

## **School Factors That Influence Closing the Academic Achievement Gap for African American Students**

**Steven Norfleet**

PhD Student in Educational Leadership  
Prairie View A&M University  
College of Education

**William Allan Kritsonis, PhD**  
**Professor**

PhD Program in Educational Leadership  
Prairie View A&M University  
Member of the Texas A&M University System  
**Visiting Lecturer (2005)**  
Oxford Round Table  
University of Oxford, Oxford, England  
**Distinguished Alumnus (2004)**  
Central Washington University  
College of Education and Professional Studies

---

### **ABSTRACT**

**This article focuses on closing the academic achievement gap for African American students in public schools and find school practices and conditions that will significantly reduce the gap. From the “War on Poverty” in the 1960’s to No Child Left Behind today, state and federal testing indicates no change in the gap to minimum change at best. What are the perceptions on what works in schools in the views of students, teachers, and counselors? The authors pursue this question.**

---

### **Introduction**

**C**losing the academic achievement gap for African American students continues to be a challenge for public school educators. Capturing the one learning style or the most conducive school environment or both could significantly change the dynamics to the problem of African American academic performance in public schools.

Most of the research so far focuses on socioeconomic factors, hiring the best teachers, working with learning styles, improving school culture, performance on high stakes testing, to decreasing the dropout rate, increased parent involvement, or to the principal's effectiveness in leadership. Although research in these areas certainly contributes to the understanding of the academic achievement gap, there is little research on the African American student at majority African American campuses.

The purpose of the article is to review current literature on what works for African American students in public high schools in closing the achievement gap. Particularly, the writer's interest is to center-in on the practices and conditions that high schools can control where African American students are in the majority, with the intent of providing some direction on where we should go from here. Sondra Cooney (2001) points out in *Closing Gaps in the Middle School*, that "District and school leaders can change the climate for learning by examining what successful schools do. Successful leaders listen to what students and teachers say about their schools, and they raise expectations. These leaders understand how effective instructional practices and deeper knowledge of content can improve student achievement." This article elects to discuss current literature, within the last five years, on African American academic achievement from the perspective of teachers, counselors, students, and researchers.

### **Culturally Relevant Practices**

One key to what works best for African American students is practicing culturally relevant practices (Love and Krueger, 2005). In a study conducted by Jacqueline Jordan Irvine (2004), the focus of the study was to assist practicing African American teachers in middle and elementary schools to develop effective classroom practices in working with African American students in urban settings. Unlike what these teachers were taught in university education programs, the teachers found right away in their teaching experiences that when teaching African American students, they had to adjust their teaching style to accommodate teaching in terms of caring, using other mothering skills, demonstrating a strong belief in African American students, demanding the best, balanced discipline, as well as adopting the teaching profession as a calling. A few specifics when teaching African American students are:

#### **Teaching by Caring**

- Care by providing honest and truthful feedback about their performance.
- Care but never relinquish authority or attempt to be friends of the students.

- Demonstrate that caring represents a whole history of African American culture including learning opportunities; learning is the key to success, and respect for the achievement of knowledge.
- Focus on caring in all aspects of the student's life, not just interpersonal ways.

### **Teaching by Other Mothering**

- Teachers are motivated because of their desires to help students learn and advance the cultural group.
- Teachers have a sense of emotional attachment, kinship, and want to develop a sense of personal attachment to the students.

### **Teaching by Believing**

- Teachers believe that African American students can learn and demand their highest performance.

### **Teaching is Demanding the Best**

- Teachers have high expectations and demanded the highest performance from each student.

### **Teaching is Disciplining**

- Teachers are warm demanders, dedicated, respectful, and competent.

### **Teaching is a Calling**

- The teachers in this report saw their position in the community as a spiritual calling.

### **Highly Effective Teachers**

In a study conducted by Angela Love and Ann Cale Krueger (2005), the study points out research by (Boykin, 1983, 1994; Willis, 1992, 1998) that “African American students might learn best in an environment whose style is relational and personal, like an extended family.” Love and Krueger also reference in their research an ethnographic study conducted by Ladson-Billings (1994). The study focused on eight highly effective teachers that were recommended by principals, colleagues, and parents as being successful with African American students. Teacher comments were summarized in the study as follows:

- Teachers provided students on regular basis opportunities to learn collectively and cooperatively.
- Few assumptions were made about student prior knowledge.
- Teaching was viewed as an art.
- Teaching was viewed as giving back to the community, knowledge was reciprocal, and critical thinking skills were accentuated.

