An In Depth Analysis of African American Students' Schooling Experiences: A Rural School District in Review

Dr. Mack T. Hines III
Sam Houston State University

Abstract

Within the last 30 years, one of the most puzzling challenges for schools has been to effectively educate African American students. In spite of the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision, African American students still continue to experience poor performance and academic achievement in American schools. Consequently, there is a strong need to examine other ways to effectively meet the needs of these students.

The starting point for such efforts should begin with the African American student. That is, there is a need to evaluate the school related experiences and beliefs of the African American child. This investigation would provide more insight into how African American children's schooling experiences impact their orientation and commitment to learning. In addition, educators may be able to develop a better understanding of how to best work with African American children.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate 120 African American students' experiences in a rural school district. The perceptions for both purposes were framed in accordance to the following research questions:

1. What are African American elementary students' perceptions of experiencing teacher-related characteristics with their teachers?

2. What are factors that motivate African American secondary level students to pursue achievement in a rural school district?

3. Do teacher and school characteristic differences exist among teachers' perceptions of their effectiveness in teaching, relating, and holding high expectations for African American students?

The qualitative research question for this study was as follows:

4. How do African American students describe their experiences in elementary school, middle school, and high school?

The remainder of this article highlights African American students' responses to these questions. In the literature review section, I provide a research and theoretical back drop for the study. In the methodology section, I present the statistical methods used to analyze these research questions. I use the fourth section to present the quantitative and qualitative findings from the surveys and interviews with African American students. Specifically, this section highlights African American students' perceptions of their schooling experiences.

A reflective discussion of my thoughts and interpretations of the findings for the study are provided. Here, I organize my thoughts from the investigation into a clear picture of thoughts and attitudes that undergird the current status of African American students' experiences in a rural school district. In other words, I offer possible explanations for the outcomes of the quantitative findings and qualitative findings for this study.

I present the implications to be used by a rural school district's educators to effectively address the problems and issues that may stifle the success of African American students. I make a strong case for using my findings as the basis for becoming more cognizant of and committed to teaching and reaching African American children.

Finally, I summarize the findings from the investigation. Overall, this article should collectively empower a rural school district's educators with a better understanding of how to teach and reach African American students in a rural school district.

Literature Review

One of the most discussed phenomena in education today is The schooling experiences of African Americants. No other ethnic or racial group has received as much press about its educational struggles as African American students (Cokley, 2006). Much attention has been given to the achievement gap regarding African American students. For example, recent data has shown that the average high school graduation rate for African American students is approximately 60% compared to 80% of their European American counterparts (Aud, Fox, & KewelRamani, 2010).

Reasons cited to African American adolescent academic underachievement range from lack of parental involvement to motivational issues (Graham, 1994; Graham, Taylor, & Hudley, 1998) and academic disidentification (Cokley, 2002, Osborne, 1997), dissonance between home and school (Tyler et al., 2010), poverty and substandard schools in low income areas (Kozol, 1991; McLaren, 2007; McLoyd, Aikens, & Burton, 2006; Spring, 2008), and cultural factors (e.g., oppositional identity) related to race and identity (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

However, two major constructs have been consistently cited as being major influences on the experiences of these students. The constructs are teacher expectations and teacher-student racial congruity (Antrop-Gonzalez & De Jesus, 2006; Bondy & Ross,2008; Carter, 2006; De Leon, 2006; Jamar & Pitts, 2005; Kyburg & Hertberg-Davis, et al., 2006; Lane & Wehby, et al., 2006; Love & Kruger, 2005; Olson, 2008; Rozansky-Lloyd, 2005; Rubie-Davies, 2003;

Singham, 2003; Wentzel, 2002). The remainder of this section highlights key research findings for these constructs.

Teacher Expectations

In general, teacher perceptions (i.e., how they perceive the student), teacher expectations (i.e., what they feel or think the student is capable of doing, and teacher attitudes (i.e., how they interact with the student based on their perceptions and expectations) all impact student achievement. Teachers' attitudes and xpectations can influence classroom climate, shape what they teach and how they teach it, and influence student achievement (Graybill, 1997).

