

# School Factors That Contribute to the Underachievement of Students of Color and What Culturally Competent School Leaders Can Do

**Camille A. Smith**

*California Department of Education*

*Abstract: Both socioeconomic and school factors contribute to the underachievement of poor children and children of color. This article explores factors that contribute to the underachievement of students of color and offers practices that culturally proficient school leaders can use to build a school culture that may positively impact the academic achievement of students of color.*

One of the most urgent issues that the educational community is facing is how to meet the academic needs of a culturally and linguistically diverse student population. Currently, there are many students, primarily African American, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students, who are not being well educated in this country. The inequities that prevent the educational achievement of these children may very well affect the social stability of the United States (Bowman, 1994, p. 1). This

### *School Factors That Contribute*

---

low level of education threatens these students' economic and social integration into mainstream America. A poor education creates a permanent underclass and severely compromises this country's ability to develop and sustain a well-balanced, pluralistic society that enjoys a high standard of living.

Many factors contribute to the underachievement of poor children and children of color (EdSource, 2003; Kober, 2001). While there is a strong correlation between low socioeconomic status, usually defined by the educational level and family income of parents, and poor academic performance, there are also links between various school factors and underachievement (Howard, 2002). Misguided perceptions of students of color are often demonstrated through a lack of respect and acceptance for cultural diversity (Howard, 2002; Revilla & Sweeney, 1997); low expectations for underachieving students (Steele, 1992); poor teacher/student relationships (Sadowski, 1992); and a sense of privilege that prevents needed changes from occurring in schools (Beswick, 1990; Gordon, Piana & Keleher, 2000; Weissglass, 2001). This paper will explore how a lack of respect and acceptance for cultural diversity impacts the achievement of African American students and suggests ways that school leaders can be more successful in addressing the academic needs of students of color in their schools.

#### Defining the Gap

The "achievement gap" refers to differences in performance (e.g., test scores and graduation rates) between children of color and middle class, White children. While poverty is strongly associated with low academic achievement, the gap breaks down along both racial and ethnic lines (Howard, 2002; McRobbie, 1998). The results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveal that the percentage of African American and Hispanic students who score "below basic" across all subjects and grade levels is two to three times lower than that of White and Asian/Pacific Island students. The percentage of African American and Hispanic students who score at or above the "proficient" level tends to be about one fifth of what White and Asian/Pacific Island students score (EdSource, 2003, p. 3). The College Board (1999) reported that regardless of socioeconomic status and parent education, African American, Hispanic, and Native American students perform at lower academic levels than White and Asian students.

In California, the academic landscape for children of color reflects this national dilemma. Schools have not succeeded in educating students of color or poor students. All of California's students are required to take the

California Standards Test (CST) in English /Language Arts and Mathematics. Recent CST English/Language Arts scores (Table 1) and math scores (Table 2) demonstrate the achievement gap in the performance of students for various ethnic groups and economically disadvantaged students (Ed Data Online, 2005). In California, Asian and White students performed about twice as well as students who are African American, Hispanic or economically disadvantaged.

In English/Language Arts, Asian students out performed all groups and scored slightly better than White students. African American, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students performed poorly in reading with over 75% of students from each of these groups scoring below proficiency. African Americans did slightly better than Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students in English/Language Arts.

Table 1  
*California Standards Test (CST) 2004  
English/ Language Arts (ELA) Score Results*

Student groups grades 2-11	Number of students tested	Number of students below Proficient Level	Percentage of students below Proficient Level
African American	389,000	298,000	76%
Asian	395,000	172,000	43%
Hispanic	2,200,000	1,700,000	79%
White	1,600,000	714,000	46%
Economically disadvantaged	2,300,000	1,900,000	79%

Table 2  
*California Standards Test (CST) 2004 Mathematics Score Results*

Student groups grades 2-9	Number of students tested	Number of students below Proficient Level	Percentage of students below Proficient Level
African American	274,000	216,000	78%
Asian	253,000	82,000	32%
Hispanic	1,619,000	1,176,000	72%
White	1,038,000	484,000	46%
Economically disadvantaged	1,800,000	1,321,000	72%

### *School Factors That Contribute*

---

In math, African American, Hispanic and economically disadvantage students again performed poorly with over 70% of students from each of these groups scoring below proficiency. African Americans performed slightly worse than Hispanics and economically disadvantaged students in math. Asian students were the highest scoring group in math, as they were in English/Language Arts. White students performed at the same level in math and English/Language Arts.

