9
Improving the Schooling Experiences of African American Students

What school leaders and teachers can do

Gail L. Thompson

Many years ago, the congregation of an African Methodist Episcopal Church in southern California realized they had a big problem: At the end of the school term, none of the male high school seniors had enough credits to graduate (Thompson, 2002b). After this revelation, the congregation's and the pastor's sense of outrage was so great that the church developed a weekend tutorial program to assist struggling students. The general consensus was "If the schools can't meet our sons' academic needs, then we must do so ourselves."

Although this church's response was innovative and probably rare, its dilemma was not unusual: African American student underachievement is a national problem that has perplexed educators and researchers for decades. In recent years, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act's emphasis on closing the achievement gap (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) and the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark Brown versus Board of Education legislation mandating school desegregation have added a new sense of urgency to closing this gap. However, according to Yale child psychiatrist, Dr. James P. Comer "...much of the public, as well as too many educators do not understand the conditions that support or serve as obstacles to learning" (2004, p. 14). This is all the more true when it comes to obstacles to learning for African American students, a constant theme in my own research and that of others.

Even though too many educators are unaware of ways in which they can improve African American student achievement, there is a substantial amount of research on this issue, and many African American students and parents (Thompson, 2002b; Thompson, 2003c) have strong opinions about what is needed to provide African Americans with optimal learning opportunities in school. In the remainder of this chapter, I describe some of this research based on my earlier work at underperforming-high-minority schools. I begin with a brief summary of research on the role of school leaders in improving African American student achievement and follow with an explanation of "Seven Things that African American Students Need from Their Teachers." Based on a review of research and my own work, the seven points emphasize

what African American students need for optimal learning. I conclude the chapter by emphasizing the importance of professional development and providing recommendations for policy and practice.

9.1. The Blind can't Lead the Blind: School Leadership that Makes a Positive Difference for African American Students

"Leadership sets the tone in organizations" is a message that I emphasize in my research. Other scholars have also stressed that in the absence of effective leadership, true school reform—which includes closing the achievement gap—is impossible (Comer, 2004; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Reitzug & Patterson, 1998; Tirozzi, 2001). As Leighton (1996) put it, "'Strong leadership' appears in virtually every list of attributes of successful schools" (p. 1). Whereas each individual K-12 teacher can improve student achievement within his or her *classroom*, in order for *school-wide* reform to occur, school leaders must be effective and proactive.

Although the media and some researchers constantly disseminate negative information about urban, high-poverty, and predominantly Black and Latino schools, a growing body of research, and even some news articles have revealed that numerous high-poverty-high-minority schools, including some predominantly Black schools, have improved student achievement. In fact, some have even become high-performing schools (Comer, 2004; Denbo, 2002). A recurring theme about these exemplary schools is that their styles may differ, but leaders engage in similar practices. In the next section, I summarize several of these practices.

9.2. How Effective School Leaders Improve Student Achievement

A main theme in the literature about school leaders' role in improving achievement is that effective leaders are able to create a learning community that is built on respect for teachers, staff, students, and parents. Forming partnerships with the broader school community and soliciting input from individuals within and those outside of the school setting are an important component of school reform (Leighton, 1996). This not only includes welcoming input from other administrators, staff, teachers, and students, but parents as well. The relationships among adults and students in low-performing schools are often dysfunctional and impede learning, and historically the voices of students, Black and Latino parents, and teachers of color have been ignored (Comer, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Thompson, 2003a, b, c, 2004b). However, in order for optimal achievement to occur, effective leadership requires the ability to establish positive relationships that are built on a foundation of mutual respect for all of the school's constituents (Comer, 2004; Denbo, 2002).

In addition to being based on inclusiveness, the learning communities created by effective leaders are permeated by high expectations (Carter, 2000; Comer, 2004; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2002; Denbo, 2002; Simon Jr & Izumi, 2003; Thompson, 2002b; 2003c; 2004b; Yau, 2002). This climate of high expectations, which begins with explicitly stated measurable goals (Carter, 2000; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2002), leads to a school-wide "cultural transformation" where a rigorous curriculum results in higher achievement (Denbo, 2002), and where educators strongly believe that all students can succeed academically (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2002).