Research has shown that "Black children's achievement is affected by teachers' expectations, perceptions, behavioral styles, and the type and frequency of their interactions with children" (Holliday, 1985, p. 71). In addition, teachers have certain expectations of African American students (Webb-Johnson, Neal, McCray, & Bridgest, 2003). The perceptions have been mostly focused on African American student attitudes and discipline concerns "One of the dominant stereotypes concerning African American males that European Americans teacher expectations tend to hold is that they are hostile, angry, and prone to violence" (p. 50).

Teacher Student Racial Congruity

Extensive research has highlighted beliefs regarding the extent of African American students' success when they are taught by African American teachers. The belief has been that an African American student would learn more when being taught by an African American teacher because they can develop a cultural understanding of each other. In addition, Ferguson (1998) stated that "all children learn more when their home and school environment are well matched, and same race teachers are better able to provide black students with cultural congruence between home and school" (p. 345).

One of the major reasons that this belief has gained power in the literature is that Black teachers "have higher expectations for and interact more positively with Black students than other teachers, thereby increasing the motivation and self-esteem Black students need to take on the challenge of rigorous coursework" (Klopfenstein, 2005, p. 2). In addition, African American teachers believe that there is more to educating the African American student than substantive knowledge. African American teachers teach about life and why education is important to their, African American students, overall success.

Along those same lines, Black teachers have been shown to possess personal experience as well as institutional knowledge that can be particularly valuable for young black students making their way through white-dominated society. These teachers have been highly skilled in communicating with African American students about the personal value, the collective power and the political consequences of choosing academic achievement over failure. These communicative exchanges have empowered and involved many African American students in the uplift of their education.

As a result, the implications from this research are for all teachers to realize that African American students require teachers who are willing to be "admonisher, urger and meddler. Foster referred to this part of black children's schooling, in which Black educators explain to Black students the "political reasons" for "investing in learning" (Tyson, 2003 p.13). They must be willing to teach American students the importance of education in the context of being

African Americans in this mainstream society. This style to teaching guides African American students on how to position themselves successfully as minorities in mainstream society without losing their identity. As Delpit (1995) stated, "positioning minority students for mainstream success requires a delicate balance of explanation and affirmation, for with out this balance, there is a danger of sending messages of cultural deviance to students" (p. 40).

Methodology

Student Participants

The student population for this study was comprised of 120 African American students in a rural school district. The sample was drawn from 4 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, and 1 high school. The sample consisted of 48 elementary students, 27 middle school students, and 45 high school students. The elementary sample for this study consisted of 48 fifth grade students. Of this population, there were 21 males and 27 females. Of this population, 27 students lived in single parent homes. The remaining 21 students lived in 2 parent homes. All of the students ate either free or reduced priced lunch.

The middle school sample for this study consisted of 27 students. Of this population, there were 12 males and 15 females. Of this population, 16 students lived in single parent homes. The remaining 11 students lived in 2 parent homes. All of the students ate either free or reduced priced lunch. The high school sample for this study consisted of 45 students. Of this population, there were 22 males and 23 females. With regards to family life, 27 students lived in single parent homes. The remaining 18 students lived in 2 parent homes. All of the students ate either free or reduced priced lunch (See Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Statistics: African American Students

	Number	Percentage
<u>Gender</u>		
Males	21	43.7%
Females	27	56.3%
<u>Family Structure</u>		
Single Parent Homes	27	43.7%
Two Parent Homes	21	56.3%

Middle Level Students

	Number	Percentage
<u>Gender</u>		
Males	12	44.4%
Females	15	55.6%
<u>Family Structure</u>		
Single Parent Homes	16	59.2%
Two Parent Homes	11	40.8%

High School Students

	Number	Percentage
<u>Gender</u>		
Males	22	48.1%
Females	23	51.9%
<u>Family Structure</u>		
Single Parent Homes	27	60.0%
Two Parent Homes	18	40.0%

Instrumentation

This instrumentation for this study consisted of 2 student centered surveys and 1 teacher survey. The first survey was used to measure elementary students' perceptions of their teachers. The survey featured a demographic variables and a teacher characteristics section. The teacher characteristic sections consisted of 20 items about characteristics of teachers. These items were based on research studies regarding effective teachers of African American students.