In California schools, African American and Hispanic students also have lower graduation rates than White students. High school completion rates for Hispanic students are 64.1%, compared with 94.6% for Asians, 91.8% for Whites, and 83.7% for African Americans (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). The question for educators is not how large the achievement gap is for students of color, but rather how to close that gap.

#### Perceptions about Students of Color

Julian Weissglass (2001), Director of the National Coalition for Equity in Education, contends that many educators, through their race and class biases, have developed low expectations, misconceptions, and false assumptions about students of color and poor students. Such assumptions often result in low expectations that hinder the learning of these students. These lower expectations are a threat to the academic performance of students (Campbell-Jones & Campbell-Jones 2002; Ferguson, 1998; Ogbu, 1994; Roscigno, 1998; Steele, 1992; Warren, 2002). Students begin to accept the lower standards, develop a low self-concept of themselves, and become less confident in their ability to be successful (Ogbu, 1994; Viadero, 2000).

For example, African American children experience school differently from White children. (Sadowski, 2001). African American students battle negative perceptions and social expectations that often hinder their achievement (Sadowski, 2001; Steele, 1992). Ogbu (1994) posited that African American children may not be given access to advanced classes because teachers and administrators may perceive of them as inferior to their White counterparts. This differentiated treatment is revealed through several practices including tracking students into low-level classes, inappropriate assessments, and insensitive or unrepresentative portrayals in textbooks. Ferguson (1998), an economist and researcher at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, found that teachers behave differently toward African American students than they do toward White students. Teachers tend to be less supportive of African American students which may help perpetuate the continuance of low academic performance. He concluded, "stereotypes of black intellectual

inferiority are reinforced by past and present disparities in performance, and this probably causes teachers to underestimate the potential of black children more than that of whites” (p. 312).

When African American students internalize negative concepts, they suffer what has been characterized by psychologist Steele (1999) as *stereotype threat*. Stereotype threat is the hazard of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype (Ferguson, 1998; Sadowski, 2001). Accepting racial stereotypes can affect grades, test scores, and academic identity. Dr. Steele believes that when capable African American college students fail to perform as well as their White counterparts, the explanation often has less to do with preparation or ability than with the threat of stereotypes about African American’s capacity to succeed. These negative connotations about the intellectual capabilities of African American students impede their performance on standardized tests. In both subtle and overt ways, African Americans remain devalued in public schools. National surveys reveal that, from elementary through high school, African Americans are twice as likely as White students to receive corporal punishment (Steele, 1992,) and be disproportionately suspended or expelled from school and labeled mentally retarded (Denbo & Beaulieu, 2002). This devaluation has far-reaching effects. After a while, African American students realize two things: (1) society is preconditioned to see the worst in them, and (2) if they achieve in one classroom, or one level of schooling, that approval has to be won again in the next classroom or at the next level. Skills, appearance, and success can decrease this racial devaluation, but many African American students are left hopeless and deeply exposed to this type of treatment (Steele 1992).

