

# From Cultural Responsiveness to Cultural Activeness: Promoting Public School Success with Minority Populations

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*Abstract: A mismatch of initial teacher perceptions and classroom realities of working with African-American children ultimately have an impact on academic success. This paper reviews literature and discusses how the impact of teacher beliefs influence African-American student achievement. In addition, cultural activism and the creation of culturally responsive classrooms are also discussed. Teachers, counselors and school systems serve as a key component in protecting the academic prosperity of the African-American learner and are called to produce successful results.*

Keywords: Cultural Responsiveness, Teacher Values

**W**HO ARE THE underdogs in American Education? They are the leavers, the individuals that public education leaves behind. There were 269,600 leavers in public education in the 2004-2005 school year (Marvel, et.al 2006). Of those 269,600 public school leavers, 11% were African-American; 9.3% were Hispanic and 8.2% were White (Marvel, et.al 2006). Of those leavers, 104,000 or 9.7% came from schools where 50 or more of the K-12 students were approved for free or reduced-price lunches, compared to 7.4 % that contained free and reduced populations of 15%-49% and 7.9% that contained free and reduced populations was less than 15% of the student population (Marvel, et.al 2006). Leavers are teachers. They are teachers who left the teaching profession after the base year (Marvel, et.al 2006). The number of leavers in public education has more than doubled since the 1988-1989 school year growing from 132,300 to 269,600 (Marvel, et.al 2006). Addressing public school leavers is a significant factor when addressing the academic success of public school children, specifically, minority children. African-American (13.8%) and Hispanic children (17.3%) are 31.1% of the total student population and of that population 35.6% (11.8%; 23.8% respectively) dropout of school (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). African-American (4%) and Hispanic (4%) teachers represent 8% of the total teaching population and of that 8%, 45% leave after their first year (23%; 22.1% respectively) (Marvel, et.al 2006). In fact, the highest percentages of leavers (22.3%) were those that had no full time teaching experience at all (Marvel, et.al 2006). As schools aggressively recruit minority teachers, they are categorically becoming leavers at higher rates than non-minority teachers. Likewise, as schools work on improving the academic condi-

tions of African-American and Hispanic students, minority students are dropping out of public school at critical rates. If the American education authentically desires to experience equitable teacher success through retention and academic success for all stakeholders, specifically those currently not experiencing success on statewide or national assessments, than an extensive paradigm shift must occur.

Remarkably, 8% of the teaching force includes an African-American and Hispanic racial background, 45% of this group is leaving the teaching force. Sharing the same racial background, while may be beneficial in some aspects of developing relationships with students, and promoting academic achievement is not enough to garner student or teacher retention. In fact, the vast majority of the teaching force that is non-minority, experience success rates with minority students, despite racial differences. Teacher efficacy directly impacts student academic achievement. Teacher success is significantly influenced by highly effective practices and a sense of efficacy, rather than by the racial background of teachers. It is a mistake to believe that teachers labeled as “highly qualified” will also be highly successful (McLeod & Tanner, 2007). Highly effective teachers – not by title, but by practice experience student outcomes that reflect academic progress. Teachers' sense of efficacy is one of the few teacher characteristics consistently related to student achievement; in other words, teachers who believe that student learning can be influenced by effective teaching despite home and peer influence and who have confidence in their ability to teach persist longer in their teaching efforts, provide greater academic focus in the classroom, give different types of feedback, and ultimately improve student performance (Gibson & Dembo). While recruiting

a teaching force to reflect the student population is important, the recruited teaching force must be equipped with tools of empowerment and enlightenment to spur academic success with minority learners, but also to increase their longevity in the field. Even African-American teachers need help in learning to cope with some of the special demands that African-American children from disadvantaged backgrounds can present (Ferguson, 2003). Teachers choosing to accept the challenge of working in schools that have high concentrations of students who are not experiencing success on academic assessments must be able to create classroom environments in which they culturally connect with their students (McLeod & Tanner, 2007). Although it is logical to assume that every teacher who pursues coursework in teacher education will learn about the characteristics of various learning styles of students, it is not safe to assume that they will learn about the cultural and environmental factors that impede learning outcomes for students of color (Ford & Harris, 1998). It is critical that educators are exposed to culturally relevant teaching practices and that they learn how students' cultures interact, both positively and negatively, with school systems in general education (Moore et al, 2005).

