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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether there was a pool of qualified, interested African-American high school students available for recruitment into teacher education programs, noting barriers to pursuing a teaching career. In the 2002-03 school year, 127 African-American honor students from six Indiana high schools completed surveys about their interest in teaching as a career. Results indicated that of the career options presented, only 7 percent of respondents identified teaching as their first choice. However, 32 percent of the students indicated they would consider a career teaching in regular education classrooms, and 22 percent of the students reported they would consider a career teaching special education. Lack of career awareness, lack of positive information regarding teaching, and lack of encouragement were obstacles to pursuing teaching as a career. Although limited, some qualified African-American students (particularly females) were interested in teaching as a career and were available to be recruited into teacher education programs. Students identified five changes in the schools that would make teaching an attractive career choice: discipline and respect for teachers, better benefits and salaries, improved facilities and resources, students who come to school wanting to learn, and greater challenge in the curriculum. (Contains 71 references.) (SM)

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# AFRICAN-AMERICAN HONOR STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER EDUCATION AS A CAREER CHOICE

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## **African-American Honor Students' Perceptions of Teacher Education as a Career Choice**

### **Abstract**

It is widely recognized that there is a need for more African-American role models to teach both African-Americans and non-African-Americans. Why are the brightest of the African-American high school students not seeking a career in teaching? This investigation surveyed African-American honor students with regard teaching as a career choice. It expands an earlier study that surveyed male, African-American honor students. The findings suggest that some qualified African-American students are interested in teaching as a career and are available to be recruited into teacher education programs. The article presents recommendations for increasing African-American enrollments in pre-service education program.

# **African-American Honor Students' Perceptions of Teacher Education as a Career Choice**

## **Statement of the Problem**

Why are the brightest of the young, African-American high school graduates not seeking a career in teaching? It is widely recognized that there are pedagogical and societal benefits to having more African-American role models for both African-Americans and other ethnic and racial groups. This investigation was based on the premise that awareness of issues restricting African-American male and female participation could significantly contribute to larger effort to create a culturally informed and culturally diverse teaching population.

The study was designed to answer the questions: Is there a pool of qualified, interested African-American high school students available to be recruited into teacher education programs? If so, what are the barriers that restrict them from pursuing a teaching career? To seek answers to this question, this investigation surveyed the attitudes of African-American honor graduates with regard to teaching as a career choice. The study provides an extension of an earlier study that surveyed African-American male high school graduates (Mack, Smith, Akea, and Norasing, 2002).

## **The Issue of Recruiting Minority Teachers**

School districts and teacher educators have continued to express their concern about the critical under representation of minority groups in the profession of teaching (Banks, 1991, 1994; Case, Shive, Ingebretson, & Spiege, 1988; Golinick & Chinn, 1986; Gordon, 1993; Greer & Husk, 1989; Holmes, 1986; Smith 1988, Spelman, 1988, Mack & Jackson, 1998). In 1993 minority students comprised 30% of the student population (Hodgkinson, 1993). That figure is now approximately 38%, and six states (California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Texas) and the District of Columbia have majority minority populations (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). In Great City School Districts, minority students comprise 69% of the student body, English language learners account for 21%, and 72.5% of the Great City School

Districts cite an immediate need for minority teachers (Recruiting New Teachers, 2003). Yet, only 12% of teachers in the United States are members of minority groups (Duarte, 2000).

Without sufficient exposure to minority teachers throughout their education, both minority and majority students tend to characterize the teaching profession, and the academic enterprise in general, as better suited for white Americans (Mack and Jackson, 1995). As the proportion of white American teachers grows, role modeling that might encourage minority students to pursue careers in education decreases, possibly further decreasing the already inadequate ratio of minority teachers to minority pupils in the schools. While the United States' population is growing in its racial/ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, the teaching force is not.

The racial mismatch between students and teachers is quite striking. African-Americans represent about 17 percent of students in public schools, but constitute only about eight percent of the teaching staff. Hispanics/Latinos are among 14 percent of public school students, but only about four percent of the teaching force. About five percent of public school students are Asian/Pacific Islanders, while less than one percent of public school teachers are categorized as such. American Indian and Alaska Natives comprise one percent of the student body and less than one percent of the teaching force (AACTE, 1999).

