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T H E   T R O T T E R   R E V I E W

# Race, Ethnicity and Public Education

Vol. 14, No.1 - Winter 2002

THE WILLIAM MONROE TROTTER INSTITUTE  
University of Massachusetts Boston



*In Memory*

*of*

Dr. Harold Willard  
Horton, Sr.

June 20, 1933 - August 4, 2001



# Table of Contents

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2	Introduction <i>Philip Hart</i>
5	Toward Democratic Education: The Importance of Culturally Responsive Leadership in 21st Century Schools <i>Donna M. Davis</i>
17	Improving the Selection Process for Identifying Gifted Ethnic Minority Children <i>John Dillard and Nettye R. Brazil</i>
31	High-Stakes Tests Require High-Stakes Pedagogy <i>Randy Lattimore</i>
45	Over-representation of African- American Students in Special Education: The Role of a Developmental Framework in Shaping Teachers' Interpretations of African-American Students' Behavior <i>Valerie Maholmes and Fay E. Brown</i>
61	Why Malik Can "Do" Math: Race and Status in Integrated Classrooms <i>Jacqueline Leonard and Scott Jackson Dantley</i>
79	Race, Ethnicity, Class, and School Dropouts: A Policy Perspective <i>Richard Verdugo</i>
105	Alternative School Administrators "At Risk": What Does it Mean for Children? <i>Christopher Dunbar Jr.</i>
121	The Impact of a Culturally Responsive School Environment on Pre-service Teachers' Willingness to Teach in the School <i>Delois Maxwell</i>
133	Tribute to Dr. Harold Horton <i>Rev. Trevor L. Clement</i>
134	Commentary <i>Tanya Hart</i>

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# INTRODUCTION

*Philip Hart*



We are pleased to share with our readers this issue of the Trotter Review. The events of September 11, 2001, will forever reshape our world as we know it. In addition to the far-reaching effects of this tragedy, it has revealed our general lack of knowledge about Islam and places in the world where religion and faith shape governmental and civic engagement. In crisis often comes opportunity. This opportunity to learn more about other religions and cultural pluralism is positive. It underscores the continuing importance of education and learning in today's world. So I think it particularly appropriate that this issue of the Trotter Review focuses on 'Race, Ethnicity and Public Education.'

Our world here at the Trotter Institute has changed as well since our last issue. Dr. Harold Horton, Associate Director of the Trotter Institute and Associate Editor of the Trotter Review, passed away in August of 2001. This issue of the Trotter Review, reflects his life-long interest in public education, particularly in urban settings. We will miss Dr. Horton's humor and high standards immensely. This issue of the Trotter Review is dedicated to Dr. Horton's memory. The University of Massachusetts, Boston, the Trotter Institute and the College of Education held a memorial service for Dr. Horton on November 9, 2001. This service was attended by family, friends, students and colleagues of Dr. Horton and reflected the love and dedication we all still feel toward him. At this service I was pleased to announce my initiation of the Harold Horton Lecture Series and Scholarship Fund. This lecture series and scholarship fund will insure that Dr. Horton's memory lives on in perpetuity.

Another change is that I have taken over as Editor of the Trotter Review from the very capable hands of Dr. James Jennings. I want to personally thank James for his long commitment to both the Trotter Review and to the Trotter Institute. We welcome his past contributions and look forward to his continued involvement and support.

This issue on 'Race, Ethnicity and Public Education,' focuses on culturally responsive leadership and school environments, the selection process for gifted minority children, mathematics, race and status in the classroom, the overrepresentation of African-American students in special education, and alternative school administrators at risk. In addition, given that this is my inaugural issue and given my background in public education and higher education, I have provided a commentary on public education and the continuing need for alternative education in today's world.

Donna Davis provides us with a cogent definition of culturally responsive leadership in her article. Davis, in her discussion of the nature of democratic education, the nature of individual freedom and the barriers to culturally responsive leadership provides us with an optimistic view of the opportunity before us to truly develop culturally responsive leaders. Again, the events of September 11, forces the reality of the need to develop culturally responsive leaders even more to the forefront of discussion. Delois Maxwell's article focuses on the impact of a culturally responsive school environment on pre-service teachers. This is the report of a study of the extent to which selected features of the urban school environment impact pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in the school. This quantitative study is very useful in articulating and interpreting those variables most relevant to teaching, cultural differences and urban schools. Both Davis and Maxwell draw upon the work of James A. Banks who is a leader in the field of multicultural education.

The John M. Dillard and Netty Brazil article focuses on the difficult task of identifying gifted students by public school teachers and administrators, a task made even more complex when ethnic minority students are considered. They point out the importance of considering more than IQ tests when selecting gifted students, which should include training teachers in understanding cultural differences, lifestyles, and how to identify talented and gifted behavior. Dillard and Brazil also discuss the value of teachers knowing how to work with parents of gifted children. Competence in mathematics has been a stereotypical albatross around the neck of African-American and ethnic minority students. This is more so now in this age of high-stakes tests. The increasingly popular requirement across the country that students pass specific tests before they are allowed to graduate from high school is an alarming trend for those concerned about the future of African-American students. Randy Lattimore's study of six African-American high school students in Ohio, reveals that the cultural and social circumstances of African-American students are rarely taken into consideration when preparing them for the state mathematics tests. This results in inappropriate, inadequate and ineffective preparation for the tests, leading to mass failures and giving the impression that African-Americans are incapable of doing math. But Jacqueline Leonard and Scott Jackson Dantley show us that indeed "Malik can 'do' math." This case study recommends that teachers become cultural brokers to assist all children – particularly African-American and ethnic minority students – in learning the 'language' of mathematics.

The issues of gifted students and competence in mathematics are related on the flipside to the overrepresentation of African-American students in special education. As Valerie Maholmes' and Fay E. Brown's article shows, disproportionately large numbers of African-American students are consistently diagnosed and placed in special education programs. Maholmes

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and Brown argue that often it is the teachers' perceptions that lead to such classification, not objective reality. The authors present a model to help teachers reshape their perceptions. Finally, Maholmes and Brown make relevant recommendations for policy, research and practice.

Negative perception of minority students by their teachers is just one factor that leads to school dropout. In his article, Richard Verdugo extensively reviews literature on conditions and circumstances that lead to dropping out before completion of high school. Verdugo suggests that the two major theories of academic performance – cultural and structural – can be fused together in order to formulate more meaningful and effective interventions to the problem of school dropouts.

Christopher Dunbar, Jr., argues persuasively that in order for alternative schools to work administrators need to create a different cultural climate than in traditional schools. This includes knowledge of, and contact with, the culture of the students and their parents. In addition, parents must be encouraged to come to school. Further, given the long history of alternative schooling in American education, school superintendents have an extensive history of existing research to draw upon concerning alternative approaches to the traditional school. In my commentary, I draw upon this long history of alternative education as well as my experience in running an alternative school system in Roxbury, Massachusetts in the early 1970s. My commentary also draws on the fact that I was educated in public schools from kindergarten on through my doctorate degree. In addition, my mother taught in the Denver Public Schools for nearly forty years until her retirement a few years ago. Thus the importance of improving public education remains a priority for me. This issue of the Trotter Review reflects this interest as well as the importance of this issue to my dear departed friend Dr. Harold Horton.

I want to thank Dr. Regina Rodriguez-Mitchell for so ably stepping in as Associate Editor of the Trotter Review as well as Interim Associate Director of the Trotter Institute. Thanks also go out to Anne Gathuo for her consistent high standards as Managing Editor of the Trotter Review. I also want to welcome Powell Design to the Trotter Review, and in assisting us in taking this publication to the next level of excellence. Finally, to Trevor Clement, who worked very closely with Dr. Horton, thank you for your poetic tribute to his memory.

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# Toward Democratic Education:

## *The Importance of Culturally Responsive Leadership in 21st Century Schools*

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Donna M. Davis, *University of Missouri-Kansas City*

*The author defines culturally responsive leadership as “essentially a process” by which communities create systems that support democratic education. The author explores relevant education scholarship and literary texts to better define “democratic freedom,” and the essay examines issues related to democratic education and the role of educators and community members in creating democratic schools. The author argues that humanistic, child-centered, democratic schools are not only essential for the development of the sense of self that enables one to experience true freedom, but democratic schools are also necessary to the goal of changing the conditions that create inequities. Davis outlines barriers to the development of culturally responsive leadership. These include education administration priorities; faculty-driven not student-driven curricula in departments of education; K-12 curricula which fail to see the students themselves as important educational resources and which fail to respond to and support student culture; and political agendas surrounding the creation and flow of curriculum and knowledge.*

When we talk about culturally responsive leadership, we are really acknowledging the need for educational leaders to value unconditionally the students they serve. This stems from a fundamental belief in the idea that students bring a wealth of prior knowledge about their world from which educators can create and support meaningful educational experiences. Further, if we are to begin to create school systems that can enrich the lives of poor and minority children, we must develop a philosophy of leadership that is mindful of the importance and significance of culture. Indeed, the goal of culturally responsive leadership is to devise mechanisms and environments for others to experience the freedom to become their best selves. It makes sense, then, that if our purpose is to ignite this kind of freedom, then only

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culturally responsive leaders, who are in tune with the specific needs of their students, can best provide them with the tools necessary for their success. In looking even more fundamentally at the underlying goal of culturally responsive leadership, we see that it essentially is a *process* by which we can create systems that support democratic education. The immediate task for educators, therefore, is to examine the many issues related to democratic education and freedom and thus illuminate the importance of fostering culturally responsive leadership.

## The Nature of Democratic Education

In first defining education, Lawrence Cremin states that it is the “deliberate, systemic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, and sensibilities, as well as any learning that results from the effort direct or indirect, intended or unintended (xiii). N. Ray Hiner goes a step further and provides a definition of education that is more comprehensive in nature and key to our understanding and acceptance of responsive leadership. He states that education is “the entire process by which human beings develop a sense of self and formulate their identities; learn the ways of society so

*...education is the entire process by which human beings develop a sense of self...*

that they may function within it; and define and transmit their culture from one generation to the next. He further states that “persons or groups who seek to reproduce their class or culture depend ultimately on the process of education to accomplish their goal...culture cannot transmit itself.” Hiner’s definition recognizes the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of education but does not ignore the role that individuals may play in their own education.<sup>1</sup> Using Hiner’s definition, then, we must consider our significant role in the educational processes of others, that is to say, our role in shaping how others develop a sense of self, formulate an identity, learn the ways of

society, and define and transmit their culture. It is this kind of reflection that is necessary for culturally responsive leadership to thrive and for individuals within organizations to experience true freedom. Both Cremin and Hiner’s broad definitions of education require an acceptance of the individual that is necessary for democratic education to thrive. In thinking about the notion of democratic education, there is of course a broad base of research from which we may discover relevant definitions that support our goals. In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey states:

*Since education is a social process, and there are many kinds of societies, a criterion for educational criticism and construction implies a particular social ideal. The two points selected by which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups...A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have the type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder (99).*

Dewey's views on the ideal society and its implications for education have influenced current thinking and provided the foundation for a discourse that is relevant to the ideas related to cultural responsiveness. Moreover, his thoughts on what constitutes a democratic way of life can assist educators with conceptualizing and implementing democratic systems of education. Indeed, Michael Apple and James Beane note that "democracy has a powerful meaning, that it can work, and that it is necessary if we are to maintain freedom and human dignity in our social affairs." While they are careful to remind us that democracy has had "multiple meanings in the larger society [and requires] continuous examination in light of changing times," they nonetheless argue that there are several "conditions" on which democracy depends — the foundations of the democratic way of life. The authors state that it is these conditions and their extension through education that are the central concerns of democratic schools. Among such conditions are the following:

1. The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible.
2. Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems.
3. The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems, and policies.
4. Concern for the welfare of others and "the common good."
5. Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities.
6. An understanding that democracy is not so much an "ideal" to be pursued as an "idealized" set of values that we must live and that must guide our life as a people.
7. The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life.

Apple and Beane further argue that the creation of democratic schools "does not happen by chance." First, "democratic structures and processes [must be created] by which life in the school is carried out."

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And second, the “curriculum [created must] give young people democratic experiences.” Ultimately, they argue, democratic schools, which are humanistic and child-centered, “seek not simply to lessen the harshness of social inequities in school, but to change the conditions that create them” (11). Democratic education, then, or our quest to foster it, seems essential to the goal of changing the conditions that create inequities and providing individuals with the means to develop their senses of selves that can ultimately allow them to experience true freedom.

## The Nature of Individual Freedom

While it is clear that one goal of developing culturally responsive leaders is to create democratic schools, we also must acknowledge that this kind of democracy demands an examination of the nature of individual freedom. In *Experience and Education*, John Dewey states:

*The commonest mistake made about freedom is...to identify it with freedom of movement, or with the external or physical side of activity. The fact still remains that an increased measure of freedom of outer movement is a means, not an end. The educational problem is not solved when this aspect of freedom is obtained. Everything then depends, so far as education is concerned, upon what is done with this added liberty? What end does it serve? What consequences flow from it?(61)*

Dewey argues, “the only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worth while”(61). For educators interested in culturally responsive leadership, Dewey provides a definition of freedom that, paradoxically, provides students with the ability to question their environment, what is being taught, and ultimately the very leadership that created the system.

Maxine Greene analyzes the nature of freedom and specifically outlines the tragedy that can occur when democratic structures such as those Dewey suggests are not in place. She provides several examples of individuals—from the downtrodden immigrant to the dehumanized slave—and their quests for the ideal. Greene states that blacks, “because they did not choose to come to this country and became deprived of their freedom...have given expression to the archetypal predicament of the

outsider more eloquently than have those of many others.” She uses as one example Langston Hughes’ “As I Grew Older,” in which Hughes relies on the metaphor of a “wall” to represent the racism that precludes his attaining his dream. The wall rises “between [him] and his dream,” and ultimately dims the light of it. Greene says, “we may find that the search for freedom, in personal and shared lives, almost inevitably [leads] to an engagement with that wall”(88). She believes though, that educators can expand their perspectives on the meanings of freedom through an examination of those who sought to attain it amidst unspeakable hardship and pain.

Greene relies on other examples from literature to reveal the nature and quest for freedom. She points to Richard Wright’s tragic character Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and says that he is “the rejected and frustrated black American who is propelled into murderous violence by conditions he cannot control.” Bigger, she says, “presents the issues of freedom in one of the starkest ways we know.” Bigger’s life spirals out of control as the result of his murdering his employer’s daughter, Mary. But it is Greene’s examination of Bigger’s Marxist lawyer that is central to her analysis of freedom, and she states, “People like Bigger, the lawyer claims, have the same capacity to live and act as anyone else, but they are not permitted opportunities to express their capabilities. Some starve from the lack of self-realization; others murder because of it”(97).

Greene also recalls Ralph Ellison’s protagonist from *Invisible Man* and his quest to discover his identity and to be recognized as an individual. She says the “narrator is on a journey, not unfamiliar in the United States. It is evocative of the early settlers’, of the pioneers’, of Huck Finn’s, of Jay Gatsby’s.” The “wall” the Invisible Man encounters, according to Greene, is the “racism of society, along with its manipulations and labelings.” She notes:

Each time he has tried to define a self by means of a project, he has been subsumed under other people’s definitions; his invisibility has been intensified. We are reminded once more that neither the loss nor the achievement of freedom is attributable to the objective world around or to the person in his/her subjectivity (97).

Ultimately, Greene argues that freedom requires an “exchange” between situations and individuals. It cannot occur in a vacuum. And most importantly, no one group can attain true freedom while any other group remains oppressed. She asks the fundamental questions, “How, in a society like ours, a society of contesting interests and submerged voices,

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an individualist society...can we educate for freedom? And, in educating for freedom, how can we create and maintain a common world?" (116)

Paulo Freire provides part of the answer to these questions as he reminds us that "freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift," and that "it must be pursued constantly and responsibly". It is, he says, the "indispensable condition for the quest for human completion" (29). As educators, we have it within our power to engage in such a conquest as we assist others with their quest for completion. It is our task to understand the nature of freedom in order to confront barriers that undermine the quest, and responsive leadership is vital to this process.

### **Barriers to Culturally Responsive Leadership: Meeting the Challenge**

To return to Greene's use of Hughes' "wall" metaphor, our efforts to effect culturally responsive leadership quite often are met with many obstacles or "walls." Indeed, as institutions of higher education work to develop partnerships with organizations charged with creating democratic education, several barriers present themselves. However, it is the duty of higher education institutions and particularly schools of education to work directly with public school partners and help them become more adept at understanding cultural issues and how they relate to overall organizational sensibilities and structures. Deborah Meier notes, "If the primary public responsibility and justification for tax-supported schooling is raising a generation of fellow citizens, then the school – of necessity – must be a place where students learn the habits of mind, work, and heart that lie at the core of...democracy" (28).

Linda Lambert's notion of constructivism as it relates to leadership seems appropriate in thinking about democratic schools. She states that constructivist leadership is "viewed as a reciprocal process among the adults in the school and proposes individual and shared experiences."

The school functions as a community that is self-motivating and that views the growth of its members as fundamental. There is an emphasis on language as a means for shaping the school culture, conveying a commonality of experience, and articulating a joint vision. Shared inquiry is an important activity in problem identification and resolution; participants conduct action research and share findings as a way of improving practice (9).

She further notes that anyone involved in the educational community—teachers, parents, administrators, or students—can engage in leadership activities, and she ultimately notes that, "constructivist leadership enables human growth that was previously reserved for the few. Others were

followers, relegated to second-class citizenship and second-class growth. [With this kind of leadership] interdependence and reciprocity require equal partners” (29).

With this in mind, one clear barrier that exists is in the lack of awareness and understanding among educational leaders in K-12 schools about the cultures from which their students come. In addition, many leaders demonstrate an unwillingness to change as their communities display profound demographic shifts. This is a result of education administration programs not adequately addressing the need for cultural responsiveness. This need is particularly intense in light of recent desegregation issues. Indeed, Gary Orfield and Susan Eaton remark that “for the first time since 1954, school segregation is actually increasing for African-Americans” (xix). Their work profiles specific districts across the country that have addressed the issue of desegregation with varying degrees of success. Orfield and Eaton’s conclusion, however, is that, “slowly, quietly, and without the nation’s comprehension, political and legal forces have converged to dismantle one of our greatest constitutional victories.” They argue that *Brown’s* true intent has been neutralized as a result of conservative Supreme Court decisions and an ideological shift in the political climate. “More than forty years after *Brown*,” they state, “racial separation both between and within school districts is an ordinary, unnoticed fixture in K-12 education. And there is a great deal of evidence to support *Brown’s* basic premise that in American society, separate schools are inherently unequal” (xix). We cannot ignore the reality that educational leaders in the new millennium must address the issue of what it means to lead a school that is, for whatever reason, segregated. What new duties and instructional needs present themselves? What new strategies must we employ to ensure a democratic education? What obligation do we have to address this obvious demographic reality? What will the curriculum look like? Who will teach it? Do we celebrate this separateness? Bemoan it? Fight against it? How do we prepare students to be members of a larger, global community in light of this reality? And most importantly, how can we ensure that all students will experience intellectual freedom? These are the kinds of questions that culturally responsive individuals and leaders must address. And, it is the charge of higher education institutions to ensure that they do. Honest dialogue about the significance of race in this country must be central to and infused in the coursework required by education administration candidates.

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*...what constitutes a democratic way of life?*

Frederick Dembowksi states that all too often, “many departments of education administration have political realities that result in an

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inappropriate mix of coursework required of their students...The curriculum...is often faculty-need driven instead of student-need driven” (2). Indeed, if we are to begin to address the need for cultural responsiveness – a need that is clearly student-driven, then we must look carefully at what it is we are doing at the university level to ensure that students receive the kind of exposure to and exploration of issues related to diversity that we know will be vital to their success as leaders of 21st century schools.

The second barrier that public school leaders face and that schools of education must confront is that the curriculum in many K-12 programs often does not acknowledge what students already know and can do. Research in the area of urban education and the transmission of culture can be useful in thinking about strategies to align more closely the curriculum offered in public schools with what students already know and can do. Indeed, Belinda Williams’s work around the *Urban Learner Framework* and her quest to close the achievement gap for poor and minority children is relevant to discussions regarding curriculum and its absolute need to respond to and support student culture. Williams makes four assumptions:

1. Culture and cognitive development are interrelated.
2. Education must foster the full potential of every learner by appreciating group membership and individual diversity.
3. All educational systems must value and care for the learner and the community.
4. All individuals are both learners and facilitators of learning.

These assumptions stem from Dewey’s philosophy that learning is indeed a social process and that individuals must have some degree of control over how and what they learn. Williams’ democratic approach to the educational process provides a means to create a framework for educating urban children, and she calls on educators to “revise their perspective of urban youth from students at risk to learners displaying resilience.” She also states that the curriculum, staff development programs, school environment, and school management all need to be aligned with this thinking in mind (77).

## **The Politics of Official Knowledge**

**W**illiams offers one approach to meeting the needs of diverse students, and it is not intended to be a magic bullet. The point is that educational leaders must explore all avenues and take many approaches in responding to cultural issues. And in addition to identifying promising practices like the *Urban Learner Framework*,



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educational leaders must become savvy at understanding what Apple terms, the politics of official knowledge. Indeed, Apple's thoughts on *the politics of official knowledge* are relevant to discussions about curriculum and he states:

Education is deeply implicated in the politics of culture. The curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge, somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of a nation. It is always a part of a selective tradition, someone's selection, some group's vision of legitimate knowledge. It is produced out of the cultural, political, and economic conflicts, tensions, and compromises that organize and disorganize a people. The decision to define some groups' knowledge as the most legitimate knowledge, as official knowledge, while other groups' knowledge hardly sees the light of day, says something extremely important about who has power in society (Cultural Politics 22).

This power, according to Apple, determines how the official knowledge will be presented, who will teach it, and what counts as an appropriate display of having learned it. Most important, a system of dominance and subordination is created as a result (23).

In *Cultural Diversity and Education*, James Banks describes five types of knowledge: 1) *personal/cultural*; 2) *popular*; 3) *mainstream/academic*; 4) *transformative academic*; and 5) *school*. Personal/cultural knowledge consists of the concepts, explanations, and interpretations that students derive from their personal experiences in their homes, families, and community cultures. The facts, concepts, explanations, and interpretations that are institutionalized within the mass media and in other institutions that are part of the popular culture constitute popular knowledge. Mainstream academic knowledge consists of the concepts, paradigms, theories, and explanations that constitute traditional Western-centric knowledge in history and the behavioral and social sciences. ...Transformational academic knowledge consists of the facts, concepts, paradigms, theories, explanations that challenge mainstream academic knowledge and expand and substantially revise established canons, paradigms, theories, explanations, and research methods. School knowledge consists of the facts, concepts, generalizations, and interpretations that are presented in textbooks, teachers' guides, other media forms, and lectures by teachers (197).

Banks argues that we must recognize the danger in one type of knowledge dominating an institutional approach to instruction and ultimately asserts that "the knowledge institutionalized within the schools, colleges, and universities, and within the popular culture should...empower all people to participate effectively in a democratic

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society” (199). Gloria Ladson-Billings states that the curriculum we devise must be culturally *relevant*-that is, it must “make deep and meaningful connections with the lives of the students” (333). If we say we want to create democratic education and freedom of choice, culturally responsive leaders must acknowledge the political agendas surrounding the creation and flow of curriculum and knowledge in the process.

There are, of course other barriers to developing culturally responsive leadership, each creating its own research base. School district bureaucracy is one. State and national standards for students, teachers, and administrators is another. Within each barrier, however, exists opportunities to play a significant role in creating mechanisms and infrastructures to overcome it. Thus, the fundamental issue remains how institutions of higher education can create the kind of leaders we need to bring about democracy in public school systems. One clear strength in tackling this issue lies in our unique position as the trainers of these new leaders. We, again, can expose students in our programs to the thinking necessary to effect change. We can participate at the public school level by spending time outside our offices and inside classrooms investigating and determining if democratic education is in place. We can provide staff development for teachers and leaders with democratic education and culture in mind. We can assist school systems with creating the environments necessary for individual freedom to flourish.

*All educational systems must value and care for the learner and the community.*

Langston Hughes so eloquently establishes the reality of the wall for us in his personal quest for freedom and in our collective struggle to achieve equity. It is important to note, however, that the poem does not end at the *raising* of the wall. Indeed, Hughes, ever the dreamer, saw a ray of hope-an amazing feat considering his place in life-and the poem ends with his “dark hands” breaking through the wall. Clearly Hughes believed he had it within himself to overcome the

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<sup>1</sup>N. Ray Hiner, “History of Education for the 1990s and Beyond: The Case for Academic Imperialism,” *History of Education Quarterly* 30. (2): 138-160. Hiner defines self as “the concept one has of his or her own person.” Identity is defined as a “sense of sameness and historical continuity of one’s self and the ability to accept or adopt a role that is provided by society.”

