods and Materials**

#### **A. The Investigative Process**

The research methodology of this capstone is Grounded Theory. Key components of grounded theory are delineated in the bullets below:

- In grounded theory research, no preliminary review is needed, but a general research topic. However, to gain a preliminary understanding of available thought I conducted an analysis of available pertinent information.
- Data collection can be done through qualitative and quantitative means. The results of interviews and focus groups, in my case, will inform the literature and vice versa.
- Grounded research is characterized by coding, where interviews and focus groups are transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes.
- Memoing, is drawing from these code to come up with emergent themes.
- Finally, a grounded researcher will sort these memos into concepts to be placed in a draft.

### **III.A The Participants**

#### **The Researcher**

A thorough discussion on the outputs of these candidates wouldn't be appropriate without exploring the backgrounds of each of the participants.

I am a black male, with a very diverse and privileged upbringing. I have lived in 7 states throughout my life and have lived in the Birmingham area for almost two years. For most of my life I have had a strong support system through family and friends. Though I did not formally attend school, for much of formative years I was exposed to numerous ideas and topics as an upper middle-class suburban kid. Through involvement with church outreach I gained some exposure to low-income urban communities. For my practicum, I worked with a local non-profit organization to help establish and Urban Farm program at an inner-city school, while supporting a teacher by planning and teaching Biology and Environmental science lessons. After completing my practicum, I began a job as a Risk Analyst at a financial institution in the Birmingham area. I approached this research topic with the following presuppositions informed by my experience, coupled with preliminary readings

1. Students in the school are not intellectually deficient, they are just disengaged from an irrelevant curriculum and hence they don't apply themselves to learn
2. The backgrounds of students and teachers are so dissimilar that they do not know how to engage with each, resulting in negative outcomes for students
3. Many educational deficiencies in urban schools result from students rejecting the imposition of Eurocentric ideas on the minds of students
4. Teachers and Administrators with more cultural similarities to students will be more effective at teaching.
5. Institutional and Explicit racism play a major role in constraining student educational



outcomes

### **The Subjects**

To explore the question described in this paper I reached out to 9 sources 3 from each of the following categories: educator, business leader and former student population. In the first category were business leaders. All three of leaders were black men with 2 of three spending significant time in Birmingham. The first Business Leader I interviewed worked for a Business Development organization and had an extensive background in entrepreneurship and senior leadership at a Financial Services firm, his current and former roles allowed to ample opportunity to interface with non-profit, business and local government leadership. The 2<sup>nd</sup> business leader I met with is an executive at a Financial Services firm with over 30 years of experience in that field. His role also provides him with access to the job market both as an employer and as a partner of other businesses. The 3<sup>rd</sup> individual I engaged with in this category is in his mid-twenties, has been in Birmingham for 2 years and works at a staffing firm. His role places him in a position to vet and hire potentially thousands of job candidates in the Birmingham area on behalf of various firms. Hence, I saw him as well positioned to discuss challenges involving the intersection of education with workforce preparedness.

In the second category were former students. All three students I interviewed spent their entire life in Birmingham and in the Birmingham school system. Additionally, all 3 were black men. The first student I interviewed excelled in school, earned a full ride to a highly esteemed HBCU, and is currently involved in a number of specialty extracurricular activities. In the Birmingham community he is highly regarded as a success story. The second student I interviewed, graduated with a modest GPA, but was severely hampered by low ACT and ASVAB scores. He is now struggling to score high enough so that he can join the Navy and work his way into a college education. The 3<sup>rd</sup> student I interviewed, attended specialty public schools and is now at a reputable university in the Birmingham area and is involved with a number of nonprofit and Business development entities. He is also a part-time math teacher in the Birmingham City School system.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> category of people interviewed were 3 educators. The first educator I interviewed was a Black Woman in her 50s who had been in the school system for over 30 years and currently serves as the Business and Finance academy coordinator in the school system. The 2<sup>nd</sup> educator is a white male in his mid-thirties who had spent about 10 years in the BCS system. He had experience teaching a number of different subject areas, but currently teaches science courses. The 3<sup>rd</sup> educator I interviewed was a black male who has Engineering background but transitioned into the education system twelve years ago. He has spent his education career, in teaching, administration and curriculum. He worked both in and outside the BCS system.

### **III.B Research Limitations**

The data presented, and discussed in this paper is accompanied by several limitations that are key to recognize when examining the results of this study. These limitations deal with the biases I have, the biases my participants possibly had and the quality of the data I examined.