The downturn in minority educators has been so dramatic that some authors have referred to minority teachers and administrators as an "endangered species" (Cole, 1986; Irvine, 1988; Michigan Education Association, 1992; Tewel & Trubowitz, 1987). The implications are that most teachers teaching today's children are white, and tomorrow's teaching force will be even more so. The racial mismatch between students and teachers has reached the point that many students of color can go through 13 years of public education (K-12) without meeting a single teacher from their same racial group. In school districts in which minority students outnumber white students, two-thirds (66 percent) of the teachers are white. Of these districts, African-American teachers still make up only 21 percent of the teaching force; Hispanic teachers 10 percent; and Asian/Pacific Islander teachers, three percent. Even in the high minority populated central cities of the United States, minority teachers still account for only 27 percent of the teaching force (Recruiting New Teachers, 2000).

Most white students in the United States complete their K-12 education without ever having a teacher of color. In school districts in which 90 percent or more of the students are white, the faculty is almost exclusively (99 percent) white. Even in districts with ten to less than 50 percent minority enrollment, 91 percent of the teachers are white (Alliance for Equity in Higher Education, 2000; Recruiting New Teachers, 2000).

In 1950 nearly half of the African-American professionals in the United States were teachers (Foster, 1989). However, with the increase in the number of African-American college graduates in a variety of fields, teaching is no longer perceived as a way out of the lower class. As a result, both teachers and parents may be discouraging talented African-American high school students from identifying teaching as a career option.

Even as potential role models, minority teachers may not be encouraging students to become teachers. In a 1988 survey of American teachers (Harris & Associates, 1988), African-American and Hispanic teachers were reported to be much more likely, than white teachers, to see themselves as leaving the teaching force. Of 300 teachers surveyed, 41% said they would likely leave teaching within five years as opposed to 25% of the white teachers. Although African-American teachers generally reported positive views of the factors associated with their teaching careers, they were not very likely to encourage their own children to enter the profession (Page, 1991; Mack & Jackson, 1996). Sullivan and Dziuban (1987) discovered that teachers frequently discouraged academically talented students from considering a career in teaching. Because of the frustrations associated with their own employment and status, they were accomplishing this so effectively that virtually none of their students, interviewed in the study, seriously considered public education as a career choice.

Page and Page (1984) reported that negative school environments discouraged high school seniors from considering teaching as a career option. The major finding of their study was that the variable which best determines if students will consider teaching is simply whether or not other individuals have discussed the career choice with them. The majority of students had never had anyone talk to them about selecting the teaching profession as their occupational choice.

A closer review of the teaching force in the United States reveals that the median age of the nation's teachers is over 40, and that minority teachers with full-time teaching experience are concentrated in the upper age bracket. Among minority teachers, nearly half (46.3%) have ten-to-twenty years of experience, while almost a third (28%) have taught for more than twenty years. Thus, a significant number of minority teachers are anticipated to retire by the year 2005 (AACTE, 1999).

Within the context of these enrollment figures is the ever-growing disparity between the diversity of the student body and the teaching force. Current population estimates project that "minority" students will become the majority in United States classrooms by 2050. The proportion of the United States minority school-aged population (ages 5-to-17) is expected to increase to 44 percent by 2020 and to 54 percent by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

#### **Survey Group and Survey Instrument**

The survey group included 127 African-American honor students from six high schools in the Gary (Indiana) School District during the 2002-2003 academic year. They were asked to complete a survey instrument regarding their interest in teaching as a career choice, consisting of 12 questions. Nine of the questions elicited a "yes" or "no" response and five of the questions asked for additional narrative information from the respondents. From the sample, 82 surveys were returned with a return rate of 65%. Representation of the students by gender included 24 4) males and 58 females

Of the five questions asking for additional information, the two asked the respondent to explain their answers using 100-200 words; one asked them to identify their primary career choice; one asked them to identify their career choice; one asked them to list five characteristics of their "best" teacher, and one asked them to indicate what they would change to make teaching an attractive career choice. Students were instructed to carefully read each item and to mark their response and/or write in the space provided. They were informed that the survey was not a test, and the only "right" answer was the one that was a true reflection of their opinion.

