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PARADOXICAL RELATIONS OF RACE, CULTURE, AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: INTERVIEWS WITH INNER-CITY BLACK MALE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

By

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ABSTRACT

PARADOXICAL RELATIONS OF RACE, CULTURE, AND SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT: INTERVIEWS WITH INNER-CITY BLACK MALE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

By

Kenneth E. Robinson

Black male student under-achievement remains a concern of teachers and administrators who work in predominantly black inner-city school districts. Though educational reformers have assumed that the establishment of all-male academies and the hiring of larger numbers of black teachers--particularly black males as "role models"--will resolve this issue, few have questioned whether racial congruity between black students and black teachers may be contributing to this problem rather than eliminating it.

This study investigated how the positive attitudes that black students have of black teachers may be linked to "less effort" on the students' part to achieve. Taped interviews with 20 black high school students who attended school in or near a large mid-western metropolitan area were conducted in order to explore these students' perceptions of their teachers.

This study showed that these 20 students generally had positive perceptions of their black teachers. They also said they generally feel as if they have "more to prove" to white teachers than to black teachers.

These findings suggest that the positive perceptions that black students have of black instructors can be paradoxical. Feelings that black students have about "having something to prove" to white teachers might actually produce an increased incentive to achieve academically compared to the effects of their positive feelings toward their black teachers. This possibility suggests that further examination is needed of the complexities of the black student-teacher relationship before conclusions can be drawn about its merits and policies formulated concerning the efficacy of cultural congruity as a factor for improving black students' educational achievements.

This work is dedicated with love and respect,

to my mother Mary and my father Kenneth,

and to the memory of

my grandmother, Caldonia Williams.

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The path to the completion of this dissertation has not been easy. At one point I was almost certain that there would not be a completion of the vision that I started out with in September of 1985. It is now August of 1996, eleven years later, and through the assistance and prayers of many generous people and the grace of God, the vision has come to pass. I would now like to recognize and thank several of the individuals who have helped me to arrive at this point.

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INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of This Study

Does the shared racial identity and presumption about trust between black teachers and black students based on cultural congruence contribute to increased effort on the part of black students to achieve academically in school? The research I conducted in this study focused on this question, which was motivated by the assumption that the academic failure that continues to occur among black male students in inner-city schools is, part, a result of racial and cultural differences between black students and white teachers. A great deal of past and present research on this issue places racial and cultural incongruity at the center of discussion and debate. The purpose of this study is to broaden the conversation by showing why this and related explanations for the persistence of black academic failure are too narrow in focus.

My own teaching and coaching experiences over the past four years as a secondary school teacher in a large predominantly black

urban school system--which has included many conversations with experienced urban teachers, coaches, administrators, and former and current students--suggests that actions taken to create greater racial and cultural congruence between students and teachers, as an incentive to students to put forth greater effort to achieve academically, have not worked.

The data suggest that the racial and cultural identities and experiences that black students and black teachers share do create an atmosphere for more trusting teacher-student relationships, make black students feel a greater sense of comfort in the classroom, and help them feel they are more readily accepted and understood by their teachers. It also shows that there is some variation in the level of effort that students put forth in the classroom when the social class of the student is taken into account. However, my evidence does not support the often accepted notion that racial and cultural sameness among teachers and students translates into increased efforts by students to achieve academically.

As I will show, my own experiences as a classroom teacher support my findings. Ultimately, my results point to the need to go beyond an analysis of racial and cultural congruence in order to better understand the complex and paradoxical nature of the black teacher-student relationship. I will argue that shared racial and

cultural identity between black male students and black teachers creates a dynamic that in some cases even "allows for" or "makes permissible" less effort on the part of students to achieve academically.

Rationale for This Study

I became interested in conducting this study because of an increasing concern in recent years over the dearth of black students deciding to enter the field of education and the steadily increasing numbers of children of color entering this nation's system of public schooling. Research by Paine (1990) and Young (1990) points out that as of 1986 only 10% of the total teaching population consisted of persons of color. These data also project a further in this percentage over the next several decades, given the occupational decisions that college-age men and women of color are making (Young, 1990). Consequently, the teaching profession, which has historically included significant numbers of minority persons, is no longer attracting these groups (Berry, 1982). If persons of color are not choosing to enter the field of education, then who is? Young's (1990) research reveals that the majority of college students who are now choosing teaching as a profession are primarily white middle-class females from suburban communities or small towns. What these

patterns suggest is that while the number of students of color attending public schools is steadily increasing, there is also a decline in the number of persons of color choosing to become teachers (Young, 1990). Research data project that the numbers of children of color in public schools will soon exceed its current level of 30 percent (Young, 1990).

This concern over the growing numbers of white teachers instructing non-white students is based on anthropological research in the area of education, which suggests that cultural differences between teachers and students can result in negative classroom experiences for children of color. The fact that increasing numbers of whites continue to enter the teaching profession and will subsequently be in positions to evaluate the emotional and intellectual abilities and potential of black children has raised concerns, particularly in relation to the cultural orientation of white teachers. The research of Young (1990) suggests that a great many of this nation's future teachers will be entering this profession with little if any experience with persons who are culturally and racially different from themselves. Consequently, most will enter the classroom with definite cultural assumptions about who their students are, how they should behave, and what they should be

taught (Young, 1990). Lortie (1975) states the following in his book Schoolteacher:

> Those who teach have normally sixteen continuous years of contact with teachers and professors. In fact, they see teachers at work much more than they do any other occupational group. It is estimated that the average student spends 13,000 hours in direct contact with classroom teachers by the time he/she graduates from high school.

Lortie's (1975) statement suggests that prospective teachers do not enter teacher education programs as blank slates. Rather, they enter these programs embracing certain ideas and points of view as a result of earlier experiences. Understanding this, many universities have attempted to prepare prospective teachers for an increasingly diverse and urban-based public school population (Young, 1990). For example, many teacher education programs are now requiring students to do more course work that deals with racial and cultural pluralism. Many students are also being provided with pre-student teaching and student teaching experiences in racially, culturally, and economically diverse settings.

Colleges of education have also become proactive in recruiting greater numbers of African-American teacher candidates (Young, 1990). The rationale behind these actions is that positive teacher-student relationships will result in more attentive and positively behaving students as well as in increased academic achievement

(Young, 1990). The more attentive students are in the classroom, the more time teachers can devote to the analysis and study of the subject matter rather than attending to misbehaving students and discipline problems. Academic achievement has the greatest chance of occurring in this kind of classroom environment.

Thus, the concern among teacher educators has been to identify and eliminate those factors that could militate against the development of positive teacher-student relationships. Research suggests that one of the ways to maximize academic achievement among students of color in inner-city schools would be to eliminate as much of the racial and cultural incongruity between students and teachers as possible (Young, 1990). Recruiting African-American students at the undergraduate level for the field of teaching has been one of the steps that universities have decided to take to achieve this goal (Young, 1990).

However, efforts by university faculty and public school officials to create a greater degree of racial and cultural congruity between black students and their teachers have failed to achieve this objective. In spite of the fact that greater numbers of black teachers are now instructors in large predominantly black urban school districts, academic failure continues to be a problem, particularly among male students.

For example, the middle school where I now teach has a student body of approximately 900 students--99% of whom are black. The majority of the administrative and instructional staff are also black. In spite of the high degree of cultural and racial congruity between the faculty and student body at this school, the CAT and MEAP scores of students are continually below state and national norms (Annual Report, 1995), and the grade-point averages of students fall into the C range. More specifically, over the past five years the combined grade-point average of all students at this middle school has been approximately 2.3. The grade-point average of students at the high school these students will attend is only 1.8 (Annual Report, 1995).

School attendance is also a problem at this middle school. For example, at the beginning of the 1994-95 school year, I had 35 students assigned to my homeroom. By the end of the school year only 22 students were still attending school on a regular basis. During the school year several students were transferred to other schools for disciplinary reasons, two were excluded for having weapons in their lockers, one was sent to juvenile court for possessing a firearm, one was withdrawn by a parent because of constant threats from gangs, and two others just quit coming to school. Of the 22 students who remained in school, at least five had

missed 30 days or more of school, two had missed close to 50 days, one missed 77 days, and another missed 98 days.

Student discipline is also a problem at this school. During the course of any school day, students can be observed walking the halls, talking loud and beating on walls, and occasionally slamming an open door or shouting obscenities into classrooms at peers or teachers. There are also points in time where fire alarms are pulled, lockers are set afire, and gang graffiti is written all over bathroom walls and mirrors. Gang fights have become a common occurrence in hallways, in the lunchroom, and on school property after school.

Research suggests that there should be increased academic effort and achievement among students where there is a high degree of cultural and racial congruity between them and teachers. However, statistics as well as my own teaching experiences have pushed me to question and rethink the assumptions of cultural congruence research. As an African-American instructor in a predominantly black inner-city school system, my experiences suggest that racial and cultural congruity does not create the kind of positive classroom milieu nor the sense of readiness among black students to put forth the kind of effort necessary to achieve academically in school, at least not on the scale commonly assumed and asserted.

Personal Reflections: How My Own Experiences Have Shaped My Thinking

My earliest teaching experiences influenced my thinking such that I fully embraced the ideology and assumptions linked to the notion of cultural congruity. My early enthusiasm and support for this educational theory was in part tied to my own upbringing. I grew up in a small working-class town of perhaps 35 to 40,000 people located approximately 35 miles west of metropolitan Detroit. This town is linked to a moderate-sized university campus and is about five miles east of a larger, more prestigious university. Residential areas in this town are heterogeneously mixed in terms of socioeconomic status and race.

Though my rearing in this rather diverse setting and my years as a college student at a liberal midwestern university certainly did not insulate me from racial prejudice, my life experiences had not prepared me for the social and racial segregation I would observe and the cultural city of Houston, Texas.

The high school where I taught was one of the early magnet schools in the large Houston Independent School District. Though located in a predominantly white middle-class community, this school's status as a "magnet school" opened the possibility for students from anywhere in the city to apply and attend. One of the

prerequisites for entry was a student's interest in one of the school's special programs in foreign language or science. Other factors considered were the student's grade-point average and over-all school record.

By and large the competition to get one of the spots not set aside for students who lived in the school's community was furious because of the school's academic reputation. It was not unusual to have the school district's top performers on the SAT or ACT Exam or on Advanced Placement Exams in Science or Foreign Language as members of this school's student body. Nor was it unusual to have a substantial number of the graduating seniors go on to attend top universities such as the University of Houston, the University of Texas, Texas A&M, and occasionally Rice, Stanford, Yale, or Harvard. Being a part of the faculty of a school that placed such an emphasis on academic achievement was rewarding in many respects. The high degree of parental interest and involvement created a school environment where discipline problems were few and where students could flourish academically.