Ladson-Billings referred to this as culturally relevant beliefs, but they seem to work well for teachers of African American students in public schools. Another key point that was brought out in the study is that all eight highly effective teachers endorsed the use of repetition, drill, and practice.

### **Learning Mathematics**

Vivian Moody ((2004) followed two African American female high school students, chronicling their perspectives on learning mathematics from two different orientations of life. Of particular focus was the role of sociocultural orientations of the students in mathematics. One orientation was being a student as a minority of the campus enrollment and the other orientation was being a student as part of the majority enrollment on a different campus. Both students contributed their mathematical success in the following points:

- Being able to identify with caring educators were important constituents to their success.
- Teachers encouraged student efforts often and made special efforts to help them succeed.
- Teachers believed by saying you can do it.
- Teachers provided opportunities to learn upper level mathematics.
- Teachers were approachable and made themselves available.

- Both students had a preference for female African American mathematics teachers.

### **Noncognitive Model**

Powell and Arriola (2003) research on the Relationship Between Psychosocial Factors and Academic Achievement Among African American Students was guided by a noncognitive model for academic achievement. Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) found that there were seven noncognitive variables that are especially predictive of academic achievement among students of ethnic or racial minority background. Of the seven variables, Powell and Arriola focused on community service, academic motivation, social support, and student method for handling unfair treatment. Eighty-four African American high school students enrolled in an academy for health sciences participated in the study. Four hypotheses were drawn from the model as good predictors of African American student success including higher academic motivation yields a higher GPA, students that perceived themselves having strong social support yields higher GPA's, students that persevered by talking things out to others when faced with unfairness yields a higher GPA, and students that demonstrate community service yields a higher GPA. Only the method of coping with unfair treatment was associated with GPA. Therefore, Powell and Arriola concluded that African American students who talk things out to others about their problems are more likely to seek help in their schoolwork, which yields the likelihood of a higher GPA.

### **How Schools Can Help Minority Students**

Based on an ethnographic study conducted by John Ogbu, Erwin Flaxman (2003) points out how Ogbu investigated how schools can help minority students be more academically engaged and better achievers. In his research, students reported that they felt that the lack of discipline and other disruptive behavior in the classes where they were in the majority were not conducive to learning, unlike the advanced placement classes (Flaxman, 2003). Ogbu's research further recommends that, for students to be successful each student needs help in developing and distinguishing long and short term goals, as well as improved study habits and study skills to resist anti-academic peer pressure (Flaxman, 2003).

S. Kent Butler (2003), in an article entitled Helping Urban African American High School Students to Excel Academically: The Role of School Counselors, makes several important recommendations in the pivotal role school counselors can play in helping to ensure African American student academic success.

- When conceptualizing strategies to affect improving academic achievement in African American students, include systematic models that emphasize resilience and strength.
- Include field trips to local professional companies that have large African American staffs or leaders.
- Develop mentoring and tutoring programs with academically motivated African American college students.
- Develop and attend career fairs with African American guest speakers from a wide range of professional occupations.

### Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the purpose of this article was to review current literature on what works with African American students in public high schools in closing the achievement gap. The achievement gap has concerned government and educators from President Johnson's "War on Poverty", to the Head Start program, to Ron Edmonds and J. S. Coleman's research on Effective Schools, to Title I programs, and now to No Child Left Behind. With more research on what works for African American students in real situations, the future looks very bright in significantly closing the achievement gap.

### References

- Anderson, Lorin W. (2002). Curricular alignment: A re-examination. *Theory Into Practice*, 41 ( 4), 255-260.
- Decker, Greg (2003). Using data to drive student achievement in the classroom and on high-stakes tests. *T.H.E. Journal*, 30(6), 44-48.
- English, Fenwick (2003). *The postmodern challenge to the theory and practice of educational administration*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, LTD.
- Gentilucci, James (2004). Improving school learning: The student perspective. *Education Forum*, 68 ( 2), 133-143.
- Hill, Heather C. and Rowan, Brian, and Ball, Deborah Loewenberg (2005). Effects of teachers' mathematical knowledge for teaching on student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 42 ( 2), 371-406.
- McGehee, Jean J. and Griffith, Linda K. (2001). Large-scale assessments combined with curriculum alignment: Agents of change. *Theory into Practice*, 40 (2), 137-144.

Tomlinson, Carol Ann and Allan, Susan Demirsky (2000). *Leadership for differentiating schools & classroom*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

---

Formatted by Dr. Mary Alice Kritsonis, National Research and Manuscript Preparation Editor, NATIONAL FORUM JOURNALS, Houston, Texas, [www.nationalforum.com](http://www.nationalforum.com)