

FROM PERCEPTION TO PRACTICE: HOW TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS AFFECT AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ACHIEVEMENT

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Abstract

For youth, schools are simultaneously sites of production, socialization, and development. At school, students learn about race, social values and norms, power, and positionality (Noguera, 2003, p. 443). This “hidden curricula” reinforces social inequities and influences how individual students experience the process of schooling as well as come to understand themselves. School processes that divide students along lines of difference communicate beliefs about those differences and marginalize separated groups. Nowhere is this more damaging than in the case of male African American students, where the intersections of race and gender place them at odds with their environment, resulting in academic underperformance and a disconnection. Although theories like Ogbu’s (1978) “oppositional culture” and Lewis’ (1998) “culture of poverty” make culturalist arguments for the disparate achievement of Black males, the current text will take a structuralist approach, arguing that schools are production sites for inequities that facilitate underachievement in African American males; consequently, teachers exist as agents of the structure who create and maintain a dominant culture through practices that are at odds with the academic productivity of young black males.

Keywords: Teachers’ Perceptions, African American males, Academic Achievement,

Teachers’ perceptions shape practices in the classroom and school environment (Skiba, 2002). At the micro level, classrooms and teacher–student interactions within that context influence how students view and respond to schooling and can produce both social and academic disparities. Noguera (2003) argues that “students can be unfairly victimized by the labeling and sorting processes that occur within schools” (p. 442). I contend that these processes are the result of dominant perceptions amongst school personnel—largely teachers, whose daily performance in the classroom and school environment conveys beliefs about the abilities of their Black male students.

The purpose of this paper is to explore what current research has uncovered regarding teachers’ perceptions and the extent to which they guide practices that affect the educational realities of African American males. Specifically, this paper will explore

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the connection between teachers' perceptions and the education of African American boys with a focus on the following question: "How do teachers' perceptions shape practices that influence academic achievement?"

Each year, the Schott Foundation on Public Education (SFPE) releases the Schott Report on Black Males and Education, which provides state and national data on graduation rates, reading proficiencies, special services placements, and discipline percentages for African American school-aged males. In 2010, the report presented data for the 2007-2008 school year, when the national graduation average for Black males was a strikingly low 47 percent (SFPE, 2010). This information alone makes the case for the need for continued research on educational attainment among African American males. Disproportionate placements in special education services, lower rates of inclusion in gifted and talented classes, and an overall gap between African American males' achievement and that of their White male counterparts indicate the need to critically analyze the schooling context, paying particular attention to these unbalanced placement and success rates (Applied Research Center [ARC], 2002).

Research has proven that teachers are the single most important factor in school success for students (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Hattie, 2003). The dynamic between a student and his teacher can have tremendous impact on that student—not just because of the teacher's ability to shape the schooling experience, but also because teachers influence academic progression. Focusing on the relationship between African American males and their teachers and the extent to which perceptions shape interactions and guide practice, placement, and promotion are integral steps in creating reform that increases school achievement and mobility for African American males.

Early and Biased Assessments

Focusing on work in education, urban education, and educational psychology, this paper seeks to offer both an educational and psychosocial lens to issues related to teacher–student interactions as well as elucidate concerns and challenges facing African American school-aged males. Educational research discusses the current educational reality of African American males, noting instances of lower academic achievement and engagement in schooling as early as elementary school. Davis (2003) noted that students are assessed and labeled early in their school career and that such labels have implications for academic success down the line. Early and biased assessments along with the implementation of common exclusionary practices within educational institutions influence the educational experiences of African American males, causing detachment and creating barriers to school success (Davis, 2003; Davis & Jordan, 1995; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; Noguera, 2003). Finally, reports on black male achievement statistics present data on a widening achievement gap, heightened dropout percentages, and—most disheartening—inequitable discipline and special needs placements. Studies in education and educational psychology highlight teachers' attitudes and appraisals of African American males' abilities as well as the role that these assessments play in determining interactions with students and overall student access to high-quality and rigorous coursework. A careful analysis of these texts will offer insights into teachers' perceptions and practice as well as African American males' achievement and experiences connected to these practices.