<sup>2</sup>For the complete poem see, Langston Hughes, “As I Grew Older,” *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1994, 93.

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obstacles of oppression and racism and realize his dream. There is no question that we have walls before us that can preclude the development of the kind of leaders we need. But, this is our challenge, our opportunity to do just that.

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# Improving the Selection Process for Identifying Gifted Ethnic Minority Children

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*Poor and ethnic minority students are underrepresented in programs for the talented and gifted. As the number of public school students from ethnically diverse and low income backgrounds steadily increases, schools need to revise assessment tools that cannot effectively evaluate the academic potential of these populations. The authors examine the definition of giftedness, outline the limitations of current testing methods, and explore the role played by teachers' perceptions of ethnic minority children. The authors explore as well the range of social pressures on gifted African American students which may lead them to adopt behaviors that camouflage their giftedness. Dillard and Brazil present a case study in which training improved a Caucasian teacher's responsiveness to the gifted traits in one African American student. Practical suggestions to improve access to gifted education programs include new criteria of giftedness, the use of multiple selection criteria, strategies for training teachers to recognize gifted minorities, and strategies for improving parents' observations of behavioral characteristics of gifted minority children.*

Identifying students with gifted potential is often no simple task for public school teachers and administrators. The selection process becomes even more complex when ethnic minority students are considered. Whereas many Caucasian students are admitted to special programs, such as gifted education, many poor and ethnic minorities are less fortunate (Damiani). These latter students are more often forced to remain in traditional education settings, where their full potential is less developed, or not achieved (Worrel, Szarko, and Gabelko). For example,

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Worrel et al. (2001) argues that poor ethnic minority students are disproportionately excluded from programs for the talented and gifted. That is, the number of students representing the identified gifted in the United States is less likely to include a significant proportion of ethnic minorities.

Similarly, Scott, Deuel, Jean-Francois, and Urbano contend that children from culturally different and/or low-income backgrounds constitute an increasing proportion of all school children. However, assessment tools that effectively evaluate their academic potential are lacking. Consequently, children from culturally different and/or low-income families are less likely to be identified as gifted. Access to gifted education is highly unequal; African American, American Indian, and Hispanic youngsters are disproportionately underserved (Frasier, Garcia, and Passow; Kornhaber). Further, several gifted and talented proponents (Harris and Ford; Passow and Frasier; Scott et al.; Bonner; Worrell et al.) maintain that ethnic minority and poor children have been and remain underrepresented in educational programs for the gifted and talented.

It appears there is need to improve current practices for identifying and selecting potentially gifted ethnic minority students for gifted education programs. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss: a) the definition of giftedness, b) limitations of testing methods, c) teachers' perceptions, and d) social pressures on students. Also, a discussion of practical suggestions is presented regarding identifying and selecting African American students as potential candidates for gifted programs.

## Defining Giftedness

Most educational programs typically define gifted children as those who express the following characteristics: "intellectual, creative, artistic, leadership, capacity and specific academic achievement" (Brown 159). According to Gallagher and Gallagher there is little agreement about how giftedness should be defined. Resenick and Goodman indicated that as to 'giftedness' itself, there is no tight definition, no single agreed-on meaning. It is a flexible construct which is part of the debate over culture and policy" (109). Passow and Frasier argue that:

*The components of traditional models and paradigms for identifying talent potential have come under criticism for a variety of reasons including: the giftedness construct is too narrow and limited; alternative approaches to or modifications of the identification processes focus on 'fitting' populations into a narrow giftedness construct; and the impact of culture and environment is not taken into account (105).*

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Federal law defines gifted and talented children as those who demonstrate “high performance capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity or in specific academic fields and require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school... to develop such capabilities fully” Hallahan and Kauffman 455). The U. S. Department of Education definition also states: “Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavors” (2). This statement appears broader and more inclusive of all students from various socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural groups. Measurements of students’ giftedness, using this concept, would indeed ensure greater equity among all students.

Yet how giftedness is defined is changing, according to Hallahan and Kauffman. For example, the common variable “intelligence” is much too complex to be assessed “by narrow focused standardized intelligence tests” (455). Thus, giftedness is present in children from all ethnic and cultural groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. According to the U.S. Department of Education, giftedness can be exhibited among children with high performance capacity in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, and unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic field (2). Another problem in indentifying potentially gifted ethnic minority children is associated with assessment methods.

### **Limitations of Testing Methods**

**I**ndividual assessment instruments, such as the Stanford-Binet, do not accurately measure the full potential of ethnic minority students (Brown; Ford). Further, many of the objectives items are biased against African Americans since they are related to differences in values, inner city experience compared to suburban and other life styles, differences in ethnic and cultural experiences, and differences in language usage indigenous to group culture (Brown 1997). Although intelligence tests meet technical standards for validity and reliability, they are often misused in identifying students for gifted education (Tyler-Woods and Carri). For example, group I.Q. tests are commonly used to select students rather than screen them for additional identification procedures, even though group tests are too crude for selection purposes. Even when appropriately used, because mean I.Q. scores vary across racial and ethnic groups, the use of intelligence tests dramatically diminishes the chances that ethnic minority youngsters will be selected (Gagne, Belanger, and Motard). Frasier

*There is debate about whether or not teachers can accurately identify gifted students.*

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maintains that: “[a] traditional identification paradigm, which relies on teacher nomination and requires performance scores on test of intelligence and achievement, has been a serious barrier to the participation of more ethnic/minority children in programs for the gifted” (5). The ongoing yet outmoded focus on the intelligence measures as the evaluation instrument of giftedness is indeed a very real barrier to equity in gifted programs. Underrepresentation for low socioeconomic and ethnic minority students is widely associated with commonly used assessments of identifying students for gifted programs (US Department of Education; Callahan and McIntire; Frasier, Garcia, and Passow; Passow and Frasier; Kornhaber). According to Brown, many proponents of gifted education argue against the use of intelligence assessment. Furthermore, they advocate less dependence on intelligence testing for selecting potential gifted students. However, Bonner argues that standardize tests have their usefulness and should not be eliminated but used as an indicator rather than sole measure of students’ giftedness.

### **Teachers’ Perception of Ethnic Minority Children**

Often, African American and other ethnic minority students are omitted or passed over simply as a result of teachers’ and administrators’ attitudes towards and perceptions of these students, for example, Schafer (1998) states,

*Discrimination and classism within the race based on darkness of skin, haircut, quality of clothes and possessions, and socioeconomic factor divide students. Rural students are dismissed by the urban ‘elite’ despite their academic qualifications. Teachers often have lower expectations for their African American pupils, and inflexible, irrelevant curriculum restricts pupils (58-59).*

There is debate about whether or not teachers can accurately identify gifted students. Some investigators assert that teachers tend to select compliant students over more challenging students who may have greater potential (Adam and Callahan; Kornhaber). Further, some researchers (Frasier and Passow; Frasier, Garcia, and Passow; Kornhaber) contend that teachers refer disproportionately fewer African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanic youngsters to gifted and talented education programs.

Moreover, teachers hold different expectations of majority and ethnic minority students, which may affect both instruction and grading (Grantham and Ford). Grades may also vary across groups, because students who especially value group identity, among many American



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Indian and African American students, sometimes avoid high grades for fear that this may isolate them from their peers (Mickelson; Kornhaber). These and other social encounters can have lasting effects on students' emotional state.

### **Social Pressures on Gifted African American Children**

Schafer (1998) contends that "Talented African American students suffer and endure humiliation and trauma [from peers] as they become aware that it is often dangerous to succeed. For instance, peer pressure has equated education with success and the rejection of African American culture for Caucasian values. Hence, these students might opt for academic failure to attain peer acceptance and security" (59). Many African American gifted students encounter negative experiences from peers as well as family members.

Bonner concurs, saying that gifted African American students may encounter problems with family and peers inside and outside the classroom. In an effort to attain social acceptance, these students often camouflage their giftedness to become part of the group. It is not uncommon for these students, while exhibiting their abilities around others, to be thought of as "acting white".

The family home environment too often expects its children to behave within a certain range of normalcy. Again, to receive acceptance, gifted children might adopt and exhibit behaviors that camouflage their giftedness such as kidding around, skipping school, and limiting achievement efforts (Bonner).

### **Concerns about Traditional Methods for Identifying Gifted Children**

According to Kornhaber, most states require schools and districts to have gifted identification screening. Traditional criteria for screening include intelligence (or I.Q.) test results and teacher endorsements (Brown). Many educators and parents contend that traditional and current methods employed for identifying and selecting gifted students exclude many ethnic minority students who are likely candidates for gifted programs. Instead, these criteria tend to favor majority students over students from low-income families and most ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans. For example, Passow and Frasier maintain that the traditional method of identifying students that depends on teacher nominations and required scores on I.Q. tests

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and achievement measures functioned mostly as major barriers to ethnic minorities' entry to gifted programs.

We have explored several of the problem areas which often limit many African American students' participation in gifted education programs. What kinds of strategies can improve the procedures for identifying potentially gifted students?

### **Strategies for Improving the Selection Process of Gifted Ethnic Minority Students**

Several problems are inherent in the process of identifying and selecting ethnic minority students for gifted programs. It is clear that teachers' perceptions of students are often culturally based (Ford and Grantham) which can lessen potentially gifted, ethnic minority students' chances of being selected. Addressing these practices may indeed require teacher training to ensure greater accuracy in identifying and selecting gifted ethnic minority students (Rhodes). This section will discuss three general areas pertaining to training teachers: 1) assessing African Americans' learning styles, 2) identifying African Americans according to the new criteria for identifying gifted students, and 3) involving parents in the identification of giftedness.

### **Helping Classroom Teachers Make Accurate Student Assessments**

The initial step in identifying gifted students begins with teacher nominations. Both Bonner and Rhodes argue that most teachers fail to receive professional training, in college or elsewhere, for recognizing potential gifted behaviors among ethnic minority youngsters. Consequently, teacher training is needed to raise awareness of various cultural dimensions and how they impact each student differentially.

Obvious attributes of gifted behavior exhibited by ethnic minorities often elude teachers because their backgrounds, experiences, and learning styles are vastly different (Bell; Ford). Many teachers, unaware of this teacher-learner dissonance, regard those students who fail to adapt to the school environment as unresponsive, disruptive, and apathetic toward learning (Graybill). Consequently, low expectations ensue and malleable skills and talents are not recognized. Certain behaviors are exhibited in such rudimentary form they go unnoticed because of, for example, poor expressive language skills. As an example, children may be extremely knowledgeable about a particular area to which they have been exposed and can articulate their knowledge of the topic in their unique

communication style extremely well during unstructured or free time with friends. This skill is not valued in school. Due to a lag in verbal development, children fail or refuse to participate in activities because they cannot recall or articulate the daily history assignment as eloquently as some of their peers. A culturally responsive teacher would realize the discrepancy in performance and focus on students' abilities to converse effectively with peers. Cultural insensitivity to gifted behavior can be offset or eliminated through culturally based training.

Culturally focused training for teachers should highlight the strengths and enriching opportunities ethnic minorities bring to the learning environment (Graybill). Ethnic minority students seem to prefer field dependent and sensitive learning approaches which include cooperative learning and hands-on activities as opposed to the field independent, experimental analytical learning style (Bell; Graybill; Griggs and Dunn). Mexican Americans, according to Griggs and Dunn, work best in highly structured environments. African Americans, on the other hand, are more effective in socially oriented, less structured surroundings. They react positively to tasks and assignments that are personally relevant and can be processed holistically (Ford). Teachers must provide flexible learning opportunities such as cooperative groups, demonstrations, open-ended tasks and hands-on activities (Renzulli and Purcell).

Inconsistent performance among learning variables may be another signal of giftedness. For instance, students who score poorly on exams and who approach daily tasks inconsistently, yet score in the upper range on standardized tests. Students with higher order processing skills and superior conceptual ability may become behavior problems because often they are not challenged (Nicholas et al). Culturally responsive teachers recognize discrepancies in academic and test performance, develop intervention strategies and ultimately recommend qualified students for gifted education.

*Cultural insensitivity to gifted behavior can be offset or eliminated through culturally based training.*

Teacher training programs can increase awareness of methods to ascertain an accurate account of a student's performance. In addition to culturally focused workshops, seminars, university courses, and ongoing professional development, teacher interviews with students are valuable in soliciting additional information about a particular project, performance, or an exceptional characteristic. Autobiographical questionnaires (Kirschenbaum) focus on intentions, hobbies, preferences and past experiences that may prove relevant in forming accurate teacher perceptions. Teachers can further probe an assignment or project or

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create a situation to showcase artistic abilities during a school assembly or a community function. Interested persons can provide feedback and the results can be analyzed for consensus. An expert in the area of the noted attribute could be asked to observe and visit with the student and compare and share opinions. If the teacher and the professional agree, referral to the gifted program should follow. Ethnography, another data gathering technique, requires school personnel to get information about presumed characteristic of superiority from a person in the community in which the child resides (Castellano). Collaboration with other professionals and community acquaintances serves to validate and strengthen a teacher's input into the identification process.

### **New Criteria of Giftedness: Training Teachers To Recognize Gifted Ethnic Minorities**

**T**he new paradigm shift in gifted education calls for a new and dramatically different approach to identifying giftedness (Passow and Frasier). The focus is on a technique that encompasses a wider spectrum of behaviors, including potential gifted traits. It also recognizes psychological, cultural, environmental, and social influences on behaviors, and employs multiple selection criteria and procedures that would ensure greater ethnic minority representation in programs for the gifted (Ford; Frasier, 1997; Passow and Frasier; Renzulli and Purcell). It is imperative that teachers are aware of the new criteria for identifying and selecting students who qualify for gifted education. Entry into a gifted program is not based solely on superior performance on an I.Q. or achievement test (Passow and Frasier; Renzulli and Purcell). A combination of factors such as high grade point average, strong scores on teacher rating forms, and exceptional characteristics may be taken into consideration.

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Forsbach and Pierce found that teachers increased their ability to identify attributes of gifted behavior through staff development and the use of multiple criteria.

Subsequently, the number of African Americans referred to the gifted program increased. Pre-service training has been shown to heighten awareness of the complexities surrounding academic needs of students from diverse backgrounds, to highlight the necessity for

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appropriate curricula and to promote a change of attitudes toward these students (Moon, Callahan and Tomlinson).

Authentic assessment such as rating of portfolios (Schwartz) can be used to validate students' gifted potential. Other methods that teachers have used to identify talent among ethnic minorities are biographical self-identification inventories (Schwartz) and tryouts in programs of interest (Fishkin and Johnson).

### **Psychological and Social Pressures of Gifted Ethnic Minorities**

Cultural responsive teachers are well aware of the social and psychological pressures that confront brilliant children from ethnic minority communities (Patton and Townsend). Peer pressure, test anxiety, and wavering teacher support often have psychological implications for ethnic minority students (Ford and Harris III). Peterson, (1997) alludes to the difficult lives that mask the abilities of some children. The homeless, abuse, neglect, and unstable living arrangements can affect students psychologically. Psychological problems may cause some bright younger students to withdraw and older students to turn to violence, crime, drugs and alcohol (Dixon, Mains and Reeves). Without support and assistance from teachers these children are less likely to achieve their optimal level of development (Peterson 1997). Teachers who have low academic expectations of ethnic minority students, maintain their distance from these students, and are strictly influenced by standardized test scores (Ford and Harris) create a social environment that is not conducive to learning at higher levels. Peterson, (1999) states teachers' values, beliefs and attitudes, as well as those of others in the school environment, if less than positive, can create sociological problems for these children and may cause them to feel disconnected from school, teachers, and peers.

Teachers can help parents and peers to understand and accept ethnic minority children and their giftedness as they work with these students to nurture and develop their talents as well as address their personal needs (Peterson 1999). Mentoring (Goff and Torrance), tutoring, counseling, and peer collaboration are suggestions that can help to alleviate psychological and social obstacles students face.

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## Improving Parents' Observations of Behavioral Characteristics of Gifted Minority Children

For those parents who are unaware of their children's superior abilities, educational training programs (Levine) and partnerships (Strip and Hirsch) can assist them in recognizing and cultivating intellectual and creative potential in their children. Culturally responsive teachers form cooperative parent-teacher teams (Strip and Hirsch) and make concerted efforts to share ideas and determine what is best for the intellectually gifted child. Parent checklists or rating forms may be used, according to Dixon, Mains, and Reeves, to assess a child's potential. Inviting parents to observe in their children's class (Covarrubia 2000) as teachers points out children's strengths, how they are addressed, and offer suggestion for parents to use at home and parenting courses are strategies that will increase parents' observations of their children's gifted behavior.

### A Case Study

Ethnic minority children and adolescents may possess emerging or dormant talents that elude recognition by educators because the attributes do not fit the typical profile of persons interested in certain professions (Fishkin and Johnson). For example, Aaron, a 10-year-old African American male, is very active, gregarious and disorganized. During the time he is quiet, however infrequent, and between or during assignments, he draws an array of geometric shapes. He is performing below grade level in content subject areas, but his achievement test scores are well above average. He excels in art and can put together any do-it-yourself kit of model cars and airplanes effortlessly without reading the instructions. In art classes he abstractly sketches shapes and forms and relishes in describing them to his peers and teachers.

*A single criterion functions as a barrier to program entry*

One morning in particular, as Ms. Dabkee, a middle-aged Caucasian and Aaron's homeroom teacher, circulated around the room during an independent activity, she did not reprimand Aaron for his off-task behavior as she usually did. She had recently attended a cultural awareness workshop and for the first time noticed the unique features of his art. She observed Aaron in her class and his art class for one week. Ms. Dabkee observed and recorded Aaron's behavior and drawings in art and her class. She decided to use his art as an incentive to increase the quality and quantity of his academic work. Ms. Dabkee talked to Aaron

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and was appalled that she had not realized his potential for and interest in architecture. His parents were surprised that his drawing actually represented something other than scribbling. The parents recounted Aaron's fascination with building anything that could be glued or nailed together and they had proof of his art and other creations all over the house. They never considered it a special talent. His teacher submitted a nomination to the gifted and talented coordinator after Aaron's academics improved and his interest in art soared.

The scenario above used four procedures that are recommended for uncovering hidden talents. Ms. Dabkee's insight into Aaron's emerging talent was kindled through her participation in professional development offered by the school district. She used direct observation to establish and record a behavior pattern. Communicating with the student about his interest and the attribute in question was another strategy the teacher used to explore beyond the visible signs of the child's potential. Interacting with the parents to obtain information about their child's past experiences and accomplishments regarding the observed attribute proved beneficial.

## **Conclusion**

**I**n spite of the underrepresentation of ethnic minority students, particularly African Americans, in the talented and gifted education programs, serious efforts are warranted to change the selection process for enhancing the numbers of ethnic minorities for these programs. Professionals should consider the definition of "giftedness" as one that is broad enough to include children of all cultures and ethnic groups. Additionally, it is obvious that a single criterion to qualify students for gifted programs such as students' performance on I.Q. tests, is an insufficient measure of their abilities. A single criterion functions as a barrier to program entry. This is probably true for most students, Caucasians as well as ethnic minorities. Employing multiple criteria, including I.Q. tests results, in the selection process will provide greater assessments of ethnic minority students' talents and abilities and enhance their chances for gifted program selection.

Another significant aspect of improving the selection process is the training of teachers regarding ethnic minority students' culture, learning styles, and how to identify talented and gifted behaviors. Professional training with teachers should also include methods involving how to work with parents of gifted children. Parents can be instrumental in monitoring their children's growth and development as well as working to enhance their children's abilities.

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# High-Stakes Tests Require High-Stakes Pedagogy

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*High-stakes mathematics tests continue to gain popularity in the United States, with an increasing number of states setting the passing of such tests as a high school graduation requirement. Consequently, instruction and instructional content have changed, with teachers emphasizing materials on the test while neglecting other important aspects of learning. The tests have become all-consuming, taking over many students' lives. Yet students are often ill prepared for these tests. This is even more true for African-American students whose cultural and social circumstances make their preparation for high-stakes tests inadequate and ineffective. The author examines six such students – their hopes for the future, their preparation for the tests, and the impact of the tests on their lives.*

## Introduction

Despite mounting concerns about the high-stakes mathematics test performance of US students, schools continue to employ a variety of untested and unproven practices which are said to be “innovative” (Carnine 40; Marshall 102-106). Proponents and opponents of high-stakes tests including Douglas Fisher et al., Ivor Pritchard, and William A. Firestone et al., point out the highly negative consequences of such testing relative to underrepresented groups. More specifically, even the limited amount of literature that is available does not address the impact of high-stakes mathematics tests on African-American high school students. However, all educators and policy makers will recognize one point, that high-stakes tests are now or shortly will be used in a majority of the states (Natriello and Pallas).

A 1999 report by the American Federation of Teachers indicated that 23 states had examinations as a requirement for high school graduation, up from eighteen in 1998 (Heubert and Hauser). The number of states in

the process of developing examinations that will be required for high school graduation is expected to increase to 29 by 2003 (Shore, Madaus, and Clarke 1-7). The American Federation of Teachers reported that of the 23 states, fourteen now set graduation-test standards at the tenth-grade level or higher and use the standards to hold students back a grade, withhold students' diplomas, or to punish teachers, principals, and schools that perform poorly.

In this paper, a critique of high-stakes tests, particularly for minority students as a requirement for high school graduation in public school districts in this country will be discussed. A qualitative research study regarding the importance of the preparation experiences of six African-American students involved in a high-stakes mathematics test is then presented. Finally, implications are discussed for further research in mathematics education.

### **High-Stakes Tests and Minority Students Unintended Deleterious Repercussions**

Historically, high-stakes testing in the US has been used to diagnose and classify students, and to assign them to educational treatments (Madaus). Heubert and Hauser noted that proponents and opponents of graduation testing agree there exists relatively little research that addresses the consequences of such testing. There exists however, perceived negative consequences of such tests among some groups. For example, some Michigan parents in an affluent school district refused to allow their children to take a high-stakes standardized test when they perceived that it might be harmful to their children in terms of future college admissions (Johnston). Unfortunately, relatively few parents in urban districts have that option when it comes to their children. It is therefore important to evaluate closely the claims and possible ramifications of the detrimental consequences of high-stakes testing on low-income and minority students.

Milbrey W. McLaughlin (250-251) associated the following possible negative fallout with high-stakes testing schemes:

- discouraging classroom innovation, risk-taking, and invention;
- forcing out of the curriculum the very kinds of learning – higher-order thinking and problem solving that educational theorists, and others say are most important to “increase national competitiveness” and success in the world marketplace.

In general, high-stakes testing affected both the content and the

sequence of instruction, and efforts to affect test scores directly increased as the testing date approached. Smith and Rottenberg found that testing reduced the time available for ordinary instruction. Schools were also neglecting material not on the tests, while encouraging the use of instructional methods resembling testing, such as multiple-choice exams.

Shepard and Dougherty found that teachers gave greater emphasis to basic skills instruction and that non-tested content suffered because of the focus on standardized tests. Herman and Golan also found that teachers spent an inordinate amount of time preparing for tests. Consistent with Shepard and Dougherty, they found that teachers were spending class time on worksheets covering test content and format. Teachers also changed the content and sequence of instruction throughout the year to accommodate the high-stakes test. Should the curriculum change to improve standardized test scores? Rodgers, Paredes, and Mangino examined the effects of the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) which is a test that students needed to pass in order to graduate from high school and receive a high school diploma. Rodgers et al., found that basic skills, as measured on the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP), increased as a result of the minimum competency exam, but that higher-order skills remained the same in Texas. They concluded that districts should be cautious about narrowing the curriculum and letting higher order skills suffer for the sake of improving test scores.

*...districts  
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the  
curriculum ...*

## **Advantages and Disadvantages of High-Stakes Testing**

A description of the advantages and disadvantages of high-stake testing programs shows that some of these effects may at first glance appear to affect only the curriculum or the teacher, but ultimately they affect what and how students study and learn and what they come to value in the educational process. Stephen P. Heyneman noted important advantages and disadvantages that have been attributed to high-stakes tests:

- They are relatively objective and are an impartial means of distributing educational benefits.
- Preparation for high-stakes tests often overemphasizes rote memorization and cramming by students and drill-and-practice as a teaching method.

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- The use of examinations for the dual purpose of certifying the completion of a secondary education and for university admission puts those not bound for college at a disadvantage.
  - Results for individual students are often used to serve a variety of purposes for which they may not be designed.

Highlighting some of the advantages and disadvantages of testing provides a starting point for an educational venture. Some policies have sought to “hold schools accountable” by using the test scores to trigger rewards, sanctions, or remedial actions (Darling-Hammond; Lieberman). Darling-Hammond asserted that the negative effects of high-stakes test stem partly from the nature of the tests and partly from the way in which the tests have been used for educational decision-making. Lieberman posited that developing a system of accountability can be an impetus for raising standards, reforming schools, and rethinking American education. If these tests are to be effective, then they must be consistently aligned with what is taught, what is learned, and what is assessed.

