

The Influence of the Teacher and Parent on the Academic Achievement of African American Students

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The social structures that exist in the educational system in the United States consist of students and teachers (Urban, 2000). Based on the roles assigned to them in the educational system, students are dependent persons and teachers are independent persons (Urban, 2000). The educational system creates expectations and evaluates outcomes based on ideas, beliefs and values generally accepted by the culture of the school. As the United States moves into the 21st century, African American students constitute a greater proportion of the student population. When the student is of a race or background that is subordinated within society and the teacher is of a race or background that enjoys majority status, the student must then cope with the possibility that their efforts may not be valued for a number of reasons other than the quality of their educational performance (Darder, 1991). African American students, basing their self-evaluations on the values and expectations of a person not of their race or cultural background, may face pressures that students who share the race and cultural background of the teacher do not (Martin & Baxter, 2001).

The discussion about the lack of academic success for African American students tend to lead to discussions about factors external to schools such as inadequate preparation and lack of family support. The question of what is happening to African American students in the school and classroom is often overlooked, and when it is examined, the recognition of the shortage of African American teachers is noted (Avery & Walker, 1993). According to Ayers (1995) and Kohl (1998), relatively little is known about the effectiveness of White public school career teachers on African American students. Given that an underlying tenet of multicultural education is that all students benefit from information about or models of persons with similar racial and cultural backgrounds, this is a limitation in the literature that consistently undermines the efforts of teacher education programs across the country to adequately prepare White adult education students as future teachers of African American students (Pang & Sablan, 1995). This is especially problematic at a time in history when African American students are very likely to be educated by primarily a White teaching force (Fielder, 1993). Therefore, the primary purpose of this study is to explore the influence of the teacher and parent on the academic achievement of African American students.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Describe the African American students enrolled in a public high school in northern Colorado on the following demographic characteristics: (a) age; (b) ethnicity; (c) gender; (d) parent's ethnicity; and (e) favorite teacher's racial group.

2. Determine if the influence of the teacher is different between male and female African American students.
3. Determine if male and female African American students differ in their feelings of how successful they are in school.
4. Compare the differences in the parent's racial group and whether or not they consider school important to their child's economic future.
5. Determine if there is an association between encouragement from the teacher to achieve, student's grade point average, the family income, the student's favorite teacher's racial group, and whether or not the student's parents inspired them to stay in school.

Significance of the Study

Historically, the two major racial groups in the United States have been identified as being African American and Whites (Myrdal, 1944). These groupings have led to many divisions in the United States. Pang and Sablan (1995) noted that race is a powerful aspect of schooling given its impact on attitudes towards African Americans. Pang and Sablan also noted that teachers may assume that African American students lack the ability to do as well academically as White students. Because of their skin color, certain assumptions are being made about African American students in terms of their ability to be successful in school. Cochran-Smith (2000) states that the mainstream educational community has historically ignored the significance of what the African American community values in the education of its people. Because of this, teachers have missed the opportunities to both understand and value what this information can tell us about educating African American students successfully. The significance of the study is further highlighted by the fact that research on the race of the teacher as a factor in students' personal and academic success is still an emotionally charged and often misunderstood phenomenon. As a result, it impedes successful teaching across racial lines and also impedes effective teacher education (Cochran-Smith, 2000).

In her research, Cross (1993) emphasized that teachers' values, beliefs, attitudes, and prejudices do affect their teaching. Beady and Hansell (1981) noted that teacher race was strongly associated with expectations for students' future success, and from their results, they revealed that African American teachers had significantly higher expectations for their African American students than White teachers. In his study of African American principals, Lomotey (1989) agreed that the race of the teacher may affect how teachers view African American students and what their commitment may be to the education of these African American students. According to Branch (1994), racial attitudes and ethnic identity influence the learning and development of African American students. Branch also noted that racial attitudes may play a critical dimension in the learning equation in that those attitudes may create or discourage the development of a sense of academic growth and development through the expansion of African American students' knowledge base.