I begin this paper by looking at the importance of the school environment and teachers' perceptions as well as outlining how teachers' perceptions are often shaped by dominant ideologies and stereotypes. Inequitable practices that result from such judgments will be discussed with emphasis on student identity development. This section argues that communicated expectations are often deterministic for students who understand themselves through their exchanges with others. Lastly, I present data from studies on the connection between African American males' educational attainment and teachers' perceptions. My final sections will focus on issues not covered in this text as well as suggestions for reform, looking specifically at teacher training as an integral component for creating a teaching force that is highly reflective and aware of the social and academic needs of their students.

The School, Teachers' Perceptions, and Educational Practice

The structure and culture of schools reify categories of difference and promote differential treatment. Noguera (2003) asserted that students' ethnic or socioeconomic background governs how students are perceived and treated by adults within an educational environment. Alvidrez and Weinstein (1999) and Ferguson (2003) concluded that students with higher SES were judged more positively by teachers than those with lower SES, although IQ scores were less likely to align with teachers' predictions. They also found that race became a deterministic factor in teachers' perceptions of students' ability, with minority students being regarded as less capable despite demonstrating achievement comparable to their non-minority peers. These biases often have implications for teacher-student interactions and affect curricular and instructional opportunities for students.

Students are assigned to various educational pathways as early as elementary school. Such ability-based grouping is largely a reflection of teachers' judgments (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999). As a result, students of color—specifically, African American males—are largely underrepresented in enrichment programs and college preparatory courses and are given their assignments at the hands of teachers who underestimate their abilities. This leads to higher rates of placement in remedial or special needs classrooms. Assigning African American males to special education courses has been often associated with teachers' misinterpretations of behavioral, movement, and verbal patterns in the classroom (Harry & Anderson, 1994; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). For instance, male African American students with a “stroll” or culturally representative movement are more likely to be perceived as low achieving and recommended for special education placement by teachers (Neal et al., 2003).

Harry and Anderson (1994) argued that initial special need assignments are normally related to cultural preferences for physical and verbal behaviors that are highly racialized as well as socialized. “Teachers are driven by the structure of schools, which calls for control, homogeneity, and the inculcation of socially sanctioned behaviors and language” (p. 610). School norms prioritize qualities like acquiescence and passivity in gender and racial minorities, and teachers are charged with the task of extinguishing conduct in opposition to these qualities and replacing it with more favorable behaviors. When students prove to be less malleable to this conformity, they are labeled and given alternate placements.

Although not directly discussed in this paper, it is important to note the additional challenge that African American males face as they confront the construct of an ideal student alongside gender norms. The conflict between Eurocentric maleness, which stresses aggressive and competitive behavior and school-based norms place African American males in a precarious condition as they attempt to locate themselves (White & Cone, 1999). They are subject to punishment when emulating their White male peers and experience micro-aggressions at the hands of school personnel who consider their actions to be the result of cultural and racial differences. Thus, the young men struggle to negotiate their identity in the presence of standards and practices that position them further from rewards and educational success.

Evidence from numerous school districts indicates that, even when male African American students do not represent a large percentage of the school population, they endure the most district suspensions (Davis, 2003; SFPE, 2010). Teachers function as a decisive component in the suspension process, and suspensions are often the result of classroom interactions shaped by bias. One Hoover High School student recalls an instance where he and other minority students were not only treated disrespectfully by teachers, but also punished with a suspension when they persisted in a request to sit near the front of the class in order to see the blackboard more clearly (ARC, 2002). Black male students are often labeled defiant and have few protections against biased actions (ARC, 2002). These actions are commonly the result of the perceived “toughness” of male African American students that can evoke fear school personnel (Noguera, 2003). Such fear is managed and overcome through punishments and policies that criminalize Black boys (Monroe, 2005).

Implicit in differential treatment is value assignments based on socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Students learn the valuation of their SES, gender, and race assignment when they receive either preferential or unfavorable treatment as a result (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999). “For African American males, who are more likely than any other group to be subjected to negative forms of treatment in school, the message is clear [as they sit in] remedial classes or waiting for punishment outside of the principal’s office” (Noguera, 2003, p. 445). These students’ treatment reminds them that they are not valuable and capable learners, but deviants who should be penalized.

Importance of Reciprocal Relations

Teachers decide how they will work with students based on their perceptions of students’ academic or social strengths or weaknesses (Ferguson, 2003). Teachers may respond to students whom they consider difficult by withdrawing supports. The depth of teacher–student relationships are marked by how much teachers enjoy teaching students or the degree to which the relationship is troubled or troubling. Students who have positive reciprocal relationships with teachers are more likely to receive more academic support and have higher outcomes (Ferguson, 2003).