Yet teaching in this setting was not without its drawbacks. As a black teacher, one of the most disconcerting aspects was the fact that black students were rarely contributors to the school's academic successes, nor were they actively involved in any of the school's

social clubs or after school activities. The only school activities black students in large numbers got involved with and excelled in were athletics. Few if any of the school's black student body were members of the debate or drama teams or held offices in the school's student government. For the most part, if a black student was not a member of one of the school's athletic teams, s/he was generally observed boarding a bus at the end of the school day to return to his/her own community in another part of the city. In a real sense, black students at this school were invisible.

As a black instructor at a school with few other black instructors and a relatively small black student population, I discovered that the context in which one teaches and carries on relationships with students tends to lead to the racial identity that one shares with black students as being the most important factor in relationships. During this period I gradually came to view myself as a protector of and advocate for the black students. This led to my being increasingly preoccupied with issues related to racism as well as with forming relationships with black students around a mutual interest in this topic.

Over time, my concern with racial issues emerged as both the defining and confounding factor in my relationships with black students at this high school. As a result, the dynamics of the

relationships that I established with black students tended to be singular and not multidimensional in focus. In essence, I had come to perceive black teacher-student relationships as being defined by skin-color more than anything else. More importantly, it was during this period that I began to believe that black instructors were essential if black students were to have positive classroom experiences and excel academically.

After my third year at this high school, I became so interested in learning more about why large percentages of black students fail academically in school that I resigned my teaching position and returned north to enter graduate school in order to do advanced studies on this issue.

A great deal of the literature I read in the area of race and education centered primarily on the experiences of the black students in predominantly white or racially diverse school environments. The literature also tended to center on black students who are from economically disadvantaged families and who are isolated from the cultural norms and values that are usually associated with middle-class communities. The positive aspect of focusing on these black students is that they are, because of their race, economic class, or cultural orientation, the most "at-risk."

On the other hand, the problematic aspect of this research is that it defines an entire group of students in a much too narrow way. For example, if "prospective teachers" with little or no experience in dealing with black students are introduced to the black school-age population through this research, there is a risk that they will define all "black children" as poor, rebellious, and academic underachievers, despite the considerable diversity that exists even among the poorest of black students. Again, becoming aware of the monolithic assumptions that are sometimes made in research on black students only further convinced me of the necessity of having black teachers instructing black students.

This belief in the necessity of racially and culturally congruent classrooms went unquestioned until my stint as an instructor in a college of education at a predominantly white university in southeast Michigan. In my early stages there, I once again found myself in the position of being a spokesperson/advocate for black students on campus, both in and outside of the classroom. As one of the few black faculty, I would often talk with black students as they attempted to make sense of what they did not understand about what they were experiencing racially on campus. Again, instead of having to consider the many different facets of my relationships with black students, concerns with racial and cultural issues became the focus of my

attention. However, what I did not know at this point was that I was to soon have an experience that would dramatically change my thinking about the black teacher-student relationship.

During the winter of 1991, I taught a course for senior level education students entitled "The Foundations of Education." As was the case with many of the classes in this college of education, this course had only one African-American student. However, I noticed during the first three to four weeks of the course was how talkative and interactive this student appeared to be with the other students before and after class, during breaks, and in other contexts, versus how withdrawn and quiet she was during class. Her quiet and withdrawn behavior was particularly noticeable whenever emotionally charged issues such as race or culture were being discussed.. Even when questioned directly by the white students, she appeared quite uncomfortable with being "put on the spot" and was very unresponsive. What added to the peculiarity of her behavior was that she would occasionally come to talk to me during office hours where she was quite articulate and passionate in expressing her views about racial and cultural issues.

As the term progressed I thought more and more about why this black student behaved differently in each setting. One reason could be that she was simply uncomfortable speaking in large group

settings. Yet I had observed her in other large group settings, where she appeared quite relaxed and loquacious. I began to consider that her uneasiness may have been linked to the subject matter of the course I was teaching, the fact that she and I shared the same race, and the close friendships that she obviously shared with the white students. All of this, when brought together in the classroom setting, may have created a dynamic that she found disconcerting. She obviously had opinions about the issues we were discussing, but for some reason she was unwilling to share them openly.

By the end of the semester I had deduced that the primary reason for her uneasiness was the fact that she and I shared the same racial identity. My hunch was that she had to distance herself from me and the issues that highlighted race in order to be perceived in a certain way by her white friends and classmates.

My experiences with this young student challenged my thinking about research on "cultural congruity." For the first time I began to ask this question: "Could the shared racial and cultural identity between black teachers and black students create a dynamic that does not result in positive classroom interactions, trusting relationships, and ultimately academic achievement?" Though my relationship with this student was in a predominantly white school environment and at the college level, I also began to wonder if these

same teacher-student dynamics were present at the secondary school level in an all-black setting. It was from this experience that I began to entertain the possibility of the shared racial identity between black teachers and black students contributing to the academic problems experienced by black male students in inner-city schools.

I encountered further evidence for this possibility as an instructor in a summer program that was funded by and housed on the campus of a university in the city where I am currently teaching. I taught both English and writing courses in this program in the summers of 1992, 1993, and 1994. This program, called "Upward Bound," is designed to help "at-risk" high school students whom school high school counselors have identified as having the potential one day to attend college to improve their skills in mathematics, English, science, history, and reading. The target population was black students attending high schools in and around the Detroit metropolitan area. There are 90 to 110 students enrolled in this program each summer. Typically the numbers of boys and girls are similar, though girls for some reason always slightly outnumber the boys.

The 20 person summer teaching faculty was also predominantly African-American. In the three years that I taught in

this program, generally 16 to 18 members of the faculty were black and three or four were white. I mention the racial breakdown of faculty because it is an important aspect of the point that I will soon make about black teacher-student relationships.

The culminating event of this Upward Bound Summer Program is the annual awards program that is held during the final week of the eight-week summer session. During this program students and a few faculty are presented with awards that are either earned in class or voted on by both students and faculty. The awards ceremony is usually a spirited and memorable evening, with faculty presenting group and individual awards to students who have distinguished themselves academically and in leadership positions as organizers of small group activities. The Upward Bound administrative staff is also called upon to present awards to faculty members whom the students vote as the summer's outstanding instructors.

Though I did not notice it in my first and second years in this program, it eventually dawned on me that the white faculty, though only a small percentage of the summer instructional staff, had won several of the Outstanding Instructor Awards. Even more interesting was the fact that these results came as a result of the vote of a predominantly black student body. As I thought about this issue, my question became, "Why do the black students in this program

select the few white teachers as the summer's best instructors?" One obvious possibility is that the black students believe that the white teachers were generally better instructors than the black instructors. Could it also be possible that the race of the black instructors positioned them to be "taken for granted" or to be perceived in negative ways by the black student body?

In any event, it increasingly appeared to me that the racial identity that is shared by the black teachers and students is not enough to compel the black students in this program to select many of the black instructors as the summer's "outstanding instructors," even if they believe that several of the black instructors are better teachers. The results of this voting was evidence enough for me to question the assumptions that are often made about the relationship shared by black teachers and black students. The actions of the black students in this program convinced me that the issue of racial cultural congruity warranted further study and suggested that their views on the issue of race are far more complex than is often assumed.

The Event That Precipitated This Study

The event that convinced me that an investigation of the black teacher-black student relationship could provide valuable insights

into the issue of black student under-achievement occurred during an afternoon class at the school where I currently teach.

I am presently a teacher at a middle school in a large urban school district located in the midwestern section of the United States. The school where I teach is located on the west side of this metropolitan area and is a part of what would be considered a "high poverty" community. Over 90% of the children qualify for free breakfast and lunch. Approximately 99% of the students are black. A large percentage of the instructional staff and administration is also black. Given the racial composition of the student body and staff of this middle school and the assumptions I held about teacher-student relationships when both share the same race, I entered this teaching experience believing that I would be instructing a well-behaved and disciplined student body. What I found was far from what I had expected.

In spite the presence of an all-black faculty and administrative staff, the array of guest speakers that speak to the students on a regular basis, and the abundance of photographs of successful blacks throughout the school's hallways and classrooms, negative behaviors and poor academic achievement have remained a much too common pattern. For example, students can be seen and heard regularly talking to teachers and administrators in extremely disrespectful

ways; classroom tardiness and running in the hallways is commonplace; gang graffiti has become ubiquitous; and test scores, though slightly improving, remain quite low. The question that I have continually asked myself is: "How could this be, given the high degree of racial and cultural congruity that exists between teachers and students here?"

As I have stated previously in this introduction, I had long believed that shared racial and cultural identifications between the teachers and students would mitigate negative student behaviors and result in increased academic achievement. Why then is there so much negative student behavior and academic failure at this school as well as in many of the other middle schools and high schools in this district?

An insight into this question emerged one afternoon in mid-February during an eighth-grade government class. After several unsuccessful attempts to get the students in my classroom to lower their voices and focus on their lesson, in frustration I made the following statement:

> Look at you all...wasting time, talking, laughing, and passing notes...I bet if I was a white teacher I wouldn't have to ask you but once to be quiet and you would have quieted down and completed all of your work.

Upon hearing this, one of the students replied,

> Yeah, you're right, Mr. Robinson. If you were white, we would have quieted down and done our work, 'cause with a white teacher you've got something to prove.

This comment convinced me that even in all black school settings--where one would assume the issue of race would be moot--this is not necessarily true. This student's comment suggests that black students are aware of and are thinking about color differences and what these differences mean in relation to their own behaviors and their interactions with their black teachers. As Vivian Paley (1979) has stated,

> People see color...they are color conscious and not color blind. People also attach meaning to color...it is rarely a neutral venture.

The fact that this young man said that he would "work harder" for a white teacher than for a black teacher suggests that he has been influenced by certain racial beliefs in spite the fact that he lives in an all black community and attends an all black inner-city school with a predominantly black teaching staff, from whom he is constantly receiving encouragement to work hard in school. An important question to ask here is, "What would compel this young man to put forth 'less effort' academically and worry less about engaging in negative behaviors in school because he has a black rather than a white teacher?" Another important question is, "What has shaped this young student's thinking such that he believes he

has less to prove to his black teachers than he does to white teachers?" A third question of interest is, "How wide-spread among black male high school age students in inner-city schools is the perspective of this student?"

The mind-set expressed by this young man contradicts what is generally assumed to be true by scholars in relation to the minority student-minority teacher relationship. It is generally assumed by many that the solution to the problem of black student achievement and discipline in inner-city schools is to have a greater presence of black teachers. The working assumption behind this belief is that the more students see persons racially like themselves as teachers, the more they will be able to identify with the teacher in a cultural. Therefore, the more comfortable the student becomes in the classroom environment and with the classroom teacher, the better s/he will do scholastically. This line of reasoning is also behind why departments of teacher education in a great many of this nation's universities have been actively seeking more minority teaching candidates.