In his review and critique of research on high-achieving elementary schools with large percentages of low-income African Americans, Yau (2002) stated that in order for reform to occur, among other changes, school leaders must improve the school culture, provide support for teachers to be successful, increase parent involvement, and focus on the needs of students. This focus on student needs should lead to an increase in instructional and learning time, the use of test data to improve instruction, and efforts to boost students' self-esteem, and morale. Again, high expectations for the entire school community surfaced as a hallmark of high-achieving schools.

One of the best models of the essential components of a comprehensive school plan to improve African American student achievement was developed by Comer and members of the Yale Child Study team more than 30 years ago. Since then, the School Development Plan (SDP) that they piloted at two low-performing-high-poverty schools in New Haven, Connecticut, has been used by more than a thousand schools. The SDP is based on a holistic child-development approach to learning, a "no-fault" (not indulging in the "blame game" that is so common) perspective about school reform, an emphasis on positive relationships among adults and students, and a culture of high expectations that emphasizes focusing on students' strengths, instead of their weaknesses (Comer, 2004).

Another characteristic of effective leaders is that they use test results wisely (Carter, 2000; Comer, 2004; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2002; Denbo, 2002; Simon Jr & Izumi, 2003; Yau, 2002). However, although the wise use of test data can be beneficial in school reform, for too long many school leaders have used test data unwisely, particularly to bolster the widespread belief that African American students are cognitively inferior to Whites and Asians (Gould, 1981; Thompson, 2004b). As Comer (2004) stated, "But human behavior or performance, and its meaning, are too complex to be captured by numbers alone" (p. 19). Effective school leaders realize this and use data prudently.

In sum, in order to be effective, school leaders must begin with the right mind-set about students, parents, teachers, and the leader's own role in improving student achievement (Comer, 2004; Simon Jr & Izumi, 2003). The "no-fault" mind-set that Comer (2004) and others have described as essential to school reform, positive relationships, inclusiveness, providing support for teachers, the creation of a community of learners that is built on high expectations, and the wise use of test data to improve the curriculum and instruction are all among

the key ingredients that school leaders must include in the recipe for reform that results in improving African American student achievement.

9.3. Seven Things that African American Students Need from their Teachers

In order for school-wide reform to occur, outstanding leaders are crucial, but what occurs in each individual classroom is largely up to the teacher. Teacher preparation programs have historically failed to adequately prepare teachers to work successfully with students from diverse backgrounds (Carter, 2000; Delpit, 1995; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2001; Thompson, 2004b; U.S. Department of Education, 2000), and many teachers, especially those in high-poverty and urban schools, leave the profession during the first five years of their teaching careers (CNN, 2003; Thompson, 2004b; U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Nevertheless, just as researchers have identified the characteristics of leaders of high-performing-high-poverty-high-minority schools, there is also a large body of research describing the characteristics of effective teachers of African Americans, and research focusing on how teachers can improve African American student achievement (Aronson, 2004; Boykin, 2002; Collins, 1992; Comer, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Denbo & Moore, 2002; Drew, 1996; Foster, 1998; Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001; Kunjufu, 1985; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Thompson, 2002b; 2003c; 2004b; and many others). In the remainder of this section, I will synthesize some of this research by describing "Seven Things That African American Students Need from Their Teachers."

1. African American Students Need Teachers Who Have The "Mrs. Tessem Mind-set."

One of the clearest messages in the literature about Black students is that the relationships they have with their teachers can have either a positive or a negative effect on their academic achievement (Collins, 1992; Comer, 2004; Delpit, 1995; Foster & Peele, 1999; Gay, 2000; Gunn Morris & Morris, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Thompson, 2002b; 2004b; Wimberly, 2002). African American students equate good teaching with certain strategies and practices. In addition to making the curriculum interesting and comprehensible, however, "More than anything…successful teachers of African American students must possess a certain mind-set. Instead of expecting deficits, teachers must look for the innate talents and gifts that all African American students arrive at school with…" (Thompson, 2002b, p. 165). Furthermore, the students want relationships with their teachers that are "…built on trust, mutual respect, and a sincere desire to provide African American students with the best caliber of instruction that teachers can offer" (p. 165).