Teachers also provide differing treatment to students whom they believe are hard workers. This attribution is typically applied along the lines of race and socioeconomic status, with poor minority children being perceived as lazy—an assignment readily applied to African American males. Research also shows that teachers—even when they have not communicated negative perceptions of their students—fail to provide African American students with the same positive reinforcement, feedback on mistakes, and

helpful slips of the tongue as they do their White counterparts (Ferguson, 2003; Pollard, 1993). Research also reveals that African American males are subject to lowered expectations by teachers and given less access to rigorous educational materials (Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; ARC, 2002; Pollard, 1993). They are less likely to be encouraged to take advanced courses and are provided fewer opportunities for exposure to complex math and science curricula. “Investigations into the academic orientation of Black males students must focus on the ways in which the subjective and objective dimensions of identity related to race and gender are constructed within schools and how these influence academic performance” (Noguera, 2003, p. 441). Because Black males are more likely “to be channeled into marginal roles and to be discouraged from challenging themselves by adults who are supposed to help them,” they often understand little of their actual potential (Noguera, 2003, p. 446). When students’ potential is underestimated in this way, they struggle not only with performance but also with goal setting, key to success (Ferguson, 2003).

Glass Ceiling Effect

Students who come face to face with their perceived limited potential and the practices that result from these perceptions fall victim to glass-ceiling effects, understanding that barriers and impediments to their mobility exist. Although the glass-ceiling effect is not generally applied to the study of education, it is important to note that schooling mirrors society (Nieto, 1999). Discrimination that leads to the glass ceiling effect is imbedded in daily practices that shape the lived experiences of an individual (Jackson & Leon, 2010). These educational practices are built to enforce dominant culture ideologies that stifle and repudiate students of color. They promote the power and privilege of the white middle class and force minority students, for the sake of forming a positive cultural identity, to distance themselves from schooling and reject educational achievement as a marker of success. In addition, constant interaction with stereotypes and limiting policies and practices can weigh on students’ self-esteem and cause them to construct an identity that mirrors expectations or is accepting of failure.

Connection between Teachers’ Perceptions and Students’ Achievement

Nieto (1999) highlighted the casual relationship between current educational environments and academic performance. According to Nieto (1999), schools have failed to create an environment that produces academic success for its minority students. A student’s social as well as academic identity is tied to experiences within the school environment and what those experiences imply. Within a school, the bulk of student interactions are with their teachers; thus, teachers are directly linked to the formation of students’ academic identity and, as a result, their performance. Consequently, a teacher’s impression of a student can have tremendous impact on that student’s achievement.

Students’ awareness of a teacher’s perceptions determines motivation and attachment to school (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999). For instance, research shows that students who are exposed to higher expectations will rise to the challenge. In their work “Determinants of School Success Among African American Boys,” Davis and Jordan (1995) used findings from the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study to analyze the educational achievement of African American males. Findings suggest that teachers

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played a large role in African American males' achievement at school. Teacher attendance and motivational abilities were the key determinants of African American males' educational success. The data indicated that, in high school, teachers' expectations inspired achievement among African American males. When teachers lowered expectations, outcomes were sure to follow.

Students who feel more teacher support are more likely to achieve at higher levels, demonstrate stronger critical thinking skills, and have higher concepts of self-ability (Pollard, 1993). Conversely, those who feel less supported by their teachers are less likely to expend energy in classes or to believe that they can be successful in academic schoolwork (Howard, 2002). "If students do not believe that their teachers care about them and are actively concerned about their academic performance, the likelihood that they will succeed is greatly reduced" (Noguera, 2003, p. 449). This is especially true for African American students as teachers' perceptions have a significant impact on minority students (Ferguson, 2003). For African American males, a disparity exists between the value they place on education, and the support they feel they receive from adults. In a study of African American students in the Bay Area, Noguera found that African American boys were likely to disagree or strongly disagree with the following statement: "My teachers support me and care about my success in their class" (Noguera, 2003). However, almost 90 percent agreed that education and educational success were important to them. Despite how they feel about education, the lack of strong support from teachers intensifies students' underachievement.