The first challenge is seen in the background I bring to the research table. I moved to Birmingham almost exactly two years. Hence, I do not have an experiential understanding of the surrounding. Historical details I learned about the come from the people who have been here. Additionally, I grew up with largely a high degree of privilege. My family was always solidly middle to upper middle class. The home I grew up in was quite peaceful. All of my needs and most of my wants were readily supplied. For college, I got to choose where I wanted to go and made the most of the experience. This was easy to do as I was under no obligation to work my way through school. With this background, I bring severe deficiency in understanding and relatability to many of the participants in my research.

From a participant standpoint I know that there are several factors that limit the effectiveness of the research. The first is the small sample size. Though each interview was insightful, came from individuals with rich experience in Birmingham, and provided great material it is still a miniscule group of the population. Though, I believe, the demographics of Birmingham were well represented in that group, a reader must understand that the results presented may not be the most accurate depiction of city consensus.

Another limitation to consider is the over-representation of males in my sample group. Due to the combination of logistical factors, such as availability, lack of gender diversity among acquaintances/friends that fit the chosen parameters, and the general lack of gender diversity among business leadership my sample was overwhelmingly male. I believe this lack of gender diversity in the group may have affected the outcomes, though I cannot specify how. It is my hope that as I build upon this research I will be able to increase the gender diversity among the participant categories.

An additional limitation I considered was the impact the knowledge of being recorded had on the participants. In at least two interviews, I noticed greater relaxation and openness among the participants before and after the recording than during it. This was particularly true for educators' school system, even with the knowledge that their recording would be published some participants still maintained highly noticeable reservations.

Finally, I acknowledge that my relation to two of the participants among the business stakeholder group could have slightly altered feedback received. Because this topic did not involve issues that we were experientially enmeshed in and due to the increased comfort, I would suggest that this created a more open channel of communication than I might have had with other participants. However, there might have been some impacts that might unduly skew the results. My hope would be that in my attempts to present and discuss findings based on common participant themes (elaborated below), that skewing would be diluted.

### **III.C Sorting Methodology**

In processing my transcripts I picked 3 themes to sort my codes in. I picked these based on the content of transcripts and the nature of my questions (Appendix II). The themes were not an attempt to impose restrictive structure on my codes, but create a basic framework, in which I could present and discuss my findings. The code themes are the following:

1. Experience – As defined by past events external and internal that shaped the views and realities of participant categories in my research
2. Culture – As defined by values, behaviors, thoughts and attitudes held by educators, business/non-profit community along with the students and parents of Birmingham City Schools
3. Economics – Primarily defined by possession of and/or access to stable jobs requiring either college education or vocational training.

In addition to providing a coding framework I also created 3 tags: Codes, suggested facts, telling quotes. For coding I decided to use a more grounded approach. In the spirit of striving to reduce the bias I introduce to the topic, I garnered codes in the text itself, rather than utilizing the A Priori approach, which would implicitly require me to introduce additional bias, by predefining terms to impose on each text of the of the interview.

To accomplish my transcribing methodology listed above, I created a spreadsheet containing the following columns from left to right: Name of Interviewer, Line(s), Role (Educator, Business, Student) Tag, Theme, Item Description, Verifiable Reference, Reference, Summary of Research Findings. In executing the processing I went through all interview transcripts and documented the interviewee, lines along with the corresponding code tag, theme and title (See Appendix III)

### **IV. Study Results**

In the presentation of my results I am using the key component of my research paper as the means to sort my answer. My answers will be divided into the themes culture, experience and economics, which correspond with my question of connecting cultural and experiential approaches of inner-city education to Birmingham's economic potential. For each of the three elements we will examine the inputs of each of the three stakeholders groups and then combine them for overall insights.

#### **IV.A Culture**

Participants described the culture in which the student learning experience is enmeshed by pointing to an administrative culture of nepotism, protectionism, inflexibility, inconsistency and mercurial with a strong penchant toward squelching any successful attempt at change. The administrative culture cascades downward and is reflected through disempowerment, demoralization and, consequently, disengagement at the educator level and even greater demoralization among students. Additionally, negative perceptions of the school system, both in Birmingham and the surrounding suburbs communicated through the news, teachers and parents add to the demoralized culture that the school system faces.

#### **Students**

In describing the cultural environment students I spoke with painted a picture of school system occupied by heavily demoralized students in the majority of Birmingham City Schools. Students spoke of continual media criticism of test scores, corruption exposure along with constant comparisons to neighboring school districts continually demoralize them. Additionally, alumni mentioned interactions with parents and teachers as the strongest means of demoralization. Parents continual reminders to students that they would not succeed. Alumni felt that teachers failed to recognize the individuality of student experience and would punish them indiscriminately. Disengagement also resulted from teachers explicitly picking classroom favorites and failing to give all students equal chances at success.

