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TOWARD A RADICAL PRAXIS FOR OVER-AGE, UNDER-CREDITED AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

Iesha Jackson[1]
Arizona State University

Abstract

The "over-age, under-credited" (OA/UC) student population is defined as high school students who are at least two years behind their peers in terms of age and credits earned toward a high school diploma. To date, few studies have examined the schooling of OA/UC students. The purpose of this study is to use the insights of six African American OA/UC high school students to define strategies for improving educational outcomes at their school. The specific research question explored is: What recommendations, rooted in participants' race, gender, and age, do they offer for improving the educational experiences of OA/UC students? Data analysis for this case study incorporates critical race theory, adult learning theory, and culturally relevant pedagogy as a comprehensive theoretical and analytic framework. The findings serve to provide a foundation for realizing a radical praxis that leads to substantive changes in the education of OA/UC African American high school students.

Keywords: African American students, over-age under-credited, student voice

Efforts to increase the number of African American students graduating from high school include expanding alternative education opportunities, specifically establishing more transfer high schools expressly designed to meet the needs of older, academically under-performing students. Due in part to its established history of transfer high schools, New York City has been looked at as a model for this approach by some stakeholders interested in innovative ways to reduce dropout rates (Burrow, Smith, & EGS Research & Consulting, 2007). In New York City, transfer high schools serve a student population referred to as "over-age, under-credited" (OA/UC). The OA/UC population is defined as high school students who are at least two years behind their peers in terms of age and credits earned toward a high school diploma (Cahill, Lynch & Hamilton, 2006). Nearly half (48%) of all entering ninth grade students become OA/UC during their high school careers, and "there are 14% more African Americans and Hispanics in the OA/UC student population than in the general population of New York City high schools" (Advocates for Children of New York, 2007, p. 2).

Despite efforts to provide a substantially different educational experience for students in transfer schools, the long established grammar of schooling (Tyack & Tobin, 1994) remains unaltered and unchallenged in many transfer high schools; the institutionalized framework of public education that perpetuates racial inequalities and a dominant culture of schooling are

[1] **Iesha Jackson** is a Postdoctoral Research Scholar at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona and can be reached at Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University, PO Box 876103, Tempe AZ 85287-6103 or via email: iesha.jackson@asu.edu.

inescapable in alternative settings. When educational reform efforts lead to incremental changes in schooling experiences, improvements for African American students are often slow in coming if they occur at all (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Thus, African American students attending transfer high schools are likely to experience similar barriers to their academic achievement as they would in other school settings.

Complicating efforts to improve educational outcomes for African American students is the underlying assumption that policymakers, practitioners, and scholars who advocate specific reform strategies can know and do what is best for students without engaging them in conversations about reform. A growing body of literature calls for consulting students and incorporating their voices in improvement efforts (Friend & Caruthers, 2015; Mitra, 2008; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). A reason for this is the acknowledgement that students possess unique insights about their schools that teachers and administrators cannot fully anticipate in the absence of listening to students (Cook-Sather, 2010).

While policy initiatives aimed at increasing the academic achievement of African American students are advancing, the specific needs of OA/UC students are rarely considered, and the voices of these students are silenced. To date, few empirical studies or education reform efforts have examined the experiences of students who are considered OA/UC and choose to persist in high school. When race, gender, and age are ignored, reform efforts that focus solely on the experiences of African American students in the aggregate will likely be limited in their ability to help OA/UC students who face unaccounted for obstacles on their path to a diploma.

The purpose of this study is to add the experiences of six OA/UC African American high school students to school reform conversations and use their insights to define strategies for improving educational outcomes at their school. The specific research question explored in the findings is: What recommendations, rooted in participants' race, gender, and age, do they offer for improving the educational experiences of OA/UC students?

Conceptual Framework

This study combines tenets of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), adult learning theory (Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998), and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2009) as a framework for understanding the schooling experiences of the participants and evaluating the curricula, instruction, and culture of the school. Taken together, these three frameworks become a united analytic tool to explore avenues for better educating over-age, under-credited African American students by utilizing their raced, gendered and aged subjectivities to positively influence their educational experiences.