Teachers who do not share the same cultural background as the majority of their students can experience success when they are able to make connections with students in ways that transcend environmental factors (McLeod & Tanner, 2007). In this instance, teacher efficacy and resiliency are supported. Teacher efficacy and resiliency are by-products of teachers who have removed cultural barriers that have interfered with teacher and student success. If there are negative forces in the environment that have left mental scars on the minds and practices of educators, they will begin to act, think and speak and behave within the mental framework of their cultural and environmental perceptions and experiences. People tend to define themselves according to their membership in a particular racial group (Moore et al, 2005). In fact, the person's apparent racial background serves as the referent that connects the individual with his or her identified cultural roots and historical experience (Cross & Vandiver, 2001; Madison-Colmore & Moore, 2002; Moore, 2000). They will adapt to the mental environment they have created. Nathan McCall (1994) states that "children have an enormous capacity to adapt to insanity" (p.20), this same statement may very well be applied to teachers as well. Teachers, who are unable to escape negative cultural mental perceptions, may begin to adopt a deficit model of thinking.

A teachers deficit model approach to student relationships with African-American learners is transferred, adopted, assimilated consciously or uncon-

sciously to a student's self concept and self-esteem. Students can be unfairly victimized by the labeling and sorting processes that occur within schools in addition to being harmed by the attitudes and behavior they adopt in reaction to these processes (Noguera, 2003). In other words, they adapt to the deficit thinking patterns practiced and modeled by the teacher and begin to question their own academic potential and ability to contribute significantly to produce successful academic environments. This results in the contribution of inappropriate perceptions, and projections of academic displays of performance. The most damaging impact is the student's perception of their individual academic capacity. A negative self-perception of academic aptitude and potential of the African-American student has damaging long-term affects (McLeod, 2006). The structure and culture of school plays a major role in reinforcing and maintaining racial categories and the stereotypes associated with them (Noguera, 2006). Knowledge of effective pedagogical practice is meaningless without the wisdom to effectively implement practices that manifest change in the performance of underachieving minority students, specifically African-American students (McLeod, 2005).

Teachers must master the ability to transfer knowledge in the classroom in a way that instills a sense of self confidence to student's as they transfer their learned skills, to standardized assessments or real life practical applications. Research has demonstrated that knowledge and prior skill attainment are poor predictors of future performance because the beliefs people hold about their performance have more power than acquired learning (Pajares, 1996). It is when teachers take a cultural activist approach to understanding African-American students, by conducting a self examination and elimination of biases that negatively influence student performance and potential; that he/she can begin to create culturally responsive classrooms that are not negatively influenced by race.

Many pre-service teachers resist the painful process of confronting their own prejudices, and this may be attributed to different levels of readiness or differences in personal and intellectual development (Jordan, 1995). Stereotypical thinking negatively affects student performance as it contributes to the manifestation of a self-fulfilling prophecy reflected in student potential. Intentional or not, racial beliefs held by the teacher impact the culture of a classroom (McLeod, 2006). Teachers become susceptible to believing that they are unable to reach students because of a lack of control of their environment, in spite of receiving learning experiences in multicultural education or professional development. Gomez (1994) reports that multicultural education is viewed as only about the Other's and does not include the

self. Many students continue to view multicultural education as merely a two part technical adjustment to the curriculum by (a) including contributions of other races and gender (Banks, 1995), and (b) by removing the bias from textbooks (Grant & Koskela, 1986). Furthermore, many public schools continue to "mark the 'Other'" as different and that difference in this context means deficit (Gomez, 1994; Clark & O'Donnell, 1999). To restructure, educators must first look deeply at the goal that we set for our children and the beliefs that we have about them (Hilliard, 1991). Teachers, minority and non-minority, must be able to have an honest self dialogue with themselves, and arrest any preconceived beliefs about African-Americans and African-American student achievement. They must examine how they may have inadvertently reinforced negative stereotypes. For example, qualitative findings simultaneously indicate that teachers confine reprimands and punitive consequences to African-American children even when youths of other races engage in the same unsanctioned behaviors (McCadden, 1998 taken from Monroe, 2005). Hence, negative identification of students along racial lines profoundly impacts student and teacher perception, and the self-perception of the African American student.