Fielder (1993) points out that professional education literature encourages the recruitment, training, and retention of more African Americans as teachers. Although this is a noble goal and should be vigorously pursued, how many African American teachers will be needed to address the academic needs of all African American students? The impact of teachers on the academic achievement of African American students has not had sufficient study and it is becoming increasingly critical that the dynamics of this relationship be understood. Society needs educators who can help all African American students prepare

for intensifying national and international competition, and to handle the change that will determine how competitive the United States will be in a global system (Pang & Sablan, 1995). The findings of this study should help in the training and development of educators to meet the challenge of teaching African American students and other students of color.

Review of Related Literature

There are marked disparities in the outcomes of education for African American and White students (King, 1994). In its 2004 report, the United States Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR) noted that African American students do not achieve as well in school as White students. In 2004, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the United States Department of Education reported that African American students continue to trail White students with respect to educational access, achievement, and attainment (NCES, 2004). Unfortunately, the report of the United States Department of Education does not discuss who is teaching African American students or whether these teachers are prepared to teach African American students effectively.

Research on effective teachers of African American students emphasizes, among other items, the teachers' collective belief that African American students' potential will not be realized in classrooms where teachers view African American students from a deficit perspective (King, 1994). Most often associated with White teachers, this approach does not assume African American students' potential, but aims to compensate for what is presumed missing from the student's backgrounds (Foorman, Francis, & Fletcher, 1998). Because a deficit model of instruction attempts to make students fit into the existing system of teaching and learning, it cannot build on the strengths of cultural characteristics or cultural preferences in learning. Compounding the problem of some White teachers' cultural ignorance or indifference, additional research suggested that the gap between White and African American students is exacerbated by powerful social conditioning that cultivates actual negative attitudes towards African American students (Pang & Sablan, 1995). Boykin (1992), Darder (1991), and Scheurich (1993) agreed that many White teachers work from within a hegemonic, Western, epistemological framework, often unconscious and almost always unstated that predisposes them to have lower expectations of African American students and a lack of respect for the students' families and primary culture. Therefore, the possibility of effective teaching by these teachers is eliminated.

This predisposition may account for the fact that, historically, African American students have fared less well than White students, not only on standardized tests and measures, but also in graduation rates and college admissions rates (Ogbu, 2003). This is not to say that the presence of an African American teacher guarantees academic success for African American students or that the race of the teacher can be expected to overcome known debilitating effects on school performance. Lower income levels, inferior school resources, and less parent involvement, for example, have long been associated with African American students' under-performance in school (Ogbu, 2003). However, the research does suggest that White teachers' failure to address or value African American student's primary culture can also be a significant factor in their academic success.

The gap between the achievement of African American students and that of White students is one of the most infuriating problems afflicting education. Singham (2003) points out that there are no genetic or other immutable traits that could conceivably be the cause of the gap. "The repeated attempts to explain and solve the vexing problem of the achievement gap have clearly been inadequate..." (Singham, 2003, p. 586). Part of the problem is that the

topic is filled with myths. “The difficulty with myths is not that they are necessarily false, but rather that they are beliefs whose truth or reality is accepted uncritically” (Singham, 2003, p. 586). There are a number of causes for this gap. Singham (2003) points out that:

You will find a range of analyses (and a corresponding variety of suggested solutions): biased standardized tests, tests that do not match the learning styles of black students, less money spent on educating black students, socioeconomic differences, lack of motivation, negative peer pressure, lack of family support for education, teacher biases, and many other possibilities. All of these figure prominently in the menu of causes. (p. 587)

Deeply embedded in American society, racism negatively affects the quality of teacher-student relationships. “Because school performance depends on the quality of teacher-student relationships, the neglect of poor quality interactions between White educators and Black students only insures that the Black-White achievement gap will persist” (Martin & Baxter, 2001, p. 381). Schools have not totally ignored the problem of racism. “As a way to combat the negative effects of racism and improve interracial relations, schools have embraced Multicultural Education, the curricula that expose students to a socially diverse variety of heroes, historical events, and holidays” (Martin & Baxter, 2001, p. 382). The authors also discuss the Antiracism Education model as a way to change the achievement level of African American students. Antiracist Education principles work to provide both a basis for teachers to develop a common language around the problem and experience of racism and a means for the creation of instructional practices that promise to ameliorate its negative impact on school children (Martin & Baxter, 2001).