The integrated framework I constructed for this study accounts for diversity within African American student populations in terms of learning styles, experiential knowledge, cultural assets, and schooling experiences while directly linking students' educational experiences to inequitable structures of schooling that are rooted in institutionalized racism. Figure 1 represents key elements from critical race theory (CRT), culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), and adult learning theory (ALT) applied in this study and how they intersect with one another as an integrated framework.

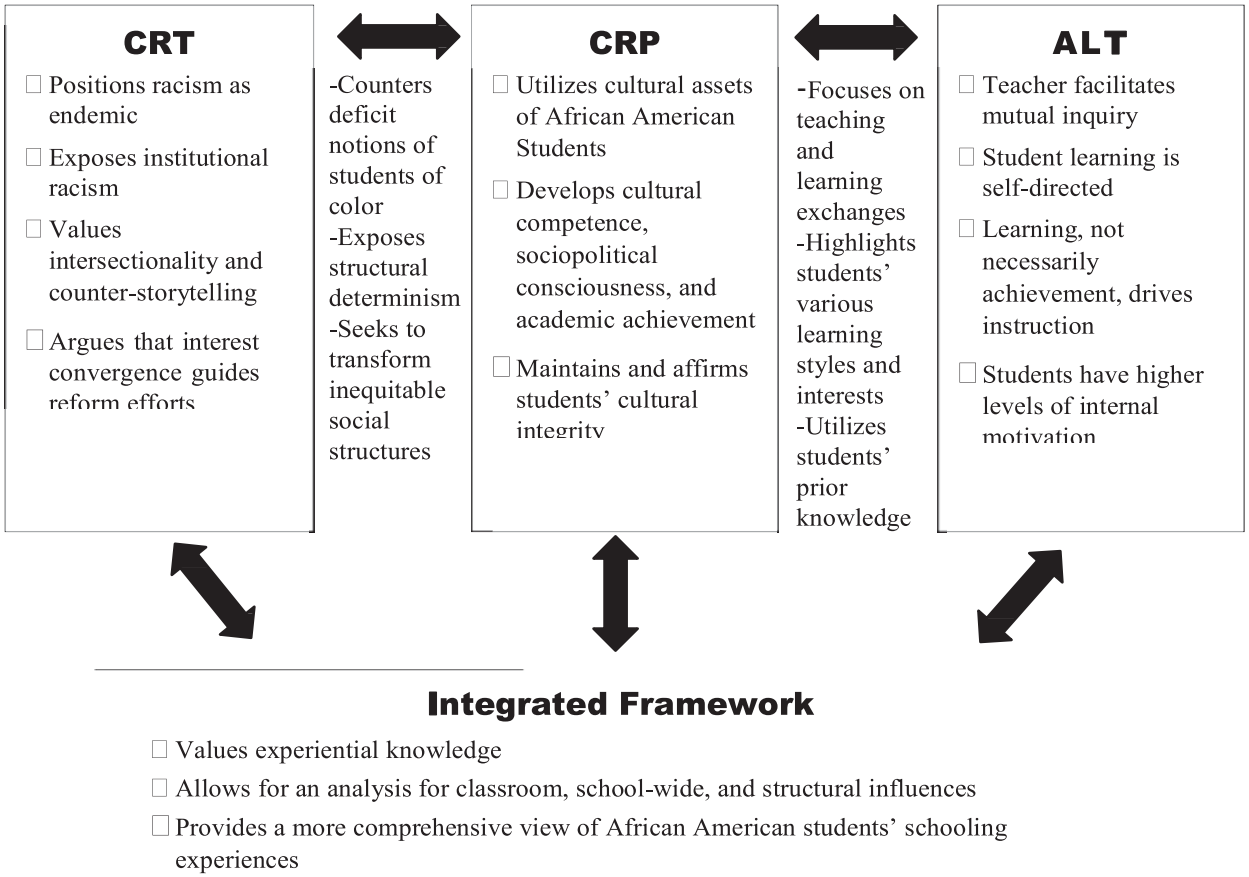

Figure 1. Key Elements from CRT, CRP, and ALT. This figure demonstrates areas of overlap and convergence between CRT, CRP, and ALT.