Often students of color have a negative attitude toward school because they feel discriminated against (Ogbu, 1994; Roscigno, 1998; Sadowski, 2001; Viadero, 2000). Professor Asa Hilliard (1992), noted educator and researcher, argued that teacher expectations play an important role in student success or failure by stating:

The literature on teacher expectations is clear; the images that teachers and others hold about children and their potential have a major influence on the use by teachers of their full range of processing skills. ...It is not the learning style of the child that prevents the child from learning; it is the perception by the teacher of the child’s style as a sign of incapacity that causes the teacher to reduce the quality of instruction offered. (p. 373)

Many educators, whether consciously or unconsciously, believe that children of color and poor children cannot achieve at the same academic levels of White children (Cooney, Moore, & Bottoms, 2002; Denbo, 2002;

### *School Factors That Contribute*

---

Ferguson, 1998; Ogbu, 1994). And while low expectations may influence how African American students view their own chances of success in school, Sadowski (2001) found that the effort and academic motivation put forth by African American students was as high or higher than that of White students.

#### A Need to Address Privilege and Entitlement

Gary R. Howard (2002), Founder and President of the REACH (Respecting Ethnic and Cultural Heritage) Center for Multicultural Education in Seattle, as well as others, contend that a lack of awareness, respect, and acceptance of cultural differences on the part of many educators contributes to the current level of student achievement in schools (Revilla & Sweeney, 1997). Howard posited three interrelated and reinforcing dynamics of dominance that support educational inequities, including: (1) *the assumption of rightness*, where educators assume that the academic failure of students lies with the students and their families, and not with the structure of the school; (2) *the luxury of ignorance*, where many White educators remain unaware that the home environment of poor students and racially diverse students are dynamically different from the school environment and therefore these students may not experience as smooth of a transition between home and school as White middle class students do, and; (3) *the legacy of privilege*, where advantages flow to some and not to others based merely on their membership in the dominant culture of this country (Howard, 2002, p. 2-3).

To examine possible contributing factors to the underachievement of students of color schools need to examine the concepts of *White privilege* and *entitlement*. There is a belief among people of the dominant White culture that what they have acquired in life is based on merit and character. This privilege or entitlement creates a lack of awareness that not all Americans have an equal opportunity to exercise their inalienable rights. Many people of "privilege" feel that everyone has the opportunity to be successful. Our curriculum does not teach about the duality that exists among the privileged and people of color (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999). People of the dominant culture may not feel a need to re-evaluate the way other people are treated, especially if it interferes with their entitlement or privileges (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999).

Peggy McIntosh, associate director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women (1990), refers to this entitlement as *White privilege*. In discussing White privilege she states:

In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught

to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance of my group from birth. To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge the colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these subjects taboo. (parg. 16-18)

Unchecked White privilege is one precursor to racism that Weissglass (2001) defines as, “the mistreatment of groups of people based on the color of their skin or other physical characteristics. Racism can be conscious or unconscious. This mistreatment can be carried out by individuals (personal racism) or through society’s institutions (institutional racism)” (p. 1). An example of unconscious personal racism is when teachers expect less from African-American students or when they interact less often with African-American than they do with White middle-class students (Weissglass, 2001). Institutional racism is evident in schools when school procedures and practices disadvantage students of color and poor students; when White middle-class values go unquestioned; and when there is a lack of concern to reexamine policies and behaviors that are detrimental to the learning and well-being of culturally and ethnically diverse students (Beswick, 1990; Denbo, 2002; Gordon, Piana, & Keleher, 2000; Ogbu, 1994; Weissglass, 2001).

Addressing White privilege and institutional racism are among the most difficult challenges that schools face. Educational leaders need the knowledge, skills, desire, and capacity to address such issues as well as the challenges that arise in a culturally diverse environment. Many schools have found that bringing in an outside expert to approach these issues with members of the organization has laid the foundation for honest dialogue and problem solving.

Glenn Singleton, founder of the Pacific Education Group—an organization that advises school districts on how to address issues of educational inequities—believes that districts and schools must examine privilege and entitlement of White America (Sparks, 2002). This work entails the introspection of Whites to examine their own assumptions, beliefs, culture, power, and position in America and the role these factors continue to play in the perpetuation of racism in this country (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999; Sparks, 2002; Weissglass, 2001). In order to address institutional racism, Singleton (2002) suggests that schools need to develop educational equity plans that require everyone in a school community to participate in this equity-centered approach of exploring White privilege in order to create a culturally competent learning environment (Sparks, 2002).