Though there are, indeed, benefits to having a greater representation of minority teachers in K-12 schools, my experiences over the past four years as a teacher in an all-black middle school where teachers and students share the same race have presented me

with evidence that challenges this notion. In addition, my teaching experiences have suggested that the "racial sameness" that is shared between many of the teachers and students in urban schools may in fact be contributing to academic mediocrity and under-achievement rather than to success.

In an effort to find answers to the questions my teaching experiences have raised about the black teacher-black student relationship and academic under-achievement, I decided to conduct a study to gain greater insights into the dynamics that go on daily between black teachers and students. The ultimate concern guiding this study, although not its specific focus, was whether or not this relationship is in any way connected to the academic under-achievement so prevalent among inner-city students. As a step toward addressing that larger issue, and using the research questions below, I investigated how perceptions about black versus white teachers are related to the effort students exert toward achievement:

1. In what ways does the racial identity shared by black teachers and black students give students permission to fail or not work as hard as they should in school?

2. Does the racial identity shared by black teachers and black students create a classroom context and teacher-student relationship in which minimal achievement from students is permissible?

3. Does the racial identity shared by teachers and students in inner-city schools create a classroom dynamic that suggests

to students that under-achievement or failure is understandable?

4. Does the racial and cultural identity shared between black teachers and black students sometimes allow teachers to become too sympathetic to the problems faced by black students, thus causing teachers to expect less of the students and to view them as victims rather than as capable of achievement?

5. Does the shared racial identity between black students and teachers create a situation in which black students begin to manipulate or take advantage of the fact that teachers understand their situations? In this context, can students begin to use or exaggerate the race issue to make excuses about why they have not performed to their academic potential?

In Chapter 2, I will review the literature on the academic failure and under achievement of black children in inner-city schools. This review will focus on the differing explanations that research offers for the under-achievement that continues to manifest itself in black schools in urban areas. I will begin with a historical look at this issue, focusing on how beliefs about the genetic inferiority of the black race justified whites in forbidding (sometimes even by law) any attempt, both formally and informally, to educate blacks. I then continue by looking at what the research says about other factors (such as economics and culture) in relation to the poor academic performance of black students in school. Ultimately what I suggest is that the abundance of current research does not address the possibility that racial similarities shared by black teachers and

students, often thought of as a positive factor, may in fact be producing opposite results.

In Chapter 3, I will introduce the students that participated in this study. I will also discuss the methods, rationales, and techniques I utilized in the gathering data.

The overall goal of Chapters 4 and 5 is to understand better how black male students perceive of and react to black and white teachers and to understand how these perceptions and behaviors are similar or different in terms of the social class of the student. Chapter 4 has two more specific purposes. The first is to report on differences among the students studied in relation to their perceptions of black and white teachers. The second is to present the ways in which students' perceptions of black and white teachers differ in relation to the social class of the student.

The purpose of Chapter 5 is to show what I learned from asking the students whether they put forth more effort for a white teacher compared to a black teacher--this having been the provocative implication of what my eighth grade government student said that stimulated me to conduct this study. Chapter 5 also reports on how the students' responses to this question varied by social class.

Chapter 6 is a summary of what the findings of this study suggest in relation to the study and practice of teaching. Specifically, I will discuss the implications of this study in relation to (a) why academic excellence has been evasive within many black urban school districts; (b) the importance of monitoring student/teacher relationships just as closely when the race of the teacher and student is the same as when it is different; (c) teacher hiring practices in predominantly black urban school districts; and (d) further research suggested by the results of this study.

Chapter 2

EXPLANATIONS FOR ACADEMIC UNDER-ACHIEVEMENT IN BLACK INNER-CITY SCHOOLS

An Overview of the Chapter

Black students in schools in urban communities are not doing well academically. The problem of academic under-achievement and failure has been a recurring theme. Over the past ten years, the test scores and grade-point averages of black students in inner-city schools have decreased while drop-out and delinquency rates have continued to rise. Research in the area of urban education tells us that while black student achievement in grades K-3 has remained equal to or above national norms, beginning in about the third grade students (particularly males) begin to decline both in their enthusiasm for school and in their scores on tests of achievement. Statistics also tell us that by the time many of these students reach the ninth grade, approximately half will have dropped out of school.

The purpose of this chapter is to (a) review the literature on academic under-achievement and failure among black students in

inner-city schools; (b) survey and assess various explanations as to why black students in urban school districts continue to perform poorly in the classroom, and more specifically explain how school failure and under-achievement among blacks is linked to the history and purposes of public schooling and to the racial, economic, and cultural differences that exist between many students and their teachers; (c) discuss why many black educators are strong advocates for having only black teachers in schools with predominantly black settings; and (d) present my argument as to why a belief in having only black teachers as role models for black students may not produce the intended results.

A Review of the Literature on Black Under-Achievement in Public Schools

The problem of academic under-achievement and failure among African-American youth in urban communities has been well documented. Much of the research comparing the academic performance of African-American students to other groups of students reveals that blacks consistently score lower on most indicators of achievement. In his book How Schools Fail Black Children, Harry Morgan (see Kunjufu, 1985) asserted that in the early primary grades black children progress at the same rates as

their white counterparts until after the third grade. At this point, argued Morgan (Kunjufu, 1985), the achievement rate of a great many black children begins to spiral downward. School research specialist Jawanza Kunjufu (1984) referred to this pattern of failure as "The Fourth Grade Failure Syndrome." One of the ways that Kunjufu (1984) supported his "fourth-grade failure syndrome" theory was through evidence collected in a 1970's longitudinal study of the Iowa Reading Test Scores of 20 randomly selected black students in grades three through seven. Table 2.1 shows the test results for these 20 students.

This study revealed that in several instances the test scores of students fell almost 50 points in a 4-5 year period. More specifically, of the 20 scores, 14 decreased, four improved, and two remained constant. The median percentile of all the reading scores at the beginning was approximately 52%, but in the end it was only 29%. The average change in reading among all students was 1.3 years. Kunjufu (1985) also provided evidence of the effects of the "fourth grade syndrome" by citing the research of Nancy Arnez, which focused on ability grouping and labeling of students at the elementary school level. In her book The Implementation of Desegregation as a Discriminatory Process, Arnez (cited in Kunjufu, 1985) revealed that though blacks make up only 12 to 15% of this

Table 2.1

Reading Achievement Scores

GRADE THREE	GRADE SEVEN	READING PROGRESS
98	35	1.3
97	54	2.7
92	24	2.1
91	68	3.1
87	72	3.9
72	72	3.6
66	59	3.9
63	7	.7
63	4	0
57	39	3.2
47	9	2.1
41	11	2.5
29	12	3.0
21	44	3.6
21	29	4.7
21	17	3.8
18	1	1.3
16	39	4.6
7	30	4.5
5	5	3.2

nation's public school population, they account for over 75 to 80% of those labeled as learning disabled, emotionally impaired, etc. In looking at schools in the southeastern United States, Arnez's (Kunjufu, 1985) research also found that in 505 school districts in Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Arkansas which had classes for those labeled "educable mentally retarded," over 80%

of the students so labeled were black, although less than 40% of the total school district was black. Her research further indicated that disproportionately more of the eligible black children were actually recommended for placement in special classrooms than were eligible white children.

In addition, Kunjufu (1985) cited the research of Nathan Hare who, in a sample of ten- and eleven-year-olds on a hierarchical academic performance structure, found that African-American males scored lower than all other groups. As a consequence, it is not surprising that black males, 15% of the total school population, were 21% of the dropouts. This was further evidenced by statistics which revealed that there were only 74 black men with at least four years of college for every 100 African-American women with equivalent credentials (Kunjufu, 1985). Among college bound high school seniors in 1978, there were only 66 African-American males for every 100 females. Black male students were certainly more "at-risk" to fail academically or drop out of school than black females.

Data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (1993) revealed findings similar to those of Kunjufu (1985), Morgan (1980), and Arnez (1980). The NCES found that in relation to writing and mathematics proficiency in grades four through eleven, blacks scored consistently lower than whites and other minority groups. Consistent

with these findings was the data from the Digest of Education Statistics (1993), which showed that black students at ages 9, 13, and 17 scored an average of 15 points lower than whites on examinations which tested the students' ability to understand basic ideas, compare ideas, make inferences, search for new information, interpret ideas, make judgments, and understand, summarize, and explain relatively complicated ideas in literature.

Further work in relation to black student under-achievement was presented by Herrnstein and Murray (1994). The thrust of this argument about black student failure centered around achievement tests. In the text The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in America, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) found that differences in IQ scores between blacks and Europeans in dozens of studies consistently measured out to about one standard deviation, which means that the average white student tests higher than about 84% of the population of blacks and that the average black tests higher than only 16% of the white population. What this means in terms of IQ testing is that African-Americans average approximately 85 on this test while whites average about 100. These researchers went on to point out that in 156 studies, the average black-white difference is consistently about 1.08 standard deviations, which comes out to about 16 IQ points.

These findings are consistent with research by Andrew Hacker (1992), which showed that in the past 8 to 10 years black applicants to the University of Virginia have averaged approximately 240 points lower than white applicants on standard tests of achievement. The results of these lower achievement scores have been lower enrollments among black students on the campuses of this nation's predominantly white colleges and universities. For example, only 3.2% of the students at Smith College (in 1992) were black, Bates College on Maine could manage only a 2.1% black enrollment, and at the University of Wisconsin at Madison black student representation was only 1.7% of the total student population.

Hacker (1992) went on to cite 1981 statistics about the University of California at Berkeley which revealed that the numbers of black students remained about as low as those at Smith, Bates, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison. The black student count at U-C Berkeley in 1991 was around 3.8%. According to Hacker (1992), the reason for the small numbers is low test score performances among black students. To be accepted to Berkeley, black students had to rank in the top 12.5% of all California high school graduates when combining grades and SAT scores. Few blacks were in this 12.5%.

Finally, achievement test scores from the Detroit Public Schools Center for Testing and Evaluation (1993) are not positive. For example, the results of MEAP and ACT tests given to Detroit Public School students during the 1989-1990 school year revealed that over 60% of those who took the MEAP fell into the "high needs" category in the areas of mathematics and reading. This means that most scored well below the mean in these two areas. Statistics from the Testing and Evaluation Center also tell us that black students in this school district generally read at a grade level one to three years below the grade in which they currently find themselves.