The items were divided into two constructs: a cognitive construct and affective construct. The cognitive construct consisted of items related to the instructional aspects of teaching. Sample items for this construct are "My teacher expects me to behave in class"; "My teacher encourages us to work together"; and "My teacher shows us how the different things that we learn relate to each other"

The affective construct consisted of the relational and behavioral aspects of teaching. Sample items for this construct are "I feel loved by my teacher"; "My teacher has some understanding of my lifestyle"; and "If I got into a disagreement with the teacher or another student, my teachers would listen to my side of the story" Students' ratings of teachers were measured on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1-Not True to 5-Very True.

The second survey was a secondary level student motivation survey. The survey featured a demographic variables section and specific factors related to student motivation in schools. The introductory line to the survey was "How important are the factors below in motivating you to put forth an effort to achieve in a class?" Sample items for the survey were "The teacher's attitude about the class"; "My parents' level of support and help given to me"; and "Whether or not the class has other students from my racial group."

Data Collection

I collected the data for this study during focus group sessions with African American students. During the focus group sessions, I administered the surveys to students. I then collected the data and continued with the focus group discussions with students. The student focus group interviews were used to gain further insight into African American students' perceptions of and feelings about their schooling experiences in a rural school district.

Data Analysis

The data analytic methods used for the quantitative questions of this study were a descriptive statistical analysis, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). A descriptive statistical analysis is used to rank the mean scores from a sample population. This analysis was used for all of the student related research questions.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) is used to determine if statistically significant differences exist between groups' perceptions of one dependable variable. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) is used to determine if statistically significant differences exist between groups' perceptions of two or more dependent variables.

The qualitative research questions and focus group discussions were analyzed through coding and theme development. First, responses were analyzed for key words and phrases. The key responses were then grouped together and analyzed to develop common themes.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

Elementary Students

1. What are African American elementary students' perceptions of experiencing teacher related characteristics with their teachers?

A descriptive statistical analysis was used to calculate and rank the mean scores for African American elementary students' perceptions of the extent to which their teachers showed specific teacher characteristics towards them. The findings showed that the three highest ranked mean scores were from the cognitive domain of teaching. The mean scores were "My teacher expects me to behave in class." (4.95); "My teacher expects us to be success in this class." (4.83); and "My teacher can teach." (4.72). The three lowest ranked mean scores were from the affective domain of teaching. These scores were "My teacher has some understanding of my lifestyle." (3.18); "My teachers show interest in things that I do outside of the school." (3.09); and "My teacher calls my family when I do good things in school." (2.94).

Thus, the African American participants for this study very much believed that their teachers could teach and expected success and good behavior from them. On the other hand, they only somewhat believed that their teachers understood them and showed an interest in their lives outside of school. In addition, there was some truth to the notion that teachers called the students' families when the students gave good performances in school (See Table 2).

Table 2

Mean Score Rankings for Elementary Students' Perceptions of Teacher Characteristics

Statement	Mean Score	
1. My teachers expect me to behave in class.	4.95	Cognitive
2. My teachers expect us to be successful in this class.	4.83	Cognitive
3. My teacher can teach.	4.72	Cognitive
4. My teachers make me feel important.	4.63	Affective
5. My teacher makes our class feel like a family in this class.	4.61	Affective
6. I feel loved by my teachers.	4.52	Affective
7. My teachers treat me fair.	4.47	Affective
8. My teachers care for me like my parents care for me.	4.38	Affective
9. My teachers treat me just as good as students from other racial groups.	4.30	Affective
10. My teachers encourage us to work together.	4.28	Cognitive
11. When I make a mistake in class, my teacher talks to me instead of yelling at me.	4.27	Affective
12. My teachers do not accept failure from me.	4.19	Cognitive
13. During class, my teachers use examples I can relate to.	4.13	Cognitive
14. My teacher listens to me.	4.02	Affective
15. If I had a big problem, my teachers would listen to me.	3.97	Cognitive
16. My teachers show us how the different things that we learn relate to each other.	3.84	Cognitive
17. If I got into a disagreement with the teacher or another student, my teachers would listen to my side of the story.	3.77	Affective
18. My teacher has some understanding of my lifestyle.	3.18	Affective
19. My teachers show interest in things that I do outside of the school.	3.09	Affective
20. My teachers call my family when I do good things in school.	2.94	Affective