The deficit model assumes because of environmental, genetic, cultural and experiential differences teachers have limited control of the learning environment. (Nieto, 2000). Beyond individual factors, schools that serve children of poverty and of color also may introduce risk factors by failing to provide a supportive school climate, by institutionalizing low academic expectations, or by delivering inadequate educational resources (Borman & Overman, 2004). Failure of the public school system to the minority child, specifically, the African-American child, is not from a lack of knowledge, but an improper or restrained effort to adequately apply available tools, resources and information with established rates of success (McLeod, 2005). In essence, it is not a lack of control of their classroom environment that impedes learning; it is a lack of the teacher's ability to control negative perceptions that binds their thinking that impacts student learning.

It is only in this mental environment that teachers have coped, learned and lived life. Faulty thinking and negative cultural perceptions, paralyzes educators from becoming culturally responsive while lowering teacher efficacy, hindering student achievement and increasing the percentages of teachers who are disconnected from their environment that ultimately inflates the teacher leaver rate. Negative environmental influences do impact student learning, but in ineffective school systems, negative environmental influences paralyze student learning opportunity and potential. Negative mental impres-

sions and faulty thinking must be eradicated and replaced with accurate perceptions that represent truth, empathy, confidence, courage and an understanding on how to reach diverse groups. Research and theory suggest that teachers who understand and integrate the cultural needs and styles of African Americans into the curriculum promote and enhance achievement among these students (Ford & Harris 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2002; Shade et al, 1997).

Compensation is behavior that develops either consciously or unconsciously to offset a real or imagined deficiency. Addressing achievement gaps of minority youth is in essence addressing a major deficiency in the American Education system. It is necessary that conscious efforts be made to offset the deficiencies in the American Education system. It is essential for educators take extreme steps to ensure minority youth, specifically African-American and Hispanic children, equitably receive a rigorous curriculum that reflects mastery in measurable terms and that minority teachers are adequately prepared to work in the teaching force as eagerly as they are to enter the teaching force. As such, an identification of the strengths of the American Education system should be acknowledged by practicing educators, preparing them to manipulate the strengths within the system to offset the deficiencies of the system.

The incredible amount of racial and ethnic diversity in the public school system is a growing phenomenon nationally. 43% of public school students were considered to be part of a racial or ethnic minority group in 2004, an increase from 22% in 1972 (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The school system, in harmony with the demographic landscape of the United States is becoming more diverse at significant rates. Truly, the strength of America and the American Education system is in its natural capacity to diversify. Concomitantly, as there are sensational gaps in achievement scores among African-American and Hispanic children compared to their white counterparts, there are also cultural gaps that exist that encumber educators from retaining a holistic understanding of the diverse needs in the classroom that are a result of cultural ignorance and cultural dissonance (McLeod & Tanner 2007). However, growing amounts of student's of diversity, specifically of African-American students, in the public school system have experienced more learning deficits and inequitable academic equalities than their white counterparts. In such African-American students make up 17% of the total public school population (Hoffman, K. et al, 2003). Of that 14.7% are in special education, (Hoffman, K. et al., 2003). 18% of African-American students enrolled in K-12 have repeated a grade (Hoffman, K. et al., 2003). 35% of African-American students enrolled in grades 7-12 have been suspended or expelled. There is about a

50/50 chance that the African-American student will graduate on time with a high school diploma (Swanson, 2004). Nearly half of the nations African-American students, but only 11% of white students, attend high schools in which graduation is not the norm (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004). Of those that do graduate only about a third of them are college ready (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006). Of those that do enter college only 18% actually graduate, respectively 82% do not complete college (Hoffman, K. et al., 2003). Indisputably, diversity, specifically related to African-American learners has not been successfully addressed by public school experiences. African-American students are capable of achieving successfully in the public school system, when they are approached and viewed as a contribution of strength to the academic system and their academic potential is realized. A major concern of African Americans is that teachers underestimate African-American students' potential, not necessarily their performance (Ferguson, 2003). All teachers should be provided with a skill set to successfully work with African-American children regardless of race based on approaches that focus on the assets African-American students contribute to the learning environment (McLeod, 2006). A.W. Boykin describes Nine Dimensions of African-American culture that assists leaders and teachers in the development of "opportunities" for academic engagement based on the integrity and strengths of African-American learners and their families (Boykin, 1983; Boykin & Bailey, 2001; Boykin, Tyler, Watkin-Lewis, & Kizzle, 2006; Webb-Johnson, 2002; 2003; 2006). The nine dimensions (i.e., spirituality, harmony, movement, verve, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, oral tradition, and social time perspective) can be utilized as a mode for a better understanding of culturally sanctioned behaviors often demonstrated by African-American learners in the school