When specifically looking at the ACT scores of students at the high school level in this district, the Detroit study showed that scores below the national average were numerous. The average test score on the ACT among Detroit Public School students (98% of whom are black) was 16.5. The average ACT score nationally is about 20. These findings are also consistent with the research of Farley and Allen (1989), who found that blacks have lagged behind whites on major indicators of educational achievement, including such tests as the CAT, the SAT, and the LSAT. Like Herrnstein and Murray (1994), Farley and Allen (1989) found that blacks scored an average of 1 to 2 standard deviations below the national mean when test results were calculated. Even in areas where black students have shown

improvements, The National Center for Educational Statistics tells us that the negative are even more pronounced when focusing on black students in schools in poor urban communities.

A second set of problems closely related to academic under-achievement among black inner-city students includes delinquency and dropping out. Research by Debra Prothrow-Stith (1991) tells us that black students in urban areas were suspended and expelled from school more frequently, dropped out more frequently, and had lower grades in school than any other group of students. Prothrow-Stith (1991) also found that black inner-city youth accounted for more than 94 percent of the suspensions in public schools from 1978 to 1985.

Given the aforementioned statistics about to black student under achievement, delinquency, and dropping out, it only stands to reason that the level of overall academic attainment among black students would be lower than whites. Again, if we revisit the findings of Farley and Allen (1989), we see that black adolescents 16 years and older consistently had lower educational attainments than whites. Their research also revealed that 40.5% of blacks, versus 28.1% of whites aged 16 years and older, had completed 8 years or less of schooling. Furthermore, they found that white high school graduates continue to outnumber black high school graduates and

that whites are twice as likely to have graduated from college or to have completed advanced degrees.

The work of Prothrow-Stith (1991) and Farley and Allen (1989) provides an excellent backdrop for what Jonathan Kozol (1992) and Debra Adams (1993) have to say about black students and school failure. In his book Savage Inequalities, Kozol (1992) discussed two predominantly black inner-city elementary schools in Chicago where dropout rates were 76 to 81%. He also talked about a high school in Chicago where the dropout rate was 86%. Again, these statistics are consistent with those presented by Prothrow-Stith (1991), who quoted a Detroit Public School official saying that in the poorest neighborhoods the dropout rate in inner-city Detroit is about 80%. Schools in these sorts of communities, according to Kozol (1992), are often referred to as "dumping grounds" for children with special problems.

In 1993, Detroit Free Press education writer Debra Adams presented her findings from a study she conducted entitled "A Mile Away, World's Apart." In this study Adams (1993) took a comparative look at several poor and predominantly black inner-city elementary schools located on Detroit's east side and two all-white elementary schools in located in the upper-middle class community of Grosse Pointe Park. Her findings were chilling. Adams (1993)

pointed out that in nine years or so, most of the Grosse Pointe Park students will enter Grosse Point South High School and with few exceptions all will be in college preparatory programs. With few exceptions, most will go on to college.

On the other hand, Adams (1993) asserted that many of the black elementary school students will enter either Detroit Denby or Finney High School if they are not lucky enough to gain entry into one of the district's "schools of choice." However, by this time much of the enthusiasm that these students had for school will have disappeared. The average grade-point average for students attending Finney High School is about 1.5 (out of a possible 4.0). Only 45% of the students who entered Finney High School in 1987 graduated four years later.

Problems of poor academic performance, delinquency, and dropping out in predominantly black urban communities are perhaps expressed best by a teacher in the Chicago Public School system. When asked about issues related to academic under-achievement among her students, she replied,

> Eighth grade graduation here as elsewhere in (the inner-city) Chicago is regarded as a time for celebrating as much as a 12th grade graduation would be celebrated in the suburbs. (Kozol, 1992)

Explanations for Under-Achievement among Black Students

Explanation One: The Relationship Between Purposes of Public Schooling in This Country and Black Student Under-Achievement

> It was soon after the war that a white member of Johnson's restored Louisiana legislature passed one of the schools set up by the Freedman's Bureau in New Orleans. The grounds were filled with children. He stopped and looked intently, and then asked, "Is this a school?" "Yes", was the reply. "What, for niggers? He through up his hands and said.. "I have seen many an absurdity in my lifetime, but this is the climax." (DuBois, 1935)

There are several explanations for the current state of education in many black inner-city communities. The first deals with both the history and purposes of schooling for black Americans.

In the southern United States in the 18th and 19th centuries the black slave trade and the use of black labor through a system of slavery became a way of life. This system of slavery was legitimated by beliefs in the superiority of the white race and the inferiority of the black race. Evidence of these 18th and 19th century racist notions are found in Harriet Beecher Stowe's (1897) novel Uncle Tom's Cabin. Stowe's text not only describes the unequal power relations between the black and white races, it also provides insights into white beliefs about what she referred to as "the childlike intellect and nature of the black race." The principal character in this

novel was a black slave named Tom, who was depicted as passive, gentle, unassuming, childlike, and lacking the sensibilities and intellect to carry out everyday functions outside his master's guidance.

These same 18th/19th century paternalistic notions is also a central theme of Stanley Elkins' (1963) book Slavery. Elkins argued that the close scrutiny that slave masters gave to their slaves was born not out of a fear or suspicion but rather out of necessity. He asserted that the paternalistic mindsets on the part of many slave masters convinced them that black slaves could accomplish very little without close supervision and guidance. Further evidence of this 18th/19th century ideology of paternalism is found in the work of historian John Blassingame (1972). In his book The Slave Community, Blassingame (1972) stated that during this period whites generally believed that members of the black race were immature, immoral, passive, cheerful, child-like, lazy, cowardly, stupid, superstitious, polygamous, and submissive.

Along with beliefs about the childlike nature of the black race, notions about their intellectual inferiority were also born during the 18th and 19th centuries. In the book Black Image in the White Mind, Frederickson (1971) discussed 19th century anthropological studies which examined differences in skull sizes of members of the black

and white races. Evidence from these studies suggested that cranial differences between the white and black races--whites overall having larger skulls--meant larger brain mass and therefore greater mental capabilities for whites. Similar evidence was reviewed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968) in his book Where Do We Go from Here? While doing research on the origins of racism in this country, King (1968) discovered the work of two other 19th century anthropologists, Dr. Samuel Morton and Dr. Josiah Nott. King suggested that these researchers helped strengthen racist ideologies about the superiority of the white race through their own research on skull size differences between the races. They too adhered to the presumption that the white race possesses greater mental capabilities than the black race because whites were found to have larger skulls.

One final book that defended notions of white superiority and also dealt with the issue of skull size was entitled The Natural History of the Caucasian and Black Race. In this book, Nott (cited in King, 1968) defended his analysis of the superiority of the white race by stating, "The black man is a little above the level of an ape."

Nineteenth century beliefs about the inferiority of the black race also had origins in the theology and religious practices of the period. Though some blacks in the northern United States were

allowed to worship in white churches in the early 18th century, the seating arrangements were segregated. Black parishioners were not allowed to sit in the sanctuary which was reserved for its white members. Blacks were most often relegated to the balcony sections (Hughes and Meltzer, 1956).

Contrary to the northern practice of integrated but separate church attendance, the notion of slaves attending church services with members of the white race in the south was out of the question. In many instances, slaves were even forbidden to assemble among themselves to worship (Hughes and Meltzer, 1956). Historian Eugene Genovese (1976) asserts that it would have been an aberration, except perhaps among Quakers, for racial integration to have existed its truest sense in the church in either the southern or northern United States in the 18th or 19th century. He argued that ubiquitous segregation in the religious community was evidence of the pervasive nature of racism and how it became inextricably tied to the theology of the white church. For many whites, a belief in a "moral and just God" and in the superiority of the white race was not a contradiction. The logic of white theology during this period was illustrated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. with the following syllogism:

> All men are made in the image of God.
> God as everybody knows is not a Negro;
> Therefore a Negro is not a man.

Beliefs in the intellectual inferiority of Black Americans during this early period in American history appear to have had a great impact on shaping the views of white public school and government officials about the role that schooling should play in the lives of black people. In the southern United States in the 18th and 19th centuries, many whites felt that there was no purpose for either formally or informally educating blacks. With the rise of the American slave system and the need for a large and cheap labor source, powerful southern political and economic leaders began to develop laws (both formal and informal) that would insure slavery's continuance (Genovese, 1976). During this period (in the southern U.S.) laws emerged that strictly forbade the education of the Negro (Walters, 1978). The only way that a Negro could learn to read and write without consequence was if it was allowed by a slave master (Genovese, 1976). Though rare, it did occur in some instances. Yet in most cases to educate a Negro formally or informally could result in a fine or a public flogging for a white violator and/or a severe beating or death for a Negro (Walters, 1978).

As alluded to in the above section on historic beliefs about the inferiority of the black race, southern whites did not view their refusal to educate the Negro as a cruel or insensitive act. Instead

they defined this act as an of compassion toward a group of people who would probably perish outside of the scrutiny and care of the white race. Moreover, argued Genovese (1976), the Negro in 18th and 19th century in America was not viewed as "human" in the same sense that whites considered themselves "human." Rather, the Negro was for the most part viewed as property or chattel in the same sense as cattle or other animals. Given this point of view towards the Negro, any notion formally to educate members of this group during this time period was defined as an illogical proposition and was usually met with strong opposition.

Laws forbidding the formal education of members of the black race were still staunchly in place during the Reconstruction (post-civil war) years in the south. During this "Jim Crow" era, efforts by northern Freedman's Bureau workers to build society were often met with resistance from members of fast-growing white supremacy groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (Walters, 1978). Even schools built in black communities were not immune to attacks from such groups. Klansmen would periodically ride into black communities at night and burn black schools. Instructors in these schools, both black and white, received constant threats and in some instances were attacked.

The fact that large numbers of newly freed black slaves in the southern U.S. were prohibited from participating in Horace Mann's flourishing Common School Movement was again evidence of white misgivings in relation to the formal education of blacks. Even in situations where black schools were established, the curriculum often reflected the southern belief that blacks were intellectually inferior to whites. For example, William H. Baldwin, a southern white educational reformer made the following assertion about the purpose of schooling for blacks:

> Avoid social questions; leave politics alone; continue to be patient; live moral lives; live simply; learn to work....know that it is a crime for any teacher, white or black, to educate the Negro for positions that are not open to him. (Andersen, 1988)

Charles W. Dabney, then president of the University of Tennessee, asserted the following:

> We must use common sense in the education of the Negro. Most important, we must recognize in all its relations that momentous fact that the Negro is a child race, at least two thousand years behind the Anglo-Saxon in its development. (Andersen, 1988)

Dabney went on to state the following:.