Multivariate Analysis of Variances Findings

A series of Multivariate Analysis of Variances (MANOVAs) were conducted to determine if any statistically significant gender-based, family structural, and socioeconomic status differences existed among African American students' perceptions of the extent to which teachers showed specific teacher related characteristics towards them. The findings from this analysis revealed that there were no statistically significant gender based differences, family structural differences, or socioeconomic status differences among students' perceptions of teacher characteristics.

2. What are the factors that motivate African American students to pursue achievement in a rural school district?

A descriptive statistical analysis was used to calculate and rank the mean scores for African American elementary students' perceptions of factors that motivate them to achieve in school. The findings showed that the three highest ranked mean scores were "Whether or not the teacher recognizes and helps me when I don't understand the lesson." (4.42); "The way in which the teacher explains the subject." (4.42); and "My belief in whether or not I can do well in the class." (4.69). The three lowest ranked mean scores were "Whether or not the class has other students from my racial group" (2.46); "The gender of the teacher" (1.79); and "The race of the teacher" (1.67).

Thus, the African American participants for this study perceived that it was important for them have teachers who gave clear explanations of the subject and assisted them with understanding the lesson. Another important motivational factor was the extent to which the students believed that they could succeed in class. On the other hand, neither race nor gender played significant roles in motivating these students to achieve in school. In this regard, the students' motivation for learning was not influenced by the race or gender of the teacher or if classrooms consisted of other African American students (See Table 3).

Table 3

Mean Score Rankings for Factors That Motivate African American Student Achievement

Item	Mean Score
1. Whether or not the teacher recognizes and helps me when I don't understand the lesson.	4.42
2. The way in which the teacher explains the subject.	4.42
3. My belief in whether or not I can do well in the class.	4.34
4. The way in which the teacher treats me in the class.	4.32
5. The teacher's attitude about the class.	4.28
6. My parents' level of support and help given to me.	4.26
7. Whether or not the teacher listens to me.	4.20
8. Whether or not the teacher believes that I can be successful in the class.	4.16
9. The way in which the teacher treats me in comparison to students from other racial groups.	4.14
10. Whether or not the teacher is able to keep the class focused.	4.12
11. The amount of homework for this class.	3.57
12. Whether or not the teacher understands me as a person.	3.51
13. The number of quizzes and tests given by the teacher.	3.46
14. Whether or not I will be able to work in groups with other students.	3.22
15. Whether or not the teacher recognizes me when I do well on a test, lesson, or anything in the class.	3.12
16. Whether or not the teacher makes an effort to form a relationship with me.	3.08
17. Whether or not some of my friends are in this class.	2.59
18. Whether or not the class has other students from my racial group.	2.46
19. The gender of the teacher.	1.79
20. The race of the teacher.	1.67

Multivariate Analysis of Variance Findings

A series of Multivariate Analysis of Variances (MANOVAs) were conducted to determine if any statistically significant gender-based, family structural, socioeconomic, grade configuration, and class structural differences existed among students' perceptions of factors that motivate them to achieve in school. The findings from this analysis showed that grade level configuration, $F(2, 87) = 2.79$, $p < .05$, had a statistically significant impact on African American students' perceptions of the factors that motivated them to achieve in school.

The findings showed that middle school students placed higher importance on six motivational factors for learning than did high school students. The items were as follows: "Whether or not the teacher believes that I can be successful in the class" (Middle School-4.41; High School-3.92); "My parents level of support and help given to me" (Middle School-4.62; High School-3.92); "Whether or not the teacher recognizes me when I do well on a test, lesson, or anything in the class" (Middle School-3.41; High School-2.84); "The way in which the teacher treats me in comparison to students from other racial groups" (Middle School-4.33; High School-3.96); "Whether or not the teacher makes an effort to form a relationship with me" (Middle School-3.79; High School-2.40); and "Whether or not I will be able to work in groups with other students" (Middle School-3.59; High School-2.96) (See Table 4).