One of the main characteristics that Ladson-Billings (1994) identified in the eight exemplary teachers of African American students that she studied was their ability to form positive relationships with their students that extended beyond

the classroom. These teachers treated students humanely, developed a "connectedness" with them, and encouraged students to build positive relationships with each other through collaborative learning and a sense of responsibility for each other. In short, they were able to create a psychologically safe, comfortable, and supportive learning community.

In my own work, I contrasted Mrs. Tessem, my sixth grade teacher, with my previous elementary teachers in order to illustrate the differences between an effective teacher of African American students and ineffective ones. The main difference between Mrs. Tessem and the others was her skill in developing positive relationships with her students—poor Black children from one of the city's worse communities. Her ability to develop these relationships began with her mind-set about her job and her students. This mind-set consisted of eight core beliefs: (1) African American students are capable of academic success; (2) It was her job to equip students with strong academic skills; (3) Having high expectations was in her students' best interest; (4) The curriculum must be culturally relevant; (5) It is necessary to identify students' strengths and build on those strengths; (6) Life skills should be incorporated into the curriculum through current events and class discussions; (7) Effective teachers teach the "whole child"; and (8) It was imperative that she develop a "college-going mind-set" in her students (Thompson, 2004b).

Like Marva Collins (1992) and some of the educators that Comer (2004) and Ladson-Billings (1994) described, Mrs. Tessem is a prototype that teachers who truly desire to increase their efficacy with Black students can emulate. She is also an example of what can happen when a teacher is able to develop positive relationships with African American students. As I said in *Through Ebony Eyes. . .*:

> Any decent teacher can become successful with well-behaved and high-achieving students. Only the phenomenal teachers who possess the Mrs. Tessem mind-set can succeed with underachievers, students from challenging backgrounds, and those who are perceived as discipline problems. Becoming a phenomenal teacher is not easy, but it is an option that is available to all teachers (2004c, p. 131).

2. African American Students Need Teachers Who Equip Them With the Academic Skills That are Prerequisites for Academic Success.

Many years ago, several television news programs featured stories about George Dawson, who learned to read at a third grade level about five years before his death. Shockingly, because of limited schooling as a result of racism and poverty during his childhood, Dawson didn't learn to read until he was 98 years old. In *Life is So Good*, Dawson and educator Richard Glaubman (2001) chronicled his remarkable journey to become literate. Although on the surface, Dawson's heartwarming story appears to be unusual, a deeper look at the realities of the U.S. K-12 school system suggests that his story is not so unusual. Despite the fact that most African American children aren't prevented from attending school due to economic circumstances or racism, many are passed through the school system year after year, with such weak academic skills that it's possible for them

to actually graduate from high school and still be functionally illiterate. In fact, it is well known that far too many students, particularly Blacks and Latinos, are passed through the school system with weak reading, writing, and math skills (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003; Thompson, 2004b; Thompson & Louque, 2005). Functional illiteracy has been correlated with prison incarceration rates, school dropout rates, and poverty during adulthood (Thompson, 2004b). Weak math skills can become one of the greatest barriers to college admission and future economic success (Drew, 1996), and having poor writing skills can not only prevent students from earning good grades in their K-postsecondary education (Delpit, 1995; Thompson, 2004b; Thompson & Louque, 2005), but it can also have a negative impact on their future success in the workforce (National Commission on Writing, 2005). Therefore, one of the most obvious ways that teachers can improve African American students' academic achievement is to ensure that they have the skills that are prerequisites for academic success: good reading, writing, and math skills (Cooper, 2003; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2002; Thompson, 2004b).

In *Through Ebony Eyes*. . .(Thompson, 2004b), I explained that one of the easiest ways for teachers to teach basic skills is through the Theory of Small Wins. "The basic premise is that if individuals are permitted to learn new information in small steps, there is a greater likelihood they will comprehend it, because their stress over learning new material is greatly reduced" (pp. 52–53).

Ladson-Billings (1994) referred to this as "scaffolding," which enables students "to build upon their own experiences, knowledge, and skills to move into more difficult knowledge and skills" (p. 124).

