Closing the Color Gap in Teaching:
A Study on African American Middle School Students’ Perceptions of Teaching

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Abstract

This study is part of a research study funded by the Texas A & M Regent’s Initiative. The study investigated the perceptions and attitudes of African American middle school students towards teaching. Participants in the study were 256 African American middle school students in Harris and Waller counties in Texas. A questionnaire was used to collect data. Results using the chi-square test indicate that a significantly high number of African American middle school students have already made decisions about their life career and that females are more likely to become teachers than males. Based on the findings from this study, middle school students do realize the shortcomings of the teaching profession. Efforts to attract African Americans into teaching should therefore address these shortcomings if we are to succeed in closing the gap between the percentage of African Americans in the educational system and the percentage of African Americans in the teaching profession.

Teacher shortages have been a major issue across the nation for the last two decades (Gerald & Hussar, 2000; Fideler & Haselkorn, 1999). Education Week's comprehensive report on the nation's teacher labor market, Quality Counts 2000, and other sources indicate that over two million new teachers will be needed in America's schools over the course of the next decade (Merrow, 1999; Riley, 1998). According to the “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001,” the...
goal is to have a qualified teacher in every classroom by the year 2006. Despite efforts to satisfy this mandate, states and schools, have not fulfilled this goal for schools with high percentages of minorities and low socio-economic students (Prince, 2002). Trends in teacher supply and demand have been influenced by many factors over the years, including changing demographics and the economy, as well as political and social conditions. While the number of people entering the teaching profession has grown during the last decade, the projected demand for teachers indicates a shortfall of serious proportions especially in the areas of math, science, bilingual/ESL, special education, and minority populations (Gerald & Hussar, 1998).

Public schools do not currently reflect diversity in the teaching force, and according to current trends, 40 percent of the student population is minority, but only 5 percent of the teachers are minorities (Gerald & Hussar, 2000). Several short-term efforts, like alternative certification programs, waiving tuition in college, and forgiving students loans, have been implemented to address the projected need for educators. However, short-term solutions, no matter how effective, will not replace a systematic method of attracting and keeping large numbers of students into teacher education programs.

The process of career awareness and ultimately career choice is influenced by many factors, although primarily by an interaction between identity formation and family (Bregman, & Killen, 1999; Bluestein & Noumair, 1996; Lopez & Andrews, 1987). When students reach high school, they make a series of choices that will ultimately determine their career paths. Unfortunately, many high school students are inadequately prepared to make decisions relating to their future because there were few programs available in middle schools to provide the necessary guidance from teachers, counselors, and parents (Boyer, 1993; Peterson, Long, & Billups, 1999). If students are to graduate from high school with teaching as a career goal, programs must be in place on the middle school level to interest and guide them toward this objective.

Without reliable data that reflect middle school students’ current level of interest in teaching, their already formed impressions about teaching as a profession, and their parents’ and peers’ views about teaching, it will be difficult to create an effective career awareness program about teaching that will encourage students to select education as a career path in high school and later in college. Little, if any, data is available to indicate middle school student preferences for different types of career awareness activities, and available student opinion data on teaching as a profession is almost entirely concerned with high school and college level students or those adults considering teaching as an alternative career. Without long-term approaches to teacher recruitment, like targeting middle school students, many students will continue to choose other career paths. Those professions that do recruit early will recruit the best and brightest, academic progress will suffer, and minorities will continue to be under-represented in teacher ranks.
The Study

In a study funded by the Texas Agricultural & Mechanical University Systems (TAMUS) Regents’ Initiative, six hundred and fifty six middle school students were surveyed to determine their career choices, attitudes, and perceptions of the teaching profession in order to formulate strategies that will help address shortages in science, mathematics and special education and minority populations (Mason & Hansen, 2002). Responses of the 256 African American middle school students to questions in the survey related to the research questions in this article are presented and discussed. Special attention is given to socio-economic status (SES), gender and grade level differences in African American middle school students that are associated with the teaching profession.