### Ohio’s High-Stakes Test

A review of the legislative objectives relating to the contemporary statewide testing trend reveals a plethora of hopes and expectations that diverge somewhat across states but have many elements in common.

Rather than reduce the list to a set of statistics, examples will be used to convey the character of these objectives. Legislation in the state of Ohio will be discussed. Ohio’s Statewide Proficiency Test went into effect at the beginning of the 1990-91 academic year. By an action of the State Board of Education, all students who entered the ninth grade prior to the 1990-91 school year, even those who dropped out of school and re-entered after September 1990, are bound by the new high school graduation requirements.

The Ohio Proficiency Examination, commonly called the Ninth Grade Proficiency Test is a criterion-referenced test designed to assess competence on a designated minimum on reading, writing, mathematics, and citizenship skills.

In order to receive a high school diploma, students are bound by the policy and must pass all four skills areas of the examination (i.e., reading, writing, mathematics, and citizenship) in addition to fulfilling the regular graduation requirements. The test is initially administered during the fall of a student’s ninth-grade year. Students failing the first attempt are

*If these tests are to be effective, then they must be consistently aligned with what is taught*

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retested in the spring as well as the fall and spring of their tenth, eleventh, and twelfth-grade year. Thus, each student receives eight opportunities to pass the test prior to the time of his or her graduation. I discuss the six students and their preparation experiences for a high-stakes mathematics test in the next section.

## **The Six Students**

Below are descriptions of six African-American tenth graders from a large urban high school in central Ohio. The students are Snuffi, Jasmine, Wanda, Tia, Art, and Boo (not their real names). These students passed the other parts of the test which were citizenship, reading, and writing. They were active in extracurricular activities such as music, theater, and school sports. All but one had stated goals for their future. Snuffi wanted to be an elementary teacher, Wanda wanted to be a law enforcement officer, Tia wanted to be an accountant, Art wanted to be a pharmacist, Boo wanted to be an architectural engineer, while Jasmine was undecided as to her future goal. They had done everything that school administrators, teachers, and parents have required, but their test performance did not show their hard work.

### **Snuffi**

Snuffi is a 15-year old African-American male. In his spare time he collects pogs, baseball cards, plays video games, and talks on the telephone to his girlfriend. He spends a great deal of his time and energy raising, and playing with his two dogs and one cat. Learning is valued and fostered in his family. Everyday before he can talk on the telephone or play video games he has to complete his homework. An emphasis on learning is also evident in his family's career choices. His mother is a teacher's aide at an elementary school and his stepfather is a physical therapist. Snuffi's goals are to graduate from high school, then graduate from college, and become an elementary school teacher. His goal of becoming an elementary teacher is based on the good things he has seen his mother do with her students in her role as a teacher's aide. He believes he has a good chance of becoming an elementary school teacher because he has heard that they are looking for a "few good men."

### **Jasmine**

Jasmine is a 15-year old African-American female undecided on her future goals. Her extracurricular activities include participating in Double Dutch (a jump rope game), playing on the high school basketball team, and being a member of Future Homemakers of America (FHA). She describes herself as being very selfish, looking out for

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herself and no one else. Jasmine believes things should go her way or “no way at all.” She has struggled with the notion of being a serious student or being the mediocre student that has led to the rough life, which included her participation in gang rituals and the initiation ceremonies of new gang members. She knows it is important to learn mathematics because “mathematics is everywhere” and she knows she needs some mathematics skills, but she considers herself lazy.

### **Wanda**

Wanda is a 15-year old African-American female who is growing up in a family in which a college education is not valued; neither of her parents received four-years of high school education. She lives in a large five bedroom house with her grandmother, niece, uncle, sister, and brother. Her hobbies consist of reading African-American literature, singing, dancing, playing the saxophone, and talking on the telephone. She enjoys discussions on controversial topics such as sports, gangs, and racism. She loves collegiate and professional basketball and football. Wanda enjoys listening to jazz, rhythm and blues, and rap. She is a very outspoken young woman who is well liked by her peers at Hysteria (the name given to the school in the study). At home she likes to curl up with a good novel while drinking a cup of Kool-Aid. She also reads to her little niece. Though she loves to read, she does not like to be put on the spot. She admits reading for school purposes has been a turn-off because as a child she was forced to read and memorize everything.

### **Tia**

Tia is a 16-year old African-American female who wishes to become an accountant. Because she likes to work with numbers she needs all the mathematics courses she can take. Tia does her homework as soon as she comes home. Once the homework is complete, she may have time to play some games on the computer before going off to work. She enjoys playing the flute, talking on the telephone, going to work, and playing on the computer. She especially enjoys working with numbers, equations, and formulas that help her solve certain mathematics problems. Tia lives with her mother who works as a claim examiner at the state’s unemployment office. She was encouraged by her middle school mathematics teacher to take college preparatory mathematics classes in high school.

### **Art**

Art is a 16-year old African-American male who wishes to become a pharmacist. His hobbies are drawing, riding his bicycle, weightlifting, and repairing old cars given to him by his father. The collection so far consists of a 1987 Escort G.T. and a 1986 Buick Regal. He describes himself as not being spoiled and as doing productive things.



## Boo

Boo is a 16-year old African-American female. She lives with her mother and four siblings in a fairly decent neighborhood on the south side of this large central Ohio city. During our interview Boo often comments on the closeness of her family and her love for her siblings. Her hobbies include drawing, singing, dancing, and acting. She is a member of the cheerleading squad, captain on the Army ROTC drill team, and a member of her school's softball team. At age 12, she participated in a modified version of the Broadway musical "Cats." That was the highlight of her life. Boo believes she was born to be in the spotlight. She said all of her siblings aspire to attend college and major in education, medicine, or law. Boo works as a cashier at a local restaurant in the city.

### Resilience to Achieve in the High-Stakes Storm

According to these students, the test is taking over their lives.

Tia explained:

I have grown tired of coming to school and taking the test for two hours.

Art echoes the comment:

I admit the test is important because if I do not pass it, it will hurt me eventually because I want to have College Preparatory written on my diploma and if I do not pass the test, this will not happen.

In the closing conversation with Boo:

*Randy:* How do you feel about not having passed the test so far?

*Boo:* I do not like it, but I cannot help it.

*Randy:* What keeps you motivated to keep taking the test?

*Boo:* I want to pass it so I can go to college.

In fact, the test is their life. The reality reflected in these statements suggests that few studies have given voice to African-American students to assess the impact of these tests on their lives. By all accounts, the testing process for African-American high school students in high-stake test districts is a complicated one that does not take into consideration the influence of their culture in the preparation process (Heubert and Hauser; Natriello and Pallas; Willingham and Cole; New York Urban League, Inc. v. New York). Programs and solutions developed by educational institutions are based on models that do not fit the

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circumstances of the students (New York Urban League, Inc. v. New York).

Another approach that was detrimental to the preparation process of these students was the last minute preparation of the students. Which is an indicator of their perceptions of the value of the test. For example, two of the research participants stated:

*Art:* I had begun to study weeks before the test rather than two weeks before the test or the night before the test, relieving the pressure of learning everything at once. I reviewed my math notes for a half-hour a day to help me prepare for the proficiency test.

*Snuffi:* Well, if you start studying at the last minute, you get nervous and stuff like that. You do everything in a hurry and you get nothing done.

Two other participants stated:

*Tia:* I admit that last minute cramming led me to be confused about the information I was trying to cram into my head.

*Jasmine:* Because when you cram stuff, then when you look at the paper, it all gets mixed up, then you get confused because you done cram so much and tried to memorize in that night and so it does not help. It helps if you look at this part one day and look at the next section the next day, then you can remember more.

Two other research participants echoed those responses:

*Boo:* Because you get all confused in stuff and you need more time to study your work, and more days or a couple of hours then it will not all be crammed in there and you will be ready.

*Wanda:* Because you have to cram it all in, and when you get ready to take the test. You have forgotten it all.

From a very passionate discussion with these students the need to implement alternate strategies or preparation techniques was voiced because of the ineffectiveness of the methods already in place in the school. For example, two of the participants said:

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*Art:* If you try to cram everything in at the last minute, then you are going to forget something. It is a rush, and it is a rush on your mind.

*Snuffi:* Preparing for the proficiency test has been memorization. Memorization means being sent home from school with a ton of worksheets that I am to study several weeks before the test and then being tested by a practice test during my regular mathematics class. I felt like I had adequately prepared for the test. When I took the test I felt really confident. I had been studying all my preparation materials. I felt some of the material on the test was very simple. Some parts were very difficult and I kept checking them over and over until it was time to turn in the test. I feel the mathematics section of the test is really something I want to pass because it is deciding my life.

Three of the participants captured the essence of the other students' remarks:

*Tia:* You cannot study and think over it the way you want to. You are trying to cram it, and the information you are cramming in is not clear.

*Jasmine:* My preparation for the test has been listening to the math teacher in class, taking a practice proficiency test and then watching the teacher go over the practice test. The teachers, in my opinion, are not doing all that they should be doing. They offer after school help, help during lunch period. I feel they try to help for the most part.

*Wanda:* The teacher should give the practice materials earlier and stop waiting until the last minute to give the practice testing materials.

Throughout the interviews there was a surprising lack of bitterness from the participants. They did not seem to be irritated by the consequences that this test lends itself. To them it seemed to be another obstacle, and since their schooling has been replete with obstacles and barriers, they saw it as another barrier to cross. In some absolute sense, the test was difficult for them, they failed, but they vacillated as to the difficulty or ease of the test. It was a very consistent comment from the participants that the content of the test changed each time it was taken. The

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mathematics preparation of these students by their teachers and the school, in particular, could serve as one reason for their failure.

It is known by empirical evidence that some of the same “turn offs” of mathematics experienced by students are experienced by the teachers who teach them and so the teachers convey the message of the difficulties of mathematics. Teachers who dislike mathematics while at the same time teaching the subject pass negative messages to the students, the people who most need a positive attitude. From an analysis of the observations on mathematics teaching the most productive type of mathematics problems were the ones which required engagement. When problem-solving in groups and working with manipulatives students had positive attitudes about mathematics. When performing drill and practice, memorization and rote, as well as computation out-of-context, students were most often bored with learning and felt low levels of engagement. The types of problems engaged in had an observable impact on the participants’ attitudes and reactions during the mathematics class.

Case studies such as these are useful, although they may not be generalizable. These case studies address an important phenomena, the mathematical classroom experiences of students in preparation for a high-stakes test. The implication of the findings obtained here led to a consideration of the critical elements that determine success in urban mathematics classrooms. These elements are: mathematics must be fun, mathematics must be challenging, and mathematics must be interesting. Is it appropriate motivation, attitude, or predisposition, or is it what happens to students once they begin to prepare for the test? That leads to success, it is, most likely, some of both. I concluded, however, from the evidence provided by Snuffi, Jasmine, Wanda, Tia, Art, and Boo’s cases that the assumptions about the students held by researchers and practitioners, and students’ actions in preparation for the tests, can be a powerful indicator as to the student’s success in the mathematics classroom. To pass the test students must receive proper preparation in a timely fashion. Furthermore, students must act in accordance with a coherent theory of pedagogy that provides a framework for appropriate learning experiences. Certainly, many factors contributed to the inadequate preparation of the students, but one aspect of this complex and multidimensional processes of teaching and learning must be held accountable, and that is the pedagogy provided by the teacher. In summary, these students perceived the test as a barrier, they remained hopeful, although they realized the test was an impediment. It is particularly interesting that according to these students, at best, these

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imposed pressures tended to create an improvement in their sense of self and instill a committed passion for learning and passing the test.

## **Implications for Research in Mathematics Education**

These students' experiences convince me that by creating a space to narrate and renarrate their stories so as to act on them, we can improve mathematics performance on statewide proficiency tests by developing appropriate and effective teaching strategies. Students are not passive recipients of teacher instruction but are active interpreters of the classroom environment (Weinstein). An important framework for seeing what is happening in mathematics classrooms is found in the work of Lave and Wenger. This framework gives us an understanding of situated learning, or situated cognition. It provides a notion of complexity. This might be thought of as "complexity theory" (Casti). Situated cognition suggests that individuals do not learn in a vacuum. Rather, learning occurs in multiple social contexts.

Thus, success in mathematics of African-American students is deeply embedded in a variety of social contexts (Tate; Ladson-Billings). Besides changing the names of story problem characters, teachers will also need to understand the deep structures of students' experiences. This may mean doing some things with students that have not been done in the traditional mathematics classroom like, interviewing them, having them write autobiographies, and discussing their interests in mathematics (Ladson-Billings).

Teachers provide the experiences that exert powerful influence on students' attitudes about mathematics. However, to learn mathematics, students must want to learn and feel good about learning (NCTM; Kenney and Silver; Mullis et al.). Educators must be aware of situations that can cause low engagement, and work with students in ways that increase engagement levels by providing mathematics curricula and pedagogy that take full advantage of the "adaptive", "resilient", "complex" nature of learners in urban mathematics classrooms (Ladson-Billings 706).

There exists an abundance of literature that documents the mathematics failure of African-American students. This discussion is however not an effort to rationalize the poor performance of African-American students on high-stakes tests. Rather the focus is to address important phenomena for understanding high-stakes testing. The implications of the findings obtained here lead to a consideration for the

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implementation of the critical elements that determine the success of high-stakes tests in urban settings. These interviews provide evidence that the assumptions made about these tests can have a powerful influence on the learners' success. What can be seen is that teachers could teach better if they knew their students better.

Unfortunately, five of the individuals in this study were unable to successfully pass the test (Tia successfully passed on her fourth attempt). Clearly, better preparation of students is vital if these kinds of statistics are to be avoided.

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# Over-representation of African-American Students in Special Education:

## *The Role of a Developmental Framework in Shaping Teachers' Interpretations of African-American Students' Behavior*

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*The authors draw on the findings of gestalt psychology to demonstrate how teachers' views of African American learning styles and behavior can determine whether these will be pathologized or supported by the educational system. The disproportionately large numbers of African American youth incorrectly assigned to special education courses indicate a lack of clarity in disability criteria and indicate also the use of a "deficit model" or perceptual lens through which teachers assign negative meanings to the behavior of African American students. Case examples of language used by teachers in describing randomly selected students illustrate teachers' deficit-based focus on student behavior "problems." Maholmes and Brown argue that an alternate, developmental model offers a new perceptual lens through which teachers focus on six critical "pathways" of human development when assessing any student. These pathways of development are physical, language, social, psychological, ethical and cognitive development.*

### Introduction

The old woman/young women gestalt representation, referred to in gestalt psychology as "The Wife and Mother-in-Law," pushes one to answer the question "what do you see?" This answer reveals an issue that underlies the problem of over-representation of African-American students in special education classes. Patton argued that disproportionately large numbers of African Americans are being

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persistently diagnosed as disabled and placed in special education programs. While, many of these students are misclassified due to lack of consistent and valid criteria for diagnosis, the authors of this paper put forth the argument that the perceptual field through which teachers view African-American students' learning styles and behavior determines whether they will be pathologized or supported.

The meanings and interpretations teachers assign to African-American students' behavioral presentations are often derived from a deficit perspective. This perspective may lead teachers to perceive African-American students as discipline problems, and as incapable of performing to high academic standards. Such myopic vision often results in swift referral of these students for special education programs.

Consequently, special education classes often become the "dumping ground" for so-called problem students, instead of the supportive and nurturing environment required for students who have a genuine need for these services. How are these perceptions formed? It has been well documented that the ecological structure of African-American children's lives is complex requiring them to develop extensive behavior repertoires that must be demonstrated with greater flexibility in anticipation of problematic situations (McAdoo and McAdoo; West; Delpit). However, these repertoires may not be consistent with the social and behavioral norms of the school. Consequently, many students find it difficult to make friends or be socially successful in their academic settings.

*Teachers may assign negative meanings to the students' adaptive behavior and hastily refer them for special services.*

Teachers may assign negative meanings to the students' adaptive behavior and hastily refer them for special services. However, Stevenson's (1998) study of ecological structure and its psychological effects on African-American youth revealed that they require a context that is both supportive and challenging: one that understands the social barriers of racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination and yet holds them accountable for their behavior when it violates social norms and harms other individuals. This view, unfortunately is not always taken and the consequences of inappropriate referrals and placements are detrimental to the personal and academic future of African-American students.

In this paper, the authors contend that a developmental rather than a deficit perspective changes the perceptual lens through which teachers view African-American children. They identify specific developmental pathways that when used as an analytic framework, give rise to alternative meanings and interpretations of African-American students'

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learning and behavior. The authors identify areas for targeted research on the critical topic of African-Americans in special education. Finally, they make policy and practice recommendations for reducing the disproportionate number of African-American students referred to special education.

### **Meanings and Interpretations: Introducing The Concept of the Perceptual Lens**

Perception is the process by which one extracts meaningful information from a myriad of raw sensory data (Woolfolk). For example the wife and mother-in-law representation drawn from Gestalt psychology presents two images—an old woman and a young lady. These images are connected to each other such that one part of the image forms the critical aspects of other parts of the image. When one views this representation, only one of the images is seen at a time—either the old woman or the young lady. This happens because the mind selects aspects of the image and assigns meaning based on pre-existing knowledge and experiences. This knowledge and experience shape the lenses through which one views and “perceives” the sensory data. These perceptions are organized, assimilated and stored into mental models or frameworks that one draws upon to assign meaning to what is perceived through the lenses. Thus a viewer, focusing on particular aspects of the image—the collar, the chin or the nose will be certain that the representation is that of a young lady. Another viewer will focus on the same aspects of the image and be certain that the image is that of an old woman.

School children are viewed by teachers in similar ways. The mental models or framework from which educators operate, strongly influence how meaning is assigned to children’s appearance, attitudes and behaviors. Through their perceptual lenses, certain aspects of children come clearly into focus. If a teacher focuses on what she perceives to be a child’s unfavorable characteristics, then that new information will be assimilated into a “deficit” framework. Each time a teacher evaluates and interacts with the child, she does so from a deficit point of view. Consequently, her choices about curriculum, instruction and classroom management are drawn from this perspective.

Therefore, the authors put forth the argument that a deficit perspective allows the teacher to place blame on a student whose appearance, attitude, and behavior may fall outside the parameters of what she typically experiences with children. As a result, the teacher may behave toward the student according to those perceptions and the student may

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respond to those behaviors in ways that reinforce the teacher's deficit perspective. This creates a tense and sometimes adversarial relationship between the teacher and the student and often leads to the student being sent out of class for behavioral intervention. This is frequently the case for African-American students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. In many cases, these children have developed adaptive behaviors that enable them to survive in difficult circumstances. However, these behaviors may be in direct conflict with the expectations of mainstream behaviors in school. Moreover, many children who come from low-income, single-parent homes are least likely to have developed the fundamental academic skills, such as pre-reading and questioning, needed to be successful in school. Overtime, these children lag further behind in school than their peers. As a result, they exhibit behaviors that may mask their inability to read, speak well or think critically. Taken together, these factors may lead a teacher to view an African-American child's behavior through a deficit lens and to regard the child as needing special services.

### **The Deficit Perspective and the Problem of Over-representation in Special Education.**

**R**ecent research studies such as the one conducted by the Harvard University Civil Rights Project have shown that in comparison to their white peers, African-American students are more likely to be identified as needing special education services. This study revealed that nationwide, black students were 2.9 times as likely as white students to be identified as being mentally retarded, 1.9 times as likely to be identified as being emotionally disturbed, and 1.3 times as likely to be labeled as having a specific learning disability. The studies also found that the wealthier the school district the more likely black male students were disproportionately labeled "mentally retarded" (National School Boards Association). In their study of data from the Office for Civil Rights, Coutinho and Oswald) found that African-American students were 1.55 times as likely as non-African-Americans to be identified as emotionally and behaviorally disturbed.

Some researchers (Reschly) have argued that assignment to special education provides students with individual educational programming, smaller student-teacher ratios, and teachers who have special training in working with children who have such difficulties. However, many special education programs have been found to be seriously lacking in quality of instruction and in support to these children. The Harvard Study also indicated that once assigned to special education classes, these students are given less demanding schoolwork, placed in more restrictive

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classes and are isolated from their peers (National School Boards Association). African-American males are particularly over-represented both in disciplinary practices and in certain special education categories. In addition, they are more likely to receive their special education in segregated classrooms or buildings (Patton). Despite the promise of special education, Daniel J. Losen, a lawyer with Civil Rights Project said that in many cases special education classes have become dumping ground for low-achieving students (National School Boards Association).

Compared to other disabled students as well as their non-disabled peers, students labeled emotionally and behaviorally disturbed are more likely to miss classes, receive poor grades, be retained at the end of the year, disciplined, suspended and expelled. They also are likely to be placed in more restrictive settings, and leave school prior to graduation as drop-outs or push-outs (United States Department of Education, 1999). Patton (1998) contends that this limited exposure to the core academic curriculum continues the spiral of “lower levels of achievement, decreased likelihood of post-secondary education, and more limited employment” (Patton, 1998, p. 25). The psychological and social effects of the stigma associated with being in these classes and the perceptions that labels such as EBD, SED, MR or LD conjures among school children and faculty can have a life-long impact on these students. Bynoe suggests that this tendency towards labeling and the deficit perspective is due in part to the increase in the nation’s cultural diversity. This is particularly evident in urban areas where there have been marked shifts in the conditions, expectations, and ratios of minority to non-minority school-age children and those who educate them. Ford contends that teachers’ lack of preparedness, negative perceptions of multicultural students and low expectations contribute to low referrals of these children to gifted education programs. On the other hand, these same factors increase the likelihood of children’s referral to disability categories.

*African-American males are particularly over-represented both in disciplinary practices and in certain special education categories.*

A critical challenge in addressing the problem of over-representation is the lack of clarity around certain disability categories. Though one of the most widely diagnosed disorders among school-aged children, the concept of learning disabilities is continually being questioned by researchers and practitioners alike. Learning disabilities is the largest category in special education (Kavale and Forness). According to the US Department of Education, (cited in Kavale and Forness, 2000), the LD population has increased about 150% since the passage of PL 94-142. This represents a level of over 50% of all students with disabilities and

5% of all students in the United States. With this tremendous growth in the percentages of students with LD, researchers call for more clarity and specificity in the LD definition. McMillan and Reschly argue that since 1978, when PL 94-142 was to be fully implemented, there has been consistent evidence that between 52% and 70% of children identified by the schools as LD do not meet the standards as conceptualized in federal and state definitions of the disability category.

In their examination of variables contributing to the over-representation of minority students, McMillan and Reschly discussed various studies examining the congruence between characteristics of school-identified students and the criteria specified in state education codes. The results of these studies revealed very low levels of adherence by the schools to the state education code criteria in classifying students. A total of sixty-one children referred for pre-referral intervention were ultimately classified as LD by the schools in the study. Fewer than half of the children classified as LD met the diagnostic criteria, while seven students who met the research diagnostic criteria and who had been referred by their regular classroom teachers were not identified as LD. McMillan and Reschly further indicate that comparisons of this “false negative” group with the students the schools did identify as LD revealed several reliable differences on I.Q., problem behaviors, teacher ratings of academic competence and social skills. The false negative group scored higher and were perceived more favorably than the children identified as LD by the school.

*...between 52% and 70% of children identified by the schools as LD do not meet the standards*

These findings underscore the argument put forth by Kavale and Forness that failure to produce a unified definition has meant that LD lacks two critical scientific elements: understanding – a clear and unobscured sense of LD; and explanation – a rational exposition of the reasons why a particular student is LD. The authors suggest that without understanding and explanation, statements about LD remain conditional.

Similar arguments have been made for the seriously emotionally disturbed category. Patton cites Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Thurlow, who observed that the arbitrary shifts in diagnostic criteria and frequency rates across states call into question the validity of the SED category. Patton charges that the ambiguity and subjectivity embedded in the mild disabilities categories, and teacher judgments in the referral process, combined with inherent biases of the assessment process contribute to the disproportionate referral and special education placement of African-American students.

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## Moving from the Deficit Perspective: Lessons from Gestalt Psychology

While much is being done by the mental health community to clarify the disability categories and to strengthen the process of referral, much still needs to be done to help educators refocus their lenses to more positive perceptions of African-American students. Gestalt theorists such as Wertheimer, Kohler, and Koffka are credited for exerting a significant influence on the psychology of perception (Bruce, Green and Georgeson). They had much to say about the way the mind handles information coming in from all the senses. The mind automatically and unconsciously selects what to pay attention to and what to ignore. One way of doing so according to the theorists, is to consider objects in terms of figure/ground relationships. "Figures tend to be complete, coherent and in front of the ground, which is seen as less distinct, is attended to less readily, and is often seen as floating behind the figure" (Bruce et. al 65). Furthermore, "a figure suggests meaning, while a ground seems relatively meaningless" (Bloomer 51). Applying this principle to classroom practice, some teachers, may allow student behaviors to become the figure, taking on more significance, and other aspects of the child to become the ground, taking on less significance.

