



‘Latrisha’s choice’ gives new perspective

Dr. Michael Dumas leads discussion on urban education and inequality at 6th annual Leadership Symposium

When addressing the problems educators face in urban education, Dr. Michael Dumas proposes a more effective way of changing the landscape of urban education.

It’s a shifting of focus, an “economic turn” is what he calls it. And this means a societal “turning away from our confidence in cultural explanations.”

“I’m suggesting that ... the cultural decisions and ways of understanding the world are all within an economic context,” Dr. Dumas explained in his keynote at the Leadership Symposium on Jan. 23.

While every explanation is not economic, every explanation still takes that economic turn. Race, human choices, agencies, school leadership all still matter, but understanding these things are all formed by the class structure of society and capitalism is crucial, he said.

Dr. Dumas told the story of Latrisha Lewis, a poor, black mother of two facing everyday choices of how she will pay the rent and put food on the table. After several attempts at trying to better her life through college and schooling, Latrisha had found herself knocked down again

and again. “Latrisha’s choice” illustrated the lack of choice that many poor, marginalized parents have because of the systemic class and racial inequality, Dr. Dumas said.

“Although Latrisha blames herself for her academic failures ... I recently visited the elementary school she attended,” Dr. Dumas said. “The new principal complained that the school still suffers from limited resources, large classes and high teacher turnover ... So while Latrisha blamed herself for making poor choices as a child, my own analysis suggests that the city and the school district had long ago made the choice to abandon the children in this neighborhood.”

Dr. Dumas explained how the cultural understandings are always rooted in the economic conditions and discussed the difference between social capital and cultural capital. Social capital is having the right connections and access to high-status institutions and networks to improve one’s life chances while cultural capital is one’s familiarity with the kinds of knowledge and skills most associated with those in high-status positions in society, he said.

“We must spend more time thinking about how thinking about how the structures and logics of capitalism result in predictable and intentional reproduction of class and racial inequality,” Dr. Dumas said. “And thus make our preoccupation with cultural factors and individual choices naive, or worse, complicit, in the reproduction of material inequality.”

“But also, equally important, the reproduction of the actual cultural ideological justification of inequality, the justification where we say: ‘That’s just natural, that’s the way things ought to be, it’s either their fault or it’s by accident, there’s nothing we can really do about it.’ And I think that our emphasis on cultural choices and not understanding the context of capital actually facilitates that.”

DR. DUMAS is an assistant professor at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Education and the African American Studies Department. His research is primarily on the cultural politics of Black education, the cultural political economy of urban education and the futurity of Black childhood.

Students and staff get a chance to show their stuff

The one-day symposium consisted of plenty of learning opportunities after the keynote by Dr. Dumas. Faculty, staff, students and other professionals had the opportunity to propose workshops, panels and poster sessions to present their research.

Top photo: Dr. Dan Bryan (not pictured), an Ed.D Alumni, leads a workshop on “Leadership, Access and Opportunity.” The workshop discussed how school site leadership can “positively affect student access and opportunity.” Dr. Bryan shared stories from his time as a principal that illustrated real steps leaders can take at their schools to build around these values and act on them.

Middle photo: Dr. Virginia Cerdas and Satya Rosabel (pictured) from Universidad Nacional Costa Rica lead a workshop focused on how “leaders express their views about social justice and how they turn their beliefs into action” in Costa Rica. The ultimate goal is to create equity to benefit all citizens.

Bottom photo: SDHE and EDP graduate students (left to right) Tiffany Inabu, Menglong Cong and Melissa Mahoney as well as Dr. Avery Olson (background) present in the poster session on promoting latino student success in STEM. In their research, they examined the “key programmatic elements delivered by CSU HSI-STEM programs and the ways they have contributed to Latino/a student success in STEM fields.”