Research Questions

1) Do African American middle school students think about their future careers?
2) What are the careers of interest to African American middle school students?
3) What are African American middle school students’ attitudes toward teaching, and teaching as a career?
4) Will African American middle school students choose to attend college, and will they see scholarships as an inducement to select teaching as a career?
5) What demographic factors (gender, SES, grade level) affect African American middle school students’ attitudes towards teaching?

Participants

The survey was conducted during the 2002-2003 school year. The identities of the respondents were not reported in this study. The population for this study was middle school students in the Harris and Waller counties in Texas. The sampling method used to select the participating classes was cluster sampling. Three middle schools were randomly selected and classes from these schools were randomly selected to participate in the study. Eight hundred and fifty questionnaires were sent out to various schools and 656 (77%) of the questionnaires were returned. Of the respondents 256 were African American middle school students in 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. The gender distribution for the African American middle school students was 50% males and 50%
females. Fifty three percent of the African American students participated in the reduced lunch program, which is used as an indicator for their socio-economic level.

**Research Design and Instrument**

The research design for this study was a quantitative descriptive design. Descriptive research involves the collection and analysis of quantitative data in order to develop a precise description of a sample’s behavior or personal characteristics. The survey approach was used in this study to collect information about the participants’ attitudes and interests, through a questionnaire. The questionnaire included demographic variables and items with categories provided for selection. It consisted of 30 questions presented in a systematic, structured and highly precise fashion. The questions were developed to elicit information related to several variables of interest and were directly related to the purpose of the study. The questionnaire was relatively easy to answer, was designed to require minimal time for completion, and excluded questions that might have caused embarrassment for the students or reflected negatively on them. The reliability of the questionnaire using split half reliability was 0.762. The survey administrators were provided with specific information and instructions for completing the survey and were asked to distribute, monitor and retrieve the questionnaires from the students.

**Limitations**

Because survey research is based on self-report, students might have concealed information they do not want others to know, or might not have been in a position to give accurate information. Data in this study are likely to be distorted or incomplete and should be interpreted with caution.
Table 1 - Tally of responses to pertinent questions, and chi-square significance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Have you decided what you want to be in life?</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do you admire teachers?</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do you think teachers are well paid?</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Do you think most of your teachers like teaching?</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Do you think you could help others by becoming a teacher?</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Has a teacher ever helped you?</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Has anyone talked to you about becoming a teacher?</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Would you like to be a teacher when you are older?</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Do you know what classes to take in high school if you want to be a teacher?</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Are you planning to go to college after you graduate from high school?</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. If you are given a teaching scholarship for college will you become a teacher?</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 256
Significant at 0.05 level = *
Missing values omitted

Table 1 gives a summary of responses to pertinent questions in the survey. The chi-square results provide a description of the thought processes, and preferences that contribute to the selection of teaching as a career by African American middle school students.
Table 2-Career Choices indicated by students, in percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Doctor</th>
<th>Attorney</th>
<th>Pro-Athlete</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students’ choices of profession</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ choices of professions their parents will like them to pursue</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ choices of professions their friends will like to pursue</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td>7.25%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ choices of professions most respected in their community</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 256

Table 2 gives a breakdown of the top four categories of professions African American middle school students want to pursue, what their parents would like them to be, what their friends want to be, and the profession most respected in their communities. The rest of the career categories are grouped under the heading ‘other’ and the indicated percentages is an aggregate of the total percentages for these categories. The top choices of careers for students and their peers are professional sports, while the top choices of parents and the community is medicine.

Table 3-Chi-square test for independence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>SES</th>
<th>Grade level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$X^2$</td>
<td>df</td>
<td>$X^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Decision</td>
<td>.198</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.306</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 displays the results of chi-squared tests that were conducted to test the independence of the categorical variables, gender, SES, and grade level with the different responses.