Methods

The findings below are part of a larger study conducted over an eight-month period from November 2013 to June 2014 at a transfer high school in New York City. The high school, referred to here as SPHS, is one of 49 transfer schools in the city's District 79, which is specifically dedicated to alternative schools and programs (New York City Department of Education, 2012). The reported African American student population was approximately 40% in 2013-2014 with young women accounting for slightly more than 50% of the total student body (New York State Department of Education, 2015).

Participants

For this study, I selected six participants. They were chosen as the result of a recruitment meeting facilitated by flyers posted on campus and word of mouth from the school principal. Eleven students attended the meeting; three young women and eight young men. Eligible students had to meet the following criteria:

- Self-identify as U.S. born African American
- 18-21 years old
- Enrolled at SPHS for at least one full academic year at the start of the study
- In their expected last year of school (due to anticipated graduation, age/credit combination, or academic standing)
- Willing to participate and openly discuss their schooling experiences and be shadowed in their classes

All of the young women met the criteria and are included in the study. One young man was under 18 and therefore excluded; another did not agree to participate in the interviews and was excluded. Six young men were invited to the initial focus group meeting, but only three attended. After several attempts to contact the three absent young men, they were later excluded due to perceived unwillingness to participate. Therefore, the six remaining students, three young men (Amir, Shaun, and Wayne) and three young women (Evelyn, Karma, and Monica), became my participants. All students' names are pseudonyms.

Due to Amir and Monica leaving the school before all data were collected, they are not represented in the findings reported below. Table 1 provides additional participant demographic data for the four remaining participants. Age and years completed at SPHS are based on information provided at the beginning of the study.

Table 1
Participant Demographic

Name	Age	Years completed at SPHS	Expected to graduate by the end of the study
Evelyn	20	2	No
Karma	18	2	Yes
Shaun	20	3	Yes
Wayne	19	1	Yes

Data Collection

Data were collected in four distinct phases. Phase 1 consisted of 22 school setting observations recorded in a research journal. This phase began at the start of the study (November, 2013) and continued through the end of data collection (June, 2014). All observations were informal (Gagnon, 2010) in the sense that I did not use a strict observation protocol to guide or limit what I looked for during the observations. Instead, I recorded descriptive notes of spaces within the school and participant interactions in the hallways as well as reflective notes that captured my thoughts and questions. Phase 2, which took place from December through May, included 10 classroom observations (using the same informal approach as described above) and round 1 focus group interviews. Individual interviews, which began in May and concluded in June, were conducted in Phase 3. Phase 4, the last two weeks of data collection, was dedicated to a second focus group interview and opportunities for member checking. All interviews took place at the school site during lunch and lasted between 45 and 65 minutes.

Data Analysis

Coding in and around the conceptual framework began with tentative coding families based on themes from CRT, CRP, and ALT. The coding families (Appendix A) each comprised a coding context and a priori codes based on my integrated framework. For example, the coding family "participant perspectives" includes the context "the influence of race, gender, age" and a priori codes such as "deficit notions, life-centered learning, intersectionality, and supporting cultural competence." Consistent with Bogdan and Biklen's (2003) assertion that coding families often overlap, I initially placed several pieces of data in multiple families because they represented multiple contexts. For example, in a particular exchange between Monica and the school's technology coordinator, the observation note was coded as both relationship and setting/context because there was a clear teaching and learning exchange that also included reinforcing school policies.

Next, I engaged in open-coding to generate second-level codes (Charmaz, 2006) based on the nature of the specified coding families. For example, I combined every instance coded "teaching and learning exchange" first by participant. The combined data was read to better understand how individual participants experienced certain exchanges. Codes such as "student initiated interaction with teacher," "class participation," and "teacher initiated interaction with student" helped me to fracture the coding families into component parts (Charmaz, 2006).

In order to generate themes, this fractured data was first analyzed across participants by gender. I collapsed this data into categories such as "curricula," "instruction," and "school culture" for the young men and women separately. The data was finally read and synthesized across all participants to make meaning and write findings.