One former student I spoke with, described in detail how difficult it was to see students selected for special academies, get exposure to various community stakeholders and extra support in preparing for their careers while other students were denied this opportunity. He also spoke of how there was no clear process towards getting into a career track program (I later confirmed that fact with an educator I interviewed who ran one of these programs). Finally, students spoke of how teachers also played a role in comparing student performance to students in neighboring suburbs. Alumni, made it clear to me that the impact of these practices drastically demoralized students perception of their own ability to succeed. This was manifested in chronic student disengagement.

### Educators

In my discussion with educators I learned that though, from a socioeconomic background, teachers could relate to students, the high pressure environment, lack of support from administrators, and systemic inconsistencies led to a classroom culture reflective of high demoralization. This demoralization is seen from partial to complete disengagement in the classroom.

Educators I spoke with described a high pressure and low support culture where teachers are expected to drive massive gains for students, as reflected in test scores, but do not receive the support they need from leadership to work with inner-city students to achieve those goals. Continual negative feedback from parents, media agencies, local and state educational officials weakens the confidence and the sense of ownership among teachers. Additionally, teachers are overwhelmed with the immense challenges their students bring to the classroom, yet teachers are still expected to achieve wonders by meaningfully driving grades, proficiency test scores and graduation rates upward.

Another element educators pointed to was the lack of support from administrators – principals, superintendents and the school board. The educators discussed the high turnover the

Birmingham School System has had with principals and superintendents, the blatant prioritization of nepotism above merit in hiring practice and the fail or succeed entirely approach teachers receive upon entering the classroom. All these factors, were used to describe how the school system administration does not provide the support teachers need.

In aggregate, the discussions I had with educators seem to point to inconsistencies in management as being reflected in the inconsistency of policy enforcement. Lack of support and collaboration between teachers and administration and among teacher leads to great disparities in how rules are enforced. This point became much more apparent in my discussions with students.

### Business Leaders

In my meetings with business leaders I spoke at length with them concerning the cultural interfaces between the business community and educators along business community and Birmingham City Schools alumni entering the workforce. These discussions revealed some trust and increased partnership, but remaining persistent trust barriers between the business community and the school system. In addition to trust barriers, differences in expectations and behaviors between employers and potential employees, have played a major role in stemming the pipeline of qualified job candidates.

In my discussions with business leaders dual-directional trust barriers emerged as a key theme. According to the business leaders I spoke with, Decision-makers in the school system lack trust for the largely-white and well-moneyed business leaders stated intentions of preparing the professionals for tomorrow in the school system. From the business leaders I spoke with, they believe that school officials may view the business community as a threat to their authority and a threat to the community. Additionally, business leaders harbor their own reservations towards the educational community. The leaders I spoke with questioned, not so much the intent of the teachers, but the ability of the teachers and the school system to

appropriately leverage monetary and human resources to drive success in the school system. Inherent trust of Black leadership was also mentioned as a reason for the trust barrier.

In addition to the discussion around dual-directional trust issues between the business and education communities, my discussions with leaders led to some key reflections on the cultural differences between employers and prospective employees. Key themes that emerged in my conversations were employer expectations for dress, timeliness, communication and work ethic that drastically misaligned with the student alumni they interfaced with.

A staffing manager I said his client companies considered it “a win” for an employee to simply do their job and regularly show up for work. All business leaders I spoke with pointed to timeliness as a key issue. They spoke of simply the need for employees who show up on time and consistently for work as a major barrier for companies filling positions. In addition to timeliness, Business stakeholders I spoke with discussed the importance of knowing how to dress for an interview. Verbal communication skills were also a key theme in the conversation.

#### **IV.B Experience**

The feedback interviewees gave on the experiential elements such as settings, resources, and exposures, were key in helping me build context around the culture and set a pretext around the economics in my discussions with my study participants. In these dialogues it became clear to me that the Birmingham City School Ecosystem is a hub of contrasting and converging social, economic and educational experiences. The diversity of experiences appear to interface in ways that seem to, in some ways, enhance, challenge, yet impair stakeholder experience.

#### **Students**



My conversations with students pointed to a high-degree of social and educational experiential isolation from the resources and connections needed to succeed in college and in the workplace. In conveying this message to me, I was struck by the pain that betrayed itself in the expressions and voice inflection former students made in describing these realities.

Students spoke with me about how, themselves or their colleagues, had little to no access to professional development resources. In many cases, their parents were not college educated and hence there was no support with homework or in figuring out how to get into college. School Officials provided few resources to study for the ACT or ASVAB. One alumni made the point that students who made it into college are largely forced into remediation classes due to inability to function at a college level after graduating from high school. One student spoke of how, if students are not allowed entry into the special academies they are essentially blocked from having a number of networking experiences. The two alumni participants I spoke with who are currently in college all referenced their ability to build relationships with outside business groups and nonprofits as key to their current success.