## *School Factors That Contribute*

---

### Culturally Proficient Leadership

Today's schools need leaders who are *culturally proficient* and who can create *culturally proficient schools*. Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell (1999) define cultural proficiency as:

The policies and practices of an organization or the values and behaviors of an individual that enable that agency or person to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment. Cultural proficiency is reflected in the way an organization treats its employees, its clients, and its community. (p. 21)

Culturally competent leaders are individuals who develop and enact a vision of schooling that truly addresses the needs of all students. They work to eradicate distorted notions and stereotypes about students of color, and create specific conditions and practices to address the needs of diverse students. They adapt to diversity by examining, policies, procedures and programs for subtle practices of discrimination. If necessary, they change the way things are done (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999, p. 25). They model the behaviors that they would like their staff to emulate. In doing so they value diversity by creating an inclusive environment and encouraging a variety of perspectives in the decision-making processes at the school. Such leaders learn and teach strategies for effectively managing differences that might arise when interacting in a cross-cultural environment. They address issues of White privilege and entitlement.

Culturally competent leaders institutionalize cultural knowledge by providing training about diversity and incorporating that cultural knowledge into the school organization. They make sure that the school's professional development program includes cultural diversity training that will help staff examine their own assumptions and assist them in understanding how institutionalized knowledge within schools has perpetuated stereotypes about racial and ethnic groups. Such professional training should also provide teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to interact effectively in cross-cultural situations (Banks, Cookson, Gay, Hawley, et.al., 2001; Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999) and to deliver instruction that ensures all students have equal opportunities to experience both academic and social success (Banks, et al., 2001). This type of professional training reduces discipline problems and lowers student dropout rates (Banks, et al., 2001; Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999; Steele, 1992). Positive relationships between and among students, teachers, and the community lead to mutual trust and respect.

To address any lack of awareness, respect or acceptance of students of color, effective school leaders promote relationships and build linkages



between school, parents and the community (Bottoms, 2000). School leaders proactively reach out to parents and the community and create meaningful relationships. Parents are made to believe that they are important partners in the learning process of their children and that neither poverty nor cultural differences are used as excuses for students not being academically successful (Bottoms, 2000; Carter, 2000; Haycock 1999; Johnson, Lein, & Ragland, 1997; Schwartz, 2001). Culturally competent leaders incorporate the viewpoints of parents in the decisions that are made regarding the school and their children. Such leaders engage community leaders who reflect the cultural makeup of the student population to become partners with the school in improving achievement of all students.

Culturally competent leaders focus on academic success and demand high expectations for all students (Leithwood & Riehl, 2002). They assist teachers in identifying and implementing pedagogical strategies that are appropriate and effective for diverse learners. They are visible in classrooms, provide assistance for increased teacher efficacy, give feedback, and uphold norms of continuous improvement. Their role revolves around individual teacher development and the creation and sustainability of conversations around issues of teaching and learning (Lambert, 1998; Riehl, 2000). They work with teachers to scrutinize failed practices and to examine current content to engage and enable diverse student populations to be successful. Such leaders help teachers choose appropriate assessment methods to monitor student performance. They help staff examine school practices, processes, and procedures to ensure that every student receives an equitable education (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 1999, p. 25). Finally, culturally proficient principals mold school cultures that address and support diversity.

In 2001, the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, built on the work of Beswick (1990) to identify several strategies that culturally competent leaders can use to address White privilege and improve cross-cultural relationships, including:

- (1) identify the contextual barriers and supports that have an impact on cross cultural relationships at the school;
- (2) assess the nature of both overt and subtle racial conflicts, tensions and their root causes. Identify key issues that trigger these conflicts;
- (3) make a safe and secure environment a priority for the current year;
- (4) plan how the school will address racial or ethnic conflict and proactively build a positive cross-cultural environment;
- (5) articulate a clear statement in regards to racism and develop a vision