Discussion of Findings

Young Women's Recommendations for Curricular and Extracurricular Activities

Both Karma and Evelyn wanted opportunities for young women to take part in rigorous, experiential curricula that would enhance their interests in science:

> I think extra curriculum like, science—more science, hands-on stuff—cause I'm a geek so it's like more or less I like science everything. (Evelyn, Focus group 2, June 16, 2014)

> I feel like for science…maybe you could get more lab equipment, maybe people would actually experience what science is before leaving high school. I never…what is it? dissected a frog? But I feel like this is something I wanted to do for the simple fact that I want to do autopsies when I get older. (Karma, Focus group 2, June 16, 2014)

Their interests in science with a lack of opportunity to fully participate in the subject matter as desired (hands-on, bigger projects, with more lab equipment) calls attention to a structural deficit that can hinder OA/UC African American girls and women from accessing STEM careers in the future. CRT calls attention to the lack of such curricular and extracurricular opportunities as an additional structural deficit that places students at transfer schools like SPHS as a perpetual educational disadvantage; they enroll in a transfer high school seeking an alternative to their previous experiences but are overwhelmingly met with similar structures that plagued their

previous schooling. In this sense, transfer schools "allow the current system to replicate itself" (Tate, 1997, p. 222) with institutional oppressions intact under the guise of change.

As I discuss in previous work (Jackson, 2015), there are very few opportunities within the curricula for students to learn about issues directly related to African American students. Given this and following students' comments about not having enough opportunities to study African American history, I asked participants if they would recommend more programs specifically relating to African American students and history. Evelyn was most vocal, speaking against such programs:

> Programs [related to African American history] I don't think [the school needs them], but we do need a little bit more on Black history. But I say [not programs] because—like we don't wanna just sink all of our thoughts into Black history without adding the knowledge of everything else that we're supposta learn. We all come from different cultures. (Evelyn, Focus group 2, June 16, 2014)

The distinction Evelyn made between programs and a need for "a little bit more on Black history" is significant in the context of SPHS for two reasons. First, the school has what they call Heritage Day, during which, as Karma explained:

> We actually have different classes. We have dance class, we have movies, you know. We have crocheting and stuff…it's a good way to actually celebrate and it's a good way to actually motivate the children to actually prepare yourself for where you come from. (Karma, Focus group 1, December 10, 2013)

A common misconception about CRP is that it means celebrating ethnic holidays and using popular culture including movies and songs to teach course content (Irvine, 2010). However, this approach often fails to meet the real educational needs of African American students, particularly those who are OA/UC. Karma and Evelyn admit that they enjoy Heritage Day, especially the food, but Evelyn's quote emphasizes that such programs are not what she needs to enhance her learning at SPHS. She explains that she would not recommend more of these types of experiences that focus on Black history (used interchangeably with African American history). Consistent with intersection of ALT and CRP, Evelyn articulates a desire for an education that attends to her career aspirations as well as her racial heritage.

Second, without using the language of CRP, Evelyn's unfavorable reaction to the thought of "sink[ing] all of our thoughts into Black history without adding the knowledge of everything else" speaks to the importance of cultural competence. Cultural competence is the ability to participate meaningfully in one's own culture while simultaneously learning to effectively navigate other cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Any program that would center Black history without including a connection to content such as economics, sociology, politics, or legal studies would likely leave students inept at navigating dominant cultures of our society and/or participating in transforming them.

"It's 'You Shouldn't Do This, You Shouldn't Do That' but it's Not Enforced": Young Men's Reflections on Discipline Policies and Practices

Several studies have reported and examined an overrepresentation of African American students, particularly males, in exclusionary school discipline practices such as suspension and expulsion (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2011). These works expose the dangers of zero tolerance policies in schools where teachers and staff harbor racial stereotypes that position African American students as violent, aggressive, or otherwise threatening. Much of this research, however, reports on discipline practices in racially mixed or predominantly White schools, and few studies include student perceptions of school discipline policies. The young men in this study present a counter-story (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) to the narrative of schools as hyper-policed, surveillance states in which school professionals wait for a chance to punish African American students for any and every violation of school rules. Wayne described a lack of rule enforcement at SPHS:

> It's 'You shouldn't do this; you shouldn't do that' but it's not enforced… you know, there's no serious consequence. But, you know, if you are gonna do it, like if it's not cool, then don't tell them it's okay to do it, you know? That's what I mean. Like, I feel like, it's a lot of threats but no—like a lot of bark but no bite. (Wayne, Individual interview, May 8, 2014)

Instead of providing a portrait of a school in which African American students are criminalized or overly policed at school, Wayne's depiction is one of students who are told how to behave based on the school's standards but are not made to conform through any discipline measures. Shaun echoed this view:

> This school, it doesn't have that many rules. It's just like, non-violence. That's like the only rule…[No cellphones] is not a school rule. That's a board of ed rule—no cellphones in any school, so. We get to have cellphones out. They don't take it so you might as well. So it's not a rule; they let us get away with it. (Shaun, Focus group 2, June 16, 2014)

Based on these comments, I asked if the school needs more discipline in terms of holding students accountable for their behavior. Wayne's responded:

> Yeah…I think more students would be uncomfortable because it's like people, especially this generation hate being told what to do and it's like, even though it's beneficial, you feel like you can't control me. You know? And it—it doesn't end well that way. (Wayne, Individual interview, May 8, 2014)

As young adult learners, Shaun and Wayne realize that a lack of rules and not enforcing rules that do exist makes students feel more comfortable. Arguably, school professionals rely on students' internal motivation to behave appropriately rather than punishing every act that is contrary to defined expectations. Ways of being associated with youth culture in the example of using cellular phones are accepted, and structural barriers to educational opportunities such as suspending students for non-compliance are reduced in this example.

"You Can Actually Like Dig Deep into Their Personal Life": Participant Recommendations for Teachers and Their Teaching

Wayne and Karma were the only participants to offer recommendations for school professionals, particularly teachers and their teaching styles. Their recommendations relate to teacher attitudes towards the African American students they teach and the delivery of course content. Culturally relevant caring requires school professionals to act in the best interest of students (Parsons, 2005) while creating classroom environments that are conducive to learning (Gay, 2002). For OA/UC African Americans, teachers need to understand students' actual best interests from a critical consciousness that avoids deficit notions or attempts to infantilize older students. Wayne reflected on how this is lacking at SPHS:

> I would honestly say that our young men are coddled…they kinda give us stuff, you know? They kinda write our papers for us and suggest—you know suggest but it's actually telling us what to do. (Wayne, Individual interview, May 8, 2014)

Culturally relevant educators push students of color toward high levels of academic success (Howard, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Ware, 2002). However, the practices described by Wayne demonstrate educators' uncertainty about African American male students' ability to perform academically unless they are guided by teachers every step of the way. Underlying Wayne's insight is a desire for students to have more autonomy in their learning, positioning them as young adults who need to understand the practical components of the content yet are able to self-direct their learning experiences (Fogarty & Pete, 2004). Later, Wayne voiced the following recommendation for teachers to modify their instruction:

> I'm not sure. I don't think there's much to be changed about [instruction]. But what I would say is like more passion. Like I—to me if—if the person delivering the information to me is passionate about it, enthusiastic about it, then I'm gonna be interested. It's almost like monkey see, monkey do like if I see you're excited about this, it gets me excited. (Wayne, Individual interview, May 8, 2014)

Wayne's specific suggestion extends common notions of both CRP and ALT to include passionate instruction as paramount. At the same time, student-teacher relationships will still influence how instruction is perceived and received by students. Karma illustrated this point:

> [Teachers] should at least like build connection with the students. When you build a connection with the students, you can actually like dig deep into their personal life where if the student starts lacking motivation, you could at least say, 'Oh hey, such and such and such is going on with your life. You should maybe do something to better it.' You know? (Karma, Focus group 2, June 16, 2014)

Because Karma believes that motivation directly impacts student achievement, she is calling for all teachers to build a connection with all students. Though ALT argues that adult learners have a level of motivation that would allow them to persist, the theory supposes life-centered, student driven curricula and instruction. For adults in educational settings where these elements are absent, students look to their teachers for additional motivational support. A key

recommendation, therefore, is to create a school-wide climate in which constructive relationships are established between every school professionals and every student.