Perhaps the most telling account was told by a recent graduate who related how he made largely good grades in school only to get a 9 on his ACT and 9 on ASVAB for the military. Both of the scores are highly deficient. His hopes for immediate college entry have been dashed and his hopes for the military are limited as he struggles to get his ASVAB score up more than 20 points to be competitive. In our conversation, the student despairingly spoke of how, for him and his cohort it was “too late”, but that he hopes that things get better for future students in Birmingham City Schools.

### Educator

Educators I spoke with pointed to experiential deficiencies in school support resources, teacher qualifications, and student backgrounds, which created an educational context that failed to deliver education in a manner, which reflected student experience and gave them the

experiences they needed in order to succeed. Educators described teaching environments where new teachers received minimal to no support from administrators to help them be effective in the classroom. A key theme in my conversations with teachers was how they felt overwhelmed by the social, emotional and, sometimes, mental challenges students brought to school, due to lack of support staff to address the issues that impeded the student from succeeding in the classroom. Another key theme around educators was that there was a major technology need among students at some schools to ensure students received the needed technological proficiencies for success.

From a student perspective, teachers acknowledged that students come from homes with minimal parental support, scenes of domestic abuse, possible homelessness and, at times, mental disabilities. Educators saw this background profile as a major impediment to them being able to effectively teach. All educators acknowledged the parental factor as a key impediment to student's learning. They pointed to the inability of parents to help children with homework due to work schedules, the prevalence of single-parent homes and the young age of parents as reasons why children were unable to receive, and why teachers could not rely on, supplemental support from parents.

Another experiential element educators explored discussed was a lack in qualifications among teachers and school administrators. Educators saw the lack of teacher educational preparedness and nepotism as contributing to the struggle teachers have in providing quality education to students. One teacher I spoke with pointed out that if students who have graduated from underperforming schools, attend mediocre colleges, and get into education because its simply the most attainable job, the educational journey he ascribed to some teachers in the school system, it is natural to expect continued underperformance in the students'. Even if the teacher has the best intentions, they may not be appropriately equipped to effectively teach students. In addition to questionable qualifications, educators also mentioned how many teachers are hired simply on relationships and not merit.

## Business Leaders

Business leaders I spoke recognized, primarily, the experiential deficiencies, students faced when entering the workforce. The business leaders I spoke with largely corroborated with teachers in their assessment of the background students bring to school and to the workplace they provided key insight into how student backgrounds map to professional development opportunities, business stakeholders are poised to deploy throughout the school system.

Business leaders spoke about the importance of engaging students early on in their educational experience to mentor them and give them exposure to various professional opportunities. The staffing manager I spoke with, spoke at length at how students should gain first hand exposure to various industries so that they could obtain a visceral connection to the field of interest and be motivated to learn the skills necessary to reach that career objective. Another business stakeholder spoke of the need of the business community to build mentoring relationships with students in middle school and regularly engage with them so that they could be prepared to naturally transition into an employment opportunity at sponsoring organization.

The unifying theme among my business participants was a consensus that students needed exposure to prepare themselves, with not just the hard skills, but the critical soft skills needed to succeed in the workplace. Business participants agreed that the experiences that students received at home and in the school system did not imbue them with the punctuality, consistency, presentation, and social graces needed to excel in an interview or to be an effective advancing employee at a Birmingham company.

## **IV.C Economics**

In my interviews it was remarkable to note the high degree of congruence among participants in discussing the economic impacts of educational challenges, along with possible solutions.

### Students

Students recognized economic issues as key to the story of the challenges faced by students in BCS. Additionally, they joined the business stakeholders and educators in their calls for increase in professional development efforts at the school level. From their feedback it was clear that former students of the school system not only saw job accessibility and preparedness as key to the experiences, but central to determining the sustainable success of any educational intervention.

In my conversations with students they about the multiple barriers the dearth of financial resources builds for student educational prospects. One alumni related how by his teens he was well aware of his mom's struggles with bills and dedicated himself to supporting in any way he could. He then told me that this realization was the mindset permeated the minds of many of his peers.

In addition to discussing the painful state of mind experienced growing up in poverty, students mentioned how states of poverty prevented themselves and their families from getting and retaining jobs. Location of an prospective employee was seen to be a deciding factor in acquiring jobs. Students thought that employers might reject applicants based on living in poorer neighborhoods. Additionally, alumni saw a lack of cultural preparedness as barrier towards sustainable employment. Participants highlighted how many students did not know how to dress for an interview. In, addition to dress many students did not know how to speak in a manner expected by employers. Finally, one student discussed the lack of many students to understand and navigate the nuanced racism that is present in white work spaces. In order to succeed one participant mentioned how black alumni must learn such things as the importance of dressing better than one's white peers and that "just because you 'there' doesn't mean you are there".