> Nothing is more ridiculous than the program of the good religious people of the North who insist upon teaching Latin, Greek, and philosophy the Negro boys who come to their schools. (Andersen, 1988)

Finally, George T. Winston, president of North Carolina's College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts, argued the following:

> The Old South was overthrown not by Webster and Greeley and Lincoln, but by the industrial inefficiency of Negro slavery. Therefore, the free black laboring class must be taught to work, to submit to authority, to respect their superiors.....the saw and plane and the anvil must take the place of geography. (Andersen, 1988)

Even many of the black colleges that were constructed in the South during the post-civil war period did not have curricula that emphasized teaching academic subjects. This occurred mainly because many of the wealthy Northern philanthropists who contributed to building these institutions did not believe that instruction in the areas of mathematics, science, English, physics, and history would be the best investment of their money in relation to the education of blacks (Walters, 1983). In fact, many who provided financial support to black colleges agreed to do so only if the instructional emphasis was on "working with the hands" and not academics. What many of these contributors believed in relation to purposes of schools for blacks was perhaps best expressed by George T. Winston, who said the following:

> The entire system of public school education for the Negro race, from top to bottom, should be industrial. (Andersen, 1988)

The struggle of blacks to gain access to public schooling was problematic in the northern United States as well. Though the formal education of members of the black race was not prohibited by law, attempts by blacks to receive educational experiences were

comparable to those of whites were met with a great deal of resistance, particularly when achieving this goal involved attending schools with whites.

The following is a series of statements from the book North of Slavery by Leon Litwick (1961). The argument that Litwick made in this text dispels the notion that the struggle of northern blacks to gain equal access to and to integrate public schools was far easier than it was for blacks in the south. According to Litwick, the only real difference was the fact that the south had laws prohibiting the education of blacks. For example, Litwick asserted the following:

> Proposals to educate Negroes invariably aroused bitter controversy, particularly in the new western states. The admission of Negroes to white schools, opponents maintained, would result in violence and prove fatal to public education.

He continued with this comment:

> Although some white schools admitted Negroes, especially before 1820, most northern states either excluded them altogether or established separate schools for them.

Litwick went on to say,

> The means employed to exclude Negroes from public schools varied only slightly from state to state. In New England, local school committees usually assigned Negro children to separate institutions regardless of the district in which they resided.

He also made the following statement:

> Whites were so opposed to and threatened by blacks that once during the 1800s, when word got out that a proposal to build a school for black students near the campus of Yale University, the citizens of New Haven were in an uproar. Local opinion was that a Negro College would threaten the prosperity of the city. In essence citizens believed that a black college in such close proximity would frighten away visitors and students for Yale.

To make the point about white racism in the northern United States, Litwick (1961) discussed accounts of discrimination suffered by blacks attending private academies, where the majority of administrators and instructors claimed to be abolitionists (Litwick, 1961). In one such situation it was reported that a black student was told he could not live in the same house as whites and blacks could not sit at the same dinner table until all the white students had been served (Litwick, 1961). According to Litwick, even when Frederick Douglass' daughter entered Seward Seminary in Rochester, New York, school authorities assigned her to a room separate from the white students and appointed a teacher to instruct her (Litwick, 1961).

The same 17th and 18th century notions about the intellectual inferiority of the black race--which shaped the thinking of political and educational leaders in northern and southern United States--have also manifested themselves in the 20th century. In her book The Troubled Crusade, Ravitch (1983) provided evidence of how

Southern states in the 1940s and 1950s regularly allocated funds unequally to black and white school districts. For example, in 1945 in Copiah County, Mississippi, the average salary of white teachers was approximately $900 per year, as compared to the average salary for black teachers, which was about $300. The average length of a school year for white children in this county was eight months as compared to six months for black children. Of the 91 white teachers in the county, 44 had no college degree, while of the 126 black teachers, 122 had no degree (Ravitch, 1983). Furthermore, in Alabama around this time, the annual salary of white teachers was around $967 while the average salary of black teachers was approximately $600. In the state of South Carolina, where the numbers of black and white students in public schools were about the same, Ravitch (1983) found that the state spent nearly three times more money for each white student than it did for each black student.

The differences in expenditures per pupil in black and white school districts in the south were also becoming prevalent in and around many of the large metropolitan areas in the northern U.S. One explanation as to why predominantly black schools in inner-city have suffered in comparison to mostly white suburban schools was offered by former Harvard President James Conant, who in 1961 wrote the following:

> The per capita expenditure in wealthy suburban schools was more than twice as much as in big city high schools. The suburban high school is likely to be a spacious modern school staffed by as many as 70 professionals per 100 students; in the slums one finds a crowded, often dilapidated and unattractive school staffed by 40 or fewer professionals per 100 pupils. In the suburban school, 80 percent or more went on to college, in the slum, as many half dropped-out before graduating.

Jonathan Kozol (1992) offered another example of fiscal inequities between white suburban communities and schools in black inner-city communities. He wrote,

> In 1989, Chicago spent some $5,500 for each student in its secondary schools. This may be compared to an investment of some $8,500 to $9,000 on each high school student in the highest spending suburbs to the north. In simplest terms, this means that any high school class of 30 students in Chicago receives approximately $90,000 less each year than would have been spent on them if they were pupils at New Trier High School."

Kozol (1992) continued,

> When relative student needs, however have been factored into the discussion, the disparities in funding are enormous. Equity after all does not mean simply equal funding; equal funding for unequal needs is not equality. The need is greater in Chicago, and its children, if they are to have approximately equal opportunities, they'll need more than the children who attended New Trier High.

The results of the disproportionate funding of black and white schools has had devastating effects on the predominantly black inner-city schools. William J. Wilson (1987) provided the following statistics as testament to its effects:

> Of the 39,000 students who enrolled in the ninth grade in Chicago's public schools in 1980, and who would have normally graduated from high school four years later in the spring of 1984, only 18,500 (or 47 percent) graduated; of these only 6,000 were capable of reading above the national twelfth-grade level. Of the 25,000 black and Hispanic students who were originally enrolled in these non-selective high schools in Chicago, 16,000 did not graduate. Of the 9,500 students who did graduate, 4,000 read at or below the junior level and only 2,000 at or above the national average.

Why were there differences in the allocation of funds per pupil and for teacher salaries in black and white school districts in these southern states? Why is there compelling evidence to suggest that public school officials in and around large urban school districts in the northern U.S. did little to attempt to equalize the differences in money spent per-pupil in educating white children in suburban school districts and children in the inner-city? Perhaps 17th and 18th century notions about the inferiority of the black were once again shaping public policy and notions about the purposes of schools in the 20th century.

Explanation Two: The Effects of Racial Differences Between Black Students and Teachers

A second way of making sense of academic under-achievement among black students in urban schools has to do with understanding connections between beliefs about the inferiority of the black race

and daily interactions between black students and white teachers in classrooms. According to the research of psychiatrists Alexander Thomas and Samuel Sillen (1993), racist ideologies about the inferiority of the black race that developed in the 17th and 18th centuries continue to influence the thinking of both black and white Americans today. These beliefs can be most destructive when they are harbored by and acted on by teachers (white or black), or other persons of power in public schools who are in the position to evaluate the academic abilities and emotional development of African-American children.

Vivian Paley (1979) validated the notion that skin color is still a factor that people (including teachers) are both aware of and attach meaning to. She wrote,

> People see color....they are color-conscious and not color-blind. People also attach meaning to color... it is rarely a neutral venture.

Jonathan Kozol (1992) argued that even when white teachers assert that they do not see the color of their students, they really do, and in many cases it is to the detriment of black students. He used the following illustration of a conversation he had with a white female teacher while interning at a predominantly black elementary school in the Boston Public Schools to make his point:

> We stood together in the doorway. The children sat in their chairs. It was almost the end of lunch time. Each child was having his milk except the ones who couldn't afford it. At times white and Negro children chattered with each other, and it was normal and natural and pleasant to watch that, but there were not sufficient white children for it really to happen freely enough. There were not enough children who were not black. The reading teacher looked out at the children and she said to me, from where she was standing: "Roger over there, I think, is the most unhappy child in this class." Roger was one of only three white boys in this class. He was sitting behind Stephen. She did not see Stephen sitting in front of him. She said to me: "When I look at them I do not see white or black." But I felt really that she saw white much more clearly than she saw black. She saw the quiet and unhappy little white boy. She did not see Stephen before him, his hands all welted and his face scared with scabs.

Kozol (1992) went on to describe what he considered more blatant racist behaviors on the part of white teachers towards black students in the Boston City Schools:

> Whippings were frequently given at my school without a witness present. Students were repeatedly grabbed, shaken and insulted. Parents were rarely notified. And one boy at my school was whipped in such a way as to leave on his hand a physical impairment.

Finally, Kozol (1992) commented on the racist ways in which white teachers in the Boston school system spoke about black children:

> Boston schoolteachers for years have been speaking of the Negro children in their charge as "animals" and the school buildings that houses them as “a zoo.”

Research also suggests that "race" is an important factor in the evaluation of the academic abilities and potential of black students by public school teachers. In her book The Sociology of Education,

Jeanne Ballantine (1983) provided evidence which suggests that race is a factor in the separation of students into academic and non-academic tracks. Ballantine found that not only are white and black children tracked differently, these differences increase as the students go further along in school. For example, 44% of the white student body of a seventh grade class was in the academic (or college preparatory) track, whereas 33% of the black student body was in that track. However, these percentages changed dramatically as these students moved through the eighth and ninth grades. In the eighth grade the percentage of white students in the college preparatory track increased to 47%, the percentage of black students in this track decreased to 20%. In the ninth grade the percentage of white students in the college preparatory track decreased to 30% but the percentage of blacks in this track decreased as well, to 10%.

The research of Oakes (1985) and Goodlad (1984) in the area of tracking correlates well with Ballantine's study. Both found that the percentages of black students in low and vocational tracks are higher than those of white students. Specifically, Goodlad (1984) wrote,

> Minority students and students from the lowest socioeconomic groups have been found in disproportionate numbers in classes at the lowest track levels.

Oakes (1985) also argued that the use of tracking and ability grouping can have an impact on the self concept of black children

(Grant, 1989). She pointed out that even in grades K-5 the students know who is in the high and low groups. She explained it in this way:

> Rather than help students feel more comfortable about themselves, the tracking process appears to foster lowered self esteem among these teenagers. Further exacerbating these negative self perceptions are the attitudes of many teachers and other students towards those in the lower tracks. Once placed in low classes, students are usually seen by others in the school as dumb...Closely related to the student's self-evaluations are their aspirations for the future and the educational plans they make. Students in low tracks classes have been found to have lowered aspirations and more often have their future frustrated (p. 8).

Evidence from the research of Oakes (1985), Goodlad (1984), and Ballantine (1983) all suggests that the higher percentages of black students in low and vocational tracks may be a result of racist beliefs and mis-assessments by white teachers and counselors about the academic ability of children.

Another way in which black students have experienced racism in public schools is through the selection of textbooks by instructors. For example, Ellison (1958) asserted the following:.