Alvidrez and Weinstein (1999) found teachers' judgment to be one of the "strong predictors of future achievement" (p. 732). Their longitudinal study focused on children at age 4, 6, 11, and 18, finding that "preschool teachers' over and under-estimates of children's ability...predicated GPA and SAT test-taking in high school 14 years later" (p. 740). Underestimates had the most significant impact with regard to high school GPA, providing evidence that negative expectancy effects are more potent than positive ones. Although additional research is needed to determine exactly how student performance links with judgments of ability, it is important to note that racial and socioeconomic bias plays a role in student evaluation. If teachers' perceptions are biased, but are linked strongly to long-term student success, it is possible that theories of self-fulfilling prophecy apply where perceptions lead to outcomes. Some 9 to 18 percent of variance in student achievement at the end of a school year can be explained by teachers' perceptions, which can be exacerbated by students' continuous encounters with teachers who expect little success (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999).

One study of the influence of teachers' perceptions on African American preadolescents revealed that "teacher perceptions of social skills was a strong predictor of grade point average" (Seyfried, 1998, p. 381). When teachers perceived higher social skills, students received higher grades. In fact, Seyfried (1998) found that "student perceptions of the teacher-student relationship [coupled with] teacher practices" predicted student ability. Seyfried contended that the association between teachers' expectations and outcomes warrant interventions in teacher practice, which could serve to mitigate the effects of perceptions on expectations and practices. Finally, the study discovered that boys—particularly African American boys—were following a negative academic trajectory. Although additional research is needed, teachers' perceptions of boys as less favorable than their female counterparts resulted in lower grade point averages for the boys.

Limitations

Although this paper addresses how teachers' perceptions influence practices that impact African American boys, additional research is needed. This paper dealt largely with teachers' influences, but very little with how students' self-assessments, reactions to teacher-student relationships, ability to navigate social environments (like schools), and degree of help-seeking behaviors can have bearing on school success. Pollard's (1994) study of gender differences in achievement revealed that African American boys are not only less likely to believe that they can do well in school, but are also disinclined to seek help from teachers when they encounter academic or social issues. These tendencies could weigh upon teachers' perceptions and lead to negative classifications and assumptions.

Developing a better understanding of students' perceptions and how they understand support and assistance would be valuable for uncovering divergences in teachers' and students' expectations of relationships. This could enable school personnel to adjust practices or provide clarity to students, which might limit misinterpretations for both teachers and students. Moreover, further study of how students come to understand valuable or helpful academic support is needed as well.

Conclusions

Although Noguera (2003) argued that the solution does not rest solely in changing policies, creating new programs, or opening opportunities to Black males, I believe that school transformation is the starting point. Certainly, Black males may become complicit in their subjugation. However, "scholars and researchers commonly understand that environmental and cultural factors have profound influence on human behaviors including academic performance" (p. 433). Teachers hold tremendous power in shaping the classroom and school culture; thus, they become agents in the production of student identities. Their ability to call students to higher levels of productivity could assist in creating an alternative Black male self-rooted in academic excellence and long-term achievement.

Ferguson (2003) contended that rigidity in perceptions and underestimation of potential have the most devastating effect on students. If teachers are able to confront and edit their expectations of their students and the relationship between those expectations and practice, it could have immediate and positive ramifications. Structuring teacher training programs that provide the "incentives and supports [teachers] need to set, believe in and pursue higher goals for all students" is the first step in this process (Ferguson, 2003, p. 468). As Monroe (2005) suggested, "race conscious approaches at teacher preparation and professional development levels" constitute further movement toward limiting inequitable practices. I argue that this must be taken a step further. A teacher-training program with the goal of eliminating racialized processes must focus on practitioner inquiry that pushes teachers to honestly interrogate their beliefs about African American students, consider the impact they have on students, and work to create curricula and practices that promote inclusion and consideration of student difference. "In-service professional development efforts focused on discipline should be designed to identify and critique teacher perceptions" (Monroe, 2005, p. 48) and charge teachers with incorporating "culturally responsive" strategies.

Understanding the impact of teachers' perceptions is important to transforming the experiences of Black males in a school environment. However, additional research on the Black male school experience is needed. Although no dearth of research exists on the challenges they face, very little is known about how certain groups of young Black men manage to succeed. The purpose of this paper was not to explore this angle, but continued research on the "resilience, perseverance, and the coping strategies employed by individuals whose lives are surrounded by hardships" (Noguera, 2003, p. 438) could provide insight into how schools can combine strong school culture and high expectations of all students with training that assists those males in acquiring the resolve necessary to achieve both in and outside of school.

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