To address the economic barriers faced by Birmingham's alumni joined other business leaders and educators in addressing pre-graduation professional development programs. One alumni went further in suggesting that students should have general education and gain baseline competency in all core subjects by the end of 8th grade. At that point, he suggested, schools should emulate Northern European countries in allowing students to choose their career tracks and direct them to the schools, which correspond to the chosen careers. The other students I spoke with corroborated with the underlying concept - engage students early to help them prepare for careers or college after high school.

### Educator

All the educators I spoke with alluded to the deprivation of economic resources as contributing factors to the challenges they, and their students, face in the school system. In addition to acknowledging economic factors as critical issues in education, they also emphasized the importance of catering the education experience to increase the focus on job preparedness. Finally, teachers acknowledged the importance of not just training students for tomorrow's jobs, but re-training parents for today's jobs.

My discussions with teachers were infused with numerous allusions to the how economic plays a role in poor educational outcomes. One teacher mentioned that over 95% of his students were on the Free and Reduced lunch, a program largely for poor and working class families. Other key points in our discussion were around the diverse and disturbing student poverty expresses itself. Students are unable to concentrate in class due to lack of food at home. A student may not attend school consistently because he, or she, is homeless.

In moving from the question of background to the question of how to connect student educational experiences to economic opportunities, educators stressed the importance of aligning education with today's workforce requirements. Not just as a means of preparing

students for employment, but as a means of increasing the engagement in learning. One interviewee mentioned related his experience of how paying students to work on a farm greatly enhanced the engagement of students in learning – even if farming was not their career goal. An educator who leads the Business and Finance academy at one of the High Schools, posited the notion of immediately inserting upperclassmen into jobs so that resources could be more concentrated on the lower grades along with kids experiencing exceptional challenges.

Finally, educators all acknowledged the importance of parental involvement in education and also pointed an opportunity to train parents for future careers. They suggested that student-centric approaches should be expanded to a family-centric when it came to career development options.

### Business Leaders

The business stakeholders I spoke with, passionately stressed education as the cornerstone for economic development in Birmingham. Their discussion of the high availability of well-paying jobs in trades, advanced manufacturing, technology and financial services were counterbalanced by their acknowledgement of the dearth in qualifying educational background among new alumni entering the workforce. To remedy this problem business stakeholders suggested stronger partnerships between public and private sectors to give students the exposure, soft skills, and education needed to fill empty well-paying job spots so that they could fuel the growth of Birmingham's economy.

The two Business leaders I spoke with pulled from their rich exposure to the Birmingham Business Community as they adamantly expressed how crucial a strong educational system was to fueling the economic growth of the city. They both mentioned that a key component to luring companies to the city was the ability to give decision-makers confidence that their employees will be able to trust the public education system to adequately

educate their kids. Leaders also made it clear employers look to Birmingham City to supply a workforce capable of doing jobs that require a baseline degree of communication skills and increasing level of proficiency in technology and math. Currently, this workforce is desperately lacking. Consequently, the educational preparedness of Birmingham's workforce is a prevailing concern among the business community.

This lack of workforce preparedness is exemplified in a number of different ways. Graduates from BCS often lack the mathematical proficiency required for many advanced manufacturing roles. A business leader I spoke related an account of a client who told him a major challenge was finding employees who had the baseline understanding of trigonometry needed to execute the job. This lack of "hard" skills bars students from entry into well-paying careers. Another manner in which, poor preparedness is seen is just in a common understanding of professionalism and social skills needed to function effectively in the workforce. Interviewees made it clear that because these soft and hard skills are not learned in the classroom, they become perpetual barriers to economic growth for prospective employee, but also for the city.

Due to this lack, the business stakeholders I spoke with discussed how poor educational preparedness results in large numbers of predominantly poor, African-American students being relegated to highly manual low-paying jobs that are available. The staffing manager I spoke with mentioned how almost all of his hires for low-skilled and low paying temp positions are African-American while blacks, particularly black males, represent a small minority of the occupants in higher paying – more technical roles.