> Textbooks should provide the opportunity for all cultures to be seen as equal and to be celebrated in the classroom, but this has not been the case. In the 18th and 19th centuries, textbooks promoted cultural denigration and the inferiority of people of color. Native Americans were depicted as noble savages, fond of cruelty, and as having little regard for civilization. Blacks were characterized as thoughtless, unintelligent, and subject to violent passion. Asian

> Americans, when they were present, were frequently presented in a manner that implied they were socially inferior.

In addressing this same issue, Carl Grant (1989) stated the following:

> The decades following the 1950s witnessed some positive change in the portrayal of the culture of people of color in textbooks, but by no means and in no way was there equal treatment to that of white people.

Grant (1989) concludes with the following statement:

> Women of color and Hispanic Americans are underrepresented in the text materials and are rarely shown in decision-making positions, and the culture of people of color in comparison to the white culture was not portrayed in an esteemed and celebrated manner. Recently Sleeter and Grant (1989) analyzed 47 textbooks presently in use in grades K-9 for social studies, reading and language arts, science, and mathematics with copyright dates between 1980 and 1987. They found that textbooks still show the white culture as superior to the culture of people of color. Whites, by far, received the most attention, are presented in the greatest number of roles, and dominate the story line and the lists of accomplishments. Furthermore, The Sleeter and Grant study revealed that the cultures of different groups of color were rarely shown in relationship to one another, just in relationship to whites.

A final issue related to the topic of race and academic under achievement among black students comes out of the work of Herrnstein and Murray (1994). In their book The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in America, they argued that the differences we see in terms of IQ scores and academic achievement among different groups has less to do with one's home environment or socioeconomic class, and more with each person's genetic

predisposition. Herrnstein and Murray (1993) draw a great deal on the earlier work of Arthur Jensen (1969) and Cyril Burt (1937). In his 1972 book, entitled Genetics and Education, and in his 1969 Harvard Educational Review article, Jensen argued for genetics and against environment in relation to cognitive performance. To make his case, he cited four different studies of identical twins with identical genetic make-ups in England, Denmark, and the United States. Though they were raised apart, when each was given a series of tests of achievement there were no significant differences in their IQs. The small differences in IQ which emerged were defined as a result of what Jensen called "threshold variable," (i.e., home environment, SES, etc.), which are variables that may slightly push one's IQ or achievement scores 5-10 percentages in a positive or negative direction. What Jensen (1969), Burt (1937), and Herrnstein and Murray (1994) all argued is that we can no longer ignore the genetic factor when explaining school success or failure, performance on achievement tests, or group differences on IQ tests.

The problem with the work of Herrnstein and Murray (1994) and Arthur Jensen (1969) on intelligence is that they define it in much too narrow a way. It may be true that every person is in some way predisposed genetically to a certain level of intelligence. Using the twins studies to argue this point is reasonable. But Jensen (1969)

and Herrnstein and Murray (1994) define a person's level of intelligence as that which can be measured on a series of tests, developed by a specific group of people, in a specific culture. Anthropological research, however, shows that in many different cultures people engage daily in complex tasks which entail high level reasoning skills, even though they have not been formally educated. Hypothetically, if individuals from these cultures performed poorly on tests of intelligence administered by psychometricians from our culture, could it be argued that they do not reason at a high level? Obviously not. In reality, achievement tests should be viewed as merely one of many ways to measure intelligence.

A second problem with the work of Jensen (1969) and Herrnstein and Murray (1994) has to do with the conclusions that they draw from the twins studies. As stated above, when the IQ scores of identical twins who had been raised in different homes and were measured in a series of longitudinal studies, it was discovered that they were very similar. This provided evidence that it is "nature," or one's genetic component, and not environmental factors that are most significant in terms of determining intelligence. However, to accept the "nature" argument in light of the "twins studies" without first asking other questions about the studies' methodologies is in my estimation a capricious act.

One important question that was not raised by either Jensen (1969) or Herrnstein and Murray (1994) had to do with the specific differences in environments in which the twins in the study were reared. The important question here is, "Were the environmental differences between the sets of twins in the study significant enough to make a difference in their intellectual developments in spite of their genetic similarities? What factors determined whether or not two environments where the twins were reared were significantly different? I raise these questions because two environmental settings that are merely different in kind but not in any substantive way may not create a variation in IQ. If this were true, then the lack of variation in IQ scores among the twins may not be evidence that "nature" or genetics takes precedence over environmental factors in determining intelligence, but rather that faulty assumptions were made about the degree of difference between the two familial settings where the twins were placed. A failure to address these sorts of questions raises serious questions about the claims that both Jensen and Herrnstein and Murray make from their research.

The purpose of examining the work of Jensen and Herrnstein and Murray is to show again how 17th and 18th Century beliefs about the inferiority of the black race still linger in attempts to validate them through tests of achievement. By challenging the

notion that standardized tests of achievement are unbiased and objective, the results produced by these tests which often show whites scoring higher than blacks will continue to remain under scrutiny.

The research on the impact of racism on the psyche of black students suggests that black students begin to encounter negative attitudes and beliefs about their skin color as early as kindergarten. In her book White Teacher, Paley (1979) described an encounter she had in a kindergarten classroom where the comments of a white student revealed that he perceived black people in stereotypically negative ways. The following are the comments this child made after listening to the story (with pictures) called "Whistle for Willy," which focused on a young black boy:

> A little later (on the same day that the story was read), on our way to the all-purpose room to do some tumbling, Leo (white student) said to me, "All the children in Willy's book are poor." "Why poor, Leo?" "People with brown skin are poor." "Leo, I know some people with brown skin who aren't poor." "But they look poor," answered Leo, and he ran on ahead.

Paley described another classroom incident where racist beliefs about black people was voiced by a kindergarten child:

> We were looking at a set of pictures, part of a social studies curriculum. A playground fight was pictured. Joanne said, "The poor boy is helping the other poor boy." All the children wore jeans and t-shirts, but the "poor boy" was black.

Paley described a final incident that also revealed white students sometimes harbor negative views about classmates who have black skin. One day she overheard part of a conversation between a white student named Keith and a black student named Fred:

> "Fred, the front of your hands is clean, but the rest of you is dirty." Fred answered, "I ain't dirty."

Such negative perceptions of black people can have a devastating effect on the psyche and self-esteem of black children and adolescents, especially if these views are internalized as truths. In their book Racism and Psychiatry, Thomas and Sillen (1993) discuss how this can occur:

> It is, of course, true that a social system in which "white is right" presents a serious threat to the self-esteem of black Americans. They are bombarded with accusations of inferiority, spoken or unspoken, in the classroom, employment office, courthouse, and the media. As Kenneth Clark observes in Dark Ghetto (1965), "Human beings who are forced to live under ghetto conditions and whose daily experience tells them that almost nowhere in society are they respected and granted the ordinary dignity courtesy accorded to others will, as a matter of course, begin to doubt their own worth."

In elaborating further on the connection between racism and the self-esteem of black children, Thomas and Sillen (1993) allude to the findings of the famous Clark study of the 1930s:

> In their classic investigations in the late 1930s, the Clarks found that black children tended to depreciate themselves when asked to choose between dark-skinned and white dolls in terms of "being bad" and looking nice.

Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986) discuss the relationship between racism and poor academic performance among black secondary school students in public schools. In an article entitled "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the Burden of 'Acting White'," they asserted the following:

> This problem (poor academic performance) arose partly because white Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge that black Americans are capable of intellectual achievement, and partly because black Americans subsequently began to doubt their own intellectual ability, began to define academic success as white people's prerogative, and began to discourage their peers, perhaps unconsciously, from emulating white people in academic striving, i.e., from "acting white." Because of the ambivalence, many black students who are academically able do not put forth the necessary effort and perseverance in their schoolwork and, consequently, do poorly in school.

The issue of racism and poor academic performance among black students is not limited to K-12 schools. Even black students at the college level--particularly those who attend predominantly white colleges--appear to be affected by racism. In her book Blacks in College, Jacqueline Fleming (1984) asserts that black students (mostly males) at the university level achieve below their potential academically and experience high degrees of frustration emotionally. She asserted the following:

> The evidence presented (through this study) makes a straightforward statement about the impact of colleges on black students. In most cases, black students fare better

> in predominantly black institutions. By the same token, black students adjust poorly to predominantly white colleges and show poor cognitive growth.

Fleming (1984) continues:

> Black students at Georgia Tech suffer from some of the worst intellectual deterioration found in a white college in this study. Their academic energies are apparently frustrated by classroom incidents and then withdrawn from the classroom into extracurricular pursuits that afford no intellectual benefit.

The black student's struggle with the issue of race is perhaps illustrated best by Robert Sam Anson (1987) in his book Best Intentions: The Education and Killing of Edmund Perry. Anson describes the struggles and eventual death of a black high school student from Harlem named Edmund Perry who attended Exeter Academy, a private boarding school whose student body consists mainly of young men from white upper middle-class families. Scheduled to attend Stanford following his graduation from Exeter, Eddie died attempting to rob a taxi driver in Harlem during a weekend trip home. In the weeks following his death, Anson talked to several students that had fairly close relationships with Eddie at Exeter. One such classmate made the following statement:

> The last I talked to him, I guess it was a couple months before his death, you could sense a real spiritual exhaustion in his voice. "It sure is rough, dealing with all those white people," he said. You could tell it was getting to him. He was worn out. He was getting tired of the whole thing. All this black and white stuff was really grinding him down, and he

> knew it wasn't going to go away. Yeah, he had gone to Exeter, and, yeah, he was going to Stanford, but he was never going to be a member of the club. He was always going to be Eddie Perry, the smart black.

In an effort to illustrate the relationship between Eddie's death and the racial and cultural tensions he experienced while attending school at Exeter, Anson asserted the following:

> Drugs had not killed Eddie. If there had been PCP in his system at the time of his death, the violence of that evening would have been understandable. but the autopsy had found none, only a trace of marijuana from a joint that might have been smoked as long as a month before. The only villain I had found was something amorphous, not a person or a thing, just a difference called race. It was race--not the fact of it, but the consequences flowing from it--that made Harlem the hellhole that it was, race that had destroyed the schools, race that had made criminality, violence, and idleness seem an altogether normal--and thus excusable--state of affairs.