Referring to the old woman/young girl representation, psychologists agree that one cannot experience simultaneous perception of both views. At any given instant, only one image can be seen. This is explained by the fact that there are limits to the number of things that the brain can pay attention to at any given time. Consequently, seeing different meanings in turn, causes the viewer to experience a feeling of ambiguity. This feeling of ambiguity results because the brain is unable to decide which meaning is preferable (Bloomer). It could be argued that teachers experience a sense of ambiguity or frustration when they are not able to separate the child's presenting symptoms or acting out behaviors from the child as a student.

Gestalt theory puts forth the concept of "subjective contours" which refers to contours or edges that are not physically present, but are seen due to the mind's eagerness to fill in the blank and achieve meaning. Teachers are often eager to have answers and to explain undesirable classroom behaviors. By doing so, it lessens their feelings of ambiguity and frustration and provides a sense of control. Therefore, teachers apply labels to explain why some children behave in ways perceived to be outside of the norm. This process is consistent with way the mind unconsciously operates. That is, "the mind tends to see only what is necessary for meaning. Once it has made closure, it doesn't tend to look

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for information. . . .You continue to perceive whole images even when fully half of the visual information is missing” (Bloomer 55).

Therefore, once a teacher, operating from a deficit perspective, has labeled a student and decides that the student belongs in special education, she often does not continue to look for other relevant and pertinent information that if considered, could result in a different decision. Gestalt theorists also assert that the one goal of the mind in selecting and organizing the array of sensory data is to construct meaning and arrive at closure. They suggest that the mind imposes a closure pattern and that preexisting mental models program how the stimulus will be perceived. (Bloomer 61). The author goes on to explain that:

*This argument has far-reaching implications for understanding human perception. If it is correct, the human mind does not interpret stimuli with anything like an open-minded approach. Instead, people see things only in relation to categories already established in their minds. Closure does not represent objective knowledge about stimulus, but rather the confirmation of a preexisting idea. It means that on a perceptual level people’s minds are made up before the fact: they have the closure programmed before the stimulus happens! Strong evidence supports this view. . . .our perceptual processes clean up a stimulus in order to classify it more easily or fit it more satisfactorily into an already-established category. Interpreting a new stimulus as a familiar gestalt is easier and more efficient than constructing a new category to account for all the minute details that make the present stimulus different from similar stimuli encountered in the past. . . . These preprogrammed responses can be termed perceptual prejudices. As with other kinds of prejudice, these predispose people to focus on the things that reinforce their preexisting stereotypes and to tune out inconsistencies (62-63).*

### **Examining Teachers’ Mental Models: Case Examples**

**T**o get a sense of the mental models teachers draw from in thinking about their students, the authors led approximately 140 teachers in a reflective exercise. These teachers were from several school districts around the country and were participants at a recent leadership academy conducted by the authors. They were asked to partner with another teacher at their table. They were instructed to list the names of as many of their students as they could remember. Then they were asked to share their lists with their partner who randomly selected two names from this list of students. After the selection was made, the lists were returned to the original partner and each was asked to write two sentences to a paragraph about each of the two students. No other parameters were given. The responses were then collected by the author



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and were processed and coded for analyses. The authors organized the response in three categories: **1)** responses that reflect a high sense of teacher-student relationship; **2)** responses that contained language that reflects the deficit perspective; **3)** miscellaneous responses that reflect neither of the two categories. The authors coded each response independently and later compared each other's responses to achieve inter-rater reliability. Of the 116 responses collected, presented below are selected examples that reflect the deficit perspective category. Consider the following unedited examples. Pseudonyms are used to protect the students' identity.

**Case Number 1:**

A second grader. He does not like his teacher or school. Cannot stay focused, a poor reader. He enjoys working on the computer. Is an unclean child.

**Case Number 2:**

Leroy burned his house down - classified E.D. last year. Father left him this year with his last girl friend - non-custodial - on medication for behavior - child is depressed - thrives on attention getting behaviors.

**Case Number 3:**

Jamie is a car thief from the city - He has no resources and is at the school determined to change his life around - it has not been easy for him.

**Case Number 4:**

John is argumentative, horseplay, talkative, sensitive, passive aggression, violent, average intelligence.

**Case Number 5:**

Joey has been re-entered in our school three times this year. He has aggressive - confrontational behaviors. His mother does not believe it's a problem with Joey but with the schools. He has to be watched and supervised at all times. He threatens and carries through. Because of his behavior, his academic achievement is low. He will be going to summer school.

The analysis revealed a tendency on the part of many of the teachers to use seemingly pejorative language in describing their students. Even when it was clear that the teachers had a genuine concern for their students, their descriptions were laden with negative descriptors that appeared to lack a sense of true knowledge of, and relationships with their students. Despite the fact that no specific instructions were given on how to describe the child, it was striking to see the words and

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phrases that some teachers chose to use in their descriptions. Although the teachers were only given approximately ten minutes to complete the task, the descriptions they provided speak volumes about their mental models, impressions, and perceptions about their children.

While some may argue that many of these descriptions are reflective of the realities faced by teachers every day, we contend that those descriptions may come from a place of low expectations and negative perceptions. It is important to be able to describe and name specific behaviors and challenges that children bring to the classroom environment; however, the use of language has the power to negatively impact a child's entire educational experience and ultimately, the choices that they make through adulthood.

### **Moving Toward the Development Perspective: Creating New Mental Models**

**T**he developmental perspective is a way of seeing both the figure and the ground in appropriate balance. It allows a teacher to recognize the challenges that a child brings to the learning environment and to participate actively in helping the child overcome those challenges. This developmental perspective puts the teacher in the middle of the equation of students' learning and stands in marked contrast with the deficit perspective where the teacher is outside the equation. Teachers who see children through developmental lenses understand and accept that if students are going to learn and have a successful school experience, then they must look beyond students' immediate behavioral presentations and develop new mental models for working with these children. Teachers who see children through developmental lenses recognize the possibilities and the potentials that each child brings to the classroom. They do not simply focus on the aspects of the child that may be inconsistent with their expectations for appropriate appearance, attitude, and behavior.

To do this, teachers need to be provided with the tools that will equip them to form new figure/ground relationship so that they may perceive the students with a new awareness. In Gestalt psychology, it is argued that when people form new figure/ground relationships, they perceive themselves and others with a new awareness (Bloomer). One way of doing this is to provide teachers with a holistic perspective through which they can learn to view students and interpret behaviors that seem to fall outside of what they consider to be the norm. The authors use the developmental framework of the School Development Program model developed by James P. Comer in 1968. According to this

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framework, children grow and develop along six critical pathways: physical, language, social, psychological, ethical, and cognitive. This framework allows the teacher to view both the figure and the ground and also empowers the teacher to change the deficit pattern of coming to closure too soon. This development framework pushes teachers to seek relevant information before drawing conclusions that could be detrimental or damaging to children. The pathways provide all relevant information about a child - not just the behavioral, cognitive, or social - but a complete picture of the child that is taken from a richer, more meaningful set of data. This enables the teachers to make pedagogical decisions and to devise interventions that are in the best interest of the child. In doing so, teachers are less likely to depend on their own pre-existing prejudices and biases to make decisions that have life-long consequences. Rather, they draw from the objective knowledge provided through the holistic framework. If it happens that a child truly needs special education, it is because the holistic data are compelling enough to lead a teacher toward that decision.

The teacher-student relationship is a strong mediator that activates the use of this developmental framework. As a result, teachers interact with students in ways that illicit positive responses. This allows for the teacher and the student to be on the same page leading toward positive outcomes for both teacher and student. Delpit reinforces this notion of the teacher-student relationship through her challenge to teachers to know their students beyond just the classroom setting:

*If we do not have some knowledge of children's lives outside the realms of paper-and-pencil work, and even outside of their classrooms, then we cannot know their strengths. Not knowing students' strengths leads to our "teaching down" to children from communities that are culturally different from that of the teachers in the school. Because teachers do not want to tax what they believe to be these students' lower abilities, they end up teaching less when, in actuality, these students need more of what school has to offer (173).*

In keeping with this theme of knowing students, consider the following unedited descriptions of students offered by teachers in the same group about which reference was made earlier. Again, pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the students.

### **Case Number 1**

Ebony Smith lives with both mom and dad four blocks from school. She has a sister Shanna who will be in kindergarten in one year. Ebony is involved in Girl-Scouts, gems, loves to camp and visits family in Florida. Ebony's father comes in to school to drop her off. It is a bi-racial family. Good reader, harder time with math.

**Case Number 2**

Fee enjoys soccer, basketball, and sports. Fee got a basketball from Target last week. He enjoys playing at the school park with his cousin (about fifteen). Their family is very close, however they do not enjoy coming into school. Fee's mom and dad have limited English skills. They need to have things translated into Hmong. Good at math, harder time reading. Loves computer, legos and drawing.

**Case Number 3**

Michael is an eighteen year old young man who has achieved his GED. He has many hopes for the future. He is generous, hardworking, very artistic and thoughtful. He loves race cars. He loves his dog Bengy. He has people that care about him. They are important to him. He loves to read. He is very helpful.

**Case Number 4**

John is a wonderful fifteen year old who brings joy to me each day. He is brave in his struggles with many painful events in his life. He is often misunderstood. He tries hard to fit in. He has a kind and gentle soul. Sometimes his anger bubbles up in ways he doesn't like. He likes music and is great at computers, especially the net. He means a lot to me.

Teachers that focus on children's development, knowing them by name, where they come from, and what their life is like outside of school develop a relationship with the children such that the students know that they will not slip through the cracks; that someone is always there for them. The teachers extend their roles and responsibilities for caring for students outside the regular classroom setting. The understanding that teachers gain about the personal side of students, about students' lives outside the classroom, is used to enhance academic activities and can improve classroom instruction. Students value honest, authentic communication and interaction from adults, allowing students to see them as real people. Students are more open to learning from teachers who are involved in their lives. The result of this strong ethic of caring by school staff is the creation of an overall school climate that increases student commitment to the school and its members (Comer).

**Implications for Policy, Practice,  
and Targeted Research**

The developmental pathways framework calls for changes in the policy and practices that lead to over-representation of African-American students in special education. Teachers need more training in applying the pathways framework in interacting with children so that they can be more preventive than reactive. This training includes

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knowledge of how children grow and develop along the six critical pathways and all the stages that define their school years. The training would also allow teachers to consider similarities and differences of children from different cultural and language backgrounds and communities in all decisions concerning these students. Pre-service education must have as a central part of its curriculum strategies for students to gain both the knowledge base and the opportunity to apply such knowledge prior to their placement in schools. Similarly, in-service teachers need ongoing staff development in reflective practices similar to the one described earlier by the authors that challenge the mental models teachers have developed over time and encourage them to reshape their thinking and behavior.

In terms of targeted research, schools that serve children from predominantly African-American culture need to go back and examine their data to determine whether decisions for referral and placement were made based on holistic data or biased judgments. Based on their findings, they need to implement a process to transition misdiagnosed children back into the regular systems. Furthermore, there needs to be a process in place to get the teacher and the returning child back on the same positive page. They need to use the pathways framework to determine if the student was misdiagnosed and use the same framework to establish effective strategies and support to prevent the student from being placed back into an adversarial or unwanted classroom environment. As a follow-up to this practice, schools could compare whether there is a decrease in the number of students being referred for special education services. The authors hypothesize that the use of this model will result in fewer misdiagnoses and fewer placements in special education.

*Local, state, and national policies need to strongly encourage schools to use a holistic approach...*

Local, state, and national policies need to strongly encourage schools to use a holistic approach to address this issue of over-representation of African-American students in special education classes. The School Development Program (SDP) offers such an approach. The SDP uses a collaborative team of child development specialists who use the developmental framework to examine and respond to individual student behaviors, examine patterns across classrooms, and make global-school wide recommendations that are proactive and preventive. Schools that have used this approach have shown a decrease in the number of referrals to special education and other out-placement services. These outcomes have led to an improved school climate, stronger teacher-student relationships, lower absenteeism and suspension rates, and fewer behavior problems (Noblit, Malloy and Malloy).

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The problem of over-representation is serious and has life-long consequences for the African-American student population. If significant numbers of them are referred to special education based on appearances and “out of the norm” behaviors, then few will have a chance to achieve success in school and in life. The model we put forth does not blame or pass judgment on teachers for referring African-American students to special education. However, it challenges them to intentionally examine their mental models. If they find themselves operating from a deficit perspective they may use a more holistic approach to move toward making the kind of decisions that will enable each student to become the best that he/she is capable of becoming. In doing so, both teachers and students will experience a classroom environment that is conducive to teaching, learning, and overall development. This environment gives students more options for success in life, enhances the teachers’ creativity in working with the students, and builds positive teacher-student relationships that foster a sense of hope and a positive outlook toward the future. Neil Postman said that our “children are the messages we will send to a time that we will never see” (Ryan and Cooper 394). Teachers need to ensure that African-American children will be the most positive, uplifting, and life-enriching messages that can ever be sent to the future.

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# Why Malik Can “Do” Math:

## *Race and Status in Integrated Classrooms*

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*This case study reports on the small group interactions and achievements of Malik, an African American sixth grader, who attended a Maryland elementary school in 1997. Student achievement was measured by the Maryland Functional Mathematics Test (MFMT-I), which was given on a pre/post basis. Students' scores on the MFMT-I were analyzed using the ANOVA. The analysis revealed a significant difference ( $F = 3.330, p < .05$ ) between the scores of Caucasian ( $M = 342.12$ ) and African American students ( $M = 323.56$ ). However, Malik's MFMT-I score rose from 293 to 353. A passing score is 340. This study examines Malik's interactions to ascertain what factors influenced his achievement. The findings are that Malik had a positive attitude about mathematics and a strong command of mathematical and scientific language. Recommendations are that teachers become cultural brokers to help all children learn the "language" of mathematics and encourage all students to become self-advocates to overcome negative social dynamics in small groups.*

Malik is a Black male who attended an integrated elementary school that was 72% Caucasian, 26% African American, and 2% Asian in 1997. The first author, also the teacher-researcher in this study, assessed each student's achievement in the fall of 1996 and found Malik was an average student. However, he made above average gains at the end the school year. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the subtleties of classroom interaction patterns and teacher routines that may encourage full participation from minority students like Malik.

By focusing on the learning and achievement of one student, the findings of this case study are not generalizable. However, it informs teachers and administrators about the complexities of the learning environment and how it might increase the opportunities for minority

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students. To improve the achievement of minority students, teachers must be cognizant of how school processes influence student success and must work proactively to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn. Teachers must be aware of the social interaction that prevails during group activities where African Americans are paired with others who hold perceived dominance and power and decrease the voice of the minority student. Ladson-Billings' work, as cited in Watkins, Lewis, and Chou (2001), suggests that teachers should focus on building students' cultural competence by helping them develop positive identification with their home culture.

Three bodies of research inform the study described in this paper: 1) *mathematics reform*, 2) *teacher change*, and 3) *classroom environments*. A review of the literature linking these bodies of research to current knowledge in the field is outlined below. Following the literature review, the methodology, analysis, and results of Malik's case study are presented.

## Why Reform Mathematics Instruction?

The *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics* (National Council Of Teachers Of Mathematics, 1989) promote the idea that all students should learn "big ideas" in mathematics. However, these *Standards* do not go far enough when it comes to equity (Apple). The culture of American schools is based on white middle-class culture (Delpit). When students of color cannot express sufficient understanding of algorithms and procedures, they are labeled as slow learners and tracked into low-level mathematics classes where, more often than not, only the basic skills are taught. Yet all students must also be proficient in problem solving and critical thinking as mathematics remains the gatekeeper course for student placement and access to advanced courses. Therefore, two objectives of mathematics reform have been to change what and how teachers teach in order to make mathematical knowledge accessible to all (Croon).

## Changing Teacher's Pedagogy

"Pedagogy is predicated on how the teacher interprets, understands, recognizes and integrates the students' culture within the learning process" (Malloy and Malloy 251). What teachers do or don't do to engage minority students in mathematics has an impact upon these students' performance on standardized tests and their ability to succeed in advanced mathematics courses. Closing the testing gap among Black and white students requires that teachers examine their pedagogy and

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use a variety of strategies to improve the participation and achievement of students of color. While changing one's pedagogy does not occur overnight (Leonard 1998), teachers must be willing to try new methods to reach African American students if equity in mathematics education is to become a reality. Strategies that support activities where all students are expected to complete rigorous and challenging tasks include the use of collaborative and cooperative learning (Ladson-Billings 1995) and facilitating student discourse (Hiebert and Wearne 1993). Orr reminds educators that the focus has been on minority students' deficiencies but rarely on differences that might interfere with their performance in mathematics and science. The charge will be to pay more attention to and document the differences that occur from their use of mathematics and science language and terminology and less on one's cultural differences.

### **The Benefits of Small Group Learning**

Small group instruction allows peer tutoring and coaching to take place in classrooms and has the potential to engage all students in active learning (Mulryan 1995; Webb; Webb, Troper, and Fall). Both small and cooperative learning groups can be used to engage students in hands-on activities. Campbell (1989) and Ladson-Billings (1994) believe that race minorities prefer hands-on tasks to drill-and-practice. The use of manipulatives encourages exploration, multiple ways of representation, and communication in mathematics classrooms (National Council Of Teachers Of Mathematics 1991). Communication can take the form of mathematical discourse, which Hiebert and Wearne found to increase student achievement.

### **The Benefits of Facilitating Classroom Discourse**

Discourse is the social and cultural use of communication that is shaped by the beliefs, values, and expectations of a group and the institutions and traditions that define it and is defined by it (Gee). Participating in classroom discourse allows students to become members of a community of learners who listen to others explain, justify, and support their answers to mathematics problems (Lo and Wheatley). By facilitating classroom discourse, teachers allow students to articulate their own mathematical ideas, confront their misconceptions, and revise their thinking (Campbell and Johnson). Providing opportunities for students to discuss their mathematical thinking improves African American students' self-esteem, attitude toward mathematics, enrollment in advanced courses, and academic performance (Hollins, Smiler and Spencer). Thus, this case study examines the interactions and discourses

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of Malik and other students as they complete a variety of tasks within small group and whole-group contexts.

## **Classroom Environments**

**E**bby and Remillard describe the findings of a five-year study of mathematics teaching and learning practices in an urban elementary school. They offer the sociocultural view that learning is negotiated through the practices of teachers and students (Lave; Wenger). The social landscape of the classroom is examined, offering a new framework to examine differences in student responses to mathematical tasks. These researchers discovered that there were subtle but important distinctions in the manner that students worked to accomplish a given task, which led to variant opportunities for students to participate in mathematical talk, reasoning, and problem solving. Embedded in student activity were different definitions of what it meant to “do” mathematics. For one white male, doing mathematics meant doing more problems and being the first one to finish the work. For an African American female, doing mathematics meant socializing with her friend while getting the work done. Thus, the social dynamics of the classroom influenced the value of the mathematics activity to the extent that groups cannot divorce social and mathematical activities from one another. Mathematical meaning varied among students of different groups, reflecting the social agendas of each particular group. As a result, students reconstructed the mathematical task to meet their own needs. This qualitative analysis offers a different view of interpreting the role of race and gender in student learning and provides the framework for interpreting the results of this study.

### ***Methodology***

The case study reported in this paper was conducted in the teacher-researcher’s classroom where she taught three different mathematics classes and one reading/language arts class. The average enrollment in each class was 32 students. Prior to conducting the study, the teacher-researcher examined the results of the fall MFMT-I pretest that was given to her sixth-grade students to determine what they needed to learn in order to get the best possible placement in seventh grade and pass the state mandated exit test in mathematics (MFMT-II) the following fall. The Maryland State Department of Education administers the exit test, which measures students’ ability to solve basic problems in the following domains: Number Concepts, Whole Numbers, Fractions and Mixed Numbers, Decimals, Measurement, Data, and Problem Solving. A passing score is 340, and the highest possible score is 405. Classification consistency and internal consistency coefficients were used to evaluate

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the reliability of the test. The PG coefficient of .90 is in the excellent range, and the KR20 coefficient is satisfactory, ranging from .59 to .86 for all subtest domains. The test is also free from racial bias (MSDE, 1990).

The results of the pretest were disaggregated by race and are shown in *Table 1*. The Oneway ANOVA was used to compare the pretest scores, which shows that African American students scored significantly lower than Caucasian students ( $F = 3.552, p < .05$ ). These results prompted the teacher-researcher to design a study that she believed would improve her students' mathematics achievement and narrow the gap between Black and White students. She designed a series of tasks to engage her sixth-grade students in nontraditional problems and conducted a pilot study in December 1996 to test her assumptions. The teacher-researcher learned that the students were eager to engage in hands-on mathematical tasks and to work in small groups. However, she was not certain which kinds of tasks would help her students the most. Therefore, she developed three types of task environments for the main study: applied, integrated, and abstract and planned to observe the students to see how they responded to problems in each of these task settings. She hoped that these tasks would allow students to explore genuine mathematics problems, use critical thinking skills, engage in high-quality group interaction, and improve all students' achievement in mathematics.

*What teachers  
do or don't do  
to engage  
minority  
students in  
mathematics...*

### ***The Research Questions***

The main research question that guided the study was how do students' interacting or on-task behavior compare and contrast when they engage in mathematics activities within applied, integrated, and abstract contexts? Interacting behavior is defined as "an individual's interacting with the teacher and/or peers in a learning context or engaging in group activities in a way that contributes to the ongoing focal activity" (Mulryan, 1989, 447). On-task behavior is defined as the student working on approved tasks (Mulryan 1995). Another question that emerged after the study was completed is how does the social context enhance or inhibit minority students' learning?

### ***The Setting***

The study took place in Prince George's County, Maryland, during the 1996-1997 academic year at the elementary school where the teacher-researcher had been working for three years. The school population of 665 was predominantly white and came from working-class and middle-class families. The unit of analysis included the teacher-researcher and

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her ninety-five students (68 Caucasians, 25 African Americans, and 2 Asians).

## Procedures

The teacher-researcher developed several thematic units that connected important mathematics content with problem solving. Three of the units were presented during the classroom research study, which took place during a six-week period from January to February 1997. Each unit was designed to specifically address learning in applied, integrated, and abstract task environments. These two-week units focused on architecture (applied), weather (integrated), and algebra (abstract).

In order to capture the students' interactions, two camcorders were set up in opposite corners of the classroom to videotape randomly selected target students. The school counselor chose twelve target students. Eight target students were Caucasians, three were African Americans, and one was Asian. To maintain internal validity, only the counselor and the cameramen knew the identities of the target students. However, after the data was collected the teacher-researcher learned the students' identities. Malik was one of the target students. Therefore, the case of Malik, who was one of twelve African American students in his class, becomes important.

*Each unit was designed to specifically address learning . . .*

Students worked in small groups as they engaged in each of the three units. Group composition changed often to encourage greater participation (Mulryan 1995). However, the groups were organized by level of achievement in mathematics, gender, and race. Every attempt was made to have diverse groups of two males and two females, but there were more whites than students of color (68 whites, 27 minorities) and there were more males than females in the sixth-grade population (55 males, 40 females). Thus, there were some all male and all white groups.

Four groups of students in each of the three math classes were videotaped every two weeks to obtain qualitative data. The frequency of students' interactions was tallied as they engaged in two lessons from each of the three units described above. Furthermore, the videotapes were transcribed and analyzed to determine what themes and patterns emerged among the students as they participated in each task setting. Other data sources included field notes, target students' interview transcripts, student work samples, and test scores. This paper also includes quantitative analyses of the students' achievement.

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## The Case of Malik

Following six weeks of data collecting, the teacher-researcher analyzed thirty-six episodes of videotape. The teacher-researcher found that not all of the students were engaged to the same degree. In order to examine the social dynamics, the story of Malik is told. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used. The results are presented below.

### The Qualitative Analysis

Malik is a bicultural student as are all African Americans (Boykins and Toms 1985). His mother is African American and his father is Nigerian. Unlike most children in the school, who had been enrolled since kindergarten, Malik was a transfer student. He began attending the school in fifth grade and had not developed strong relationships with other children. On the playground, the teacher-researcher noticed that Malik was a loner. However, in the classroom, Malik was quite active. Malik's involvement in each of the task settings is described below.

### The Applied Task

For one of the activities, the students were asked to build a structure that would stand between 18.5 and 21.5 centimeters in height and hold the weight of a textbook (Public Broadcasting System). The cooperative group roles of construction engineer, recorder, reporter, and budget analyst were assigned to each group of four students for this task. The roles were predetermined by lottery prior to the students knowing which job they were to perform. However, all students were required to help to build the structure. Malik's job was to serve as the construction engineer. The following vignette reveals Malik's interactions with two Caucasian females and a biracial male (Caucasian/African American), who identified himself as African American.

