School Practices in Response to Subgroup Accountability Pressure: Orienting Schools to Equity and Identified Subgroups
Rachel Garver, New York University, rachel.garver@nyu.edu

Findings:

UMS FOCUSED ON EQUITY AMONG SUBGROUPS, BUT NOT THE STATE-IDENTIFIED SUBGROUPS
- state-identified subgroups not relevant to daily practice
- state citation lacked legitimacy due to unclear, complex calculations that lacked transparency
- school tied its own data practices and determined the subgroups in need
- UMS subgroups were the focus of equity-minded reforms—curriculum and instruction was revised to better engage Black and Latino male students
- district guidance & technical assistance encouraged concern for identified subgroups to avoid state audit
- reliance on documentation for accountability to symbolic compliance with state

District Administrator: "I don’t know what the formula is now, with how they come up with the groups...they are not very transparent about it...they just say, this is why you’re [critic]."

School Administrator: "The biggest achievement gap in the school is the gender achievement gap...the state doesn’t say gender...I’ll take what the state says and throw it into the action plan, but I don’t think their methodologies are as meaningful."

DISTRICT LEVERAGED SUBGROUP ACCOUNTABILITY PRESSURE TO PROMOTE ITS OWN AGENDA

District Administrator: "I don’t like the term ‘serving to two masters’...but you have to align what the district wants and what the state wants."

UMS ADMINISTRATION INTEGRATED SUBGROUP PERFORMANCE INTO FORMAL TEACHER EVALUATION
- measured individual teachers’ value-added for each subgroup
- tied subgroup growth to teacher evaluation rubric components

School Administrator: "Personalize the gap...we will really draw attention to the gap, teacher by teacher...we need to individualize it with professional development...it’s the teacher’s fault."

School Administrator: "Let’s look at the [teacher] performance rubric...let’s make it an issue of accountability...setting instructional outcomes...if you are not differentiating, you are not meeting this standard...differentiate for different groups of students..."

TEACHERS RESISTED PRESSURE BY INVOKING EXPLANATIONS OUTSIDE THEIR LOCUS OF CONTROL
- alternative explanations pin teachers between holistic explanations and accusations of shirking responsibility

Teacher: "Are we going to have a discussion about what are the reasons for the achievement gap and possible solutions to go along with the data tracking...the solution starts with finding out why these large groups are lagging"

PERCEPTIONS & EXPECTATIONS OF PARTICULAR SUBGROUPS LED TO ‘DIFFERENTIAL PRESSURE’
- belief that common core is harder for some subgroups
- perception that the challenges of ELs and SWDs make their lagging performance reasonable

Teacher: "I can’t see closing the gap with special education and ELs with the general population...you can’t in the same amount of time, do the same thing with ELs or with SWDs, they need more!"

Conclusions:

- The extensive discretion that schools have in responding to subgroup accountability pressure augments the importance of school-level factors that either facilitate or resist the policy’s intentions of focusing supports to identified subgroups and equalizing student outcomes across schools.
- Taking ownership for inadequate subgroup performance as identified by the state is more likely when the school level actors understand the data practices that lead to the school’s citation.
- When schools are pressured to respond to state-identified subgroups, but state determinations do not complement school level understandings of who is in need, schools manage the pressure through symbolic compliance as they act internally without guidance, support, or oversight.
- Subgroup accountability pressure is intensified where the district or school administration leverages its force to advance its own interests and agenda. However, integration into sensitive or controversial policies (e.g., value-added teacher evaluation) may lead to resistance.

FACILITATING FACTORS
- Complex and opaque data practices behind citation determinations lead to de-legitimization of state identified subgroups
- Lack of data literacy at school level
- Reliance on documentation for accountability
- School segregation: high-needs student population suggests explanations outside the school's locus of control & reduces school's capacity to support
- Integration with sensitive policies (e.g., value-added teacher ratings)
- Subgroup-specific perceptions & stereotypes lead to differential pressure across identified subgroups
- Discomfort around explicit discussion of race and ethnicity
- Association of responding to state data with widely-disagreed gaming practices

RESISTANT FACTORS
- District or school administration leveraging state pressure to further their own agenda
- Focus on transferring pressure through well-established authority infrastructure (e.g., teacher evaluation system)
- District guidance of how to use data practices that mirror the state
- Solutions orientation: absence of root cause analysis focuses school on local control and averts more complex & holistic understandings

Implications for Policy & Practice:
- Data literacy taught in leadership & teacher preparation programs
- Transparency & clarity in calculations for state-citation determinations
- Schools should consider holistic responses to subgroup gaps to address in school & out-of-school factors

Abstract: I draw upon a one-year ethnography at Urban Middle School (UMS) in order to understand how subgroup accountability pressure under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) impacts school-level, daily practice. I examine how UMS responded to subgroup accountability pressure and to what extent their reactions focus support on equity and the identified subgroups. I track the processes through which subgroup accountability pressure was transferred to and within UMS. I conclude by identifying school-level factors that facilitate or resist subgroup accountability pressure in directing supports to identified subgroups and equalizing outcomes among subgroups.

Research Questions:
1) Through which institutions, actors, and mechanisms was subgroup accountability pressure transferred to and within UMS?
2) How was UMS’ citation for failing to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for several student subgroups understood? How did the understanding of the citation vary among actors (district administrators, school administrators, teachers, parents)?
3) How did UMS respond to subgroup accountability pressure? To what extent did UMS focus supports toward the identified subgroups?

Theoretical Framework:
- teachers & administrators as policymakers through practice
- teacher & administrator semantically mediates policy implementation
- local context & capacity mediates policy implementation
- unintended consequences

Methodology:
- Urban Middle School (UMS):
  - public, neighborhood school
  - segregated minority school (>90% students of color)
  - diverse student body: 15% English learners (EL), 15% students with disabilities (SWD)
  - Asian, Black, & Latino populations each > 20% and < 50% of student body
  - cited by state since 2012 for failing to make AYP for SWDs in math and for Asian & multiracial students in science
- ethnographic case study
- >600 hours of observations
- 7 semi-structured interviews, protocols informed by observations
- collection & analysis of documents (meeting agendas, policy) and administrative data (grades, attendance, test scores, discipline)
- open coding, inductive generation of themes

School Administrator: "I don’t know what the formula is now, with how they come up with the groups...they are not very transparent about it...they just say, this is why you’re [critic]."

District Administrator: "We have to ensure that everything is in alignment with state expectations...put yourself in the position of the state auditor...they need justification...if you reference something internal, they cannot access that."

School Administrator: "The biggest achievement gap in the school is the gender achievement gap...the state doesn’t say gender...I’ll take what [the state] says and throw it into the action plan, but I don’t think their methodologies are as meaningful."

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