Carter and Goodwin (1994) argue that “when race is subsumed, the current and historical role that it has played and continues to play in the educational sense is distorted and clouded” (p. 292). Bowser and Hunt (1981) maintain that racism in America is a White problem because the racist attitudes, behavior, and social structures of the dominant European American culture directly and indirectly undermine Whites’ capacity to grow and develop. “To move beyond racism, White people must take a look at how they, as a race, have participated in constructing and maintaining hierarchical racial identity structures, discordant models of White racial identity” (Martin & Baxter, 2001, p. 384).

Although outright discriminatory practices in schools based on race have been banned by law, they continue in other guises. “Among the most pervasive is the use of various types of tests as a so-called objective or neutral tool to discriminate and separate students for purposes of instruction” (English, 2002, p. 298). English (2002) also points out that the assessment tools used by many state accountability systems are based on false notions of fairness and equity. Sacks (1997) states that from its inception, standardized tests have consistently demonstrated that the children of the poor perform less well than their affluent counterparts. Wealth consistently makes a difference in better test scores. Hernstein and Murray (1994) suggest that the assumption of fairness rests on an assertion in which there is a surrogate national curriculum called “the content domain” and is the basis by which test scores are assumed to form a “bell curve.” Although conceding that poverty carries a statistically significant impact on test performance, test advocates often explain away its effects through “coded racism” based on eugenic arguments that have been scientifically rejected (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). “This is a significant displacement of the relationship between curriculum development and curriculum evaluation. What it does is replace a curriculum (that which is ostensibly being assessed) with a test score (a sample of the

curriculum)” (English, 2002, p. 300).

The Department of Education’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement (1995) reports that almost 87% of the United States elementary and secondary teachers are White and 8% of those teachers are African American. More and more, African American students are being educated by people that are not of their race or cultural background. Given that a significant number of African American students in public education programs will be largely educated by White teachers, and teachers can play such a significant role in students’ lives, there is a pressing need to know more about the effect White teachers have on African American students. What role do White teachers play in facilitating African American student success or contributing to their academic failure? Do their views of African American students allow them to address the educational needs of these African American students? Do African American students have perceptions of White teachers’ ideas, beliefs, and values that get in the way of their academic achievement? Can the lack of success of African American students be fully attributable to factors outside of schools, such as their family lives, influence of their peers, or their lack of ability?

Methodology

Sample

This study involved African American students enrolled in a public high school in northern Colorado. Because of the geographic area and limited resources, the researcher selected a convenience sample of participants for this study. This type of sampling cannot be considered representative of any population.

Instrumentation

The scales and items in the instrument were developed by the researcher after a thorough review of the related literature. The instrument contained a demographics section to provide a description of the samples used in this study. The face and content validity of the proposed instrument was evaluated by an expert panel of university faculty and doctoral level graduate students. The instrument was pilot tested with 10 African American undergraduate students who recently completed high school. Changes indicated by the validation panel and field test were made. These changes occurred in the wording of items and in the instructions for completing the instrument. Internal consistency coefficients for the scales in the instrument were as follows (Cronbach’s *alpha*): Overall Educational Experience Subscale (- .60); Parental/Guardian Influence Subscale (- .61); and Teachers in your Educational Experience Subscale (- .77).

Data Collection

The researcher administered the instrument to the participants at their place of employment, which was convenient for them. The researcher explained the purpose and objectives of the survey, the specific format of the items, how the confidentiality of the data is to be handled, and who will have access to the individual responses. This method usually results in a high response rate. Other advantages are the low cost and the fact that the researcher was present to provide assistance or answer questions. Each participant was asked to fill out the instrument to the best of their ability and to leave their names off the

instrument form. The researcher was present while participants completed the survey and collected them upon completion.

Data Analysis

The researcher used descriptive statistics, such as percentages, means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions. An independent sample T-test was used to determine if there is a difference between means of variables with two levels. The researcher ran a single factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine the difference between means of variables with more than two levels. A Pearson product-moment correlation test was used to determine if there is a relationship between variables.

Results

These outputs provide descriptive statistics for all the variables labeled as ordinal and scale. The Valid N is 50, which is the number of participants in the data file. The sample size was a result of convenience sampling. Orcher (2005) suggests that using a small number of participants may be acceptable for a term project, depending on the requirements of the instructor. The Minimum and Maximum outputs are within the appropriate codebook range for each variable. All Mean scores are between the Minimum and Maximum outputs, which indicate that the Mean scores are within the expected ranges. In reference to normality, from the output we see that most of the variables have skewness values between -1 and 1 except one variable, *Question 5* (I am planning on going to college after graduation) with a skewness of -1.079. Since this core is more than +/- 1.0, we cannot assume that this variable is normally distributed.