#### Text 1

- 1 Brad: Okay. They (the cards) have to be low to the ground (desk) and thick,
- 2 but not too thick though 'cause we still have to make it high.
- 3 **Malik:** Yes.
- 4 Tina: [Takes possession of the cards.] There.
- 5 **Malik:** Hold up! Let me think for a minute. [Places finger on head.]
- 6 We have to do some cutting of index cards 'cause (they are) 7 already 13 (cm) and you can't get it up one more building...

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- 8 Tina: Malik, calm down first of all.  
9 Brad: If we had a bunch of cards, it would be easy.  
10 Tina: Hold on! No!  
11 Brad: Or you could take a couple (of cards) and cut them  
in half, but not all the way down and stick these in.  
12 Malik: Hold up! [Take the cards.] What if we did something  
13 like this? [Shows stair-step like structure with hands.] Put it like  
that.  
14 Tina: It's got to hold a math book.  
15 **Malik:** Let's see if that can hold. Of course it's not going to  
16 be that . . . [**Holds cards as pillars for support.**]  
17 Brad You have to have a platform...or it'll just fall back.  
18 Tina: What can I do? Should we make it like a box and  
build it up?  
19 Brad: They would just collapse.  
20 Tina: No, they wouldn't.  
21 Brad: Yes, they would!  
22 Tina: You got to cut them. [Takes cards back.]  
Gretchen:Hey, this will stand up if ...  
25 **Malik:** Yes, it will, but how many cards for us to keep it up?  
26 Gretchen:You can make it . . .  
27 **Malik:** Hold up before you cut. I'll measure this.

During his interview, Malik reported that he particularly enjoyed working with his hands. Thus, it is not surprising that Malik had a high number of verbal interactions in the applied task setting. He fulfilled his role by offering suggestions (Lines 6, 13 and 16). Furthermore, he illustrated his idea with his hands (Line 16), which was to build a stair-step like structure to obtain the height. However, when he tried to show the others what he was thinking, Tina took the cards back. Her control of the materials may have been limiting for all of the students, especially Malik who needed the cards to illustrate his idea. Nevertheless, Malik was an integral part of this task-focused group. He asked a key question (Line 25), which may not have received a response because the students were actively engaged in the brainstorming or they simply did not know the answer. Moreover, Malik was self-motivated, deciding to use the ruler to measure the cards (Line 27) and showed solidarity and resilience even though the group did not accept his idea.

### The Integrated Task

The students also participated in an integrated science and mathematics unit on weather. The integrated task environment allowed the students to use scientific tools to measure temperature, humidity, and wind speed. In one of the activities, the students made a



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hygrometer to measure the relative humidity in the classroom (Leonard 2000; Yaros). The materials included a card with directions, a milk carton, gauze, rubber bands, thermometers, and water. A wet bulb was made to measure the temperature of the water at room temperature while the dry bulb measured the air temperature. The relative humidity is obtained by finding the difference between the two bulbs. Each group was to make two hygrometers—one with thermometers that measured degrees Celsius and the other Fahrenheit. The following dialogue emerged as Malik worked in a small group with an African American female, a Caucasian male, and Gretchen, the Caucasian female who had worked with Malik before on the structural engineering task.

### Text 2

- 1 Mitch: So do we do Fahrenheit or Celsius?  
2 **Malik:** Celsius. [Asks Gretchen.] Do we get Celsius and Fahrenheit?  
3 Gretchen: No, you Celsius and Celsius.  
4 **Malik:** We're Celsius.  
5 Gretchen: We're Fahrenheit then.  
6 Neka: Me and Gretchen are a group.  
7 I'll put on the rubber bands, and you (Gretchen) pour the water.  
8 Don't touch the red! Don't touch the red!  
9 Mitch: Last year this boy dropped a thermometer, and it broke.  
10 He got red all over his hand, and he had to go to the doctor....  
11 **Malik:** Mercury absorbs into the skin.  
12 Mitch: That's why he had to go to the doctor because he was sick.  
13 **Malik:** [Puts thermometers inside the milk carton.]  
14 There! I am sure that will hold.  
15 Neka: You're supposed to put it (thermometer) on the side of the thing.  
16 Mitch: She said to wet the cloth (gauze).  
17 **Malik:** If there's a hole in the side, how are you supposed to put the water in?  
18 Mitch: [Reads the directions.] It says to wet the rags (gauze).  
19 Neka: You have to wet the rags first.  
20 **Malik:** [Unwraps a thermometer.] Okay, hold that.  
21 Mitch: First, you have to tie the thing (thermometer) down.  
22 Neka: Hey, we did it. [The girls finish making one hygrometer.]  
23 **Malik:** Y'all put the rag on the side where there's a slit.  
24 Gretchen: You have to put the rag through the hole.  
25 **Malik:** I know. [Boys finish the second hygrometer.]

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Once again, Malik had a high number of verbal interactions in his group. The students paired up and had greater access to materials since two products had to be made. Although this group divided along gender lines, which is typical of pre-adolescents, they shared ideas and tried to answer each other's questions. Malik's comments suggest that he had scientific knowledge. He used the correct vocabulary, identifying the Celsius thermometer and calling Mercury by name, describing how it reacts when spilled onto the skin (Lines 2, 4 and 11). Furthermore, Malik processed the task by questioning why the hole was on the side of carton (Line 17). Once again, no answer was provided, which may imply that none of the other students knew why. They were engrossed in the task, but they had little understanding about what they were doing.

### The Abstract Task

The abstract task setting allowed students to participate in whole-group classroom discussions around algebraic problems. However, when students worked on problems in the abstract task setting, they often worked independently and competed with one another to be the first to give the answers. The activities, which included solving problems that dealt with order of operations, integers, and exponents, did not lend themselves to cooperative or small group learning. However, students collaborated with other members in the class during whole-group instruction to scaffold or build on someone else's answer. The students also agreed or disagreed with other students by showing the "touchdown" signal in football for agreement and the "no good" field goal signal for disagreement (Phillips and Ebrahimi). A segment of one of the lessons where Malik was a participant is presented below. In this text, the teacher presented the students with the following problem:  $3 \times 4 + 5 - 8 \div 2 = \underline{\quad}$ . The discussion reveals that this problem was a challenge for the students.

#### Text 3

- 1 Teacher: I saw a lot of different answers for the problem I have on the board.
- 2 **Malik:** [Mumbles to himself.] That one was tricky.
- 3 Teacher: Raise your hand if you would like to share your idea.  
Neka.
- 4 Neka: Eighteen.
- 5 Teacher: I am looking around, and I see disagreement signals.
- 6 Who has another idea? Betty.
- 7 Betty: Three.
- 8 Teacher: I see some support. Who had another idea? Mitch.
- 9 Mitch: Four.

- 10 Elliot: I think it's 13.
- 11 Teacher: Okay, I will put 18, 3, 4, and 13 on the board. Any more ideas? Noah.
- 12 Noah: I think it's 4.5.
- 13 **Malik:** [Shows agreement with 4.5 by raising both hands in the air.]
- 14 Teacher: I need one student to explain his/her answer. Dwight.
- 15 Dwight:  $3 \times 4$  is 12,  $12 + 5$  is 17,  $17 - 8$  is 9, and  $9 \div 2$  is 4.5.
- 16 Rebecca: My Dear Aunt Sally. [Refers to the order of operations.]
- 17 Teacher: What are you talking about?
- 18 Elliot: You have to multiply, divide, add, and subtract. I think the answer is 13.
- 19 Teacher: If I put parentheses, does that help? [Writes  $(3 \times 4) + 5 - (8 \div 2)$  on board.]
- 20 Class: The answer is 13.

While the foregoing whole-group activity had a high level of student involvement as the teacher-researcher asked many questions, explored students' conjectures, and allowed them to explain their answers, this method of discovery teaching was limiting for Malik and other students. He raised his hand on many occasions. However, only one student was usually called on at a time. Although there were some opportunities for students to give choral responses and show signals, which they seemed to enjoy, many students including Malik showed signs of frustration because they were called upon too infrequently or not at all. Thus, the level of participation, which was high at the beginning, began to drop off as students tired of raising their hands and waiting to be called on. This analysis reveals the importance of learning in small groups.

### The Quantitative Analysis

Malik's score on the MFMT-I rose from 293 on the pretest to a passing score of 353 on the posttest. These data are consistent with his grades in mathematics, which showed a steady improvement over the course of the school year. Coupled with the fact that Malik's verbal interactions were very high, the results concur with the findings of other researchers who link high student interactions with high achievement (Hiebert and Wearne; Mulryan 1995; Webb). However, most African American students did not perform as well as Malik.

The Oneway ANOVA was used to compare the students' scores, which were disaggregated by race. The results of the two Asian students, while reported, will not be discussed because of the small sample size. As shown in Table 1, African American students' scores in general ( $M =$

323.56) were significantly lower ( $F = 3.330, p < .05$ ) than the scores of Caucasian students ( $M = 342.12$ ). In addition, the achievement gap grew from 13.88 on the pretest to 18.56 on the posttest.

	M Posttest	SD	M Pretest	SD
Caucasians (n=64)	307.60	23.67	342.12	30.49
African Americans (n=25)	293.48	17.53	323.56	31.37
Asians (n=2)	307.50	24.75	337.03	21.92
Total (n=91)	303.55	22.80	342.12	31.44

## Discussion

Why did the African American students in this study have lower achievement than their Caucasian peers, when the teacher set out to improve all students' achievement? What was different about Malik? What happened to cause his MFMT-I scores to increase 60 points? According to Boykin and Toms, the socialization of Black children involves their ability to deal with the triple quandary: mainstream, minority, and Black cultural experiences. As evidenced by Malik's interactions in all of the groups above, he knew how to negotiate his place within the social milieu of an integrated classroom. He worked very well with African American students, white students, and females. Black children's ability to negotiate their position in social groups is dependent upon the cultural conditioning they bring from home and develop at school as they learn the modes, sequences, and styles of behavior through day-to-day encounters with others (Boykins and Toms). While other African American students were withdrawn or silent when Caucasian students took control of the materials, Malik asserted himself. Often the assertiveness of minority students is mistaken for aggressiveness, and the response of mainstream students is to put minority students in "their place." Malik refused to be defined by others' terms. Instead he asserted himself by participating in small groups, asking critical questions, and taking personal responsibility for his learning.

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Malik's interview sheds some light on his success in mathematics. First, Malik realized the importance of asking questions: "If I don't ask questions, then I can't get the understanding, so I ask questions. Then I can get the right answer on the math test." The foregoing comment reveals that Malik understood the importance of doing well on standardized tests. Second, Malik had a positive attitude about the subject of mathematics and its importance in life. "Math is all around you. It teaches us how to work. If you cannot do math, you can't do anything. I feel that I'm learning something that will help me in the future."

What can teachers do to ensure that all students of color achieve to the same degree as Malik? First, teachers must realize that how they group students has a tremendous impact on their learning (Linchevski and Kutscher). It is not uncommon for a teacher to have a classroom of students with a wide range of mathematical abilities. The students in this study were placed into homogeneous groups of low-middle, middle, or high-middle ability because research suggested that this type of group composition would yield high student interactions (Webb). Ross believes that high-ability students dominate group discussions, while low-ability students or silent pupils struggle to offer explanations or serve as group leaders. However, the stronger the group interdependence is, the more likely all students, regardless of ability, are given the opportunity to serve as group facilitators.

Malik was able to work with other members in the two small groups described above. He used mathematical and scientific language, revealing that he knew what he was talking about. Having a command of the language needed to communicate mathematically, allows minority students to negotiate in the "culture of power." The culture of power has codes and rules that relate to ways of talking, writing, dressing, and interacting (Delpit). Discourse in mathematics among students in integrated classrooms is more likely to be middle-class white talk. Delpit argues that minority students should be taught the oral and written codes, the rules of power, and how to communicate within the culture of power (Delpit). Thus, the social dynamics of small groups can facilitate different power dynamics that the teacher and the students are unaware of. Teachers need to be deliberate about teaching all students to assert themselves like Malik has done. Language is a powerful tool, which enables teachers and students to develop common understandings of mathematical ideas. If mathematics is a universal language, then all students should be well versed in it. The teacher should provide African

*Malik  
refused to be  
defined by  
others'  
terms.*

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American students with “discourse patterns, interactional styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow them success in the larger society” (Delpit 285).

Students can build new words from a knowledgeable person, either from a teacher or a student. Small group interaction can serve as the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where students are exposed to a knowledge provider. For example, Malik increased students’ understanding and knowledge of mathematics through communication and language usage (Steele; Vygotsky). His mathematical language should have convinced others that he could “do” mathematics. However, Malik is not perceived by his group as a knowledge provider due to conflicting social agendas and lack of group interdependence.

Noddings found that teachers and students must build caring relationships, which produce connectedness. Research has shown that caring relationships promote rich conversation with female students in science classes where the female’s voice is gained through rapport and negotiation of relationships. Using the same model, Malik although male is treated similarly to the example of the voiceless female mentioned in Noddings’ work. The conflicting social agendas between Malik and his peers suggest that his voice is not accepted and disregarded. Further, because Malik’s peers do not fully acknowledge his abilities, they are also refusing him social membership in the group. Yet his level of mathematical and scientific language is superior to his peers. Clearly, additional research is needed on small group interactions and their effect on group social dynamics.

## Implications

**A**lthough, traditionally males tend to be risk-takers, initiate teacher interactions, and maintain teacher prolonged attention (Kahle and Meece 1994), while female students attempt to establish caring and connected relationships to gain a voice, these social dynamics may not translate in groups where minority students are present and perceived as voiceless. In particular, the social group structure changed where the male (Black) was voiceless. Even though Malik was quite vocal, he was devalued.

Teachers must be aware that successful instructional conversations might only exist between the teacher and the student, especially where minority students are involved in group interactions. If African American students are not considered as knowledge providers and meaningful members of the group, then vital skills could be lost and voicelessness results. Teachers must find a way to promote effective zones of

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proximal development where students like Malik can be valued and increase the instructional conversation among group members (Vygotsky 1978).

Katula (1991) believes that demonstrating how students can paraphrase other students' input could enhance the quality of group dialogue and respond and reflect on comments made by their peers. Occasionally this happened with Malik's group (i.e. applied task), yet the group's comments were indifferent and didn't show respect for the "right answers" generated by Malik.

Teachers can help to facilitate student dialogue, show examples of paraphrasing, and respond to comments made by students, by deliberately calling on a variety of students and repeating and incorporating their comments during meaningful classroom activities.

The teacher-researcher in this study found that instructional strategies (whole-group, small group instruction, etc.), group composition, task set-up, and classroom communication patterns affect the amount and quality of minority students' interactions. These findings suggest that cohesive small groups, equal access to instructional materials and resources, and the ability to communicate mathematical ideas improve the level of minority students' participation. The school context and teacher actions have a profound impact on student learning and achievement. Teachers must develop a pedagogy of equity, first by honestly evaluating the teaching styles and discourse patterns in their own classrooms and then proactively monitoring and intervening to make the changes needed to provide opportunities for all students to be successful. Then all students, including African Americans, will have greater opportunities to "do" mathematics and the achievement gap will begin to narrow.

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# Race, Ethnicity, Class, and School Dropouts:

## *A Policy Perspective*

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*The author presents a review of literature on conditions and circumstances that cause youth to drop out before finishing high school. The essay explains the key features of both cultural and structural theories of low academic performance, and the author argues these theories might profitably be fused in order to formulate effective dropout prevention/intervention policies. The author recommends use of the public health model for prevention and intervention and synthesizes the findings of three recent reports on effective dropout programs.*

### **Introduction**

Every year a significant number of American youth fail to complete high school and thus place great stress on themselves, their families, and on society (Levin; McDill, Natriello, and Pallas; Peng; Rumberger). Among this group, ethnic-racial minorities and working-class students have the highest dropout rates. For example, in 1999 the dropout rate for non-Hispanic whites ages 16 to 24 was 8 percent, 12 percent for non-Hispanic Blacks, and 31 percent for Hispanics. Also, students from the lowest family incomes have higher dropout rates than students from families with higher incomes. Being a school dropout is an additional obstacle that hinders the life chances of ethnic-racial minority or lower class student.

The dropout rates among minorities and working-class youth should not only motivate us to develop explanations as to why these rates are so high, but they should also drive our search for effective dropout prevention/intervention strategies. I have three objectives in this paper. First, I use an at-risk framework in reviewing an extensive body of

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literature about why youth dropout. Such a review is a necessary step toward developing sound theoretical explanations, as well as effective dropout prevention/intervention programs. Second, I describe the two main theoretical paradigms used in explaining the dropout rate among minorities and working-class youth. Third, I merge the at-risk research and the paradigm literature in creating a strategy for developing dropout prevention/intervention program(s).

## **Risk Factors and School Dropouts**

### *Review of the literature*

A review of the risk factor literature indicates that risk factors fall into one of six broad categories:

- Individual
- Family
- Peers
- Schools
- Community
- Societal.

## **Individual Risk Factors**

### *Student Attitudes*

Student attitudes are related to dropping out because students who are not motivated to do well in school and/or do not bond with school are at risk. To begin with, low commitment to conventional goals and objectives increases the risk of dropping out (Lawrence). A corollary with such attitudes is low educational expectations (Pirog and Magee; Rumberger; Rumberger and Larson; Swanson and Schneider). Students who are at risk of dropping out not only do not expect to do well in school, but they may not care to do so either. A third attitudinal risk factor is low psychological well-being. Students who have psychological problems and/or low self-esteem are at greater risk of dropping out (Gottfredson). Students must be engaged in school if they are to perform well.

### *Student Skills and School Performance*

Students who do not perform well in school are at risk of dropping out (Alexander et al. 1985; Coleman and Hoffer; Pallas 1984). Moreover, consistency in academic performance is also important because early academic performance later becomes an important predictor of leaving

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school (Alexander et al. 1997; Garnier, Stein and Jacobs; Goldschmidt and Wang; Roderick; Rumberger and Larson). Also, youth who have poor study habits perform poorly in school and are thus more likely to drop out (Pallas 1984).

Immigrant status and the attendant poor language skills are also factors related to dropping out. Not only do immigrant status and language skills interact in their effect on dropping out, but research also finds that immigrant status and poor language skills interact to increase the likelihood of dropping out (Goldschmidt and Wang; Rumberger 1995; Velez). However, research also points out that some immigrants perform well academically (Suarez-Orozco). While some have argued that language is a factor in the dropout rates, Krashen (2000) argues that it is not. Instead, Krashen argues that dropping out is related to such factors as familial socioeconomic status.

### ***Student Behavioral Issues***

Among those behavioral issues identified by research as affecting the dropout decision are low integration into school and its culture, involvement in adult roles, delinquent behavior, and student mobility. Low interest and participation in extracurricular activities are factors related to dropping out (Fine; McNeal 1995). Other integration indicators include a lack of psychic attachment to school, and the lack of participation in school activities (McNeal 1995; Newman et. al.; Tinto). Truancies and absences from school are also related to dropping out. Indeed, the greater the truancies and/or absences from school, the greater the likelihood of dropping out (Goldschmidt and Wang; Rumberger 1995; Rumberger and Larson).

In many cases, grade retention increases the odds of dropping out (Goldschmidt and Wang; Jimerson; Kaufman and Bradby; Roderick 1994; Rumberger 1995; Rumberger and Larson). However, there are some scholars who point out that being held back has the opposite effect by increasing student achievement (Alexander et al 1994).

Clearly, the reasoning behind the retention decision is crucial. If a child is being held back for reasons related to maturation and he/she does not have a history of poor academic performance or discipline problems, then retention is probably a good decision. If the decision is based on a history of academic and other behavioral problems then retention may increase the likelihood of dropping out. Student involvement in adult roles has mixed effects on dropping out. Research indicates that being married, having a child, and working long hours increases the likelihood

*...the dropout rate for non-Hispanic whites ages 16 to 24 was 8 percent,...*

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of dropping out (Pallas 1984, 1987; Mc Neal 1995). There is still some debate about the effects employment has on dropping out. Some scholars find that employment increases academic performance, school commitment, and self-esteem (Greenberger and Steinberg; Lewin-Epstein). Recent work by McNeal (1997a) provides an explanation for these contradictory findings—the effects of employment on the likelihood of dropping out depend on the job and the number of hours worked. Student delinquent behavior is a significant predictor of dropping out. For instance, drug use is linked to dropping out (Mensch and Kandel). Other kinds of delinquent behavior linked to dropping out include aggressive and violent behavior, as well as activities that can only be seen as delinquent, such as vandalism, theft, etc.

Moving from one school to another increases the likelihood of dropping out (Rumberger 1995; Rumberger and Larson; Swanson and Schneider; Teachman et al.). There are two problems associated with moving from one school to another. First, students are not allowed enough time to bond with a school and its culture. Second, students fail to form important relationships with peers. These are important issues because friends are important during the transition from elementary to middle school, and from middle school to high school.

## **Family Risk Factors**

### *Family Relations*

Unstable family relationships tend to exert negative effects on student behavior, well-being and thus on remaining in school. Family divorce, separation, or domestic violence place children at risk (Fine; Fitzpatrick and Yoels). Poor family relations tend to place students at risk, such as not enough parental time with children (Liebowitz). Other parenting issues that place youth at risk include the lack of influence on children pursuing conventional goals and objectives (Wright and Wright); poor communication between parents and their children (Alpert and Dunham; Rumberger et al. 1990); harsh behavior of parents toward their children (Bachman, Green, and Wirtanen); and single-parent households (Goldschmidt and Wang; Mc Neal; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger and Larson; Teachman et al.). Research also indicates that strong relationships between parents and their children reduces the likelihood of dropping out (Mc Neal 1999; Teachman et al.). Stable, positive family relations can be the bedrock of positive school experiences for many students.

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### ***Family Economics***

Low parental socioeconomic status increases the likelihood of dropping out (Bryk and Thum; Coleman; Mc Neal 1999; Pallas 1984; Pong and Ju; Rumberger 1995; Rumberger and Larson). A topic that is clearly yoked to family socioeconomic status is underclass status; being a member of the underclass increases the likelihood of dropping out (Ricketts and Sawhill). Economics is linked to the presence of education-related resources and materials available to children. The lack of study materials and other literary materials in the home is associated with dropping out (Ekstrom et al.). A related topic is family mobility. That is, the number of moves a family makes during a child's school career is positively related to the likelihood of dropping out. Research indicates that the greater the number of moves, the greater the risk of dropping out (Peng; Matute-Bianchi). Finally, research has linked greater parental education, living in a two-parent household, owning a home, and living outside the central city as protective factors against dropping out (Hauser, Simmons and Pager).

### ***Family Educational Support***

Parental involvement in the education of their children is crucial for their children's educational performance. First, by supporting their children's education, parents not only act as role models, but they act as advocates for their children by providing support when it becomes necessary. Second, parental involvement is symbolic; parental involvement signals to their children that they and their education are important. Research indicates that low parental involvement in the education of their children increases the likelihood of dropping out (Rumberger 1995; Suichu and Willms).

### ***Peer Risk Factors***

The influence of peers on the behavior of young people has been well-documented, and in terms of dropping out, two themes emerge from this research. First, young people who associate with peers exhibiting low attachment to mainstream social institutions, such as school, and who also engage in delinquent behavior are more likely to drop out (Coleman and Hoffer; Kim).<sup>2</sup> It should also be pointed out that associating with delinquents also places students at risk (Lawrence 1998). A second peer-related risk factor that research has identified as placing students at risk is dating (Pallas 1984). The implication is that the time spent dating and preparing to date is time that one might have spent studying or on some other school task.

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It is the negative peer relations that tend to place some students at risk of dropping out. Of particular importance are peer relations that lead to delinquent behavior, attitudes that eschew mainstream goals and values, and peer relations that take a significant amount of time away from school and school activities.

## **School Risk Factors**

### *School Policies*

Some school policies place students at risk by stigmatizing, isolating, or increasing their disengagement from school.<sup>3</sup> For instance, a recent school policy that researchers argue places students at risk of dropping out are educational standards. The push for greater standards tends to place marginal student at even greater risk by raising the academic bar which marginal students cannot meet (McDill, Natriello, and Pallas 1985, 1986). The result will be to increase the dropout rate among marginal students.

Tracking is another policy that tends to place students at risk of dropping out. Lower tracked students are isolated from their peers and must face the stigmatization and labels of being slow learners. The processes of isolation, labeling, and stigmatization tend to push low tracked students away from school; they fail to see, with good reason, schools as places that enhance their self-esteem (Gamoran; Oakes).

School retention policies also place students at risk of dropping out. Retained students are more likely to be absent from school, to be truant and to eventually drop out (Heubert and Hauser; Smith and Shepard).

### *School Climate & Resources*

By school climate I mean a school's normative value system. For example, does the school have high academic and social expectations for students? Does the school value and respect students? Some research shows there are a number of school climate factors that place students at risk of dropping out.<sup>4</sup> To begin with, a school's academic climate has an effect; the lower the school academic climate, the greater the risk of dropping out (Bryk and Thum; Hoffer; Rumberger and Thomas). McNeal (1997b), however, found that no such effect exists after controlling for student socioeconomic background and other factors, such as school social composition, school resources, and school organizational structure.

