

# What Makes a Teacher Outstanding?: A Contrast of Teachers' and African American High School Students' Perspectives

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*This study contrasted the perspectives of 101 K–12 public school teachers and 271 African American high school seniors regarding the characteristics of outstanding teachers. Data from surveys were analyzed using univariate and bivariate statistics. The results revealed six qualities that both teachers and students agree are characteristics of outstanding teachers. Significant differences also emerged among the perspectives of African American students, teachers of color, and White teachers regarding the effective characteristics of teachers. The study underscored the need to identify outstanding teacher characteristics in order to improve teacher quality and narrow the achievement gap.*

The primary goal of the national education reform venture, “The No Child Left Behind Act,” (NCLB) is to close the achievement gap to ensure that all students, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, achieve academic proficiency (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). One of the major changes the reform effort addresses is the need to “strengthen teacher quality” so that every public school classroom will have highly-qualified teachers. Research indicates that outstanding teachers play a significant role in closing the achievement gap in student achievement, particularly for African American students (Hale, 2001; Perry, Steele, & Hillard, 2003; Thompson, 2002, 2003, 2004). Therefore, it is imperative to ascertain whether or not teachers and students—particularly high school students who have historically been marginalized and whose opinions have not been sought—are perceiving outstanding teaching in the same manner.

## Literature Review

Enactment of NCLB, which underscores the positive correlation between student achievement and teacher quality, has focused the need for research in this area. Although education reformers have sought to close the achievement gap for nearly four decades, previous reform efforts have failed to make substantial improvements (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Researchers have alternated between blaming the students (Collins, 1992; Flores, Tefft-Cousin, & Diaz, 1991; White & Parham, 1990) and blaming the public school system (Kozol, 1992; 2005). Embedded in this research is the recurring theme that effective teachers play an important role in improving student achievement (Collins, 1992; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Drew, 1996; Haberman, 2005; Haycock, 1998; Honig, 2000; Ingersoll, 1999; Oviedo & Gonzalez, 1999; Ruddell, 1999; Thompson, 2002, 2003, 2004; Warren, 2002). In an examination of “Factors That Influence Student Success,” the National Center for Education Statistics (1996) looked at the effects of four categories: small classes and schools; parent education; other background factors, such as poverty, language, and family characteristics; and teacher qualifications. The Center concluded that small classes and schools were the least important of the categories. Parent education accounted for 24%, and “other background factors” accounted for 26%. However, teacher qualifications accounted for 40%. In another report, the U.S. Department of Education (2000) found that the quality of teaching that students receive is the most important “in-school factor” affecting student achievement.

The literature on teaching is replete with a variety of opinions about what constitutes outstanding teaching. Many empirical research studies on teaching effectiveness have outlined teaching behaviors that correlate with student performance on standardized tests (Brophy & Good, 1986; Gage, 1986; Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986). These studies are often criticized for trivializing the complexities and demands of teachers to rote skills that produce prescribed results. Current educators such as Parker Palmer relate good teaching to the ability to understand the complexities of the subjects and students taught, as well as the teacher’s understanding of self. Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique and comes from the ability of the teacher to connect with the students and connect them with the subject (Palmer, 1997). Cruickshank and Haefele (2001) provide an historical definition of the Ten Types of Good Teachers as portrayed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Cruikshank and Haefele's Ten Types of Good Teachers*

<b>Type of Teacher</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Ideal Teachers</b>	Popular during the first half of the twentieth century, met criteria that were determined by school principals, supervisors, and education professors.
<b>Analytic Teachers</b>	During the 1960s they used observations and investigation to improve classroom practices.
<b>Effective Teachers</b>	During the late 1960s, they were equitable, challenging, engaging, supportive, accepting, clear, and monitored learning activities.
<b>Dutiful Teachers</b>	Possessed subject matter competency and characteristics that promoted learning, and performed their duties to the school and the community well.
<b>Competent Teachers</b>	During the 1970s, these teachers were not only competent in passing standardized tests, but were also adept at performing their duties, planning and implementing instruction, and assessing and evaluating students.
<b>Expert Teachers</b>	Popular during the 1980s and 1990s, they were able to use their expertise in their instructional practices and were also efficient and able to use novel solutions to solve problems.
<b>Reflective Teachers</b>	Studied their own teaching practices and the art and science of teaching in order to improve their instructional delivery.
<b>Satisfying Teachers</b>	They were able to successfully “please” students, parents, administrators, colleagues, and supervisors.