It is also important for teachers who desire to increase their efficacy with African American students to realize that they can't afford to be sidetracked by the reading wars (Delpit, 1995; Thompson, 2004b). Instead, they must be willing to combine the best instructional practices available to ensure that students can decode words fluently and comprehend what they read (Delpit, 1995; Thompson, 2004b). These teachers should be knowledgeable about "The 8 Pieces of the Reading Puzzle" (phonological awareness, phonics, spelling, fluency, language, knowledge, cognitive strategies, and reading a lot) that McEwan (2002) identified.

Moreover, for too long math has been one of the most difficult subjects for many African American students to master (Drew, 1996; Thompson, 2002b; 2003c; 2004b), and in some cases, math phobia has become a problem that is passed on generationally (Thompson, 2003c). In order to help African Americans learn math content, teachers must make the curriculum interesting and comprehensible, and they must be patient and use diverse teaching strategies (Drew, 1996; Thompson, 2002b; 2003c). Teachers who over-rely on the textbook and who primarily use lecturing or a mechanical style of teaching (Comer, 2004) are likely to be ineffective at teaching most students the math content. Cooperative learning groups and the belief that African American students can excel at math are crucial factors in improving their math achievement (Drew, 1996, Thompson, 2002c; 2003c).

Additionally, because so many African American students have been short-changed academically by underqualified teachers, it is imperative that their teachers possess good skills themselves and remain current with research pertaining to their fields. Ongoing professional development is one way that school leaders can ensure that teachers remain current and receive the support they need (Thompson, 2004b).

3. African American Students Need Teachers Who Teach Them How to Use Their Education for Personal Empowerment.

In "Achieving in Post-Civil Rights America..." Perry (2003) wrote poignantly about the historical value of literacy among African Americans and how before and after the slavery era, Blacks equated literacy with freedom. According to Perry, "For African Americans from slavery to the modern Civil Rights movement...you pursued learning because this is how you asserted yourself as a free person, how you claimed your humanity" (p. 11). Furthermore, racial uplift, liberation, and preparation for leadership were related to one's motives for becoming literate (Perry, 2003). Unfortunately, today, many African American youths are unaware of this rich legacy and many see school as a waste of time when other factors are competing for their attention (Comer, 2004). At the same time, many teachers exacerbate the situation by using ineffective methods (Comer, 2004; Thompson, 2004b).

Consequently, another obvious way that teachers can improve African American student achievement is to instill in them the message that "A good education can lead to personal empowerment."

Making this message an ongoing component of lesson plans is possibly the easiest way to convey it. Lessons about the short- and long-term payoffs of a good education can be beneficial. These lessons should include details about the benefits of earning good grades, such as good grades are necessary for promotion to the next grade level, grades should indicate that the student has prerequisite skills and knowledge to advance to the next level of his/her education, and that high school graduation is a major benefit. Students also need to know that a high school diploma is not only necessary for most basic, low-paying jobs, but it's a requirement for admission to four-year-postsecondary institutions. In addition to storytelling and mini lessons, teachers can use guest speakers, literature, and research projects to teach students about the benefits of a good education (Thompson, 2004b).

4. African American Students Need Teachers Who Make the Curriculum Culturally Relevant.

Like many researchers, I'm convinced that one of the primary reasons why countless African American students underachieve in school is because the curriculum and traditional instructional practices are not only disconnected from their lives, history, and culture, but the curriculum also tends to portray a very one-sided portrait of African Americans (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Thompson, 2003c; 2004b). According to the standard fodder that most students get in K-12 schools, "African Americans were slaves. Lincoln

freed them, and then Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks sparked the Civil Rights movement." In general, that is basically what all students, not just African Americans, learn about Black history through the traditional K-12 curriculum (Thompson, 2004b). For this reason, it is little wonder that so many African American students become disillusioned with the school curriculum.

The theory of cultural discontinuity posits that the school culture is very different from traditional Black culture. In fact, the gulf between the school culture and traditional Black culture has historically been so wide that Hale (1986) maintained that for African American children, going to school for the first time is similar to visiting a foreign land. As a result, for more than a decade, researchers who challenge the exclusion and Euro-centrism that dominate the standard school curriculum have urged educators to make the curriculum culturally relevant (Corwin, 2001; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Thompson, 2002b, 2003c, 2004b).