Each transcript was carefully read, with close attention given to those themes that consistently emanated from the data and provided insight into the students' schooling

experiences. Similar themes were combined together. Pertinent quotes supporting a theme were identified and presented.

### Findings

#### Career Options:

Of the career options presented, only 7% of the students identified teaching as their first choice. In contrast, 32% of the group (females 34% and males 26%) indicated that they would consider a career in teaching regular education students. When asked with reference to teaching students in special education, 22% of the students (26% females and 13% males) revealed that they would consider the area as a career choice. **Table 1** lists the primary career choices of this group by percentage, and presents teaching as the least likely career option identified by these highly qualified students.

**Table 1: Career Choice by Percentage**

<b>FIELD</b>	<b>PERCENTAGE</b>
<b><i>Medical/Health Related</i></b>	<b>26.2</b>
<b><i>Business</i></b>	<b>15.5</b>
<b><i>Engineering</i></b>	<b>14.3</b>
<b><i>Computers</i></b>	<b>10.7</b>
<b><i>Other</i></b>	<b>9.5</b>
<b><i>Sciences</i></b>	<b>8.3</b>
<b><i>Law</i></b>	<b>8.3</b>
<b><i>Teaching</i></b>	<b>7.1</b>



Responses to the subsequent questions requiring a “yes” or “no” response are found in

**Table 2.**

**Table 2: Question “Yes” Response for Total Group and Gender**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Total Group</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
Would you choose a career in teaching if the pay was better?	48%	50%	41%
Would you choose a career in teaching for job security?	22%	26%	22%
Would you choose a career in teaching if we could limit the disciplinary problems?	41%	56%	32%
Does either of your parents teach?	12%	16%	4%
Did your parent(s) influence your career choice?	31%	36%	17%
Did your teachers influence your career choice?	33%	38%	22%
Did your high school counselor influence your career choice?	9%	11%	4%

When asked to list five characteristics of their “best” teacher, these students offered a range of characteristics. Similar themes were sorted to provide common characteristics which are reported in Table 3 by frequency.

**Table 3: Characteristics of a “Best” Teacher**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>frequency</b>
Encouraging/interested in students	63
Knowledgeable/challenging	39
Friendly/kind	33
Considerate/fair/respectful	28
Patient	21
Willing to assist students	21
Enthusiastic/enjoys job	18
Hardworking/dedicated	17
Professional demeanor	14
Good listener	10
Honest/trustworthy	10
Other	10
Able to manage classroom	8

When asked to identify what should be changed to make teaching an attractive career choice, these students offered a range of recommendations. Similar themes were sorted to provide common characteristics, which are reported in Table 4 by frequency.

**Table 4: Changes to Make Teaching an Attractive Career Choice**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>frequency</b>
<b>Discipline and respect for teachers</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Better benefits and salary</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Improved facilities and resources</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Students who come to school wanting to learn</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Greater challenge to curriculum</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>More effective and supportive administration</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Greater community and parent involvement</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Smaller size of classes</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Increase number of vacations</b>	<b>3</b>

**Would You Consider a Career in Teaching Students in Regular Education?**

The reasons noted for considering a career in teaching students in regular education seemed to focus on altruism and commitment to community. Following are typical comments that were made:

- *I would choose a teaching job because I see today's youth having problems. I would like to help because when I am an adult, I would have seen and known what they are going through. I would also like the feeling of being part of the reason someone has a successful life.*
- *Yes...Teachers have one of the most important and respected occupations in this world.*
- *...It would be a great opportunity to give back to the community that helped me throughout my life to come back and educate their kids...*
- *Yes, I would consider a career in regular education. I think learning is so important in life.*
- *I would live to make a difference in students' lives. The world we live in today needs better teachers. If I had a career in teaching, I would be the best teacher I can be.*
- *I love working with people and their problems...I believe students are the future.*
- *Yes, I love to be around children and like to help people.*
- *Yes, I would choose to teach to give back to the community.*