**Findings**

The chi-square results shown in table 1 indicate that a significantly higher number of the middle school students had already made decisions about their life career, said they admire teachers, thought teachers like teaching, and believed they can help others by becoming teachers. A significantly higher number of the students also said they have been helped by teachers, and are planning to go to college when they graduate from high school. On the other hand, a significantly higher number of the respondents thought teachers' salaries were low, and would not become teachers, even if they were offered scholarships for teaching. A significantly higher number also indicated that nobody had ever talked to them about teaching, and did not know what classes to take in high school if they chose to become teachers.

Results shown in table 2 indicate that the most preferred career for African American middle school students and their peers was becoming a professional athlete. This can be attributed to the large percentage of African Americans in professional sports. However according to the students, their parents and community preferred medicine as a career. It is disheartening to see that even though teaching is respected in the community, parents do not seem to encourage their children to become teachers.

Results of the chi-squared analysis on gender shown in table 3 indicate no significant relationship between the grouping variable gender, and the variables teacher admiration, career decision, teachers’ salaries, teaching if given a
scholarship, and being talked to about becoming a teacher. This implies that responses to these categories were independent of the gender of the respondents. There is a significant relationship between gender and making teaching a career, suggesting that females are more likely to become teachers than males.

Results of the chi-squared analysis on socio-economic status shown in table 3 indicated no significant relationship between the grouping variable SES, and any of the test variables.

Results of the analyses on grade level shown in table 3 indicated no significant relationship between the grouping variable SES, and any of the test variables.

**Discussion**

Education for African American children is becoming increasingly important, because of the widening gap in achievement between African American students and students from other races. Teachers can have the greatest influences on students and can make a considerable difference in their lives. However, ever so often, teachers of other races and culture instruct African American students, denying them the opportunity to have models with similar backgrounds and culture, which can motivate them to perform better and meet the challenges that still exist for African American students in society. Added to the importance of African American teachers as role models, minority teachers also bring diverse perspectives into the classrooms and help to shape the curriculum by incorporating pedagogical styles for a population that is racially and culturally diverse.

There has been a decline in the percentage of African American teachers, because the average age of African American teachers in the workforce is higher than the average age of other groups, and the rate of replacement of these teachers has not kept pace with the rate of retirement. Currently, the missing link is the absence of a significant percentage of African American teachers in the classroom and it is imperative that we attract more African Americans into teaching to make up the deficit. Legislators and Administrators have taken the initiative to promote the recruitment and retention of African Americans into the teaching profession, but these efforts are being hampered by low salaries, career opportunities in other fields, the perception of teaching within the African American community, and changes in certification requirements. Furthermore, salaries and work conditions have also been shown to be less attractive in school districts that are predominantly minority and this has further exacerbated the recruitment dilemma.

Early adolescence is a time when youth develop attitudes and perspectives about their roles as adults (Toepfer, 1994). Middle school students regard specific careers as imbued with different amount of status, and at this age, status is an important issue (Herring, 1998). Early recruitment efforts can contribute significantly to fulfilling the goal of having more African American teachers in
the classroom if the current status of teachers is enhanced. These efforts should include creating programs in middle schools to catch the interest of students, giving teachers a more positive image, and making teachers’ salaries more attractive. The efforts can be further strengthened by educating parents and the public about the benefits of teaching, such as job security, longer vacations, and the importance of the profession to the democratic process of our society.

Young adolescents rarely have opportunities to explore various careers in realistic ways, and often rely on stereotypical views of specific careers (Farmer, 1995; Guss & Adams, 1998; McDonald & Jessell, 1992). Based on results from this study, students as early as in middle school do realize the shortcomings of the teaching profession. Efforts to attract African Americans into teaching should therefore address these shortcomings if we are to succeed in closing the gap between the percentage of African Americans in the educational system and the percentage of African Americans in the teaching profession.

References