Table 1 provided the number of participants for whom we have valid data for the variables labeled nominal and ordinal, which is what we expected. For the variable *Gender*, 50% of the participants are male and 50% are female. For the variable *Age of Student*, 60% of the participants are between 15-17 years old and 40% are between 18-21 years old. For the variable *Racial/Ethnic Group*, 100% of the participants are African American. For the variable *Favorite Teacher's Racial Group*, 40% of the participants responded that their favorite teacher is African American and 60% responded that their favorite teacher is non-African American. For the variable *Mother's Racial/Ethnic Group*, 60% stated that their mother is African American, 20% stated that their mother is White and 20% stated that their mother is of a racial/ethnic group other than African American or White. For the variable *Father's Racial/Ethnic Group*, 50% of the participants stated that their father is African American, 30% stated that their father is White and 20% stated that their father is of a racial/ethnic group other than African American or White.

A T-test analysis was used to answer the following question: Is there a difference between gender and question 3 (I feel I have been successful in school), student's grade point average (GPA), and question 17 (My teachers have encouraged me to achieve in school more than my parents/guardians) (see Table 1)? The output shows that males are significantly different from females in reference to question 17, $p = .033$, $p < .05$. Inspection of the two group means indicate that the mean score for males (2.80) is lower than the mean score (3.60) for females. The difference between the means is -0.8. The effect size is $d = -.62$, which is between a medium and large effect size.

Table 1. Comparison of Male and Female on Success in School, Grade Point Average, and Teachers Encouragement to Achieve (N=25 Males and 25 Females)

Variable	M	SD	t	df	p
Success in School			-.667	48	.508
Male	3.80	1.19			
Female	4.00	.91			
Grade Point Average					
Male	2.84	.47	1.26	48	.214
Female	2.68	.43			
Teachers Encouragement to Achieve			-2.19	48	.033*
Male	2.80	1.19			
Female	3.60	1.38			

* p is significant at the .05 level

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to answer the following question: Are there differences among the mother's racial group on question 7 (My parents/guardians do not consider school important to my economic future) and question 8 (My parents/guardians inspired me to stay in school) (see Table 2)? A statistically significant difference was found among the three levels of the mother's racial/ethnic group on question 7, $F(2, 47) = 12.800$, $p = .000$ ($p < .001$), and on question 8, $F(2, 47) = 8.677$, $p = .001$ ($p < .05$). The question 7 mean for the first racial/ethnic group level (African American) is 1.83, 2.50 for the second racial/ethnic group level (White), and 3.50 for the third racial/ethnic group level (other). The Tukey HSD post hoc test was used to determine which specific means are different for mother's racial/ethnic group on question 7 because the Levene test was not significant. The Tukey post hoc test indicated that the first level racial/ethnic group and the third level racial/ethnic group differed significantly on question 7, ($p = .000$ [$p < .001$], $d = -1.70$), which has an extremely large effect size with a negative direction, and the second level and third level racial/ethnic groups differed significantly on question 7, ($p = .047$ [$p < .05$], $d = -1.88$), which has an extremely large effect size with a negative direction. The Games-Howell post hoc test was used to determine which specific means are different for mother's racial/ethnic group on question 8 because the Levene test was significant. The Games-Howell post hoc test indicated that the first and second racial/ethnic group levels differed significantly on question 8, ($p = .000$ [$p < .001$], $d = 1.95$), which has an extremely large effect size with a positive direction.