Delpit (1995), Ladson-Billings (1994), and Gay (2000) are just a few of the many scholars who have not only stressed the importance of a culturally relevant curriculum but have helped to define it as well. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), when culturally relevant teaching occurs, student achievement improves, students become socio-politically conscious, and they become culturally competent in their home culture. Using appropriate multicultural materials (Gay, 2000, Thompson, 2004b), connecting school and home experiences, emphasizing the legitimacy and value of each culture, and using diverse teaching strategies are some of the ways that teachers can make the curriculum culturally relevant (Gay, 2000).

5. African American Students Need Teachers Who Have Good Classroom Management Skills.

Researchers have repeatedly found that many teachers are more likely to perceive Black students as discipline problems at school than other students (CNN, 2003; Ferguson, 2001; Hale, 2001; Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Thompson, 2002b; 2003c; 2004b) Consequently, African Americans are disproportionately represented among the students who are suspended and expelled from school (Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Thompson, 2002b; 2003c; 2004b). Researchers have also found that many teachers have weak classroom management skills (Delpit, 1995; Thompson, 2004b), and this may actually lead to student misbehavior. Classroom management is obviously linked to student achievement because if students are out of control, a teacher is unable to teach (Thompson, 2004b). Therefore, one way that teachers can increase the likelihood that African American students will be able to achieve their maximum potential in class is to ensure that teachers have good classroom management skills (Thompson, 2004b). In other words, as Ladson-Billings (1994) stressed, "The focus of the classroom must be instructional. . .the primary enterprise must be to teach" (p. 124).

Many African American students and parents equate seven practices with effective classroom management. Some of these practices have also been cited by other researchers, including Cooper (2003), Delpit (1995), Ferguson (200l),

Hale (2001), and Ladson-Billings (1994). African American students and parents believe that an effective classroom management system must be built (1) on fairness: Teachers must not punish African American students for behavior that they ignore in other students; (2) Teachers must have a positive attitude about African American students. "Teachers who expect African American students to be problematic will find that their beliefs may become a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Thompson, 2004b, p. 99); (3) Teachers must also be explicit and consistent. Wise teachers explain their class rules to both students and parents at the beginning of the school year to prevent misunderstandings; (4) Students also need effective instruction and a good curriculum. (5) Teachers should also focus on teaching and not be preoccupied with discipline. A classroom should not be run like a prison, and students shouldn't be expected to act like criminals. When teachers *look* for trouble, it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ferguson, 2001); (6) Firmness rather than meanness is also needed. Teachers must be authoritative in a way that requires students to treat the teacher and other students respectfully but that is also respectful of students (Cooper, 2003; Delpit, 1995; Thompson, 2004b); and (7) Teachers must be patient with struggling students who may not learn subject matter as quickly as others. Impatience can create discipline problems when struggling students infer that the teacher is unwilling to give them the help they need (Thompson, 2002b; 2003c; 2004b). These simple strategies can enable any teacher to improve student achievement by having an orderly classroom in which learning is the main priority.

6. African American Students Need Teachers Who Develop a College-Going Mind-set in Students.

I once heard an African American Baptist pastor say that people often criticized him about his insistence that his three sons would eventually attend college. When asked, "But what if they don't want to go to college?" or "What if they aren't 'college material'?" the pastor would reply, "All of them are going and all of my children are college material."

This father's strong determination to see his sons attend college is similar to a dream shared by many Black parents and students. The majority of African American high school seniors whom I interviewed wanted to attend college when they graduated, and 92 percent of the African American parents who participated in another study that I conducted wanted their children to attend college. In another study, the U.S. Department of Education (2003) reported that 94 percent of the Black students planned to attend college and 96 percent of the Black parents expected their children to attend college. Wimberly (2002) also found that nearly 90 percent of the African American students planned to attend college. However, this dream of attending college is often thwarted for African American students by school factors within and outside of the classroom (Thompson, 2002b; 2003c; Wimberly, 2002). Therefore, an obvious way that educators can improve student achievement is to not only eradicate these barriers to college attendance but to also instill a college-going mind-set in African American students.