The reasons noted for not considering a career in teaching students in regular education were varied, however the responses centered around disciplinary problems in school, low

salaries, job satisfaction and negative personal experiences with schooling. Following are typical, but particularly telling comments made:

- *I would not consider a career in teaching regular education students because I do not have the temperament to deal with unruly children. I do not agree with the meager pay, either.*
- *I couldn't deal with the stuff that we put these teacher through.*
- *I like children, but I don't have the patience for bad behavior.*
- *I wouldn't consider a career in teaching students in regular education because of the disciplinary problems and the unfairness in the condition of the schools...African-American schools are inferior to white schools. I believe if they can have the best, we can also.*
- *I really don't like teaching. The thought of being around kids for even a half-day is not my idea of a successful career.*
- *...Teachers do not make a big enough salary for all the time an effort it takes to become a good teacher.*
- *I used to want to be a teacher but somewhere along the line, I changed my mind.*
- *No, I would not consider a career in teaching...First, the salary for teachers is not where it should be. Teachers should be one of the highest paid professions because they are teaching future leaders and careers. Next, teachers in our school system are not working in a suitable environment. Teachers need clean buildings, classes, and fully supplied books and materials to teach. Another issue is the disciplinary problems between some students who are against teachers. Some students try to misbehave to disrupt the learning activities. If these things were different, I might consider a career in teaching.*

## Summary and Conclusions

Are we correct in believing that African-American honor students are not interested in teaching as a career? The findings in this study, although limited, have suggested that some qualified African-American students are interested in teaching a career and are available to be recruited into teacher education programs. Our results suggest that lack of career awareness, lack of positive information regarding the profession, and lack of encouragement are obstacles to students pursuing that interest. Somehow these intervening variables have become effective gatekeepers in restricting African-American student enrollments in schools of education. African-American female students continue to be the most viable population for recruitment when compared to African-American male students. The findings of this study are consistent with a number of previous studies that have addressed the factors influencing choice of teaching as a career (Mack et al., 2002; Evans, 1993; Jackson & Salisbury, 1996; Mack & Jackson, 1998.)

For many African-American students, making money and gaining occupational stability are important factors in career selection (Wilder, 1999), but more often than not, a career decision is likely to involve interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic considerations (Johnston, McKeown, & McEwen, 1999). While individual interests and aptitudes undoubtedly play an important role, the perceived attractiveness of the work of teaching is also influential. Unfortunately, African-American students have negative perceptions of teaching as a career. These perceptions, however, can be positively influenced.

Smith (1997) documents the strong positive correlation between caring teachers and mentors and academic achievement on the part of students. Students in this study cited the constructive associations they had with teachers and the difference it made in their lives. Maybe we have overlooked the value of caring mentors, at the pre-collegiate level, in the recruitment of underrepresented populations into the field of teaching.

The views of these African-American students about classroom and school experiences are important for us to consider. An emotionally nurturing and safe climate is one of the correlates of effective schooling. The experiences of these students clearly tell that the climate is not good in our schools. Perceived negative experiences of classroom teachers and disruptive

classrooms turn off students, especially high ability students. These students identified five changes in the schools that would make teaching an attractive career choice.

1. Discipline and respect for teachers.
2. Better benefits and salaries.
3. Improved facilities and resources
4. Students who come to school wanting to learn.
5. Greater challenge in the curriculum that is offered.

The findings of this study have implications for teacher recruitment campaigns that have often focused attention on those who have already decided to consider a career in teaching or who have embarked on a teacher-training course. In contrast, we suggest that efforts need to focus more attention on those factors that the "undecided" view as important in influencing their choice of a career by in teaching. If African-American high school students are to be recruited into teaching, efforts should be designed that address concerns identified in this study.