<b>Diversity-Responsive Teachers</b>	They were effective with students who were “different” as a result of culture, intellect, physical or emotional disability, or socioeconomic background.
<b>Respected Teachers</b>	<i>Respected</i> teachers were the type of teachers “idolized in books and films.” (2001, p. 28)

### **Purpose**

Research that examines how teacher quality impacts the achievement gap between groups of students is important for at least two reasons. First, weak academic skills as a result of ineffective teachers make it difficult for students from impoverished backgrounds to take advantage of opportunities that might improve their socioeconomic status as adults. Strong academic skills are prerequisites for many jobs due to new advancements in technology, math, and science (Drew, 1996; Moses & Cobb, 2001). Without strong academic skills, a disproportionately high percentage of African American children will remain in poverty as adults (U.S Census Bureau, 2000). Second, research consistently shows that students in high poverty areas are most likely to receive the worst quality of instruction. The majority of these students are African American and Hispanic (Haberman, 2005; Haycock, 1998; Thompson, 2002, 2004).

The purpose of this study was to identify beliefs of African American teachers and students about outstanding teachers, in order to provide educators, researchers, and policy makers with feedback that might narrow the achievement gap. This research was guided by the following questions: How do teachers’ and African American high school seniors’ perspectives of outstanding teachers differ? How does the race or ethnicity of a teacher impact how a teacher defines outstanding teachers?

### **Method**

Data in the form of questionnaires were collected from two groups, 271 African American high school seniors and 101 teachers who were enrolled in a graduate education program at a comprehensive four-year university in southern California. The university is part of the California State University system; one of the largest teacher-training entities in the United States. It is located in the same region in which

the African American high school seniors attended high school (Reed, 2003).

Student participants represented seven urban public high schools located in two contiguous counties in southern California. African American students comprise 12% of the total student population in one county and 8% in the second county. Statewide, African American students comprise 7.8% of the students enrolled in public schools (California Department of Education, 2007). In the region in which the study was conducted, African American students are disproportionately represented among the public school students who are not faring well academically. Nearly 60% of the students who participated in the current study had failed one or more high school courses and math was the most commonly cited course that students failed. Approximately, 40% of the students were in college preparatory classes, 40% were in the lowest level (basic) classes and 12% were in the highest level courses such as honors. Fifty-five percent of the students had an overall high school grade point average (GPA) in the 2.0-2.9 range and 37% had an overall GPA in the 3.0-3.9 range.

The teacher participants were comprised of 69% Whites; 15% Hispanics/Lationos; 7% African Americans; 3% Native Americans; 1% Asian Americans and 5% other/unknown which mirrors the state percentages for race and ethnicity: 72% Whites; 15% Hispanics/Latinos; 5% African Americans; 1% Native Americans or Alaska Natives; 5% Asian Americans; and 2% other/unknown (California Department of Education, 2007). Female teachers accounted for 66% of the sample. The teachers ranged in age from 20 to 60 years old and 51% were older than 30. Middle and high school teachers comprised 80% of the sample. Although the majority of teachers were new to the field and enrolled in a teacher credential program, 20% had taught for five or more years and were enrolled at the university to earn a masters degree in Reading.

The teachers and students first completed demographic questions about their personal backgrounds. Then a survey was distributed to both groups asking them "In your opinion, what are the most important qualities of elementary school, middle school, and high school teachers?" Participants rated the fifteen qualities listed in Table 2 using a Likert-scale to respond to the question. The fifteen qualities were derived from Thompson's (2002) study in which African American teens discussed their schooling experiences.

The African American students, along with students from other racial or ethnic groups, completed the questionnaire in their high school English, government, or psychology class. It took students an average of 20 minutes to complete the surveys which were collected immediately thereafter. The students were told that participation was voluntary but completing the survey would give them an opportunity to describe their schooling experiences and possibly improve the education system. Data from the non-African American students has not been analyzed yet, but will be used for additional studies.

Teachers from five university classes were given the option of completing the questionnaire for extra credit. All of the teachers who were present chose to complete the questionnaire which they took home and returned at the next class session.