context (Webb-Johnson & Carter, 2007) (See Table 1). Once teachers have a better understanding of a strengths based perspective of African-American learners and their families, they can begin to apply these principles of understanding through a framework that supports teacher efficacy, competence and independence through application of The Teacher Dependent and Independent Operational Model (See Table 2).

The Teacher Dependent and Independent Operational Model emphasizes delivering equitable academic opportunities for all students, in that stakeholders are encouraged to become activists in advocating for the rights of their students by building classroom environments that create independent cultures; cultures based on strengths that lead to both student and teacher success, while compensating for academic deficiencies. Transitioning to an independent frame of reference is going beyond a teacher's individual values, experiences, resources and understandings to embracing the collective strengths students contribute to the overall environment through healthy student/teacher relationships. African-American student potential becomes limitless when a teacher has the competence, confidence and the courage to step beyond traditions and do what is necessary for student mastery and evidential success, based on the assets of the African-American learner. In this time of challenge, external and internal stakeholders can choose to compensate and control for academic deficits and inequalities, by focusing on student strengths. Through that focus the success of the teacher who focuses on the strengths of the African-American culture and operates from an independent mode of reference is in a position to experience teaching success and significantly influence evidentiary student potential.

**Table 1**

Teacher Dependence	Teacher Independence
Reliance on the school system to develop, provide and implement professional development training, based on campus or district needs.	Inclusive of, but limited to professional development through the school system. Professional development is centered preparing the teacher to address the needs specific and unique to the individual classroom.
Understanding of student needs based on overall campus performance. Typically expressed as formal or standardized performance measures.	Authentic understanding of classroom needs based on student mastery on both formal and informal instruments measured in the individual classroom, in addition to those provided by local, state and national measurements.
Utilizes resources supplied through the district system, or shared materials from other professionals in the district or on the campus.	Utilizes campus and district based resources, but also utilizes resources in the community, through grants and other agencies that donate resources or other in-kind services.
Establishes connections with parents and the community through avenues created within the school system.	Establishes relationships with parents and the community through traditional and non-traditional modalities based on the culture of the classroom.
Establishes a classroom environment based on current practice and theoretical frameworks that stems from the teachers, experience base, value system and traditional practices used in public school systems.	Creates a cultural classroom environment that is unique and customized to ensure both student and teacher experience success. Based on what the teacher and the student value as important for learning to occur and trust to develop.
Note: From "Transitioning Diverse Classrooms toward Educational Equality: A New Model of Teacher Dependence and Independence" by Kimberly McLeod & Tyrone Tanner, 2007, in <i>The National Journal of Urban Education &amp; Practice</i> .	

**Table 2**

Spirituality	Approach to life vitalistic, guided by non-material force influence life.
Harmony	One's fate interrelated with other elements/schemes, humankind and nature harmonically conjoined.
Movement	Emphasis on interweaving of movement, rhythm, percussion, music, dance; central to one's psychological health.
Verve	Propensity for high levels of stimulation, variability; energetic lively action.
Affect	Emphasis on emotion and feelings; sensitivity to emotional cues, tendency to be emotionally expressive
Communalism	Commitment to social connectedness; social bonds and responsibility transcend individual privileges
Expressive Individualism	Cultivation of distinctive personality and a proclivity for spontaneous, genuine personal expression
Oral Tradition	Preference for oral/aural modes of speaking and listening treated as performances
Social Time Perspective	Orientation in which time is treated as passing through social space; recurring, personal and phenomenological.
Note: From "The Academic Performance of Afro-American Children," by A.W. Boykin, 1983, in J. Spence (ed.) <i>Achievement and Achievement Motives</i> .	

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