Perhaps the most valuable tool of any recruitment plan might be the benefits that are available for a potential participant. It is no different in the profession of teaching. To attract bright, energetic candidates, incentives must be considered, especially in the realistic world in which highly qualified African-American students can literally choose among a variety of career opportunities. The most frequent response from these students was salary. Other items of importance included safe school environments, students wanting to learn, community involvement, quality facilities and resources, career advancement opportunities, and assistance with the cost of their college education.

It is significant to note that 32% students, in the present study indicated that they would consider a career teaching in regular education classrooms. While, 22% of the students noted that they would consider a career teaching special education students.. The efforts of schools of education and all concerned about the "endangered" status of African-American and other minority teachers must not only be focused on the collegiate level. This study suggests that innovative programs should be developed and instituted at the pre-collegiate level. Concerted efforts must be made to influence their decision-making, and to present the positive opportunities

available in a teaching career. Mentors must be assigned to these potential candidates to provide positive models of individuals who are attracted by a desire to work with children and to perform a service to society.

While the professional literature is full of tangible quantitative data about the imbalance in numbers of African-Americans compared to other racial groups, few studies have addressed the issue of African-Americans in teaching, especially those who have not considered a career in teaching. This study sought to extend what is currently known about the factors influencing African-American high school students' choice of teaching as a career. From the data, we offer the following strategies for increasing African-American enrollment in pre-service teacher education programs:

1. Establish Future Teacher Associations at middle and high school levels.
2. Establish scholarship programs that offer work-study and summer employment opportunities in high schools
3. Encourage successful African-American educators to visit every school for the purpose of proselytizing the virtues of being a teacher.
4. Encourage successful African-American teachers and administrators to serve as mentors for high school and college students interested in a teaching career.
5. Organize publicity activities that communicate the employment rewards offered by teaching.
6. Establish "magnet" middle-and-high schools that have a teaching career as a theme.  
Grow your own!
7. Make African-American community and faith-based organizations aware of the critical shortages of African-American educators and the career opportunities for African-American candidates in the field of teaching.

If our nation's schools are to reflect the model of a "just society", minorities, especially African-American males and females, will have to be empowered with an equitable representation of teachers and school administrators, and a guarantee that teacher education is inclusive rather than exclusive. As stated by E.L. Boyer (1990), we must recognize that inequality is rooted in the

society at large, and it falls on higher education to have an unequivocal commitment to social justice.

Teacher education schools and departments must greatly expand their efforts to increase significantly the number and proportion of minority graduates (Mack & Smith, 1996). Since a majority of African-American students are attending predominantly white institutions, it becomes even more critical for those institutions to adopt policies that are innovative in recruiting, supporting, and graduating a greater number of minorities. Changing demographics suggest that the nation can ill afford to waste valuable resources by ignoring minority students; and the nation's future will depend on minority students' success, thus influencing the social, economic, and political stature of the United States (Midgette & Stephens, 1990).

The goal of attracting talented African-American candidates to enter teaching is highly supported. The barrage of state teacher competency testing indicates that there is a concern for having highly qualified persons in our nation's classrooms. Both concern for quality and a need for quantity have presented a problem in the educational arena. In seeking the best qualified candidates, we have we have not given attention to what motivates people to teach nor addressed the factors that discourage people from desiring to teach (professional environment and extrinsic rewards). If we aspire to attract qualified African-American high school students, we must respond to what they view as being important for a life span of work. While African-American students in this study indicated the presence of intrinsic values of teaching, extrinsic values for the most part are unsatisfying for the overwhelming majority.

As with qualitative research, this study presents findings that can be expressed and described verbally. Characteristically, qualitative studies attempt to describe events or discern patterns of behavior exhibited by an individual or group. Qualitative studies focus on the particular documents or persons under investigation; it is not the researchers' intent to generalize the findings to some larger group (Frankel and Wallen, 2002). Instead these findings raise interesting issues many of which parallel and support the findings of other investigators focusing on this topic. Accordingly, the findings from this study warrant further research and policy makers wishing to increase the number of African-American e teachers should consider the conclusions.

It has no consequence if we don't use the findings and the similar finding in other studies to change the negative school experiences of our youth, to actively work to attract at an early age our best and brightest, and to guide the most capable into pursuing a career in teaching.



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