Table 4

School Configuration Comparisons of African American Students' Perceptions of Factors That Motivate Them to Achieve in School

Statement	Configuration	Mean Score
1. The teacher's attitude about the class.	Middle School	4.08
	High School	4.48
2. My belief in whether or not I can do well in the class.	Middle School	4.41
	High School	4.28
3. The way in which the teacher treats me in the class.	Middle School	4.20
	High School	4.44
4. Whether or not the teacher believes that I can be successful in the class.	Middle School	4.41
	High School	3.92
5. My parents' level of support and help given to me.	Middle School	4.62
	High School	3.92
6. Whether or not the teacher recognizes me when I do well on a test, lesson, or anything in the class.	Middle School	3.41
	High School	2.84
7. Whether or not the class has other students from my racial group.	Middle School	2.29
	High School	2.64
8. The way in which the teacher treats me in comparison to students from other racial groups.	Middle School	4.33
	High School	3.96
9. The way in which the teacher explains the subject.	Middle School	4.25
	High School	4.60
10. Whether or not the teacher understands me as a person.	Middle School	3.95
	High School	3.08
11. Whether or not the teacher makes an effort to form a relationship with me.	Middle School	3.79
	High School	2.40
12. Whether or not the teacher recognizes and helps me when I don't understand the lesson.	Middle School	4.54
	High School	4.32
13. Whether or not some of my friends are in this class.	Middle School	2.75
	High School	2.44
14. The gender of the teacher.	Middle School	1.91
	High School	1.68
15. Whether or not the teacher listens to me.	Middle School	4.37
	High School	4.04

16. Whether or not the teacher is able to keep the class focused.	Middle School	4.16
	High School	4.08
17. The race of the teacher.	Middle School	1.66
	High School	1.68
18. Whether or not I will be able to work in groups with other students.	Middle School	3.50
	High School	2.96
19. The amount of homework for this class.	Middle School	3.62
	High School	3.52
20. The number of quizzes and tests given by the teacher.	Middle School	3.50
	High School	3.44

Qualitative Findings

4. How do African American students describe their experiences in elementary school, middle school, and high school?

Elementary Students

The findings from the elementary student focus group discussions showed that African American elementary students were very adjusted to their schools. In addition, nearly all of the students indicated that they were treated with fairness and equality at their elementary schools. The students also indicated that they had positive interactions with students from other racial groups. Some key comments from these discussions included but were not limited to:

"I really like my classmates. We are always helping each other with stuff."

"My teacher makes us feel like a family. Nobody gets treated differently because of their skin color."

"I don't like changing classes. But I do like the people in my classes."

"My teacher, Ms. Boe, is a good math teacher. She does treat me fair."

Secondary Students

The findings from the secondary focus group discussions showed that race was a defining factor in the schooling experiences of African American middle school students and African American high school students. The students perceived that because of their skin color, they experienced low expectations and differential treatment at their schools. In this section, I further explain the students' views and feelings regarding this theme.

Low Expectations and Differential Treatment

I found that numerous African American middle school students perceived that teachers held low expectations for African American students. For example, I asked one group of African American students if they perceived that teachers held the same expectations for all students. The students indicated that they observed that teacher expectations were based on race.

Other students shared similar feelings regarding teacher expectations. For example, during my discussion with another group of middle school students, I learned that these students believed that most of their teachers did not expect African American students to show positive behavior in school. An African American student from this group provided an insightful analysis regarding race and teacher expectations. The student's statement is as follows:

> Teachers expect us to act bad and they show it in how they treat us in comparison to the White kids. For example, if a White person says something bad or wrong, I've seen teachers say, 'Don't say that no more'. But if a Black person says something bad or wrong, the teacher will yell at them and then send them in the hallway or office.

Afterwards, all of the students begin to discuss the different treatment experienced by African American students at the middle school. Some of their comments regarding this issue were as follows:

> "The teachers here watch us because we're Black."

> "We get looked at harder because of the color of our skin."

> "We don't get respected like White kids do."