Table 2. One-Way Analysis of Variance Summary Table Comparing Mother's Racial Group on Parents Considering School Improvement and Parents Inspire Me to Stay in School

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Parents Considering School Important					
Between Groups	2	21.33	10.67	12.80	.000*
Within Groups	47	39.17	.83		
Total	49	60.50			
Parents Inspire Me to Stay In School					
Between Groups	2	12.00	6.00	8.68	.001*
Within Groups	47	32.50	.70		
Total	49	44.50			

* p is significant at the .05 level

In reference to correlation, the following question was posed: Is there an association between question 17 (My teachers have encouraged me to achieve in school more than my parents/guardians), student's grade point average (GPA), the family income, question 28 (Student's favorite teacher's racial group, and question 8 (My parents/guardians inspired me to stay in school).? The output shows that four pairs were significantly correlated. There is an association between question 17 and student's GPA, $r(48) = -.374, p < .01$. The relationship is negative and the effect size is $r = -.37$, which is between a medium and large effect size. There is also an association between question 17 and question 28, $r(48) = -.339, p < .05$. The relationship is negative and the effect size is $r = -.34$, which is just above a medium effect size. There is an association between question 17 and question 8, $r(48) = -.815, p < .001$. The relationship is negative and the effect size is $r = -.82$, which is a much larger than typical effect size. There is an association between question 28 and question 8, $r(48) = .303, p < .05$. The relationship is positive and the effect size is $r = .30$, which is a medium effect size.

Discussion

This study addressed the influence of the teacher and parent on the academic achievement of African American students. The result of the T-test indicates that African American female students are encouraged to achieve in school more by their teachers than African American male students. There was not a significant difference between African American males and females on their feelings of being successful in school, nor their grade point averages.

The results of the ANOVA and Tukey HSD post hoc test revealed that mothers of African American descent and mothers of the "other" racial/ethnic group differ significantly when considering school importance to the economic future of their children. This result indicated that students whose mothers were of the "other" racial/ethnic group felt their mothers did not consider school important ($M = 3.50$) to their economic future. Students whose mothers were of African American descent felt their mothers considered school important ($M = 1.83$) to their economic future. The results also revealed that White mothers

and mothers of the “other” racial/ethnic group differ significantly when considering school importance to the economic future of their children. This result indicated that students whose mothers were White neither agreed nor disagreed to whether their mothers considered school important (M = 2.50) to their future, and students whose mother were of the “other” racial/ethnic group felt their mothers did not consider school important (M = 3.50). Further data analysis of the ANOVA and the Games-Howell post hoc test revealed that African American mothers differed significantly with White mothers on whether they inspired their children to stay in school. This result indicated that students whose mothers were of African American descent felt their mothers inspired them to stay in school (M = 4.50), and students whose mothers were White neither agreed nor disagreed to whether their mothers inspired them to stay in school (M = 2.50).

Table 3. Intercorrelations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Five Variables (N=50)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	M	SD
1. Teachers Encourage Me to Achieve in School More than Parents	--	-.37**	-.20	-.34*	-.82**	3.20	1.34
2. Grade Point Average	--	--	.07	.16	.27	2.76	.45
3. Family Income	--	--	--	-.19	-.10	3.40	1.51
4. Favorite Teacher’s Racial Group	--	--	--	--	.30*	1.60	.50
5. Parents Inspire Me to Stay in School	--	--	--	--	--	4.10	.95

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

Further analysis of the correlated data revealed that African American students who scored high on whether their teacher encouraged them to achieve in school more than their parents have lower GPAs and vice versa. African American students who scored high on whether their teachers encouraged them to achieve in school more than their parents scored lower on their favorite teacher’s racial group and vice versa. African American students who scored high on whether their teachers encouraged them to achieve in school more than their parents scored lower on whether their parents inspired them to stay in school and vice versa. Also, African American students who scored high on their favorite teacher’s racial group also scored high on whether their parents inspired them to stay in school.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings above reveal that teachers and parents have an influence on the

academic achievement level of African American students. Both teachers and parents play a vital role and must take personal responsibility in the effort to close the gap between African American students and White students. Teachers must understand their personal frame of references and the impact it may have on African American students. African American students often view teachers as mentors and role models in their lives. Through their actions, teachers send messages to children about whether they are accepted and competent enough to accomplish tasks given and about whether they are true members of the teaching/learning environment. Teachers and administrators must seek and secure involvement and form partnerships with parents if children are to succeed academically. Every attempt should be made to hold all African American students to the same academic standard as their White peers in the classroom, pushing them towards greater academic achievement. There are two specific limitations to this study. Because a convenience sample from two public high schools in northern Colorado was used, the results from this sample may not be representative of African American students from other high schools in Colorado or across the United States. Also, due to the small sample size, there is very limited power and interpretation of results.

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