Explanation Three: Socioeconomic Differences Between Black Students and Teachers

A third area of research that focuses on the problem of black student under achievement centers on economic differences between teachers and students. Since many of the black students attending schools in urban districts come from families that are considered working class or poor, the research in this area is certainly applicable. The literature on SES differences suggests that teachers and administrators often make assumptions about the academic

abilities of students and what they should be given an opportunity to learn based on their economic backgrounds. In a study entitled "Social Class and School Knowledge," ethnographer Jean Anyon (1981) presented her findings from a study on students and teachers in four different social-class communities. She found that the attitudes of students towards school, the attitudes and beliefs of teachers about their students, and what students were given an opportunity to learn appeared to be closely linked to the social class of the community in which the school was located. For example, when teachers in working class and poor settings were asked what they thought about their students and what they needed to know, their responses included:

> They need the basics.
>
> The three R's-simple skills.
>
> They're lazy. I hate to categorize them, but they're lazy.
>
> You can't teach these kids anything. Their parents don't care about them, and they're not interested.
>
> Well, we keep them busy.

Conversely, when teachers in upper middle-class and elite settings were asked to comment on their students, their responses included the following:

> My goal is to have students learn from their experiences.
>
> I try to get them to make sense of their experiences.
>
> They'll go to the best schools and we have to prepare them.
>
> It's not just academics; they need to learn to think.
>
> They will have important jobs, and they need to be able to think things through.
>
> I try to get them to create an environment where they can solve a problem--they manipulate variables and solve a problem.

The differences in how teachers from different social class backgrounds perceived their students and what their students needed to learn were profound. Anyon (1981) stated that many of the teachers in working class settings believed that most of their students were ambivalent about school. Many said that they focused their daily instruction on providing their students with factual information. Most said that they rarely engaged students in discussions. That assumption was that since a great many of the students would not be going on to post secondary institutions, there was little reason to engage them in academic exercises that would push them to think analytically and/or to debate each other in conversation. The aforementioned comments of teachers in upper middle-class and elite settings showed exactly the opposite.

What Anyon (1981) found about teacher attitudes and student social class was also reflected in the research of Ray Rist (1970). In his study of black students and teachers in grades K-3, he discovered that a kindergarten teacher had "ability grouped" her students after only eight days of school and with limited information on each, including no pre-test. Rist (1970) pointed out that the teacher apparently made certain assumptions about the academic abilities and potential of the children in her class based on observed social class distinctions in the children. Coming from a middle-class background, she seated the students who appeared most closely to approximate middle-class values in dress, speech, and behaviors near her desk, gave them special privileges, and called them to answer a most of the questions posed to the entire class. The students seated at the other two tables in the room, further away from her desk, were students whose dress and speech were less reflective of middle-class standards. They received far less attention from the teacher and performed poorer academically than the group at the first table. Again, social class differences between the teacher and students were affecting the quality of the students' education.

The research of John Goodlad also speaks to the issue of student social class and unequal access to knowledge in the

classroom. In his book A Place Called School, Goodlad (1984) asserted the following:

> Minority students and those from the lowest socioeconomic groups have been found in disproportionate numbers in classes at the lowest track levels, and children from upper socioeconomic levels have been found to be consistently over represented in the higher tracks.

Goodlad also asserted that

> Studies have shown there to be lower self-esteem, more school misconduct, higher drop-out rates, and higher delinquency among students in lower tracks. Track placement affects whether or not students plan to go to college and the probability of their acceptance, over and beyond the effects of aptitude and grades._

The work of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) deals with the issue of social class as well. The findings they present in their book Schooling in Capitalist America are consistent with what Anyon (1981), Rist (1970), and Goodlad (1984) found concerning the relation of social class and black student under-achievement. In simple terms, they argued that the manifest purposes of public schooling in poor and working-class settings have been to bolster creative thinking and academic excellence. In reality, schools instead create effective and compliant workers for the industrial workplace through classrooms activities which emphasize order, quietness, punctuality, and perfunctory tasks such as memorizing facts, completing worksheets, and answering yes or no questions.

The research reviewed here suggests that the social class backgrounds of teachers and students tend to define their perceptions of each other. This is important to note because class differences are major aspects of my study. The evidence from these studies suggests that there is usually a correlation between the class background of a student and his/her attitude and degree of interest in school. It is important to find out if the attitudes of black students from different social class backgrounds are similar to or different from the attitudes of white students in these studies. Ultimately, such information can help in determining whether race or social class tends to have the most significant influence on the lives of black students.

Explanation Four: How Cultural Differences Between Students and Teachers Relate to Black Under-Achievement

A fourth body of work pertinent to understanding the problem of black student under-achievement in inner-city schools focuses on cultural differences existing between teachers and students. Closely linked to the issue of cultural differences is the changing demographics within inner-city communities. Sociologist William Wilson provided insights into the latter issue in his book The Truly Disadvantaged (1987). Wilson argued that many of the problems in

this nation's larger metropolitan areas, including those in public schools, have a great deal to do with changing demographics in these areas. Prior to the civil rights movement of the 1960s there existed what he defined as a "vertical integration" of black communities, particularly in northern urban settings. What this means is that before the passage of the civil rights legislation during the 1960s, racist housing laws made it virtually impossible for black people, regardless of level of income or education, to live outside of the black urban community. Consequently, many inner-city neighborhoods were inhabited by black people from all social classes and with varying levels of education. Within these "vertically stratified" communities, children and adolescents from both well-to-do and poor families attended school together and were in constant contact with one another. As a result, all young black youth got the opportunity to observe persons in their immediate environment who were benefiting as a result of attending school. This was concrete evidence that attending school regularly, getting good grades, and going to college could pay off.

However, the socioeconomic make-up of these inner-city neighborhoods began to change in the middle 1960s. With the passage of civil rights legislation and new fair-housing laws, many blacks with the income to move away from the congestion of the city

to more spacious suburb neighborhoods began to do so. This exodus continued throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. This phenomenon has had a devastating effect on black neighborhoods in the inner city. The majority of those left in the cities are those who, for economic reasons, cannot leave. With the "vertical integration" that once existed no longer intact, there are fewer people in the immediate surroundings of these youth to serve as role-models that doing well in school pays off.

Moreover, Wilson (1987) argued that the economic poverty that inner-city youth grow up in is accompanied by a "cultural isolation" that keeps them from "mainstream patterns of behavior". This can put young children and adolescents from the inner cities "at-risk" because schools tend to be middle-class institutions, designed and staffed by middle-class individuals whose social, behavioral, and linguistic expectations for interaction reflect the culture of the middle-class. For example, Wilson (1987) asserted the following:

> In short, the communities of the underclass are plagued by massive joblessness, flagrant and open lawlessness, and low-achieving schools, and therefore tend to be avoided by outsiders. Thus, the residents in these areas, whether women and children of welfare families or aggressive street criminals, have become increasingly socially isolated from mainstream patterns of behavior.

Wilson (1987) also wrote,

> Thus, in such neighborhoods the chances are overwhelming that children will seldom interact on a steady basis with people who are employed or with families that have a steady breadwinner. The net effect is that joblessness, as a way of life, takes on a different social meaning; the relationship between schooling and post school employment takes on a different meaning. The development of cognitive, linguistic, and other educational and job-related skills necessary for the world of work in the mainstream economy is affected.

An explanation of how the "social isolation" experienced by black youth in the inner-city is connected to the issue of cultural incongruence as an explanation of black academic failure in school is found in the work of educational anthropologists such as Philips (1972), Heath (1982), Au and Mason (1983), and Mehan (1980). These researchers argue that the degree to which the norms of interaction in a child's home environment and community differ from mainstream norms of behavior and communication contributes to the degree to which these students will be placed "at risk" in school. For example, Au and Mason (1983) assert,

> We will consider that the minority student's failure to progress well academically can often be traced to a breakdown in communication between the children and their teacher, arising from differences between the customary pattern of communication in school and at home.

Au and Mason present research they conducted with Hawaiian children in school settings to make their case about why culturally

different minority children often do not do well in school. In commenting on their findings, they argue,

> Hawaiian children, like other minority culture children, are greatly handicapped in learning academic content we suggest because the school is ordinarily not adjusted to their ways of learning. As a result, the children appear to be much less competent in school than they appear in other settings. We think that one avenue of improvement is for the school to develop learning situations which are more congruent with those the child has experienced in his own culture.
>
> Elements of cultural congruence and incongruence may be located by comparing the participation structures in the classroom with those in the children's homes and community. According to Schultz, Erickson, and Florio, participation structures involve an understanding, shared by members of a culture, of the manner in which interaction is to be conducted, although individuals in the event probably are not consciously aware of the rules. These rules are thought to govern speaking, listening, and turntaking behaviors. In keeping with the rules, participants are accorded certain communicational rights, but they are also constrained to observe mutual obligations implicit in the interactional arrangements. (Au & Mason, 1983)

The work of Susan Philips with Native American children on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in Oregon also suggests that cultural differences between the home environment of a child and the school often place the student "at risk" in the classroom. For example, Philips asserted the following:

> In summary, Indian children fail to participate verbally in classroom interaction because the social conditions for participation to which they have become accustomed in the Indian community are lacking. The absence of these appropriate social conditions for communicative

> performances affects the most common and everyday speech acts that occur in the classroom. If the Indian child fails to follow an order or answer a question, it may not be because he doesn't understand the linguistic structure of the imperative and the interrogative, but rather because he does not share the non-Indian's assumption in such contexts that using syntactic forms by definition implies an automatic and immediate response from the person to whom they were addressed. For these assumptions are sociolinguistic assumptions that are not shared by the Indians.
>
> There is, on the part of the Indian students, relatively less interest, desire, and/or ability to internalize and act in accordance with some of the basic rules underlying classroom maintenance of orderly interaction. Most notably, Indian students are less willing than non-Indian students to accept the teacher as the director and controller of all classroom activities. They are less interested in developing the one-on-one communicative relationship between teacher and student, and more interested in maintaining and developing relationships with peers, regardless of what is going on in the classroom. (Philips, 1972)

The research of Shirley Brice Heath (1982) also focused on the issue of cultural incongruence between students and school personnel. In an article entitled "Questioning at Home and at School: A Comparative Study," Heath (1982) presented the results of a study in which she looked at differences between the kinds of questions that black working class parents asked their children in their homes and the kinds of questions middle class white parents who were teachers asked their children in their homes. She found that differences did exist, which suggested that the children of the white

middle class parents whose linguistic patterns in the home more closely approximated the patterns generally used in school were better prepared to understand what was being asked as well as how to respond. Heath's work reinforces the importance of having culturally congruent participation structures as described by Au and Mason (1983) and Philips (1983).