The values and expectations teachers have of students also play prominently in the student dropout rate. Research has indicated that low teacher expectations and negative comments directed at students who are



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already at risk tend to increase that risk. Verdugo discusses how labeling and expectations affect minority student achievement.

Two additional school climate issues have emerged from the literature: race and class composition of the studentry, and Catholic vs. public schools. The larger the racial composition and/or lower the class composition of the student population, the greater the risk of dropping out (Bryk and Thum; Mc Neal 1997b; Rumberger 1995; Rumberger and Thomas). Research also indicates that Catholic schools have fewer dropouts than public schools (Bryk and Thum; Coleman and Hoffer; Rumberger and Thomas). However, students who leave Catholic schools have the option of attending public schools.

In addition to climate, school resources have an effect on dropping out. Several kinds of social and physical structures affect the likelihood of dropping out. Smaller class and school size, a core curriculum of high standards<sup>5</sup> with opportunities for students to recover without failure or retention, teacher professional development, and scheduled planning time are all factors that reduce the likelihood of dropping out (McPartland and Jordon; Aness and Wichterle; Bryk and Thum; Rumberger and Thomas).

## **Community/Societal Risk Factors**

### ***Community Risk Factors***

One important community factor placing students at risk is low prospects for socioeconomic success or upward social mobility (Rumberger). Students raised in communities where adults have poor jobs or no jobs fail to see the relationship between education and their economic life chances.

Related community topics are high unemployment, poverty, mobility, and crime which tend to raise the risk of dropping out (Brooks-Gun et al.; Clark). Students in such environments not only question their economic prospects, but they face a number of serious educational obstacles, e.g., their safety while in school, the reality of unequal educational opportunities.

### ***Societal Risk Factors***

The larger society is also implicated in the dropout rate. Low tax revenues for government assisted programs tend to be linked to increasing the risk of dropping out, (Levin; Rumberger 1987). In addition, low national income (recessions and depressions) which

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reduces job prospects and lower political and social participation are linked to dropping out (Catterall; Levin).

## **Cultural and Structural Theories of Dropping Out**

Two paradigms dominate theoretical discussions about academic performance and dropping out: Cultural and Structural paradigms. Cultural theorists argue that values, views, and norms found in the family, community, and in youth themselves affect student academic performance. Structural theorists, in contrast, argue that the patterned, regular, and predictable behavior (and attitudes) of society, its institutions and its agents are the main causes for student's poor academic performance.

### ***Cultural Paradigms***

The most prominent Cultural paradigm hypothesis concerns the oppositional stances taken by minorities and working-class youth toward school. By oppositional culture, I mean that the views, beliefs and behaviors of youth are counter to those of mainstream society and its institutions. The research in this area is quite extensive and covers race/ethnicity, gender, and social class.<sup>6</sup>

### **African American Youth: Code of the Street**

A number of social scientists have argued that African American youth, especially those in the inner city, are sabotaging their own academic careers as a result of the oppositional stances they take toward education and school (Fordham; Anderson 1994, 2000; McWhorter 2000). At the core of this oppositional stance is the "code of the street." In a 1999 study, Aderson has this to say:

*called a code of the streets, which amounts to a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior, including violence. The rules prescribe both a proper comportment and a proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence and so allow those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way. The rules have been established and are enforced mainly by the street-oriented, but on the streets the distinction between street and decent is often irrelevant, everybody knows that if the rules are violated, there are penalties. Knowledge of the code is thus largely defensive; it is literally necessary for operating in public (82).*

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The code's key concept is respect; something that is not available in the wider society. Within oppositional culture, respect is not easily attained and a tremendous amount of energy and effort are spent maintaining one's respect. A set of rules and regulations about how one obtains and maintains respect are part of the code. To attain and maintain respect, one's entire demeanor and presentation of self focus on the "potential for violence." Clothing, speech, and movement are all part of the package.

Getting and maintaining respect is also part of one's identity, and is a central concept for research among scholars adhering to the cultural paradigm. To be a respected person, one must know the code of the street, and if one does not have respect they are diminished as a person and do not deserve things that are valued in their very narrow social system. There is, then, a certain meritocracy to the code of the street; everyone has the opportunity to know and understand the code and follow its prescriptions. Everyone is also held accountable for knowing the code; if one does not know the code and becomes a victim, well then too bad, it's that person's fault.

The process of getting respect is crucial. In gaining respect, one must exhibit nerve. One exhibits nerve by taking someone else's possessions (the greater the value, the greater the nerve), "messing" with someone else's woman, throwing the first punch, getting in someone else's face, or pulling a trigger. Such public displays of nerve are symbolic—an individual displaying such behavior has nerve and will take drastic measures to get and maintain respect. The proper display of "nerve" also sends another public message: that one is not afraid to die. Among the hardcore street youth, dying to get and maintain respect is perfectly acceptable. As Anderson's 1994 work points out:

*Not to be afraid to die is by implication to have few compunctions about taking another's life. Not to be afraid to die is the quid pro quo of being able to take somebody else's life—for the right reasons, if the situation demands it. When others believe this is one's position, it gives one a real sense of power on the streets. Such credibility is what many inner-city youths strive to achieve, whether they are decent or street-oriented, both because of its practical defensive value and because of the positive way it makes them feel about themselves (92).*

The implications for education are varied, but they can be summarized by noting that youth embroiled in such a system reject or do not value educational values, beliefs, and behavior. Inner city youth who pursue school goals and objectives are "selling out," and "acting white." Thus, students reject the value of academic performance, and other mainstream values that stress achievement and attachment to mainstream institutions.

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## Hispanic Youth: Being a “Vato”<sup>7</sup>

Fordham and Ogbu and Ogbu and Matuti-Bianchi make an important contribution to this area of study by distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary immigrant minority groups. As a result of structured inequality and prejudice, involuntary minorities believe that economic success can only be accomplished by adopting the cultural and linguistic traits of the superordinate culture. For high-achieving Latinos (and Blacks as well), such a perspective puts them in a bind because they are placed in the unenviable position of choosing between maintaining their ethnic identities or achievement. Achievement to some members of this ethnic group translates to “acting white.” For many Latinos, the choice is clear:

*To be a Chicano means to hang out by the science wing; it means, not eating lunch in the quad where all the gringos, “white folks,” and school boys eat; it means cutting classes by faking a call slip so you can be with your friends by 7-11; it means sitting in the back of a class of “gabachos” and not participating; it means not carrying books to class or doing your homework; it means doing the minimum to get by. In short, it means not participating in school in ways that promote academic success and achievement (Matuti-Bianchi 253).*

In other words, being a “Vato” means acting and presenting oneself in a manner that undermines mainstream white culture.

Foley (1991) discovered similar findings in his study of Chicano youth in South Texas. Foley found that some Chicano students come to school with a set of ideas and attitudes that undermine their academic success. Three traits were especially important among Chicano youth: Chicanos form separatist groups (become “Vatos”), they fail to follow rules and regulations, and they “ditch” school rather than do school work. The reasons for such behavior are because of the school’s hidden curriculum (which degrades them, their families, and their culture), and they fail to see how education would produce economic opportunities for them (Foley 1992).

## Working Class Youth: Manual v. Mental Labor

In a classic study of working-class “lads” in a decaying, industrial city in England, Willis (1977) found that such youth developed an oppositional culture to school. Specifically, Willis’s working-class lads rejected the school’s achievement ideology, subverted teachers and administrators, and frequently disrupted classes.

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There were very logical reasons why the lads had such attitudes and displayed such behavior. They had come to realize the inferior economic and social conditions of their class under capitalism. Very few of their fathers, older brothers, and friends had jobs; fewer yet had jobs that required an advanced education. Consequently, the lads focused their energies on manual labor over mental labor. Such stances had tragic consequences; the uncritical acceptance of this ideology led many of them to bad, dead-end jobs and reproduced class-based inequality.

Similar results were unearthed by MacLeod (1987) in his study of working-class youth in Boston. MacLeod was able to identify two groups of students, one group calling themselves the “Hallway Hangers” were composed primarily of white youth, and one group, the “Brothers,” made up of Black youth. The Hallway Hangers cut classes, acted out in class, smoked, drank, used drugs, and committed crimes. They did whatever they could to oppose the school’s ideology of achievement and conformity. In contrast, the Brothers attempted to fulfill mainstream roles: they went to class, conformed to rules, studied hard, rejected drugs, played basketball, and cultivated girlfriends. Why were they so different in their reactions to school?

*Structural theorists argue institutions and their agents erect barriers for certain kinds of student populations...*

MacLeod’s analysis is instructive in offering reasons why the Brothers did well and the Hallway Hangers did not. MacLeod argues that cultural factors shaped different responses. The Brothers were optimistic about their futures and the role of education in shaping their future success. In addition, the parents of the Brothers held high expectations for their sons and held them accountable for their academic and social behavior. Parents of the Hallway Hangers were not nearly as involved in the lives or education of their children. Their children were given free rein and their schoolwork was not monitored.

### **Structural Paradigms**

Cultural theorists focus on values and norms, Structural theorists argue institutions and their agents erect barriers for certain kinds of student populations and that these barriers tend to lower academic performance.

Some scholars have defined structure in terms of political economy (Noguera; Wilson; Massey and Denton). That is, the operation of social institutions affects educational opportunity, e.g., the labor market, the educational system. Their argument is that the “practices” and policies in such institutions deny or create barriers for upward mobility, and that these obstacles are the main cause of academic failure or low academic performance among minority and lower-class students. Three concepts

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are particularly crucial to the Structural argument-isolation, school policies, and school climate.

### ***Student Isolation***

Schools are places for the instruction of the values and norms one needs for participation in a social system; that is, how to follow and obey rules and regulations (Apple; Bowles and Gintis; Spring; Loewen). Through its practices and policies, schools tend to isolate minority and lower-class students from other students, either mentally or physically. Both practices are important because there is a link between school climate and school structure (Lee and Bryk; Irvine; Morrow and Torres), and both are tied to student performance. Indeed, accesses to experiences and/or activities that are primarily academic, as well as teacher encouragement are especially important for the academic performance of minorities (Foster; Irvine; Ladson-Billings; Sanders and Reed). Also, socioeconomic origins and race have direct effects on how students are treated and the set of expectations educators have about such students (Verdugo 1986). Four isolating practices are particularly crucial-tracking, school policies, expectations, and socialization.

### ***Tracking***

Considerable body of research indicates not only that minorities and poor students are tracked into lower classes (Simmons and Grady; Wright; Oakes), but that special education classes and learning disabled students are disproportionately represented by minorities and poor children (Harry and Anderson). Once students are placed in low tracks it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to get out, and their entire educational career entails addressing the label and stigma of being a slow learner by both students and educators. For example, most often African American males are seen as problems, including defiant, aggressive, deficient, and intimidating (Majors et al.; Slaughter-Defoe and Richards).

### ***School Policies***

An important contributor to the disengagement of minority and poor students from school are school policies. Research has shown that minorities are punished more severely and more frequently other students (Harry and Anderson; Sandler; Ferguson; Skiba and Peterson). Schools generally fail to support such students in a manner that would enhance their academic performance.

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### **School Climate**

School climate has been implicated in the poor educational experiences of minority and poor children. Of particular interest is the interaction between race and gender. Schools are places where gender identities and roles are learned, practiced, and influence social interaction. For minority male students, for example, gender is important in the school context because research suggests that they tend to see schools as feminized environments (Thorne). The importance given to neatness, orderliness, and other kinds of practices in school are seen as feminine traits, and more importantly such school traits are reinforced by a predominantly female teaching force.<sup>8</sup>

Schools are also places in which the roles associated with race are learned (Apple; Troyna and Carrington; Peshkin; Tatum; Cross et al.). Students learn these dimensions through a variety of manifest and latent rituals in the school: teachers' lesson plans, the hidden curriculum, play, name-calling and the use of racial epithets, and the implementation of school policies, such as suspensions, expulsions, and tracking.

### **Paradigms and Risk Factors: A Synthesis**

In this section I propose merging two bodies of research: Cultural and Structural paradigms and the risk factor research. I begin by making three observations. First, in causal ordering, structure precedes culture, but culture then feeds back and affects structure. Thus, while minority and working-class youth develop oppositional sub-cultures in response to an unequally structured mainstream society, in so doing, many also reproduce such a system.

Second, while cultural theorists emphasize the importance of norms, values, and behavior as factors contributing to the poor academic performance of minority and poor youth, they also acknowledge the role of structure. That is, they recognize that the development of such cultural responses are the result of real and perceived structural inequities (Ogbu). Both Structuralists and Culturalists are selective in how they criticize one another, because they fail to recognize the strong ties between them. For example, Cultural theorists are aware of the importance structure plays in influencing cultural responses. Indeed, as Anderson's 1994 study says:

*The inclination to violence springs from the circumstances of life among the ghetto poor—the lack of jobs that pay a living wage, the stigma of race, the fallout from rampant drug use and drug trafficking, and the resulting alienation and lack of hope for the future. ...Simply living in*

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*such an environment places young people at special risk of falling victim to aggressive behavior (81).*

In addition, Cultural theorists realize that structures are also perceived as open by some and not merely barriers to socioeconomic success.<sup>9</sup>

Third, the arguments made by both Structural and Cultural theorists are not “either/or” propositions. Rather, they are based on a continuum. For Structural theorists, the continuum is from open-to-closed, and for Cultural theorists, the dimension is from oppositional-to-conformity.

Fourth, risk factors fit into one or more of the arguments being advanced by both Structural and Cultural theorists. For example, individual risk factors clearly belong in the Cultural camp, while school and community risk factors fit nicely into the Structural camp. Such a synthesis helps us focus our strategies and programs on problem areas. If cultural views are taken into account, then the focus should be on values, norms, views, and behavior-skills. If the focus is on structure, then the focus should be on changing, dismantling, or erecting new structures.

The table below presents my view of how both bodies of research are related. As can be seen,

Risk factors and theoretical paradigms: a synthesis		
Risk Factors	Theoretical Paradigms	
	Structural	Cultural
Individual		✓
Family	✓	✓
Peers	✓	✓
School	✓	
Community	✓	
Society	✓	

I view individual risk factors as solely cultural since they address skills, attitudes, and behavior. School decision-makers can work to build these factors so students can become engaged in the school process and reduce the risk of dropping out.



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Individual risk factors are primarily cultural and focus on values, norms, and behavior. Programs and strategies can be developed that enhance student bonding and commitment to school. Programs also need to assist students in developing academic and social skills.

Family and peer risk factors are both structural and cultural. Low family SES (Author please spell this out) and factors related to work and economic status can be addressed by structural policies such as greater effort by schools to involve parents in the education of their children; schools need to be “parent-centered” in addition to being child-centered. Family cultural issues such as domestic violence, poor family relations, etc., can be addressed by schools providing access to counseling or social welfare services. Peer relations are also structural and cultural because youth involved in delinquent behavior lack the attachment to school and/or adults that can lead to less risk of dropping out. School policy can be developed to better integrate students into the school culture or, in effect, modify school culture so that it accommodates students who are otherwise seen as problems.

School, community, and societal risk factors are structural. At the school level, policies need to be enacted that engage students and their parents in the school culture. For example, school policies, such as zero-tolerance, tend to push students away from school, especially those at greater risk of dropping out. Schools need to think through carefully their policies. Policy at the community and societal level can work to counteract risk factors in these environments. Schools in communities with high levels of crime, unemployment and other risk factors need to make schools safer and offer children the sense that schools and education can lead to greater economic attainment and security in their lives. Schools should also counteract the larger societal stereotypes about minorities and lower-class children by developing their self-esteem and emphasizing the role minorities and working-class people have had in American society and culture.

## **Developing Dropout Policies**

**I**n developing sound dropout prevention/intervention strategies, I strongly recommend use of the public health model described by Hamburg. The public health model has the following tasks:

1. Identify the problem through surveys and other data collection efforts
2. Identify risk factors and co-factors associated with the problem
3. Design interventions and evaluations
4. Conduct outreach/education/information dissemination

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In this section I discuss practical aspects of developing programs, program implementation, and how to go about choosing a program.

## **Implementation**

In the implementation stage, it is important to select an appropriate program. In this section I offer some suggestions about how to go about such a process.

### **Traits of Effective Programs**

Three recent reports provide excellent summaries on the traits of effective dropout prevention and student achievement programs. The reports were produced by Rossi, U. S. Department of Education, and the Northwest Regional Laboratory (1999).

Rossi not only stresses the importance of services for at risk students, but the author distinguishes program activities by grade level. The author lists five service-related traits of effective programs: they are not complex, they tend to coordinate services, they provide services for more than one risk factor, and they provide counseling and adult advocacy. Rossi also draws a distinction between elementary, middle and high schools. His reasoning is that risk factors differ by grade level and require the delivery of different services. In elementary schools, he emphasizes the teaching of academic skills and the delivery of activities that foster greater attachment and engagement of students in school— after-school tutoring, enrichment activities, and adults as friends. In middle schools, the engagement processes continue by stressing peer relations, flexible schedules, and counseling. Finally, in high school the emphasis is on making school relevant to paid work that is embedded in school activities.

The 2000 report by the U.S. Department of Education takes a slightly different approach. The report embeds activities for at-risk students within an effective schools framework. First, they provide a description of effective schools that begins with the autonomy of both teachers and administrators in determining curriculum and instructional strategies. The report also stresses a climate that is child-centered and allows students to move at their own paces. Several other concepts are central to effective programs: monitoring of attendance, coordination of services, constant communication among schools in a cluster, and parent/community involvement.

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Within the effective schools framework, schools are able to address the needs of at-risk students. For at-risk students, the report adds accelerated learning, family outreach, and training and information for parents so they can help their children at home. Several kinds of activities are suggested in order to enhance the relevance of school to one's later economic status. Students are counseled and made aware of careers and job preparation. Moreover, families are made aware of various social support services, such as child care and health care.

The 1999 report by the Northwest Regional Laboratory also provides its views about effective programs. The NRL framework is similar to a business model and comparable to the Rossi and U.S. Department of Education reports. NRL suggests that effective dropout programs are comprehensive, offer professional development, have measurable and achievable goals, have school staff support, and involve parents and the community. In addition, the NRL report indicates that effective programs evaluate their activities and programs and coordinate resources.

A synthesis of the three reports is captured in the list below-

1. Effective programs are research-based
2. Use a comprehensive strategy that addresses more than one risk factor
3. Start in the early grades and make a long-term commitment
4. Create a smaller, more personalized school environment
5. Emphasize clear and equitably enforced rules and regulations
6. Include vocational education that is well integrated with the academic program
7. Include counseling that pays attention to careers, jobs, and life skills
8. Stimulate a supportive and caring school environment
9. Provide for coordinated and comprehensive services
10. Emphasize academically enriching activities
11. Allow flexible schedules
12. Ensure autonomy for educators in terms of curriculum and instructional strategies
13. Ensure systematic monitoring and follow-up of student absences with teachers, students, and parents
14. Provide special assistance and alternatives to promotion
15. Encourage communication among schools in the cluster
16. Stress parent and community involvement
17. Provide professional development and training
18. Have measurable goals and objectives and a comprehensive evaluation system.

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## Selecting a Dropout Program

**H**ow does one choose a program? A recent report by the American Institutes for Research outlines seven steps that education decision makers can use in choosing programs that enhance the educational attainment of their students . A summary of these steps follows:

1. Identify the school's needs: conduct an assessment.
2. Investigate alternative approaches to the one(s) being considered.
3. Ask program developers about-availability of support; cost; effectiveness; and other schools that use the program
4. Call a random sample of schools (if possible) that are using the program. Program developers may have contacts in these schools. Then ask the following kinds of questions—why was this approach chosen?; how were implementation programs addressed?; what was the cost of implementation?; how effective is the approach?
5. Visit schools if possible and, in particular-visit classrooms; meet and talk to staff; talk to students, parents, and community members; get a sense of the school's mission, its climate, and how it views students.
6. Match the developer's requirements with all available resources. Look at costs of-training; consultation; materials; staff
7. Put the decision to a vote—staff support is crucial to success; about 80 percent of all school staff have to agree on the approach.

### Conclusion

**W**hile a considerable body of research indicates that education is the primary vehicle for upward mobility and economic success, a significant proportion of the school aged population in the United States drops out before completing high school. Leaving school before completing high school places individuals at significant economic disadvantage and also strains societal resources because an important proportion of the welfare population are school dropouts; the same can be argued regarding the incarcerated population. For minority and poor youth, a large number will join the school dropout population.

This paper has covered several areas of policy and research with the objective of offering some guidelines about developing solid dropout prevention/intervention strategies. The areas covered included using a risk factor framework in reviewing the literature about school dropouts, reviewing two dominant theoretical paradigms about the academic experiences of minority and poor students, merging both paradigms - Structural and Cultural, with the risk factor research and developing a policy framework for addressing school dropouts. The model stresses the interaction between Structural and Cultural paradigms and risk

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factors. A final section provides practical suggestions for developing and selecting successful dropout prevention/intervention strategies.

Three conclusions emanate from my work. First, ethnic/racial minorities and poor students have the highest dropout rates. Second, a review of the dropout research employing a risk factor model reveals that dropping out is a complex process. Indeed, many minority and poor students do not see schools as relevant to their current and future lives. Third, two bodies of research suggest that both Structural and Cultural arguments can be merged in a framework for developing sound dropout strategies. Such a framework suggests that schools must invoke both structural and cultural changes in order to engage and integrate minority and poor students into the school process. Schools must become engaging, nurturing and caring environments where students see its value for their current and future life chances.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper Whites refer to non-Hispanic Whites, and Blacks to non-Hispanic Blacks.

<sup>2</sup> I should point out that associating with delinquent peers does not necessarily lead to dropping out. Dana Haynie (2001) used a networking framework and found that youth who associate with delinquent peers and exhibit delinquent behavior are those who are closer to influentials within the group, are popular, and have relationships with many members of the group.

<sup>3</sup> A recent school policy that we expect to have significant dropout implications is zero tolerance. Russ Skiba and his colleagues have argued that such policies are at the origin of greater expulsions and suspensions among Black and Hispanic students (see Skiba and Peterson; Verdugo 2000). Such policies have the effect of further distancing students from school.

<sup>4</sup> Research on the effect school climate has on student achievement, and factors related to achievement, such as teachers' job satisfaction, has a history of nearly forty years. There are currently two views about what constitutes a quality school environment: bureaucracy or community. The current research suggests that communities are the best environments. See Verdugo et al. (1997) for a review and analysis of teachers' job satisfaction. Also see Scheerens (1997) for an excellent review of the effective schools models and theories.

<sup>5</sup> This body of research appears to contradict the earlier research reviewed concerning policy and academic standards. The crucial difference, though, is that the present body of research introduces the notion that students are cared for and supported in an environment where failure is not an option.

<sup>6</sup> See Anyon, Bourdieu and Passeron, Robins and Cohen, Corrigan, McRobbie and McCabe, and Olson. This body of research makes, essentially, three points. First, it argues that the origins of the oppositional responses by minority and poor youth are based on the real and perceived structural barriers youth see as limiting their life chances. Second, these perceptions and realities lead certain youth to oppositional attitudes and behaviors. Finally, students who maintain these oppositional stances either drop out of school or resign themselves to a working-class or a "street" way of life. There are two views from the Cultural paradigm viewpoint: the "Reproduction", and the "Resistance" theories. For an excellent review see Giroux (1983). Theories of Reproduction begin with the notion that schools are places driven by class-based ideology, and that such an ideology drives social relations, teaching and the curriculum, i.e., schooling. The aim of schooling is to reproduce

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the class, gender, and race-based stratification found in the larger social system. While Reproduction theorists acknowledge the emergence of oppositional behavior among students, they assume that students merely follow in lock-step fashion the way they are treated and educated. Whether students follow in lock-step fashion or develop oppositional stances makes not difference to the stratification system-both groups are channeled into specific roles and strata. In contrast, Resistance theorists argue that some students do not merely acquiesce to the schooling onslaught. Rather, schools are contested terrains where tension and conflict define group relations. In such an environment students resist (or struggle against) the class-based educational processes that demean their class, race, or gender. Oppositional stances are seen as rational forms of resistance to an oppressive system. Moreover, Resistance theorists acknowledge that some students engage in disruptive behavior that may not necessarily jeopardize their later life chances (Giroux)

<sup>7</sup>The concept of being a "Vato" does not have an easy translation in English. However, the clearest translation is that one identifies with and associates with Chicanos, and that one maintains appropriate values and roles.

<sup>8</sup>Most of the literature deals with class and males. However, there is some research addressing the status of female students. For example, Women's Study Group (1978) found that sixth-form students in England aggressively asserted their sexuality in response to what they viewed as a sexist school environment.