A primary barrier to attending college for African American students comes from school counselors. In many schools, African American students are less likely than others to receive the advisement they need from counselors regarding how to navigate the college admission process, or to be placed in college preparatory and advanced placement courses. For African American students whose parents never attended college, school counselors can be instrumental in helping them attain the goal of college admission (Thompson, 2002b; 2003c).

Another set of barriers are created in the classroom. One major obstacle stems from the sorting and tracking that is prevalent in the public school system (Ferguson, 2001; Hale, 2001; Oakes, 1999; Thompson, 2002b; 2004a). As early as kindergarten and first grade, educators begin to place labels on students and make assumptions about them that have long-term consequences (Hale, 2001; Thompson, 2002b). Consequently, Black students are disproportionately represented among special education students, underrepresented in Gifted and Talented Education Programs (Ford, 1995), and are more likely to be labeled as discipline problems than their peers.

Another barrier that arises in the classroom is that many teachers have low expectations of Black students (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2002; Thompson, 2004a; 2004b; Thompson & Louque, 2005). Low expectations can lead to students' receiving a substandard education that fails to prepare them for college. In the end, Black students who desire to attend college may not have the necessary reading, writing, or math skills that they need (Education Trust-West, 2004). This results in a high percentage of students of color being forced to attend community colleges rather than four-year postsecondary institutions, or students being placed in remedial classes at four-year institutions.

A third barrier that arises in the classroom is that many African American students are inadequately prepared to do well on standardized tests and college admission exams, such as the SAT and ACT (Corwin, 2001). In a study that I conducted at an underperforming high school, I learned that the majority of the participants—nearly 300 White, Latino, and African American students—believed that their teachers had failed to adequately prepare them for the required standardized tests (Thompson, 2007).

Clearly, one way that educators can eradicate these barriers is to develop a college-going mind-set in their students from elementary school onward. This would require teachers to adopt the mind-set that "All students have potential, all students deserve a college education, and it is not my job to decide who goes to college and who doesn't." Developing this college-going mind-set would also require teachers to have high expectations, be willing to give extra help to struggling students, discuss college with them on a regular basis, explain the benefits of college attendance to students, and provide adequate preparation for required standardized tests and college admission exams. Counselors would also have to do their part by providing accurate and consistent advisement to students about college, and by ensuring that students are placed in the proper courses. Finally, the culture of high expectations that is the hallmark of high-performing, high-poverty schools must permeate the entire school through a tone set by

leaders and teachers. When all students—even those who may not plan to attend college—are exposed to a college preparatory curriculum, achievement increases and students are better prepared for success in college (Education Trust-West, 2004). As Carter stated, "…great schools make college the goal" (2000, p. 9).

7. African American Students Need Teachers Who Focus on the "Alterable Variables."

In underperforming schools throughout the nation, particularly predominantly Black, Latino, and low-income schools, there is at least one place on campus where the negative teachers congregate. It may be another teacher's classroom, the teachers' lounge, or some other place. Regardless of its location, the intent of the congregants is the same: They go to this place to complain and to listen to the complaints of their like-minded colleagues. In these "complaint rooms," teachers routinely criticize parents, students, and the community in which the school is located. One way that teachers can increase their own efficacy, and improve student achievement is to avoid these places. Instead, they can choose to focus on the "alterable variables" rather than on the "inalterable" ones.

In *Teach Them All to Read: Catching the Kids Who Fall Through the Cracks*, Elaine K. McEwan (2002), a former school principal and a reading expert, described the ingredients that are necessary to create a school culture that promotes reading achievement for all students. Among the "12 Traits of A Pervasive and Persuasive Reading Culture" that McEwan cited are strong instructional leadership by administrators and teachers; high expectations and accountability for students, teachers, and parents; comprehensive student assessment; the integration and coordination of special services for students with special needs; wise use of instructional time; ongoing staff development; and constant communication and coordination among teachers regarding curriculum and instruction. But McEwan also spoke extensively about the mind-set that educators must have in order to promote a high-achieving-reading culture in schools. This mind-set requires educators to "Focus on the alterable variables," a term McEwan attributed to Benjamin Bloom's work more than two decades ago. Concentrating on the alterable variables requires educators to pay attention to what is within their control rather than focusing on circumstances outside of their control. As a principal, when McEwan convinced her staff to adopt this attitude, student achievement improved and the entire school climate became more positive.