Conclusions and Implications for Radical Praxis

Consistent with student voice literature (Cook-Sather, 2010; Jones & Yonezawa, 2002; Mitra, 2004), Evelyn, Karma, Shaun, and Wayne engaged in a sophisticated critique of their schooling experiences in terms of what was present as well as what was lacking. Students at SPHS face similar barriers to their academic success as they did in traditional high schools mainly due to an institutional structure that does not account for their intersectional realities as young adult African American high school students. At the center of participants' experiences is the importance of creating a supportive school culture for OA/UC African American students. Simply put, the young men and women are calling for an educational experience that is relevant to every aspect of their lives. Based on my analysis of the experiences and stories of Evelyn, Karma, Shaun, and Wayne, I define a supportive school culture for this student population as one that provides culturally relevant and sustaining learning opportunities, requires consistent culturally relevant care from school professionals, and acknowledges older students' need for age-appropriate curricula including life-centered learning and open-ended projects.

For education stakeholders concerned with ensuring that educational outcomes for all students are improved there is a need to engage in radical praxis. I draw from Yamamoto's (1997) notion of the performative dimensions of praxis to define and posit a radical praxis for OA/UC African American students. Radical praxis is action that is engaged, responsive, and transformative for those on the subordinating side of group power. It requires collaboration between those empowered to act and those in need of transformative action. The findings from this study serve to define the "what" of action in terms of the context and subtext of SPHS as well as practical steps for change as articulated by Evelyn, Karma, Shaun, and Wayne. While student voice can be the basis of meaningful school reform efforts, alone it is not sufficient to effect change. Thus, moving toward a radical praxis for OA/UC African American students is a process that merges student voice with intentional and direct action by educators and policymakers in collaboration with youth to improve the educational outcomes for this student population.

A radical praxis to benefit young adult African American students who are being educated in transfer schools will require the creation of new approaches to understanding the schooling experiences of this student population. In devising and implementing a theoretical framework that integrates critical race theory, culturally relevant pedagogy, and adult learning theory, I propound one such approach. The combined framework underscores the need to view the OA/UC African American student population as adult learners with specific learning requisites and styles related to their race, genders, and ages. As applied in this case study, the framework also provided a means to analyze the ways in which the "predicament(s) of intersectional individuals" are structured by larger, institutional inequities evident in their transfer school (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 55).

As long as over-age, under-credited learners are housed in environments that cannot fully support them in achieving academically and gaining skills necessary to successfully pursue post-secondary options including college, there is work to be done. Currently, the extent to which transfer schools like SPHS can improve outcomes for OA/UC students whose race, gender, and age are rarely considered as coterminous factors of their schooling is called into question.

Further research is needed to continue to solicit and implement the voice of this student population in realizing a radical praxis that leads to substantive changes in the education of OA/UC African American high school students.

Appendix A

Coding Families

Coding Families	Coding context	Sample of Potential Codes	Theoretical Relationship
Setting/ Context	SPHS as a research site	Structural determinism	CRT CRP
		Institutionalized racism	CRT
Participant perspectives	The influence of race, gender, or age	Endemic nature of racism	CRT
		Deficit notions	CRT CRP
		Life-centered learning	ALT
		Supporting cultural competence	CRP
		Intersectionality	CRT
		Internal motivation to learn	ALT
Activity	Participant and school faculty recurring behavior inside and outside of classrooms	Teaching and learning exchanges	CRP ALT
		Unique learning styles	CRP ALT
		Promoting academic achievement	CRP ALT
		Developing sociopolitical consciousness	CRP
		Intersectionality	CRT
Event	Salient instances mentioned by participants and/or observed by researcher	Teaching and learning exchanges	CRP ALT
		Seeking to transform inequitable social structures	CRT CRP
		Structural determinism	CRT

Relationship	Participant interactions with and relationships to peers and school faculty	□ Deficit notions	□ CRT CRP
		□ Endemic nature of racism	□ CRT
		□ Intersectionality	□ CRT
		□ Teaching and learning exchanges	□ CRP ALT
		□ Maintaining cultural integrity	□ CRP
		□ Promoting academic achievement	□ CRP

Note. Critical Race Theory is abbreviated CRT; Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is abbreviated CRP; Adult Learning Theory is abbreviated ALT.

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