The teachers' questionnaire contained almost the exact same questions as the students' survey. The main difference was that the high school seniors' survey contained additional questions about racism at school that were excluded from the teachers' survey and the teachers' survey contained questions about their college degree attainment plans and major. The questionnaire was field-tested and received the approval of an Institutional Review Board. A test of inter-item reliability of the dependent variables resulted in an alpha coefficient of .60. Data were analyzed using a standard statistical software program for the social sciences (SPSS).

## Results

### *What the students said*

Table 2 depicts the 15 qualities identified by the African American students as the most frequently cited characteristics of outstanding teachers. Eight of these qualities were deemed important by half or more than half of the students. Seventy-four percent of the students identified two qualities, *explain things well* and *make the course work interesting* as important. *Give extra help* was the next most frequently cited quality. More than 60% of the students said that outstanding teachers are *patient* and *fair*. *Friendliness* and *humor* were the sixth and seventh most frequently cited qualities. Half of the students said that outstanding teachers *challenge students academically*.

### *What the teachers said*

Table 2 shows the three characteristics cited by 70% of the teachers as qualities of outstanding teachers: *explain things well*, *patience*, and *enthusiasm*. More than half of the teachers said that

outstanding teachers *make the course work relevant, challenge students academically, make the course work interesting, give extra help, and they are fair*. Nearly half of the teachers said that outstanding educators use *humor* and 36% said they are *friendly*. *Intelligence* was cited by 31% of the teachers. The three least cited qualities were *strictness, niceness, and gives rewards*. None of the teachers associated *giving lots of homework* with outstanding teachers. Table 2 provides a comparative look at the percentages of teachers and African American students who selected each characteristic.

Although race or ethnicity was not a significant factor in this study, there were notable percentage differences between some of the qualities that teachers of color and White teachers selected when compared to those of the African American students. For example, Table 3 indicates that a higher percentage of White teachers than both African American students and teachers of color equated outstanding teachers with *make the course work relevant*. Furthermore, White teachers were less likely than African American students and teachers of color to attribute *give extra help, fairness, and humor* to outstanding teachers. Conversely, teachers of color were less likely than African American students and White teachers to equate *make the course work interesting* with outstanding teaching and more likely than both groups to select *enthusiasm*. In fact, *enthusiasm* was the most frequently cited quality for teachers of color but *patience* was the most frequently cited quality for Whites.

Table 2  
*A Comparative Look at the Qualities of Outstanding Teachers According to Teachers and African American Students by %*

Quality	Students	Teachers
1. Explain Things Well	74	70
2. Patience	66	70
3. Enthusiasm	39	70
4. Make the Course Work Relevant	42	58
5. Challenge Students Academically	50	55
6. Fairness	62	55
7. Make the Course Work Interesting	74	54
8. Give Extra Help	67	52
9. Humor	57	47

10. Friendliness	58	36
11. Intelligence	49	31
12. Strictness	28	17
13. Niceness	38	13
14. Give Rewards	33	8
15. Give Lots of Homework	13	0

N = 27

N=101

Table 3

*A Comparative Look at the Qualities of Outstanding Teachers According to White and Teachers of color Versus African American Students by %*

Quality	Students	White Teachers	Teachers of color
1. Explain Things Well	74	70	74
2. Patience	66	71	70
3. Enthusiasm	39	67	78
4. Make the Course Work Relevant	42	66	39
5. Challenge Students Academically	50	58	48
6. Fairness	62	53	65
7. Make the Course Work Interesting	74	59	39
8. Give Extra Help	67	48	61
9. Humor	57	44	52
10. Friendliness	58	36	35
11. Intelligence	49	29	39
12. Strictness	28	16	17
13. Niceness	38	10	22
14. Give Rewards	33	8	9
15. Give Lots of Homework	13	0	0

N = 271

N= 70

N = 31

## Discussion

The current study contrasted the beliefs of a group of African American high school seniors about the qualities of outstanding teachers with those of a group of teachers. At least half of the participants in each group selected eight characteristics as qualities of outstanding teachers.