To address this disparity between job requirement and BCS alumni preparedness along with the resulting economic impacts, business stakeholders all spoke to a need for a greater engagement between the business community and the school system to ensure students get the exposure, mentorship and education needed to be prepared for the workforce. The business leaders I spoke with acknowledged that substantial progress has been made in

establishing partnerships with the school system and hoped for continual growth in that trend. Business stakeholders strongly believed in the importance of establishing mentoring relationship and enmeshing students in career experiences. The staffing manager I spoke with suggested that a first-hand experience with various lines of work would give students something tangible to strive for as they might be better able to connect the classroom to real-life experience.

## **V. Discussion**

The most immediate take-away from this qualitative-led research inquiry into the connection between Birmingham inner city pedagogy and Economic impacts is multifaceted, nuanced resultingly complex challenges and emerging opportunities. However, an acknowledgement of complexity does not absolve all stakeholders, including those of us not at all affiliated with the Birmingham City Schools. The poignant discussions I had with participants painted a picture of an Educational ecosystem composed of city residents, suburbanians, students, teachers administrators, nonprofits and business entities - that together provide enormous and, even, emerging potential. However, this Educational ecosystem appears to be gravely challenged by a failure to recognize, own and overcome the debilitating impacts of racism, fear, rigidity, mistrust, siloism and ineptitude. This research made it clear that nearly all stakeholders in this system can take steps to ensure that students have the culturally and experientially appropriate education needed to drive Birmingham's economic growth through increased workforce development.

From my discussion with alumni, educators and business leaders it became very apparent that the responsibility for creating a culture conducive to strong student outcomes lies is much broader than staff and faculty in the schools. My research partners pointed to a culture of demoralization that results from constant beratement of the communities and schools occupied by teachers and students. A heavy theme in most of my conversations with alumni and educators was the discussion of the demoralization that resulted from family members, media entities and other community members continually reminding students that



their schools are failing and consistently comparing the performance and intellectual ability of students to those of students in the suburbs without acknowledging the advantages they have due to home environments and equipment.

To corroborate the reality described by the interviewees one must only spend time reading and perusing the comments under online news article pertaining to Birmingham City Schools. The article is usually an explicit or implicit excoriation of the BCS for its failures and the comments are usually filled with racially charged personal attacks on the intellect and potential of students and teachers themselves. The impacts of heavy media criticism in conjunction with other means of community originated criticism contribute to the inordinate pressure on teachers to produce results. This demoralization is passed on to students through disengagement, frustration and mirroring and the reproducing of community criticism towards students. Here we see a possible opportunity community entities such as individuals and media entities have to channel resources away from destructive critiques and thinly veiled racism to dedicating themselves to student success: through mentoring, donations, proposing viable solutions, or through simply abstaining from leveling destructive insults at the undeserving youth of Birmingham City's Schools.

The second, and arguably most critical, layer of responsibility rests at the administrative level. All stakeholders I spoke with, pointed to principals, board members and superintendents as key to setting the culture and, consequently, building the experience necessary for the sustainable advancement of student education and employability prospects. The key elements discussed among the three groups of stakeholders I spoke with was that the culture of BCS administration is illustrated by strong distrust of outsiders, new ideas and inconsistencies in leadership. The perceptions of distrust, lack of consistency and rigidity seemed to cascade throughout the system as students, business representatives and educators discussed their experiences in and with the Birmingham City School system.

All students I talked to seemed to reference the administration as a looming force which sought to disrupt any positive force for good in the school system. Students described principals and school system administrators as non-transparent, inaccessible and inflexible to change. Perhaps the most stinging critique was that students sensed that School administrators simply

did not care about the students. One student believed that the only goal of administrators was to make district money, while another student I spoke thought administrators were only trying to maintain their jobs and hence resist any possibility of change that might alter their job stability. This perception of the school administrators seemed to further enhance the students sense that the system did not care for them and that they did not have a chance to compete. A key insight from this was the desperate need for students to get a sense that school administrators cared. One student spoke passionately about how one principal focused solely on discipline, while being unwilling to connect with students on a personal level. This feedback suggests a great need for transparent and authentic engagement between students and school administration. The progressive agendas school admin may be working on will be severely hindered, if students perceive a lack of true care among school leadership for the students.

Teachers pointed out the weaknesses of the system leadership to support teachers in classroom management. Two of the teachers I spoke with, both related experiences of how they, or their peers, were left floundering in a classroom as they learned to teach students who had numerous behavioral, socioeconomic and, sometimes, mental challenges. Educators spoke about how this lack of support resulted in rampant demoralization among educators, sometimes followed by eventual success or followed by permanent disengagement. Though acknowledging pressures school districts faced educators highlighted chronic inconsistencies in leadership at the board level. They also spoke about how this inconsistency in consolidated support for teachers results in differences in how rules were enforced.