<sup>9</sup>Duneier points out that inner city communities have strong working-class segments. Families and individuals tied to these segments of the inner city exhibit strongly held mainstream values.

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# Alternative School Administrators “At Risk”:

## *What Does it Mean for Children?*

Christopher Dunbar, Jr., *Michigan State University*

*Alternative public schools have evolved from their origins in school choice and the progressive education movement of the 1920's into a system of schools that have become the assigned “dumping ground” for a population of ill-prepared, behaviorally disruptive youth, a population that is also disproportionately composed of minority students. Research suggests these schools fall short of providing an optimal educational opportunity for their students. There are multiple factors that place alternative school administrators “at risk” of failing in their charge to educate. Using a case study from a Midwestern alternative school, the author focuses on policy and the role of administrators, presenting interviews with the state legislator, the district superintendent responsible for oversight, and the school's onsite administrator. The essay demonstrates implications of policy that emphasizes behavior over education and argues the need to develop a cultural climate within the alternative school far different than that of the traditional school. Policy must engage the role of parents, healthcare workers, social workers, probation officers.*

The catchall phrase used to describe children, who are poor, disenfranchised, and who are otherwise unable to matriculate successfully through the ranks of a traditional school environment is “at risk.” These children are generally ill-prepared (with even minimal skills) to begin a socialization process that is necessary to acquire a quality education. Coupling this phenomenon (at risk) with children who are also perceived as incorrigible, usually results in children who are unable or unwilling to conform to traditional school culture. This partnership often sets off a causal chain in students that can run from academic incompetence, to poor school performance, to a dislike for school and school authority leading to the commission of inappropriate acts (Hirschi).

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The law mandates that an education be provided for this student population. As a result, in recent years, we have experienced the growth of alternative schools for children who lack both academic and social skills. This kind of alternative school is designated to house students who have been described as incorrigible, disruptive, social misfits, and academically incompetent. This article examines the role of the administrators of these schools and their faculty who are responsible for providing students with a good education. The following questions will be explored in detail in this article: How do policymakers see the process of assuring a quality education for students facilitated, and what role do school leaders play in its implementation? What do leaders in alternative schools need to know to enhance educational opportunities for this student population? What does education really mean in this context? Does education look different in this setting?

*The growth of  
alternative  
schools for  
behavior  
disordered  
students  
necessitates a  
closer  
examination of  
the administrator's  
position*

For the purpose of this article, I have borrowed a definition from Lee, Lomotey, and Shujja (1994) that suggests that schooling /education should “foster the development of adequate skills in literacy, the humanities, and technologies that are necessary to negotiate economic self-sufficiency in society”. However education, in this context, often looks different in its practical application. It assumes a different meaning from that which is generally accepted by society as a whole. This point will be expounded upon as the article unfolds.

This article seeks to understand why alternative school administrators may be especially “at risk” of failure to effectively oversee meaningful educational opportunities for their students. The growth of alternative schools for behavior disordered students necessitates a closer

examination of the administrator’s position and the increased responsibilities that come as a result of accepting this leadership role. I begin my discussion with a brief summary of the evolution of alternative schools. I will examine a case study of a Midwestern alternative middle school, focusing specifically on the role of administrators at this school. My analysis will provide demographic information on the student population followed by an interview with the state legislator who initiated the alternative school bill. I will provide perspectives about the alternative school from the district superintendent responsible for its oversight, followed by an interview with the alternative school’s onsite administrator. Finally, I will discuss alternative approaches to address steps and direction that administrators may take to provide an optimal educational opportunity for their students in an alternative school setting.

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## Evolution of Alternative Schools

Alternative schools have been around for many decades. Cremin traces their origin to the 1920's and the Progressive Education movement. However, as noted by Deal and Nolan, the 1960's and 1970's reflect the greatest growth of these kinds of schools. They reported that there were over 5,000 alternative public schools during this time. Their data indicated that "over sixty percent of alternative schools had begun since 1962 and that over eighty percent had begun since 1970" (33). Many of these institutions held a variety of different objectives for their students. The majority of these schools were accessible to students as a matter of choice. This circumstance of choice has evolved into one where students are assigned to schools. When students are assigned to an alternative school, as in this case, emphasis is placed on dropouts and behaviorally disruptive youth. Research suggests that minority students disproportionately represent this student population. It further suggests that a great number of these schools are increasingly becoming dumping grounds and holding operations and therefore not providing an optimal educational opportunity for their students (Arnové and Strout 1980).

### School Site

In 1993 a school referendum was passed in Midwestern State that created the Alternative School Program. Its purpose was to create another option to serve behavioral problem students. This included, but was not limited to, students failing, chronic truants, and students eligible for expulsion. The purpose was to provide a place outside the traditional school to send students when they had committed expellable offenses and nothing else seemed to work.

The alternative high school opened its doors in 1995. The middle school opened shortly thereafter in a downtown building that formerly housed the Employment Office. Prior to this arrangement, both the high school and middle school were housed in the same building.

The middle school (where this study was conducted) has six classrooms including a shop class and a computer room. There are five regular accredited teachers, one resource/special education teacher, one social worker, two teacher aides, and an assistant director who oversees its management. During this study the school had twenty-eight middle school students of which fourteen were classified as Special Education. All were black except for two white males and one white female. However, all of the students occupied a low social economic status. This

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was evidenced by their eligibility for free breakfast and lunch offered by the school.

These children are primarily black and poor and many have been labeled special education. Who will be held accountable to provide them with a quality educational opportunity? What is the state's position with regard to their education? An interview with the legislator who proposed the alternative school bill follows.

### **The State Level**

**T**he legislator indicated that there was sufficient evidence that supported a perception that schools are becoming increasingly unsafe: "There has been a significant proliferation of expulsions and suspensions that have been attributed to an increase in drug and alcohol abuse, assault and battery, and weapons in the schools."

He further said that he has two children in the public school system and that they needed a safe place to receive a good education. No responsible parent would argue the need for safe school environments. However, the question now becomes one that asks, will removing disruptive children from traditional schools assure a safe school environment? Simple cause and effect theory suggests that removing disruptive students will create safe schools. However, one might ask whether removal of criminals from society make society safe? The question begs further inquiry. Are these children disruptive by nature and therefore in need of isolation? Are there ecological conditions that influence their behavior? If so, how do we address these influences so that these conditions can be removed so that we don't simply create more disruptive students? Are these students simply products of a society that deem them expendable? Is it possible to remove all the "bad seeds?" Are administrators able to address these issues? The alternative school plan appears to be an easy solution to a very complex problem.

Further, questions exist concerning the way in which the special needs of these children will be addressed. What specifically are their needs? How pervasive is the issue of foster care, and what is its impact on disruptive students? Why are some children unable or unwilling to conform to the traditional school culture? Are schools then responsible for adjusting their climate to accommodate all students? Do they have the responsibility and capabilities to do so?

What is in place in the alternative environment that would be different and hence better than that which is currently offered in the traditional



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public school? Many would argue that even traditional school environments are increasingly unsuccessful in providing an optimal educational opportunity for a swelling number of African American males particularly.

Not surprisingly, the legislator was only able to offer much of the same rhetoric espoused when the issue of alternative education and African American males is raised in academic forums. That is, change the pedagogical approach, comprise a smaller student- teacher ratio, and a smaller student population.

However, what effectively does this translate into? In many instances it means crowding students who share similar social and academic issues into smaller classrooms with teachers, who in many instances, do not have special education certification, who do not share like cultural values and whose primary responsibility is to make sure students behave. It quite often means utilizing textbooks that children cannot identify with, or relate to. Can this panacea translate into intensified reading remediation for fourteen-year-old students who cannot read? More often than not it means exposing students to a watered down regurgitation of the same themes and approaches to education used in the traditional public schools that have been unable to meet the needs of this non-traditional student population.

It is evident from the paucity of research in this area that this formula isn't sufficient to address the multi-layered issues that these children bring to the classroom, that is, issues that begin with being poor, male, black, and unfortunately, in some instances, children of dysfunctional families. It is incumbent upon legislators, whose responsibility it is to formulate effective policy governing school issues, to make informed decisions be made regarding the welfare of our children; particularly when they have the power to impact their lives. There is a moral obligation to promote policies that make provisions for all children to obtain an optimal educational opportunity. What is the superintendent's view of the alternative school?

### **Superintendent's View**

An interview with the superintendent revealed masked concerns and apprehensions about what I had observed at the school since he knew that I had already been there conducting this study. He quickly reminded me that the school was still in its infancy, "It's under a new administration; therefore many issues continue to be worked on and

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improved, including revision of enrollment eligibility guidelines, curriculum, and the referral process.”

During our conversation, the superintendent indicated three ways in which a student could be enrolled in the alternative school. The first is self-selection. A student or a parent may decide that the student is having too many problems in the traditional school and opt for a change in venue that may help to improve the situation. The second way a student could be enrolled is by faculty referral. This procedure required a faculty member to recommend a student be sent to the alternative school. This was usually a result of problems that a teacher was having with a student. This notion suggests that by removing a student from the traditional school and placing him/her into a smaller school environment, the student’s problem may be adequately assessed and subsequently addressed. It further suggests that students would receive individualized attention, therefore providing better opportunities for both teacher and student to interact and ultimately address the social and academic needs of the student. The third way a student could be enrolled involved expulsion of a student from the traditional public school. The school board had to approve all expulsions.

During my interviews with students, faculty and staff, I found one student who enrolled in the alternative school by choice. The student knew the director of the alternative school from his elementary school years where he was in constant trouble. At that time, the director was a teacher at an elementary school that handled the children that were sent to the time-out room. Soon after the alternative middle school opened, the teacher became its director.

In his traditional school, the student continued to get into trouble. He bumped into his old teacher in the Dean’s office at his middle school. It was then that he asked could he enroll in the alternative school. He felt he had a better chance of staying out of trouble. It should be noted that this student was on his last leg at the public school. It was simply a matter of (a very short) time before he would have been placed in the alternative school by the referral process or expulsion.

Other students interviewed indicated that they were mandated to the school as a result of the second process, i.e., faculty referral. Faculty referral was the process most often used because it was the last step before expulsion. In accepting the faculty referral, the student avoided the inevitable expulsion that would have left a permanent scar on his/her record. In other words, though some teachers may have had some altruistic motive in the interest of the student, such as more individual attention, it was more likely that a teacher didn’t know what else to do

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to reach the student and therefore it was necessary for something else to happen (Dunbar, 1999). The teacher had had enough!

The third step was seldom exercised because most parents opted for the second feeling that it would be in the best interest of their child. Parents were sold a bill of goods about the alternative school that left them with a sense that problems that faced their child in the traditional school were the child's fault. Further, parents were led to believe that staff and faculty would be more sensitive and better prepared to address the child's needs. Parents were convinced that problems could and would be addressed more effectively in an alternative school environment.

When asked about his vision for the alternative school the superintendent said that he believed in the program. "I am totally committed to its goals. I'd like to see a change in the behavior of the kids. What are their problems and how can we best address them?"

The superintendent made it clear that changing the behavior of students was a primary goal. He said there had been a decline in the number of suspensions generally but wasn't sure what it could be attributed to. Could it be a result of a decline in student enrollment due to an increase in dropouts, juvenile incarceration, or increased enrollment in the alternative school? In effect a plan was put into place that displaced and hence marginalized students that had no built in mechanism from which to measure its effectiveness.

*The alternative school has become a solution without an understanding of the problem.*

He indicated that there had been an increase in the number of suspensions due to violence and that the age of students suspended was becoming increasingly younger. Again, here is a problem with no way of understanding its origin. Yet, as the head administrator, he is responsible for overseeing the educational opportunities for these children.

The solution for many districts has become one to simply remove students from the traditional schools and segregate them in an environment (all to themselves) where they can't contaminate others. A question that must be addressed asks "what are the social conditions that lend itself to inappropriate behavior by this student population?" The alternative school has become a solution without an understanding of the problem. It's a quick fix for a problem in need of more than a band-aid. Is this simply a way of policing a crisis? Are alternative schools simply a microcosm of society as a whole? Do they simply portray the

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relationship between social forces and the contradictions existing within them?

The superintendent closed our conversation by briefly alluding to one of the social conditions that schools now face that impact the role of administrators. He mentioned a kindergarten student that had been in six foster homes in five years. This issue, he conceded, was quickly becoming a more significant social problem that impacts children directly while also impacting school districts and their role in meeting the needs of a diverse student population. Where do we go from here? An interview with a state legislator helps to further probe these critical issues.

### **On-site Administrator**

**M**r. Sheldon, in his first year as Assistant Director of the district's alternative school program and principal of this middle alternative school greeted me as he unlocked the front door permitting me to enter. It's early so kids hadn't begun to arrive. I had been observing students and teacher interactions for the past few weeks so I was no stranger to the school or to Mr. Sheldon. As a result of what I had observed during the past weeks, Mr. Sheldon and I agreed that mornings were the best time for us to engage in a sustained and substantive dialogue. It was clear that once the school opened its doors and children began to arrive, quiet moments for conversation would be next to impossible.

During my observations, I watched as Mr. Sheldon diffused several volatile situations without a lot of commotion. Children didn't appear to rattle him. Often, students could be heard yelling at the top of their lungs, angry for any number of reasons, but Mr. Sheldon always kept his cool, speaking softly to students, knowing that a calm rational voice would often settle a loud, combative student.

I often heard him say, "Gentlemen you know you can't play that way. You know how it will end up." Mr. Sheldon often made this comment to students who were engaged in what appeared to be ordinary horseplay. Under ordinary circumstances, horseplay for students is an expected part of growing up. However, at the alternative school, horseplay inevitably ended up in a physical altercation.

### **Administrator's Perspective**

**M**r. Sheldon and I proceeded to his office to discuss concerns he had about issues that have manifest since he had taken over the

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leadership position at the alternative middle school. Mr. Sheldon said the school needed to be restructured:

*I knew the reputation this program had gotten—one of a “dumping ground”—a place where kids were not doing anything. However, it was a convenient place for the district to send the kids they didn’t want to deal with. As far as traditional school administrators were concerned, academics were secondary—because of the nature of difficulties that our kids have. As a result, we have schools that view this school as not being a traditional school (in the sense of academics) because school to those on the outside is academics—to prepare kids for technical, vocational, business, and the future. This school isn’t doing it.*

There are obvious philosophical differences between Mr. Sheldon’s perception of what an alternative school should provide and those of the state legislator, the superintendent or his colleagues in traditional public schools.

### **Conflict in Ideology**

When asked the district’s perspective on what was supposed to happen in the alternative school Mr. Sheldon said:

*It was pretty well evident to me in one of our first staff meetings. My description to the parent was one that suggested that students must work hard to show people that they can perform in the classroom both academically and behaviorally. Then, they would be allowed to go back. Our goal was to prepare these kids to go back to their home school and that could be done within the first semester and looking into the second semester.*

However, Mr. Sheldon learned from traditional school administrators that they were not interested in students returning to their schools. Mr. Sheldon told me that one administrator told him that since these students were in junior high, he should make “them ready to go to high school when that time comes.”

Under these circumstances, placement in the alternative school is not viewed as an interim stop before returning to traditional school. School administrators do not want these students back. The perception of the alternative school from the perspective of traditional school administrators could be interpreted in several ways. The ideal notion is that students sent to alternative school will receive the necessary academic and social skills that will enable them to return to a more traditional school environment. However what more frequently occurs is the belief that alternative schools are for children who are failures.

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Operating from this perspective dooms students to watered down curriculums, low expectations and subsequently a self-fulfilling prophecy dictating a sense of impending failure. Once children are banished to alternative school environments they are often forgotten about. Traditional schools have “washed their hands” of them and left their fate in the hands administrators and teachers who are charged with the responsibility to rehabilitate and subsequently return them to a school system where they have already experienced failure and where they are not wanted. The prevailing behavior is one that suggests, “we’ve got them out of here now you deal with them.” In this instance, alternative school is simply a convenient out for traditional middle school administrators to place their troubled students. However, important questions exist concerning what administrators of alternative schools can do to meet the needs of its population. That is, how can alternative school administrators avoid failure in their efforts to meet the needs of these children? Mr. Sheldon addresses this point from several different perspectives.

Sheldon suggests that the image of the school must be changed. “We do need to change the way people look at us. We must show people that we were doing academics and that we don’t simply have kids come here for a half-day or for an hour and then just leave. People should know that this is a program that looks like theirs.”

A question that immediately comes to mind concerning Mr. Sheldon’s vision of what the school should look like to an outsider is one that asks should alternative schools look like traditional schools?

### **Does Alternative School Mirror Traditional School?**

In responding to this query Mr. Sheldon said:

*It’s the perception that matters. If they perceive us as looking like them, then perhaps, they will accept us. Does that mean that we are going to be like them? No, that’s not the intent. No, I think the intent in terms of alternatives, at least my view here, is that I want to show that as an alternative our goal is to form personal relationships with students and through those personal relationships with students show that these students are capable. I think it is all too easy at the middle school and the high school to lose that relationship with students, and as a result all you are seeing then is surface behaviors that have no deeper meanings for the administrators and they’ll just deal with those behaviors by policy. Dealing with kids on an individual basis, building a relationship with kids, finding out more about how they think, why they’re doing what they are doing, and helping to encourage them to change if what they are doing isn’t successful for them. This is part of our mission. I think this is what we are able to do in this environment, more so than what could be done in those other environments. So long term, the effectiveness of our alternative school is going to be what kind of change could we make in those middle schools and high schools systematically.*

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Mr. Sheldon raises a number of points here that could contribute to the success or failure of students who attend alternative schools. First, can the perception of alternative schools be changed from one that is thought of as a “dumping ground” to one that supports a nurturing environment? Second, how can relationships be developed between traditional schools and alternative schools that benefit children? Third, who are these children and how do they end up in the alternative school? And finally, how do you develop relationships with children who have experienced few successes both in and out of school in order to meet their need?

### **Meeting Needs of Students**

**M**any students placed in this alternative school have needs that require special attention. For example, many students are at least two years behind academically while others are unable to read beyond simple letter recognition. Many of these children live in foster homes or live with an extended family member(s) who has been worn thin as a result of problems with the student. Many have already been in and out of trouble with juvenile authorities. For most of these children, the alternative school is the “last house on the block” (Dunbar 1999). This environment is supposed to “straighten them out.” It’s supposed to provide them with the support to change their behavior and provide them an optimal educational opportunity. However what most often occurs does not fit this bill. Students are placed in classrooms with students who have experienced many of the same difficulties. Some students are special education and some are on medication. Most are at different academic levels yet they are grouped together where generic lessons are planned to keep them busy and quiet. Academics are not the focal point, transforming behavior is. This responsibility falls on the shoulders of the alternative school administrator.

### **Discipline and Staff Preparation**

**M**r. Sheldon spoke about the difficulties with changing behavior in children and preparing the staff for this daunting task.

*As far as the skills of the teachers here, they are dedicated people. But as far as being skilled to be able to work with a number of these kids, there is definitely concern about this for me. At this point it's been difficult for me to watch because I come from situation where I have seen our staff develop. We were at a fairly high level of training for working with this sort of student population. If I needed to step away from a situation, I knew that somebody else was able to and capable of stepping into it and dealing with it. They had their own style*

*but they were capable. I don't have that sense here. So, I do see myself having to deal with a lot of situations and, at some point, I think it is going to become overwhelming as our numbers increase. At this point, I see it as a modeling stage. I'm hoping that people are picking up on how I am dealing with kids. At the next stage I give some direct coaching to the teachers, that is, to step in to take a look at what is going on. I think there is a general focus or philosophy of working with kids, and I am not sure it's present here. They've used the Boys-town Model; they've heavily used a social skill approach, and they've used the ART, the Aggression Replacement Training Model. The latter model has been placed in the curriculum. I don't think that it's quite enough. So, the training and staff development is something we are going to need to work on.*

## **Meeting Academic Needs**

**M**r. Sheldon indicated that academic deficiencies are part of the reason for the behavior problems these students experience. I think academic problems among students are a larger issue at the middle school. That may well be why they are here. Many of the students are identified as special education students. They are receiving more direct instruction from the Special Education teacher. However, we teach children in a self-contained classroom. One of the problems using this method is that we place six or seven disturbed kids in one room. Unfortunately, they would pick up each other's disturbed behavior. The ideal situation would be to move to a resource model, where support is provided to kids in a regular classroom environment. The benefit received by students from this type of program would be a far greater benefit because they will have more opportunities to choose from in terms of friends and different behaviors. When you put this number of kids together with similar social difficulties and similar types of behavior profiles what you will find is that they learn from each other's poor behaviors.

## **Role Models**

**N**ow, it becomes a situation where you, as an administrator, hope that a student comes walking in the door that has a goal in mind and that their goal is to make amends for their mistake so that they can return to their home school. I think we have a couple kids here who are doing that. If we didn't, we'd be in sorry shape because I don't think we could provide the necessary modeling, given what we have in terms of our ability to do therapeutic work with the kids and given the skill level that we have here. It would be difficult to do that. So, in a sense, I rely on fortune that we would have some kids that would rise and come above a lot of the negative behavior. The ideal situation is that some



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students would show themselves as peer group leaders. Perhaps modeling appropriate behavior would influence their peers. In terms of the classroom work and the teachers' ability to modify instruction based upon students' academic ability, I would say that half of our teachers are capable of making the adjustments. Though academics are a crucial concern at the school, juvenile delinquency is also a critical issue facing alternative school administrators.

## **Juvenile Delinquency**

**J**uvenile court weighs heavy on their minds, and it does interfere with school. It's a priority, I guess. I could take another slant on that. That is, one of the things they face when they go into the courtroom is a mandate from the judge that they must do well in school. And so, given that message, given the stick that goes behind that message, you will see students make either a positive change or leave. The choices these kids make determine how we can help them. For those kids that leave, there's not a whole lot that we can do because it is all a matter of choice. You are given the message here. You've made this mistake. Now, here is how you can make amends, here is how you correct it, here's how we want you to correct it. Now, here's your choice. You can do as you are capable of doing or you can face the consequences that could be detention time or prolonged probation.

## **Summary**

**O**ne of the questions that began this discussion asked how policymakers viewed the process of educating students placed in an alternative school environment. It is clear from the interview that the policy in effect simply sanctioned the displacement of disruptive students into isolated environments. These environments served only to marginalize children that the traditional school could no longer cope with. There exists no clear plan in which to effectively address the needs of this student population. The fact is, this legislator has school-aged children who need a safe place to obtain an education. This is a primary reason for proposing the alternative school plan. This is a genuine concern for most parents. However, for the legislator, the concern has implications that affect more children than his own. As a public official, he has a moral and public obligation to act in the interest of all children. In this case, there was no sense that there was a grave concern to educate those students displaced. The superintendent wanted the children to learn how to behave. He wanted evidence that they changed their lives. He had no insights as to how this change was to occur.

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In the case of this study, there were fewer children in the individual classes hence a smaller student/teacher ratio, but this alone did not manifest into an enriching educational opportunity for students. In many instances, students used books that the school district discarded. In essence, students were subjected to a diluted version of pedagogical practices that turned them away from the traditional school culture in the first place. Again, in this case, there was one special education teacher whose responsibility it was to facilitate the regular teacher's efforts to educate the fourteen children who had been assessed as special education students. Many of these students were sent to the special education teacher when they became disruptive in the behavior-disordered classroom, or they became disruptive when told that it was time to see the special education teacher. Students felt as though they were really "dumb" (in their own words) when they were sent to or retrieved by the special education teacher. As a result, they resisted efforts by the teacher to help engage them in their work assignments.

Many of the assignments were rote memorization of material that students felt was totally irrelevant to their lives. There was no engagement between students and school assignments that held any significant meaning. Students did not buy into the alternative school ethos.

*The cultural climate of the alternative school must be different from that offered in a traditional school.*

This administrator is "at-risk" of failure to facilitate the education of these children. Students have been placed in this environment under the auspices of essentially rehabilitating them. He is responsible for "changing their behavior" without a viable and testable plan from which to work. Students are placed without school personnel having significant knowledge of their history. The administrator suggested that it took months to get to know them. That is, "to get beyond students' surface behavior." The goal

became one that focused on behavior rather than on education. In the meantime, students emulated inappropriate behavior while teachers and administrators remained uncertain of the best plan to execute to address the problem. This generally resulted in chaos.

The ultimate goal of education should be that of "fostering the development of adequate skills . . ." (Shujja et.al 1994). However, in this context, despite efforts to look like and hence emulate the traditional school culture were unsuccessful. Part of the problem may be the notion that a goal should be to look like a traditional school. If educators would begin to think about the possibility that the traditional school may be part of the problem for these students, then perhaps emulating the traditional school would not be as important.

The cultural climate of the alternative school must be different from that offered in a traditional school. Traditional schools have not worked for these students. In order to form personal relationships with students, the administrators should learn something about the culture of the students.