> "If you are White at this school, you get treated nice. But if you are Black, you get the business."

> "White teachers at this school could care less about Black kids. But White kids-they get major props from their teachers."

Most of the students discussed their feelings of experiencing racial inequality with teachers. According to these students, African American students were often treated very differently from Caucasian American students. For example, one African American girl indicated that one of her teachers targets her for "every little incident." However, when Caucasian American students commit similar incidents, the teacher does not redirect these students. In her words, the student said: "I just don't get it. It's not fair to me that I don't have the same opportunities as Whites in this one classroom!" This student further indicated that many of her Caucasian American classmates recognized the racial disparities in how this teacher treated her in comparison to Caucasian American students.

As another example, one African American female student stated that one teacher intentionally places her in positions that lead to trouble. She then said that the teacher does not address the trouble caused by Caucasian American students. The student said:

> I have one teacher who sits me next to a friend (African American girl) that she knows that I will talk to. And when me and the friend talk, we get into trouble. But when other White kids talk, the teacher says nothing.

One of the most telling examples of racial inequality emerged from a conversation with a group of high achieving African American students. The conversation centered on race and school discipline. An African American female started the conversation by stating that African American students receive harsher consequences for breaking school rules than Caucasian American students. She said:

> It's really sad, but here's the deal. I'm not going to say that Black students at this school (high school) are perfect-cause we're not. But we are no better or worse than Whites or Mexicans. But what happens is that when we (Black students) do something wrong, they automatically write us up. They don't even try to hear our side of the story. They just downright disrespectful in handling us. But they look at White kids on a whole nother level-like they are Gods are something. They do the same things that we do in the same class-but get treated totally different. They get second chances, talked to nicer, and sometimes not even called out on what they are doing.

Discussion

The crux of the findings for this report is the perception of race and socioeconomic status regarding African American students. The findings from this study showed that after elementary school, African American students seemed to define their schooling experiences in accordance to race. Based on my findings, I believe that their perceptions are shaped by three factors. The factors are treatment, expectations, and racism.

Many middle school students and high school students perceived that they were treated differently from Caucasian American students. The inequitable treatment was prevalent during instructional time and situations related to school discipline. The commonalities of these experiences are that an uplifting approach was used to address Caucasian American students during instructional situations and disciplinary situations. However, a derogatory approach was used to respond to African American students in these same situations.

For example, many secondary level African American students gave examples of why they believed that being African American caused school officials to respond to them in racially charged ways. Specifically, the students attributed the differential treatment to teacher expectations for African American children. In every focus group session, secondary students offered specific examples of why they believed that teachers held low expectations for African American students. The students attributed the low expectations to teachers' beliefs about African American people.

These students, many of whom are model students, strongly believed that teachers use these stereotypes to determine what to expect from **ALL** African American students. At the high school level, several African American students implied that racism was the cause for the unfair treatment and low expectations given to African American students. As one student said: "I just don't get it. It's not fair to me that I don't have the same opportunities as Whites in this one classroom!"

Implications

The implications from this report are for a rural school district educators to use a deliberate, racially conscious approach to improve the academic achievement of African American students. Teachers must be cognizant of how their actions are viewed by African American students. This implication is especially important for Caucasian American teachers. This suggestion does not mean that Caucasian American teachers are racist towards African American students. Evidence to this effect is seen in elementary aged African American students' belief in their teachers' fair treatment of them and students from other racial groups. Along those same lines, a few middle school students and high school students did not indicate that their Caucasian American teachers were racist towards them.

However, many African American middle school students and African American high school students did indicate that some Caucasian American teachers either held low expectations for or showed different treatment towards African American students. To truly understand this perception, Caucasian American teachers should reflect on the role of race in their interactions with African American students. Specifically, Caucasian American teachers must realize that many African American students are highly raced individuals with sensitive views about race.

Given that most of their adult interactions will be with Caucasian American teachers, African American students will use race as the litmus test for shaping the extent to which they feel that are being subjected to low expectations and differential treatment. As such, Caucasian American teachers must realize that these perceptions are not solely resultant of the socioeconomic status of African American students. Instead, the perceptions are shaped by how race plays out for African American children within their schools.