In his review of research on the causes of the achievement gap, Barton (2004) identified fourteen factors that were correlated to achievement. Eight of the factors (birth weight, lead poisoning, poor nutrition, being read to by a parent or caretaker, the amount of time children spent watching television, whether or not children lived in a two-parent home, student mobility, and parent participation in their children's education) were labeled as "Before and Beyond School" factors. Six factors (school safety, technology-assisted instruction, class size, teacher preparation, teacher experience and attendance, and the rigor of the curriculum) were labeled as "In School" factors. Because African American students are disproportionately represented among the children living in poverty in the U.S.

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2001), they are more likely than students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds to experience negative "Before and Beyond School" factors, a fact that may overwhelm many teachers. In spite of this, research has consistently shown that the quality of teaching and the curriculum that students receive, and what happens in the classroom are more important determinants of student achievement than other factors. Therefore, it would behoove educators, particularly teachers, to focus on what is within their power to change. The rigor of the curriculum, the amount of technology-assisted instruction that is available to students, teacher attendance, and how well prepared teachers are to deliver lesson plans are totally within each individual teacher's control. The other factors, class size, school safety, and the hiring of experienced and qualified teachers are factors that school leaders can control. Educators who sincerely want to improve African American student achievement will focus on these alterable variables and not waste time complaining about the factors they can't control, or indulging in the "blame game" (Comer, 2004; Thompson, 2004b; Thompson, Warren, & Carter, 2004). Moreover, educators who want to be proactive in trying to address some of the "Before and Beyond School" factors can at the very least provide parents with information and strategies to assist their children academically at home.

9.4. Conclusion

The literature on African American student achievement is clear in emphasizing that in order for true reform to occur in underperforming schools, systemic change is needed. Strong leaders who are able to improve the entire school culture are crucial, and changing the culture requires an inclusiveness that welcomes the voices and contributions of all members of the school community, especially African American parents and students, two groups who have historically been ignored and marginalized. It also entails the creation of "a culture of achievement" in which high expectations and preparation for college are the norms.

According to Carter (2000) "Improving the quality of instruction is the only way to improve overall student achievement" (p. 9). However, the quality of instruction can only improve and systemic change can only occur when school leaders and teachers receive ongoing, consistent, and thorough professional development (Guild, 2002; Thompson, 2004b). This will require educators to examine and address their own beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that might impede student achievement. Furthermore, the professional development should also familiarize educators with current research and strategies, and provide support to increase their efficacy. Landsman (2004) recommended that educators meet regularly to discuss diverse cultures and related books. I urge educators to follow a "Three-Part, Long-Term Professional Development Plan" that each individual teacher can complete in the privacy of his/her home through reading, journal writing, and the creation and implementation of an action plan to improve African American student achievement (Thompson, 2004b). The bottom line is that school reform can't occur

unless educators continue to grow professionally. Participating in ongoing professional development for school leaders and teachers is one way of ensuring that this growth occurs, as the following story illustrates.

9.5. A Final Story

In June 2005, I had a heartwarming telephone conversation with one of the most positive and enthusiastic school leaders I've ever spoken with. This woman, an African American principal at a predominantly Black Los Angeles elementary school, who referred to herself as "a missionary," made professional development a top priority at her school. "I'm on a mission," she said excitedly. "I've been at job level, but now I'm at mission level. I think we're a good school {but} we're on the verge of becoming a great school."

Most people would be surprised to learn that her school is located in a community that has one of the city's highest crime rates, highest unemployment rates, and highest concentration of children living in foster care. Nevertheless, these inalterable variables don't deter this principal from her dream of making her school a place "...where we truly are educating African American children, where we're doing it right." During the two years that she has served as principal of this particular school, her comprehensive school-improvement plan has included providing teachers with the resources and support they need, and ensuring that they have the correct mind-set about African American students. "The bottom line is my expectation is 'Children first.' I expect teachers to do their best...and I remind them 'Teaching is a service profession and you choose to be of service to children and communities.'" She went on to say, "What I tell teachers is 'To be at my school, you have to be more than a teacher. At times, on the same day, you'll have to be a social worker, a mom, a dad, and a big brother.'" When she meets resistance from teachers who are unwilling to accept this mission, the principal encourages them to find a job elsewhere.