### ***School Factors That Contribute***

---

for diversity, not just a statement, but a set of practices that take place daily in the school;

(6) involve diverse stakeholders in the development of the vision. Seek out diverse perspectives on issues that affect the whole school. Seek advice and support from parents and student advisory boards;

(7) establish and enforce expectations of a culturally responsive environment;

(8) create a system that will allow the school's progress in human relations to be measured. Communicate the successes to the school community;

(9) have key leaders in the community, who reflect the cultural makeup of the students, conduct teacher workshops, assemblies and arbitration of racial incidents;

(10) respond to racial incidents quickly and fairly. Create an environment where people can openly and safely discuss topics and issues related to race and ethnicity;

(11) hire and assign a culturally and ethnically diverse faculty and staff.

California cannot afford to allow another generation of students of color to leave our schools undereducated and unprepared to be successful citizens. In order to change the continuing tide of underachievement, schools need leaders who will take up the challenge of fundamentally changing the institutions into places that support and demand success for all students, especially students of color (Warren, 2002). Such leaders will create schools where White privilege and entitlement are challenged and where whole communities are engaged in helping students succeed to high levels. The challenge for culturally competent leaders is to transform school into cultures where beliefs, practices, and policies nurture and develop all students intellectually and socially.

### References

- Banks, J. A., Cookson, P., Gay, G., Hawley, W. D., Irvine, J. J., Nieto, S., Schofield, J. W., & Stephan, W. G. (2001). *Diversity within unity: Essential principles for teaching and learning in a multicultural society*. Seattle WA: University of Washington Center for Multicultural Education.
- Beswick, R. (1990). *Racism in America's schools*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management Web site: Retrieved February 10, 2002, from [www.idra.org/Newsltr/1996/Feb/Racism.htm](http://www.idra.org/Newsltr/1996/Feb/Racism.htm)
- Bottoms, G. (2001). *Preparing a new breed of school principals: It's time for action*. Atlanta: GA: Southern Regional Education Board.
- Bowman, B. (1994). *Cultural diversity and academic achievement*. Retrieved

- March 11, 2002, from North Central Regional Educational Laboratory Web site: [www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/leadrshp/le0bow.htm](http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/leadrshp/le0bow.htm)
- Carter, S. C. (2000). *No excuses: Lessons from 21 high-performing, high-poverty schools*. Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation.
- Campbell-Jones, B., & Campbell-Jones, F. (2002). Educating African American children: Credibility at a crossroads. *Educational Horizons*, 80(3), 133-139.
- California Department of Education, (n.d.). 2004 California standardized testing and reporting. Retrieved April 22, 2005, from [http://star.cde.ca.gov/Star\\_2004/report\\_panel](http://star.cde.ca.gov/Star_2004/report_panel)
- College Board. (1999). *Reaching the top: A report on the national task force on minority high achievement*. New York. Retrieved February 13, 2002, from [www.collegeboard.com/repository/reachingthe\\_3952.pdf](http://www.collegeboard.com/repository/reachingthe_3952.pdf)
- Cooney, S., Moore, B., & Bottoms, G. (2002). Middle grades report preparing all students for high school. *Principal Magazine*, 81(3).
- Denbo, S. J. (2002). Why can't we close the achievement gap? In S. J. Denbo & L. M. Beaulieu (Eds.), *Improving schools for African American students: A reader for educational leaders* (pp. 13-18). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher.
- Denbo, S. J., & Beaulieu, L. M. (Eds.). (2002). *Improving schools for African American students: A reader for educational leaders*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher.
- Eddataonline. (2002). *Stanford 9 tests reports*. Retrieved January 8, 2003, from <http://www.eddataonline.com/CST2002>
- EdSource. (2003). *A review of research, policies, and issues: Narrowing the achievement gap*. Palo Alto, CA: Author.
- Ferguson, R. F. (1998). Teachers' perceptions and expectations and the Black-White test score gap. In C. Jencks & M. Phillips (Eds.), *The Black-White test score gap* (pp. 273-317). Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Gordon, R., Piana, L. D., & Keleher, T. (2000). *Facing the consequences: An examination of racial discrimination in U.S. Public schools*. Oakland, CA.: Applied Research Center.
- Haycock, K. (1999). *Dispelling the myth: High poverty schools exceeding expectations*. Washington, DC: The Education Trust.
- Hilliard, A. (1992). Behavioral style, culture, and teaching and learning. *Journal of Negro Education*, 61(3), 370-377.
- Howard, G. R. (2002). School improvement for all: Reflections on the achievement gap. *Journal of School Improvement*, 3(1), 9.
- Johnson, J. F., Jr., Lein, L., & Ragland, M. (1997). *Successful Texas schoolwide programs: Research study results*. Austin, TX: University of Texas at Austin; Charles A. Dana Center.
- Kaufman, P., Alt, M. N., & Chapman, C. (2001). *Dropout rates in the United States: 2000* (Statistical Analysis Report NCEES 2002114). Washington DC: Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.
- Kober, N. (2001). *It takes more than testing: Closing the achievement gap*. [Report]. Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy.
- Lambert, L. (1998). *Building leadership capacity in schools*. Alexandria, VA:

### ***School Factors That Contribute***

---

- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Leithwood, K. A., & Riehl, C. J. (2003). *What we know about successful school leadership*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University, Laboratory for Student Success.
- Lindsey, R. B., Robins, K. N., & Terrell, R. D. (1999). *Cultural proficiency: A manual for school leaders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- McIntosh, P. (1990). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Independent School*, 90(49), 31-35. Retrieved April 21, 2005, from [http://www.languageofblood.com/White\\_Privilege.pdf](http://www.languageofblood.com/White_Privilege.pdf)
- McRobbie, J. (1998). *The achievement gap in California: Implications for a statewide accountability system*. San Francisco: WestEd. Retrieved August 23, 2001, from [http://www.wested.org/policy/pubs/full\\_text/achievement.htm](http://www.wested.org/policy/pubs/full_text/achievement.htm)
- Ogbu, J. U. (1994). Racial stratification and education in the United States: Why inequality persists. *Teachers College Record*, 96(2), 264-298.
- Revilla, A. T., & Sweeney, Y. D. L. G. (1997). *Low income does not cause low school achievement: Creating a sense of family and respect in the school environment*. Retrieved March 11, 2002, from <http://www.idra.org/Newsltr/1997/Jun/Anita.htm>
- Riehl, C. J. (2000). The principal's role in creating inclusive schools for diverse students: A review of normative, empirical, and critical literature on the practice of educational administration. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(1), 55-81.
- Roscigno, V. J. (1998). Race and the reproduction of educational disadvantage. *International Journal of Social Research*, 76, 1033-1060.
- Sadowski, M. (2001). Closing the gap one school at a time. *Harvard Education Letter*. Retrieved January 15, 2003, from <http://www.edletter.org/past/issues/2001-mj/gaps.html>
- Schwartz, W. (2001). Closing the achievement gap: Principles for improving the educational success of all students.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.
- Sparks, D. (2002). Conversations about race need to be fearless: An interview with Glenn Singleton. *Journal of Staff Development*, 23(4). Retrieved April 27, 2005, from <http://www.nsd.org/library/publications/jsd/singleton234.cfm>
- Steele, C. M. (1992). Race and the schooling of Black Americans. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 269 (4), 68-78.
- Steele, C. M. (1999). "Stereotype threat" and Black college students. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 284 (2), 44-54.
- Viadero, D. (2000). Lags in minority achievement defy traditional explanations. *Education Week*. Retrieved January 15, 2003, from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=28causes.h19>
- Warren, S. R. (2002). Stories from the classrooms: How expectations and efficacy of diverse teachers affect the academic performance of children in poor urban schools. *Educational Horizons*, 80(3), 109-116.
- Weissglass, J. (2001). Racism and the achievement gap. *Education Week*, 20(43), 49,72.