For example, African American students spoke about low expectations and differential treatment at the secondary school level. These perceptions and experiences were shared by low-income African American students and middle-income African American students. Thus, the commonality of these experiences is that the school culture played a direct role in how these students' viewed their Blackness in schools.

Principals must design a color embracing culture that is conducive to African American student achievement. To initiate this goal, principals must engage teachers in critical conversations about race. With support from this report, these conversations should first inform teachers about the seriousness of the daily racial negotiations of African American students in schools.

The conversations should then be transformed into job embedded solutions for meeting the needs of African American students. For example, African American elementary aged students perceived that they were treated with equality at their schools. Notwithstanding, elementary principals must continue to work with teachers on transforming this finding into

integrated approaches for effectively teaching elementary aged African American students. That is, these principals must continue to impress upon their teachers the importance of using specific instructional strategies to teach African American students.

Secondary level principals must engage their teachers in critical ways of examining the prevalence of low expectations, differential treatment, and racism in their classrooms. This suggestion is not designed to make teachers feel that they are intentionally racist towards African American students. Instead, this suggestion is indicative of the need for teachers to understand how their race and position and teachers impact the ways in which they are viewed by African American students.

Finally, principals must make an extra effort to create positive racial identity development experiences for African American students. Because of being in the minority group on many campuses, some African American students may feel alienated, isolated, and lonely in their schools. As such, principals must work with their teachers to empower these students to see that being Black and smart is and must be viable and vital parts, respectively, of the schooling experiences.

From the central office perspective, the superintendent must intentionally and openly advocate for the development of African American children in a rural school district. The most important step is for the superintendent to develop the findings from this report into an important, integrated part of the "It Matters" theme of a rural school district.

To put strategy to structure, the superintendent must work with other district level officials to engage principals in discussions about the district's focus on cultural diversity into racial diversity understanding within schools. In this context, cultural diversity denotes the importance of being aware of differences among racial groups through a cultural lens. Central office leaders must help other educators to understand that culture may sometimes fail to address the true racial causes of African American students' underperformance within schools.

Racial diversity is defined as placing value on the differences among racial groups. With the appreciation component, educators are challenged to understand the differences among racial groups through the lens of racial justice. That is, they are challenged to understand how race creates hierarchical differences among students and then develop a color embracing approach to eliminating these disparities to benefit African American students.

Using this definition as a guide, central office administrators must engage principals and teachers in answering the following racially diverse questions:

1. What is race and how does this factor play out for African American students in a rural school district?

2. What are the racialized aspects of the school culture that defines schools?

3. To what extent does school culture impact the way in which African American students negotiate their racial identity in elementary schools, middle schools, and the high school?

4. What are the barriers to teacher awareness, understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of the need to apply a color-embracing approach towards educating African American students?

5. What are the realities of African American students' perceptions of low expectations in a rural school district?

6. To what extent have district educators considered the way in which color blind approaches to teaching short change the schooling experiences of African American students?

7. To what extent do district educators recognize the importance of providing African American students with positive racial identity development experiences in a rural school district?

By using this framework as a guide, central office administrators can move the diversity agenda from being aware of differences to making an authentic commitment to addressing racial disparities that impact African American children. Second, central office administrators can further develop a proactive district wide effort towards removing any deeply ingrained barriers to facilitating educational experiences for African American students.

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this investigation was to examine 120 African American students' schooling experiences in a rural school district. African American elementary students indicated that they were treated with equality at their schools. However, middle school students and high school students believed that they experienced racial discord on their campuses. These students believed that many of their teachers mistreated and held low expectations for them because of skin color.

Because of these findings, district educators should design specific race embracing strategies for enhancing the academic and behavioral development of African American students. The design should be structured in accordance to critical conversations about the racial implications of teaching African American students. These strategies are grounded in a social-justice approach towards validating African American students' experiences in public schools. If used appropriately, the strategies will enhance teachers' knowledge, skills, and disposition towards effectively teaching and reaching every African American child in a rural school district.