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They must know the language of the student so that they are better able to communicate. They must have constant contact with the family. Parents must be encouraged to come to school. If transportation is an issue then it must be addressed and remedied. A comprehensive package must be assembled that includes seeking the support of outside agencies that can address the needs of the parents as well as the student. Many of these students have problems that reach beyond the school walls.

Leadership for this cultural change must come from the top. Policymakers must understand the need for change for these students. Further, policymakers must address problems of students from a holistic perspective. The issues that students bring into the classroom often originate someplace outside of school. School cannot bear the sole responsibility. Policy that excludes the role of the parent or primary caretaker, probation officer, social worker, and the healthcare worker is policy doomed for failure.

School superintendents must utilize existing research concerning alternative approaches to traditional school. Administrators must ask what are the objectives and how do they plan to meet them. They must know in advance histories of students and ask how this knowledge can assist in achieving the objectives. And finally, benchmarks should be established to assess whether the goals have been met. Until these questions are asked and until directives are executed, administrators in alternative schools will continue to be "at risk" of failure to effectively educate this student population.

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# The Impact of a Culturally Responsive School Environment on Pre-service Teachers' Willingness to Teach in the School

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Delois Maxwell, *Coppin State College*

*In a climate that acknowledges the need for teacher educators to prepare new teachers for culturally diverse student bodies, the study examines the extent to which selected features of an urban school environment affect a preservice teacher's willingness to teach in the school. A survey was administered to 48 preservice teachers after they completed a 7-week student teaching experience in a large urban school district. The survey sample was drawn from a northeastern university which enrolls 90% Caucasian education students. The study pursues the following research questions: does race/ethnicity, gender, program level, school location and major relate to the preservice teachers' willingness to teach in the urban school? What school environment factors have the strongest association with preservice teachers' willingness to teach in the school? Is preservice teachers' willingness to teach in a school related to their perceptions of a culturally responsive school environment? Survey results show that willingness to teach in the school is moderate and positively related to preservice teachers' perception that the school climate is culturally responsive. However these perceptions concerning willingness and responsive climate do not appear to hold for the relationship between willingness and culturally responsive teaching. Interpreting these results, the author raises additional questions for research regarding preservice teachers' understanding of cultural diversity as well as their perception of the need for culturally responsive teaching.*

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## Introduction

Rapidly changing demographics of the nation's student population leave little choice for teacher educators in the matter of program and curricular change (Morey and Kitano 1997). The inclusion of a multicultural education in teacher training programs is driven by the recognition that teachers entering the profession must begin with a new commitment and ability to serve a diverse student population (Dilworth; Bennett; Deering and Stanutz). Although the terminology varies, the literature is rich in studies and discourse that examine issues relating to multicultural education and teaching for cultural diversity. Much of the research examines pre-service teachers' perceptions, knowledge, and teaching behavior in schools or field experiences, while others focus on developing multicultural education theory (Boyle-Baise and Washburn). Kea and Bacon's research describes a partnership that was designed to promote student teachers' reflective experiences in multicultural school settings, while Peterson, Cross, Johnson, and Howell, examined the impact of diversity issues on perceptions of pre-service teachers in an educational foundations course. In a review of 1990's

research that addresses urban teacher preparation, Weis noted, "A significant development in the decade was the shift in thinking about whether prospective teachers should be screened for admission to programs of teacher preparation on the basis of their attitudes about teaching a culturally diverse student population"(395).

As teacher educators struggle to prepare teachers for culturally diverse schools and as researchers explore the topic from a variety of perspectives, issues emerge that need to be considered. How do pre-service teachers feel about cultural diversity in teaching? Do we know enough about its effect on their perceptions of teaching? For example, do teachers understand what it actually means to teach for cultural diversity? Given the current demands on teachers, do pre-service teachers believe the issue of cultural diversity

in teaching is just another "thorn in their sides"? Is cultural diversity really important to the novice teacher struggling to survive the first year or two? What effect would it have on a novice teacher's propensity to stay in teaching? Would a pre-service teacher know a culturally responsive school if he saw it in operation? Would a culturally responsive school make a difference in a pre-service teacher's decision to teach at the school?

*Teaching at the  
culturally  
responsive  
school reflects  
appreciation  
and  
accommodation  
of cultural  
similarities and  
differences*

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## Culturally Responsive Education

What is culturally responsive education? How does it look in actual practice at the school? Neito suggests that schools should reflect an understanding and acceptance of all students having talents and strengths that can enhance their education. Culturally responsive schools are caring communities, “places where teachers and students care about and support each other, actively participate in and contribute to activities and decisions, feel a sense of belonging and identification, and have a shared sense of purpose and common values” (Lewis, Schaps and Watson). The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory’s *Strategic Teaching and Reading Project Guidebook*

*The curriculum content is inclusive, meaning it reflects the cultural, ethnic, and gender diversity of society and the world. Instructional and assessment practices build on the students’ prior knowledge, culture, and language. Classroom practices stimulate students to construct knowledge, make meaning, and examine cultural biases and assumptions. Schoolwide beliefs and practices foster understanding and respect for cultural diversity and celebrate the contributions of diverse groups. School programs and instructional practices draw from and integrate community and family language and culture, and help families and communities to support the students’ academic success (1995).*

Teaching at the culturally responsive school reflects appreciation and accommodation of cultural similarities and differences. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg developed a comprehensive model of culturally responsive teaching that crosses disciplines and cultures to engage learners while respecting their cultural integrity. It accommodates the dynamic mix of race, ethnicity, class, gender, region, religion and family that contributes to every student’s cultural identity. Other researchers suggest that culturally responsive pedagogy is developmentally appropriate and reflects a commitment to learn from and about children, building on the strengths and experiences that children bring to school (Delpit; Ladson-Billings)

### Teacher Willingness to Teach in the Urban School

Large urban schools tend to be less attractive to new teachers for a variety of reasons. Some prefer the more affluent suburban schools with more resources and enticing beginning salaries. The social and cultural climate of the suburban school may also appeal to the average teacher who is white, female and approximately 44 years old. Other teacher and school factors may also play important roles in a teacher’s

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decision to stay or enter an urban or non-urban school setting. Leadership behavior, teacher-student relationship, and instructional issues, for example might influence the tenured teacher, regardless of grade level taught to leave the school – whether urban or nonurban. There are some teachers who may choose not to teach in large urban school districts, believing the challenge is too great for their cultural integrity and pedagogical ability.

### **Purpose of the Study**

**T**his study examined the extent to which selected features of the urban school environment impact pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in the school. A second aim of the study was to determine if perceptions of a culturally responsive school environment is important to pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in the school. The study was framed around the following research questions:

Does race/ethnicity, gender, program level, school location, and major relate to the of pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in the urban school?

What school environment factors have the strongest association with pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in the school?

Is pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in a school related to their perceptions of a culturally responsive school climate?

### **Assumptions of the Study**

**T**he research was grounded in the assumption that if a culturally responsive school climate is important to pre-service teachers, it might also influence their decision to teach in the school. Answers to these questions might inform educators who struggle with planning teacher class assignments, and those engaged in restructuring academic programs for inclusion or mainstreaming.

### **Methodology**

#### *The Data*

**T**he data for this study consists of responses to a survey administered to 48 pre-service teachers after completing a 7-week student teaching experience in a large urban school district. The pre-service teachers were majoring in early childhood, elementary, and



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secondary teacher education program at a Northeastern University enrolling approximately 14,000 students, with about ninety percent Caucasian. There are approximately sixty faculty members in the teacher education program, which graduates the largest pool of teachers in the surrounding tri-county area.

### ***The Data Context***

Student teaching occurred during the final semester of the senior year in two 7-week periods. Upon completing each 7-week internship student teachers were required to complete surveys about the teacher education program and University Supervisor. In order to engage in a multicultural teaching experience, interns were required to student teach in the local urban school district for at least one 7-week period. Administrators in the school district indicated an interest in knowing pre-service teachers' perceptions of the school. To address this request the school climate survey was added after the second 7 weeks of student teaching.

### ***Measures***

The school climate survey consisted of 95 Likert-scale items grouped under 6 domains or themes, and one open-ended statement. The domains included: *a) teacher-student relationship, b) leadership behavior, c) student engagement in learning, c) parent engagement in the school, d) staff governance of the school, e) school climate, and f) willingness to teach in the school.* Participants were asked to respond to each item using a 6-point Likert scale. An open-ended item asked respondents to "Please give your opinion of the school." The questionnaire design was based on the NASSP School Climate Survey, which collects and measures data about perceptions on teacher-student relationships, security and maintenance, administration, student academic orientation, student behavioral values, guidance, student-peer relationships, parent and community-school relationships, instructional management, and student activities (Lunenburg and Ornstein 1991).

### ***Variables in the Study***

Pre-service teachers' perceptions of student teacher relationships, leadership behavior, student engagement in learning, and student ability are the independent variables in the study. The dependent variable is willingness to teach in the school. It measures the extent to which pre-service teachers agree that they are willing to teach in the school in which they engaged in student teaching.

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## *Data Analysis*

All items used in the study were recoded from a Likert response scale to a dichotomous scale. Responses of 1-3 were recoded to “1” and labeled “disagree” and 4-6 responses coded as “2” and assigned an “agree”. An Alpha reliability coefficient for each composite variable was calculated to determine the reliability of composite variables. Bivariate analysis was used to assess the relationship between the independent and the dependent variables and examine the questions addressed in the study.

## *Results*

The research questions examined the extent to which pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in a school is related to their perceptions of a culturally responsive school climate, and determined if race/ethnicity, gender, program level, and major also related to the propensity to teach at their school. To explore the importance of a culturally responsive school environment, another aim of the research was to examine the extent to which other factors in the school environment related to pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in the school.

### *Teacher Characteristics and Willingness to Teach in the Urban School*

None of the background variables were statistically related to teachers' willingness to teach in the school as noted in Table 1.

**Table 1. Bivariate Analysis – Teacher Characteristics and Willingness to Teach in the School**

	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Major	Program Level
Willingness to Teach in the School	.13	-.04	.16	-.23

Table 2 presents the extent to which pre-service teachers in the study were willing to teach in the schools in which they completed their second 7-week internship. While one-third of the group indicated a willingness to do so, it also appears that almost 68 percent of these interns were not willing to teach in their school. Respondents' level of agreement on all other variables in the study is presented in Table 4.

**Table 2. Pre service Teacher's Level of Agreement on Willingness to Teach in the School**

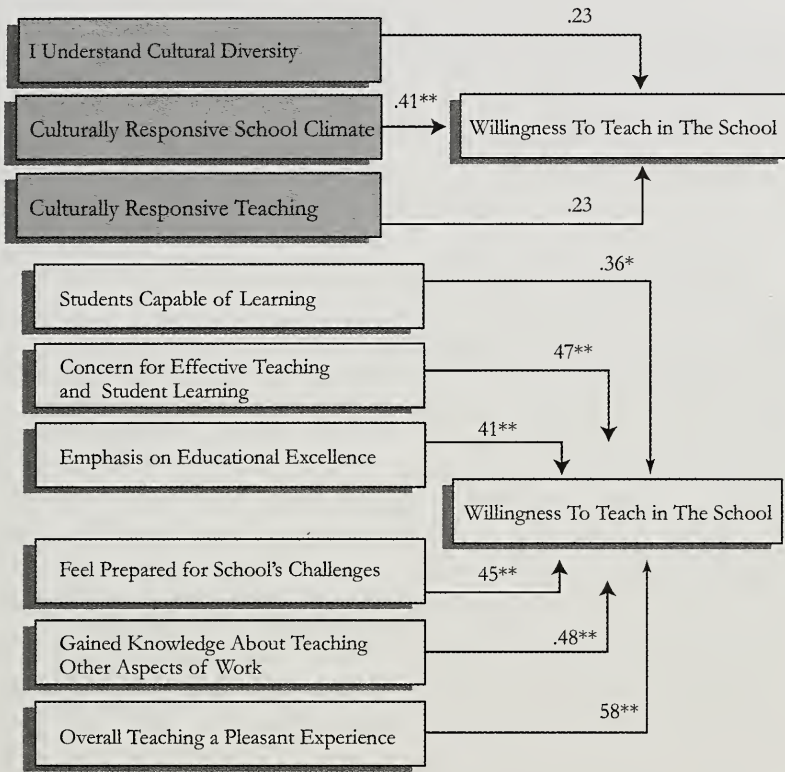
	Frequency	Percent
Disagree	32	66.7
Agree	16	33.3
Total	48	100.00

Note in Table 2 that one third (33.3 percent) of the interns indicate they would teach in the school, while 70 percent said they feel prepared to meet the challenges at the school. Yet 50 percent (Table 3) would not teach at the school because they are not comfortable in the setting, and did not feel that the student teaching experience was pleasant and enriching.

**Table 3.**  
**Pre Service Teachers' Level of Agreement on Selected School Environment**

Factors	Frequency	Percent
My school emphasizes education excellence		
1. Disagree	16	33.3
2. Agree	32	66.7
Total	48	100.0
I feel prepared to meet challenges at my school		
1. Disagree	14	29.2
2. Agree	34	70.8
Total	48	100.0
I understand cultural diversity		
1. Disagree	13	27.1
2. Agree	35	67.7
Total	48	100.0
My school has a culturally responsive climate		
1. Disagree	16	33.3
2. Agree	32	67.7
Total	48	100.0
Teachers at my school engaged in culturally responsive teaching		
1. Disagree	13	27.1
2. Agree	35	72.9
Total	48	100.0
Students at my school are capable of learning		
1. Disagree	21	43.8
2. Agree	27	56.2
Total	48	100.0
My school is concerned about effective teaching and learning		
1. Disagree	18	37.5
2. Agree	30	62.5
Total	48	100.0
I gained knowledge on how teaching relates to other aspects of work		
1. Disagree	19	39.6
2. Agree	29	60.4
Total	48	100.0
Overall my student teaching experience was pleasant		
1. Disagree	23	47.9
2. Agree	25	52.1
Total	48	100.0
I would not teach because the setting is not comfortable to me		
1. Disagree	24	50
2. Agree	24	50
Total	48	100.0
There is little need to address issues of cultural diversity at the school		
1. Disagree	27	56.3
2. Agree	21	43.7
Total	48	100.0

Figure 1 presents a graphical illustration of the bivariate relationships in the study.



Shaded box represents culturally responsive school climate factors

\* Significant at 0.05 alpha level

\*\* Significant at 0.01 alpha level

Bivariate Analysis statistics suggests that pre-service teachers' willingness to teach in the school is not strongly related ( $r = .23$ ) to their understanding of cultural diversity. About 72 percent of them indicate they understand the school's approach to cultural diversity, which also has a moderately strong and positive ( $r = .58$ ) association with their perceptions of culturally responsive teaching. While their willingness to teach in the school is moderate and positively related to their perception that the school climate is culturally responsive ( $r = .41$ ), these perceptions do not appear to hold with regard to culturally responsive teaching ( $r = .23$ ). One explanation for this may be that one half of them do not feel there is a need to address cultural diversity in the school. Figure 1 presents a graphical illustration of the bivariate relationships in the study.

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## **Willingness to Teach in the School & Non-culturally Responsive School Environment Factors**

**A**s noted in Figure 1 there appears to be a slightly stronger relationship between these teachers' willingness to teach in the school and factors in the school environment that may not be related to cultural diversity. However, teachers who are willing to teach in the school may have found it to be pleasant and enriching as there is a moderately strong and positive relationship between these factors ( $r .58$ ).

### **Discussion & Implications for Further Research**

**A**lthough the interns' willingness to teach in the school was moderately related to their perceptions of a culturally responsive school climate, more than one half of them would not teach in the schools where they had engaged in student teaching. They understand the school's approach to addressing cultural diversity and multicultural education, and that understanding has a strong relationship to their belief that teaching in the school is culturally responsive, yet these factors do not appear to have a strong association with their willingness to teach in the school. It is difficult to explain this relationship while at the same time a culturally responsive school environment is related to their willingness to teach in the school. These mixed results suggest a need to re-examine these issues. For example, it is important to have a better understanding of how pre-service teachers define the cultural diversity concept.

The lack of significant correlations between respondents' background variables and the willingness to teach again may be due to a lack of variance on these factors. Almost 80 percent of the sample is comprised of white student teachers, only 6 are male, and 33 are elementary education majors. Although there is almost the same number of undergraduate as graduates in the sample, program level was not significantly related to the dependent variable. It is possible that another variable, namely SES, might have a difference effect on the questions addressed in this study. This is an issue for further research. Finally, additional analysis should be done to examine the relationship between the independent and dependent variables in this study and the responses of those pre-service teachers who said they were willing to teach in the school again. The results of such a study might provide more answers to the questions addressed in this study.

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The results of this study may indicate a need for further development of questions that guide qualitative ethnographic research and large-scale analysis of factors associated with teacher recruitment and retention in large urban school districts, and other schools systems with culturally diverse student populations. Policy and programming issues relating to the continuing professional development of teachers who teach culturally diverse students is important to educators in these schools. Knowledge of the perceptions pre-service teachers hold regarding the school environment in which they student teach may provide critical clues to administrators and teacher educators as they plan for appropriate placement opportunities. Finally, a diverse school environment is fast becoming a reality in many of the nation's schools. To make decisions that will have substantive effect, educators, researchers, and policymakers need information about the climate and culture of these schools. Views of pre-service teachers – who have little to lose by responding candidly – may provide the best insight on what actually takes place in a culturally responsive school.

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# Tribute to Dr. Harold Horton

Trevor L. Clement, Trotter Institute

*Thankful for the opportunity  
Oh! Humble soul of life  
Full of purpose and conviction  
Gentle and serene*

*Inspired to strive for better  
No matter what the field  
Excellence and quality  
Watchwords in the frame*

*Push-outs look for guidance  
Deserving poor the same  
Mediated of conflicts  
Achievements humbly gained.*

Trevor L. Clement, is a Research Assistant at the Trotter Institute.

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# Commentary

Tanya Hart

**Tanya Hart:** *You were educated in the public schools from age five on, and your mother was a long-time teacher in the Denver Public Schools until her retirement. Tell us about your experiences with public schools and their continuing value.*

**Philip Hart:** My memories are generally positive about the public education I received. My parents were very much oriented to doing well in school, and they were always involved in the schooling of my two brothers and me as we grew up. My older brother Jud was a good student, an excellent track athlete and a gifted artist. I was a very good student and a multi-sport athlete. My younger brother Chris was an excellent student, but not as athletic as Jud or me. Despite our interest in athletics, my parents made it clear that good grades came first. In addition, my family was very well known in Denver and my mother taught in the Denver Public Schools, so she knew all the teachers. My brothers and me had little margin for error in our behavior in school else my mother would find out from her friends.

**Tanya Hart:** *What about some of the people you went to school with over the years. Where are they now and did public schooling help or hurt them?*

**Philip Hart:** Growing up in Denver in the 1950s and 1960s was fairly liberal compared to other cities in terms of race relations. I grew up and went to school with kids from all racial and ethnic groups. When I look at my sixth grade class picture from Columbine Elementary School, I see people whose lives range from being diplomats, university professors, judges, FBI informants, petty criminals, business people, teachers, medical doctors, the whole range of life pursuits. I think for the most part attending public schools was good for the majority of these people. I think the added value is that this class portrait is like viewing a mosaic, kids from every racial and ethnic group represented. The teachers were mostly white. But I have positive thoughts about most of them...even Mr. Hinderlinder, my fifth grade teacher and a former Marine. If you were bad in his class, he had all sorts of Marine punishments to put you through at the back of the classroom. That is until, Bobby Hamm's dad, a postal worker and former professional boxer, heard about Mr. Hinderlinder's punishment and encouraged him to cease and desist - which he did.

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**Tanya Hart:** *You graduated from East Denver High School which was then and is still now considered one of the best public high schools in the nation.*

**Philip Hart:** That was a good experience as well. My experience in public schools has made me an advocate of public education. Plus I saw how my mother prepared her lesson plans with such care every day. My friends from East High School are doing things with their lives ranging from being ambassadors, professional football coaches, running cities and states, delivering babies, teaching school, running businesses, to being incarcerated or dead. I was a good student and a good athlete in high school. I learned the value of studying hard and playing hard on the field or the court – and the discipline you acquire from both activities. East High School was a very well endowed public school. We lived on the north side of City Park, and the rich kids lived on the south side of the park and we all met at East High every day and received a great public education. I just wish every youngster could receive the public education I did.

**Tanya Hart:** *You then went on to the University of Colorado in Boulder and then to Michigan State University, where we met.*

**Philip Hart:** I actually attended Colorado College in Colorado Springs my freshman year, the only time I went to a private school. I transferred to Colorado University my sophomore year. I played sports and graduated in four years with both experiences furthering my education and view of the world. You and I recently returned from my Colorado University Black Alumni reunion at this year's Homecoming in Boulder, Colorado. Some of these people I had not seen in 25-30 years. I'm about 6'3" tall, but when I tell people I was the little guy on our sports teams in college they don't believe me until they see me with my boys...guys who are 6'7" to 7', and a little bigger around the waist now. But my motto has become, 'A Waist is A Terrible Thing to Mind.'

Of course we met at MSU. I won't bore our readers with the way we met on a trip from East Lansing to New York City. But it would make for a funny movie! You were an undergraduate student and I was a graduate student. Football was king at MSU then; what with Bubba Smith, Jimmy Raye, George Webster, and other guys. Earvin 'Magic' Johnson was just a little kid growing up in Lansing who used to come and watch me and my boys play pick-up basketball in the summer at Jenison Fieldhouse. MSU is similar to CU in that it is a self-contained campus and a big-time college sports program. The education at both places was great, and I had excellent professors. I graduated with

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honors from CU. I became involved as an activist at MSU.

I helped organize the College of Urban Affairs. I helped bring Dr. Clifton Wharton on board as the first black president of a major white university. I worked for the Lansing Urban League while in graduate school. With their Labor Education and Advancement Program (LEAP) I helped prepare minority men and women for the building trades, many of whom have worked as journeymen now for over a quarter century helping to construct new buildings on the MSU campus, in Lansing, and throughout Michigan. I also ran the Urban League's consumer health education and training program in Lansing, which was a national program. My prior education prepared me well for all these demanding roles during my early to mid-twenties.

**Tanya Hart:** *We then relocated to Boston where in the early-to-mid 1970s you ran the alternative schools in Roxbury. Why did these schools form? What did they achieve?*

**Philip Hart:** That was a very interesting experience and a very interesting time. I was hired to be Executive Director of the Federation of Boston Community Schools in 1972. The Federation consisted of three schools, New School for Children, Roxbury Community School, and Highland Park Free School. These schools formed because black parents got fed up with the Boston Public Schools. Jonathan Kozol was among those who helped organize New School for Children. Harvard University professor Sara Lawrence Lightfoot's brother Chuck was the principal of the Highland Park Free School. I was twenty-eight and running an independent school system with nearly 200 employees, close to 1,000 students in K-8, in a city where racial tensions around public education were very high. When I started the job in September 1972, I had to raise \$500,000 by January 1973, or else the schools might have closed. Talk about pressure! I hired a very capable fund-raiser, David Smith, and we indeed raised the money we needed by December 1972. David went on to become an economic advisor on Ted Kennedy's staff for a number of years as well as the Economic Development Director for the City of New York. David's children attended Highland Park Free School. The schools were parent-controlled institutions so I reported to a Board of Directors made up of parents from all three schools. The schools used the open classroom model and were based upon African principles where the basics were emphasized with a good dose of self-esteem training as well. The schools did not believe in the value of standardized testing. But the funders demanded we administer these tests so they could see if they were getting value for their investment. We had funding support from

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local and national foundations, as well as from the Federal government with programs such as the hot lunch program. Our hot lunch program not only fed the students, faculty and staff, but also needy community members. Despite the parents' lack of trust in standardized testing, our students always tested well above the national norm, and considerably above students in the Boston Public Schools. The Ford Foundation documented this in their 1973 report on alternative schooling throughout the nation, "Matters of Choice." I still have a copy of this report because I am very proud of what we were able to accomplish with minimal resources, but with a lot of love and attention devoted to the students along with a strong ethic of parent participation

Unfortunately, these schools as initially conceived do not exist anymore. The new "alternative schools" are places to which students considered unfit to attend public schools are banished and more often than not forgotten. But what the original concept of the alternative schools stood for does exist. The value of an active role of parents in the education of their children. The importance of self-esteem in education. The binding of the school and community. A healthy respect for the student and parent. The important role of a respected and well-prepared teacher in the educational process. The value of strong and caring administrators who can listen to the concerns expressed by parents. These are all things I grew up with in my experience with public education. These are things we can achieve in our public schools throughout the nation if we truly care about the value of providing a quality education for all of our children.

**Tanya Hart:** Thank you.

*This interview of Dr. Philip Hart was conducted by his wife, Tanya Hart, an award-winning journalist. Tanya Hart is a graduate of the Michigan State University College of Communications Arts and Sciences. The university honored her as an Outstanding Alumnus in 1982. She also has a Master of Education degree from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education.*



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