Business leaders echoed the concern of churn among superintendent leadership as a concern - as it reflected the perceived incompetence of the school board. Business leaders recognized a key issue with distrust between business and school entities. This distrust results in the stymying of in-kind resources to students in the form of volunteers and programs.

The feedback from students, educators and business leaders seemed to suggest a few critical items. The culture of demoralization, which permeates the school cannot be addressed without an engaged system of leadership, that is visible and accessible to students, that builds and implements a consistent framework to support teachers and lowers its barriers of trust to increase the flow of ideas and generation of innovative and collaborative solutions to address

barriers to learning.

## **V. Conclusion**

When I began this quest to better understand cultural and experiential irrelevance to education and its connection to Birmingham's economic outcomes. I suspected to have conversations that focused on how students were not engaged due to an overly eurocentric approach to education and employers were deterred due to students inability to present themselves "professionally".

While conducting this research I found that this was partially correct. Business professionals I interviewed did stress the importance of soft skills - which included a requirement to speak and act in a conforming manner. A student related the story of how he dreaded learning about Shakespeare, due to its lack of relevance.

The most enduring themes, which emerged from this inquiry, however, was the dysfunction that cascaded throughout the educational ecosystem and followed students into the workforce. The cascade seemed to be contextualized around a strong sense of demoralization. Though various sources might argue towards solutions, which disproportionately place the weight on either the private sector or public sector, it seems that the greatest step in the direction would be consistent affirming support from community entities around students and teachers within Birmingham City Schools. This support can only result from all stakeholders in Birmingham's educational ecosystem acknowledging not only their agency in the solution, but their agency in the problems of distrust, fear and racism that impede student learning and result in an alumni cohort unable to fuel the growth of their communities, Birmingham's business and, consequently, Birmingham's future.

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Appendix II:

### **Interview Guide and Research Protocol**

Each interviewee will be provided with informed consent forms. Upon being made fully aware of the of the scope of the research, the nature of the interview, and their rights to anonymity and to opt out at any time, they will sign the informed consent form. The criteria question for each type of interview are shown below, followed by research protocol description.

#### **Business Leaders**

Criteria: Business owner or Employee involved with hiring and/or workforce development, organization represented must offer more than 20 jobs in the Birmingham area

### **Business Leaders Questions:**

1. What is your background in providing jobs for Birmingham's work force?
2. What challenges do you see to matching employees to emerging opportunities in Birmingham's job market?
3. What relationship do you see between BCS and Birmingham Employers ability acquire employees

### **Teachers**

Criteria: Teacher with 2+ years in the Birmingham City School system

Teacher Questions:

1. Explain the extent of your experiences with BCS
2. What classroom challenges do you run into and how do you manage those challenges?
3. What strengths and opportunities do you see in the students you work with?

### **Student/Alumni**

Criteria: High-school graduate, Aged 18-21, student or former student of Birmingham City Schools.



Student Questions:

1. Describe your background and the quality of your scholastic experience in BCS
2. Explain anything that made it harder for you or you classmates to learn
3. Please describe anything teachers could do to improve your educational experience.

Appendix III

Coding Sample

| Role    | Tag           | Theme      | Item Descriptions   |
|---------|---------------|------------|---|
| Student | code          | Experience | moved throughout the school system  |
| Student | code          | culture    | behavior issues   |
| Student | code          | Experience | fighting as way of life   |
| Student | code          |            | pros and cons of school system  |
| Student | code          | Experience | poor instructional quality  |
| Student | code          | Experience | catching up failing students and pushing successful students  |
| Student | code          | Experience | reference to success of neighboring districts   |
| Student | code          |            | examples of garbage in school?  |
| Student | code          | Culture    | immaturity among staff members  |
| Student | code          | Culture    | explicit student favoritism   |
| Student | code          | Culture    | reporting problems to stakeholder   |
| Student | code          | Culture    | resignation to failures   |
| Student | code          | culture    | impacts on students   |
| Student | code          | culture    | competition to step up  |
| Student | code          | Experience | poor instructional quality  |
| Student | code          | Experience | Misalignment student potential and available resource   |
| Student | code          | Experience | Misalignment between student grades and real-life success   |
| Student | Stated Facts  | Experience | Find remediation data for college kids  |
| Student | code          | Experience | technology need   |
| Student | code          | experience | poor instructional quality  |
| Student | code          | experience | Misalignment student potential and available resource   |
| Student | code          | experience | poor instructional quality  |
| Student | code          | Experience | What does a controlled classroom look like  |
| Student | code          | Experience | catching up failing students and pushing successful students  |
| Student | code          | Culture    | classroom management needed   |
| Student | code          | Culture    | lack of transparency  |
| Student | telling Quote | culture    | You have a lot of student that are regular, like me, who want to get ahead too. We want to be ahead and go to college too. We want to see college too when you work you want a reward in the end. |
| Student | Telling Quote | culture    | If we is going to lose give us a chance to fight. They're not giving us a chance to keep up with the material   |
| Student | code          |            | Why don't students pay attention?   |