References

Antrop-Gonzalez, R., & De Jesus, A. (2006). Toward a theory of critical care in urban
    small school reform: examining structures and pedagogies of caring in two Latino
    community-based schools. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in
    Education, 19,* 309-433.
Aud, S., Fox, M., & KewalRamani, A. (2010). Status and trends in the education of racial and
    ethnic groups (NCES 2010-015). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for
    Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Bondy, E. & Ross, D.D. (2008, September). The teacher as warm demander. *Educational Leadership,* 54-60.

Carter, S. P. (2006). "She would've still made that face expression": the use of multiple literacies by two African American young women. *Theory into Practice, 45,* 352-358.

Cokley, K. (2002). Ethnicity, gender and academic self-concept: A preliminary examination of academic disidentification and implications for psychologists. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 8*(4), 378–388.

Cokley, K. (2006). The Impact of Racialized Schools and Racist (Mis) Education on African American Students' Academic Identity. In M. G. Constantine & D. W. Sue (Eds.), *Addressing racism: Facilitating cultural competence in mental health and educational settings (*pp. 127–144). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

De Leon, A. (2006). Beware of 'black' the ripper! Racism, representation, and building antiracist pedagogy. *The Social Studies,* 263-269.

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom.* New York, NY: New Press.

Fordham, S. (1988). Racelessness as a factor in Black student's school success: Pragmatic strategy or pyrrhic victory? *Harvard Educational Review, 58*(1), 54–84.

Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the "burden of acting White." *Urban Review*, 18, 176–206.

Graham, S. (1994). Motivation in African Americans. *Review of Educational Research*, *64*, 55–118.

Graham, S., Taylor A., & Hudley, C. (1998). Exploring achievement values among ethnic minority early adolescents. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 90*(4), 606–620. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.90.4.606

Klopfenstein, K. (2005). Beyond test scores: The impact of black teacher role models on rigorous math taking [Abstract]. *Contemporary Economic Policy, 23*(3), 416-428.

Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools.* New York, NY: Crown.

Kyburg, R. M., Hertberg-Davis, H., & Callahan, C. M. (2006). Advanced placement and international baccalaureate programs: optimal learning environments for talented minorities? *Journal of Advanced Academics, 18,* 172-215.

Lane, K. L., Wehby, J. H., & Colley, C. (2006). Teacher expectations of students' classroom behavior across the grade span: Which social skills are necessary for success? *Exceptional Children, 72,* 153-167.

Love, A., & Kruger, A. C. (2005). Teacher beliefs and student achievement in urban schools serving African American students. *The Journal of Educational Research, 99,* 87-100.

McLaren, P. (2007). *Life in schools* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

McLoyd, V. C., Aikens, N. L., & Burton, L. M. (2006). Childhood poverty, policy, and practice. In W. Damon & R. Lerner (Eds), *Handbook of child psychology* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Wiley.

Osborne, J. W. (1997). Race and academic disidentification. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 89*(4), 728–735.

Rozansky-Lloyd, C. (2005). African Americans in schools: tiptoeing around racism. *The Western Journal of Black Studies, 29,* 595-606.

Rubie-Davies, C.M. (2003). Classroom interactions: exploring the practices of high- and low-expectation teachers. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 77*, 289-315.

Singham, M. (2003). The achievement gap: myths and reality. *Phi Delta Kappan,* 586-592.

Spring, J. (2008). American education (13th education 913th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Tyler, K., Brown-Wright, L., Stevens-Watkins, D., Thomas, D., Stevens, R., Roan-Belle, C., & Smith, L. (2010). Linking home-school dissonance to school-based outcomes for African American high school students. *Journal of Black Psychology, 36*(4), 410–425.

Tyson, K. (2003). Notes from the back room: Problems and paradoxes in the schooling of young black students. *Sociology of Education, 76*(4), 326.

Webb-Johnson, G., Neal, L.I., McCray, A.D., & Bridgest, S.T. (2003). The effects of African American movement styles on teachers‟ perception and reactions. *The Journal of Special Education, 37*(1), 49-57.

Wentzel, K.R. (2002). Are effective teachers like good parents? Teaching styles and student adjustment in early adolescence. *Child Development,* 287-301.