There were six qualities that half or more than half of the respondents in both groups deemed to be characteristics of outstanding teachers: *explain things well*, *make the course work interesting*, *give extra help*, *patience*, *fairness*, and *challenge students academically*. However, for four of the six characteristics--*explain things well*, *make the course work interesting*, *give extra help*, and *fairness*—the percentages of students who cited them were higher than the percentages of teachers. Conversely, the percentages of teachers who selected *patience* and *challenge students academically* were higher.

There were also differences between characteristics of outstanding teachers selected by the students and the characteristics selected by the teachers. For example, whereas nearly 60% of the African American students associated *friendliness* with outstanding teachers, less than 40% of the teachers did. Second, nearly 60% of the students said that *humor* is important, but only 47% of the teachers did. Moreover, higher percentages of African American students than teachers also selected *intelligence*, *strictness*, *niceness*, *give rewards*, and *give lots of homework*. Higher percentages of teachers than students chose *enthusiasm* and *make the course work relevant* as important characteristics of outstanding teachers.

The characteristics of outstanding teachers that African American students reported were similar to the models of the *diversity-responsive teacher* and the *effective teacher* that Cruickshank and Haefele (2001) described. These teachers are equitable with students, challenging, engaging, supportive, clear, they monitor learning activities, and they are equipped to meet the needs of diverse students including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A culturally relevant curriculum has been identified as crucial to the pedagogy of teachers who are effective with African American students (Gay, 2000; Kunjufu, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Thompson, 2004). Ladson-Billings' (1994) definition of "culturally relevant pedagogy" includes three components: academic achievement, competence in students' home culture, and sociopolitical consciousness for students. The low percentage of teachers of color and African American students who selected *make the course work relevant* may be due to a misinterpretation of this factor. For example, the teachers of color and the African American students may have interpreted *relevance* to pertain to academic standards, current events, or the curriculum. Before definitive conclusions can be drawn about the implications of

this particular finding, in future studies, participants should be given the opportunity to define what they mean by *make the course work relevant*.

White teachers were also less likely than African American students and teachers of color to select *give extra help*, *fairness*, and *humor* as qualities of outstanding educators. These findings are extremely important. In *African American Teens Discuss Their Schooling Experiences*, Thompson (2002) concluded that in order to close the achievement gap between African Americans and other students, African American students need better relationships with their teachers. In Thompson's study, many students complained of being singled out unfairly by racist teachers. African American students' perception that their teachers are unwilling to provide extra assistance may contribute to the persistent achievement gap.

Another notable difference was the high percentage of teachers of color who selected *enthusiasm* as a characteristic of outstanding teachers compared to African American students and White teachers. Whereas, a teachers' enthusiasm is important, it cannot compensate for other factors. If the curriculum and a teacher's instructional practices are not engaging, no amount of enthusiasm on the teacher's part will keep students focused on the subject matter (Perry, Steele, & Hillard, 2003).

The results of this study indicate that the perception of some teachers regarding what constitutes an outstanding teacher is extremely different from that of African American students. Such teachers appear to be unlikely to fit Cruickshank's and Haefele's (2001) definitions of *diversity-responsive* or *effective teachers*, Palmer's (1997) characteristics of good teachers, or Ladon-Billings's (1994) culturally relevant teachers.

This study was limited for several reasons. First, certain racial or ethnic groups were underrepresented among the teachers. Therefore, replication of the study with larger samples of teachers from these groups is warranted. Second, the majority of the teachers in the study were new to the field. Expanding the study to include more experienced teachers might yield different results. Third, a study that permits students to define nebulous terms, such as *friendliness* and *niceness* might give educators more insight into why the African American students in the current study associated these characteristics with outstanding teachers.

## Conclusion

This study underscores the need to understand the qualities of outstanding teachers, particularly those working with diverse students, as schools work to close the achievement gap. This understanding will assist universities and school districts as they provide pre-service training and professional development for teachers who work with disadvantaged students, such as African American students in poverty (Thompson, 2004). Since teachers' qualifications account for 40% of the factors influencing student success (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996) and the quality of teaching that students receive is the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement, improving teacher quality is clearly a reform effort that can only have a positive effect (Haycock, 1998). These findings are particularly important in the improvement of high schools (Olson, 2005). Finally, the study stresses the need for researchers, policy makers, and educators to include the voices of students—particularly those who are not faring as well academically as others—into the discussion of how best to close the achievement gap.

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