In addition to mentoring teachers, she also makes her own and her teachers' professional development a top priority each year. Although she has served as a principal at various schools for six years and a vice principal for seven years, she is dedicated to continuing her own professional growth by keeping abreast of the most recent literature about African American student achievement. She also seeks to do this for her teachers. Each fall, she motivates them to attend professional development workshops and presentations for which they can earn extra pay, and each summer, she purchases a book for each teacher to read. "I'm going to keep giving {my teachers} what the experts are saying," she remarked.

9.6. Recommendations

I'll conclude this chapter with five recommendations. These recommendations can help school leaders, teachers, and policy makers improve the schooling experiences of African Americans and other students in underperforming schools.

First, the blind can't lead the blind. Like the aforementioned exemplary school leader, improving student achievement requires school leaders to set the appropriate tone and practice what they preach through their own ongoing professional development. The result should be the creation of a learning community that rests on a foundation of high expectations, inclusiveness of historically marginalized groups, and ongoing teacher support at the school site through professional development. When this becomes the norm rather than the exception in America's K-12 public schools, the achievement gap, undoubtedly, will be eradicated and true school reform will occur.

Second, in order for the systemic reform that is necessary to occur, school leaders and teachers also need the support of policy makers, social service organizations, and parents. In many inner cities throughout the nation, parents are overwhelmed by problems, such as unemployment, high crime rates, and other poverty-related issues. Until policy makers make a conscious effort to address the problems plaguing inner cities, many parents will be incapable of devoting more time to their children's education. Moreover, in communities in which jobs are scarce, it is often difficult for adolescents and their parents to truly believe that education can improve their economic circumstances. Therefore, policy makers must make the revitalization of inner cities a national priority. In addition to becoming more equitable in the distribution of small business loans and bringing jobs to inner cities, this would include improving the substandard conditions that are common in many inner-city schools. Adequate funding is necessary for ongoing professional development for school leaders and teachers, as well as funding to improve the infrastructures of dilapidated schools, funding for textbooks, science labs, classroom libraries, and a professional development library for teachers and parents. This library should contain educational journals and books that describe practical reading, writing, math, and classroom management strategies that parents and teachers can check out.

Third, another area that policy makers should continue to focus on relates to the quality of educators in schools. The widespread practice of staffing inner-city schools with anyone who is available must cease. Policy makers must not only give "lip service" to the notion of ensuring that every child has a qualified teacher; they must also enforce this policy and expand it to ensure that every school also has a qualified principal.

Fourth, policy makers must also re-examine the No Child Left Behind Act to determine if the high-stakes testing movement will truly produce the types of students that this nation needs. Like many other scholars, I believe that multiple types of assessments should be used to evaluate students. The ongoing national controversy over the NCLB Act should encourage policy makers to review the pros and cons of high-stakes testing and determine if it will actually result in true school reform, especially for underperforming schools.

Fifth, as Comer's work (2004) in inner-city schools has shown, when social service agencies become more connected with schools, there is a greater likelihood that basic human needs that can serve as impediments to academic achievement will be met. Because of the myriad problems in inner cities, each

school should have trained therapists on site who can work with troubled children and their families. Parenting classes and workshops on specific ways that parents can assist their children academically should be available. A holistic child development approach like Comer's School Development Plan, could alleviate many problems that contribute to academic failure. Once again, this would require adequate funding for social service organizations in poor communities. More organizations are needed and additional personnel are needed.

The bottom line is that there is a lot more that can be done at the national, state, and local levels to improve underperforming schools. These schools are more likely to be attended by three of the most marginalized groups in the U.S. –poor children, Latinos, and African Americans. Actions speak louder than words. As long as our nation's leaders continue to merely *talk* about school reform and improving social conditions, America will remain a nation of "haves" and "have nots," and a nation that proclaims equality and justice for all while practicing a pernicious caste system in which some groups are treated like stepchildren and others are treated like royalty. Poor achievement will remain prevalent in predominantly Black, predominantly Latino, and predominantly low-income schools as long as the underlying issues that contribute to inequality of educational opportunity fail to become a national priority.

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