|   |          |    |
|---|----------|----|
| Role  | Educator | -Y |
| Theme   | Culture  | -Y |
| <b>Row Labels</b>   |          |    |
| Academic background of administrators is it more English/PE concentrated  |          |    |
| advers incentives   |          |    |
| Authoritarianism is reflected in increased teacher turnover   |          |    |
| Baggage student brought to school   |          |    |
| Balancing firmness customizable concern and compassion for students   |          |    |
| Balancing firmness with customizable concern and compassion for students  |          |    |
| Best Practices  |          |    |
| Cascading and multilevel dysfunction in the school coupled disengaged parents impedes BCS students  |          |    |
| collaboration need  |          |    |
| hands on activities needed  |          |    |
| high absence rate among students  |          |    |
| How do we increase parental involvement?  |          |    |
| How do we overcome distrust?  |          |    |
| Importance of diverse stakeholders  |          |    |
| inconsistency from student to parent to teacher admin to the job  |          |    |
| Inter and Intra board collaboration   |          |    |
| Lack of flexibility can be manifested in classroom difficulties   |          |    |
| lack of mental/emotional health support system  |          |    |
| Lack of parental involvement  |          |    |
| lack of transparency  |          |    |
| limited stability of students   |          |    |
| Nepotism in Hiring practices  |          |    |
| Nepotism prioritized over merit in the hiring of teachers   |          |    |
| openness to feedback among teacher  |          |    |
| Overcoming Trust Barriers   |          |    |
| parental dysfunction  |          |    |
| performance pressure hurting students   |          |    |
| Poor Administrative Temperament   |          |    |
| School System Distrust of Outsiders   |          |    |
| student empowerment   |          |    |
| students crave consistent attention   |          |    |
| Support deficiency  |          |    |
| The ability to listen to individual student experience and adapt your approach in a way that addresses behavior and prepares the student for life is what is needed |          |    |
| The importance of listening   |          |    |
| Versatility is key in administrering a school   |          |    |
| violent events  |          |    |

Appendix IV:

## Emergent Theme Framework

|                             | Culture   | Experience   | Economics  | Theme Interrelationships   |
|-----------------------------|---|--|--|--|
| <b>Educator</b>             | Non-meritocratic, adverse incentives, highly disorganized<br>Need for student compassion<br>High instability<br>Lack of support<br>Poor collaboration/trust   | Schools have been poorly equipped with staff and physical resources to meet the technological and emotional requirement students face. Diversity in educator abilities, Students come to school with overwhelming baggage  | Opportunity to maximize school to career pipeline<br>- Students come to school with great socioeconomic disadvantages  |  |
| <b>Business Stakeholder</b> | Strong trust barriers, absence of collaboration among stakeholders, need for job training programs, opportunity to leverage professional community for mentorship and other complementary/supplementary services                      | Strong trust barriers, absence of collaboration among stakeholders, need for job training programs, opportunity to leverage professional community for mentorship and other complementary/supplementary services<br>Soft skill deficiency for incoming job candidates, need for increased holistic and consistent professional mentorship opportunities, Need for exposure | High demand for talent in business sector, large ability, high prioritization of education in business mentorship opportunities, Need for exposure   | Lack of communication at leadership manifesting itself in massive gap in soft and hard skills required for jobs. Health of economy contingent on greater stakeholder collaboration.  |
| <b>Students</b>             | Disempowerment/demoralization, suppression of success by teachers, system distrust of outsiders, corruption in hiring and administering discipline, misalignment of student potential and investment, immaturity among administration | Limited access to courses and instructors to generate success<br>Substantial degree of holistic isolation from role models, technology, safe learning spaces   | Inaccessibility of jobs despite their crucialness to the City's Future<br>Opportunity to integrate Financial Education during early childhood  |  |
| <b>Combined Consensus</b>   | BCS system is described as protectionistic, insecure, suspicious, inflexible and nepotistic at admin levels at the student level by a high degree of demoralization and disillusionment   | Though progressing students are still far from equipped with the social, technological and academic experiences necessary to succeed in a workplace  | High demand from both employer and student for career training and job acquisition. Early and persistent engagement of students early-on in professional development and Financial Ed is key | Deep, systemic barriers in BCS, followed by key resource deprivation demoralize teachers and students and then disqualify from numerous open positions, while leaving numerous resources from business and non-profit sector drastically underutilized |