Finally, Mehan (1980) summarized the research of Philips, Au and Mason, and Heath about the effects of cultural incongruence between teachers and students in the classroom. In an article entitled "The Competent Student," Mehan (1980) asserted the following:

> The separation of interactional form and academic content unravels the fabric of social interaction in the classroom community and has practical consequences for students. This is as much the case for the student who provides correct academic content without appropriate interactional form, as it is for the student who conforms to the classroom rules for participating in classroom conversation without an accompanying display of academic knowledge. The student who provides academically correct content without casting it in the appropriate interactional form is inviting negative sanction. A history of such behavior can lead a student down a less than satisfactory educational career path. A history of lost opportunities can lead a teacher to believe that a student is unattentive, unexpressive, and the like, because it is in the moment-to-moment give and take of classroom interaction that teachers' expectations are built up and worked out. (Mehan, 1980)

Mehan also argued,

> Research being conducted on the social organization of the classroom is showing that competent membership in the classroom community involves the integration of social behavior and social context. Learning that certain ways of talking and acting are appropriate on some occasions and not others, learning when, where, and with whom certain kinds of behavior can occur, are some of the essential constituents of the stock of social knowledge relevant for effective participation in the classroom community. (Mehan, 1980)

This research on confused incongruities complements emphasis Wilson gives to the social and cultural isolation that characterizes the lives of black, inner-city youth (Wilson, 1987). The combined results of these two phenomena have been negative school experiences. As Grier and Cobbs (1968) comment,

> For him (black child) the long process of education is something akin to the trial of a long-distance runner who is occasionally peppered with buckshot; he may complete the race, but it will take something out of him.
>
> Black children go to school and rapidly come to perceive the formal learning process as different, unnatural, not meant for them, and not really relevant for them. The air they breath, the water they drink, and the words they read all tell them that white people are smart and black people are dumb.

The Rationale for the Support of Racial and Cultural Congruity Between Black Students and Teachers in Inner-City Classrooms

The history of exclusion, discrimination, and violence that black Americans have endured within this nation's system of public schooling has prompted a growing number of black educators and public officials to push for having all black instructional staffs in schools with predominantly black student bodies. For many this is a reasonable request with a logical premise, given the fact that a great deal of the racial and cultural discrimination that black students have endured--and as substantiated by the research--has come via white educators. Those who favor this position argue that black instructors are needed not only to protect black students against intentional and unintentional acts of racial and cultural bigotry, but also to provide them with "role models" academic achievement for black people is possible.

The idea of having only black instructors for black students is not devoid of a philosophic and academic base. For example, researcher Carl Grant (1989) pointed out the following:

> The race and background of the teacher tells them(students) something about power and authority in contemporary America. These messages influence children's attitudes towards school, their academic accomplishments, and their views of their own and others' intrinsic worth.

> By their mere presence they (teachers of color) indicate to students of color that their cultural(and racial) group is respected and academically capable.
>
> The teacher is an important role model to the students in his/her class, and, although successful teaching is not determined by a person's color, many educators are arguing that the growing shortage of teachers of color will have a negative effect on all students, especially students of color.

The research of Sleeter and Grant (1986) also provides support for the notion of having only black instructors for black students. In addressing this issue they state the following:

> Interviews conducted with students of color have shown that many of them are particularly pleased and gratified when they have a teacher of their own background, especially when they are in a school where there are few teachers of color on the staff.

In relation to the shortage of and need for greater numbers of teachers of color, Grant (1989) provided the following statistics:

> As the 1980's began, the shortage of teachers of color was emerging at an alarming rate. In public schools, 91.6 percent of the teachers were white, 7.8 percent were black, and 0.7 were classified as others. By 1986, 89.6 percent were white, 6.97 were black, and 3.4 percent were classified as others. As we move into the 1990s, there are few indicators that the shortage of teachers of color, particularly black teachers, will get better. The dismal figures and the forecast of the number of educators of color working in public schools suggests that the culture of people of color is, and probably will remain, just as proportionally underrepresented.

Those who advocate having closer racial and cultural ties between black teachers and students always point to research that focuses race and culture as the bases for their position. There is

certainly enough evidence to suggest that racial and cultural differences between teachers can be problematic. When these problems occur and as they continue to manifest themselves, it is the students who suffer most. Given the fact that racial and cultural differences appear to be a fundamental antecedent to the problem of black student under achievement, a logical conclusion would be to eliminate the factor that appears to be the cause of the problem. Thus, the push among certain groups of black educators for significantly higher numbers of black educators in predominantly black school districts is not surprising. Accompanying this idea is the assumption that the incidence and levels of delinquency, dropping out, and academic failure among black students would decrease.

However, this has not occurred. What is puzzling about the continued existence of academic and classroom problems for black students is that they are occurring in school districts where one would least expect them to occur. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, both the school and urban district in which I teach have a large percentage of black faculty, administrators, social workers, and paraprofessionals. Even the majority of upper-level officials, including the superintendent and the majority of the school board, are black. Given the high degree of racial and cultural congruity between teachers and students, why have drop out rates and

academic mediocrity and failure continued to plague this district and many others like it?

Although I focused in this study on effort to achieve, rather than on achievement per se, what I learned about effort from the black male high school students I interviewed suggests that in many respects the assumptions fundamental to the notion of role models based on racial and cultural congruity may be flawed. This was clearly illustrated by the student in my classroom, who, in response to my comment, "I bet if I was a white teacher I wouldn't have to ask you but once to be quiet and you would have quieted down and completed all of your work," responded,

> Yeah, you're right, Mr. Robinson. If you were white, we would have quieted down and done our work, 'cause with a white teacher you've got something to prove.

Chapter 3

HOW, WHERE, AND WITH WHOM THE STUDY WAS CONDUCTED

Part One: The Study's Approach

A Rationale for the Research Focus

As stated in Chapter 1, I decided to do this study because I wanted to find out why black students in predominantly black inner-city schools continue to perform poorly academically in spite of the fact that a large percentage of their teachers (and administrators) share their same race. In view of the research in the area of academic failure among black children discussed in Chapter 2, the poor school performance that I was observing, as a teacher in a mostly black inner-city school setting, would be easier to understand if the majority of the instructional and administrative staff were white. Had this been the case, then I and others could attribute black under-achievement to either racial or cultural differences between the children and their teachers.

This, however, is not the case where I am teaching. Where a large percentage of the teachers and administrators in the school

district are black. Given the high degree of racial and cultural congruity between teachers and students in this district, it seems illogical to assume that racism or cultural insensitivity are at the center of this problem. Moreover, one would assume that levels of academic achievement and school attendance would increase given similarities that students and teachers share. This, however, has not occurred. The statistics on academic failure, dropping out, and delinquency (see Chapter 2) show that my school district and school are suffering in each of these areas.

To what can we attribute the persistence of these problems among black inner-city youth? The comment I quoted at the end of Chapter 2 provides a way of making sense of these problems that heretofore has not been considered. Though research to date does not support his assertion, his comment suggests that race is, in fact, linked to black student under-achievement even though teachers and students in this setting share the same race. What this student's comment raises is the possibility that although racial and cultural congruity between black teachers and students may in fact insulate black students from overt and subtle forms of discrimination and misunderstandings, these congruities may not necessarily result in efforts to improve academic performance. His comment also implies that the black teacher-student relationship may in fact be creating a

dynamic that undermines what many have assumed to an important outcome of culturally and racially congruent classrooms, that is, improved academic achievement. Ultimately, his comment suggests that the beneficial aspects of having racial or cultural congruence may become either benignly reversed or may in some way contribute to under-achievement.

As I pondered what this young man said, I began to wonder if he was just responding out of anger in an effort to "get back at me" for the comment that I had made--was he voicing an honest opinion? Regardless of his motivation, his comment has provided a way of making sense of academic under-achievement among black students in inner-city schools that I had not previously considered. Furthermore, if what this young man said is embraced by other black high school students, then it makes sense for those of us in the field of education more carefully to examine the "racial attitudes" of black students in inner-city schools, particularly in relation to teachers who share their same race.

The purpose of my research was to gain further insights into the thinking of young black male students about the issue of race and their classroom teachers. The question that I ultimately wanted to answer was simply, "Does the race of the classroom teacher have an effect on the effort that black male students put forth to achieve

academically in the classroom?" By answering this question, we in the field of education will be able more accurately to make claims as to what cultural and racial congruence accomplishes and what it does not. It is one thing to suggest that having teachers understand culture and racial struggles will create trusting teacher-student relationships and comfortable and caring classroom environments for children. It is quite another to suggest that such relationships and classroom settings will generate greater efforts on the part of students to achieve academically. The questions I asked students in this study were designed to explore the latter notion. What the student in my classroom suggested and what I attempted to find out through this study is whether or not we have placed far too much emphasis on racial and cultural congruity.

Rationale for Focusing the Study Only on Black Males

This study focused on high school level black students who were or who had at some point in time attended a school in the Detroit Public School system. The reasons for focusing exclusively on black males were two-fold. The first had to do with the "feasibility" factor. After conversations with my committee members, we agreed that the important question to be asked before beginning any study should be, "Is this study doable?" We decided that the question I

would answer would need to be crafted in such a way that I would not end up with too many variables to have to account for. For this reason there was a consensus to limit the scope of this study to only male students.

The second reason was that research speaks very strongly to the fact that in the inner cities of this country a great deal of the academic failure that takes place occurs much more often among black males than females.

Collecting Data

To get the information I needed, I interviewed black male high school students about their ideas in this area. I thought that it would be better to do interviews as opposed to having them fill out a survey because in a survey I would be bound to the questions I asked on the survey form. By contrast, if I were personally to interview a student, I would be positioned to probe that student further. For example, if the student were to make a statement that I found ambiguous or that I did not understand, I could say, "I'm not sure what you mean by what you said." Also, in an interview situation I should ask the student to make distinctions between points if the expression of an idea was not clear. Again, I could say, "When you said this, did you mean this or did you mean that?" This

is important to be able to do because if this kind of exchange occurs in conversation, it increases the chances of getting more accurate responses to the questions. Furthermore, an interview also allows the interviewee to say, "I don't understand what you're asking," or to ask, "Do you mean this or do you mean that?" Here, again, unlike responding to questions on a questionnaire, an interview positions the person being interviewed to respond more accurately and honestly.

In essence, I conducted a series of interviews with students versus having them fill out a questionnaire because it would enable me to gain deeper and more accurate insights into their thinking.

Rationales for the Questions I Asked Students

As previously stated, the purpose of this study was to gain insights into the thinking and perceptions of black male high school students in inner-city schools, specifically, about whether they have different perceptions of white and black teachers. To get at this information I asked a series of both general and specific questions.

General Question One:

"Does the racial identity shared by black students and black teachers contribute to students feeling as if they are allowed to put forth less effort in school than they should?"

This area is important in that it is directly related to the issue of cultural congruity as well as to the statement made the student in my classroom. As a reminder, this student said,

> Yeah, you're right, Mr. Robinson. If you were white, we would have quieted down and done our work, 'cause with a white teacher you've got something to prove.

The purpose of this line of questioning was to establish if in fact black students have a sense that the racial identity which they share with their teachers in any way allows them to "slide by" academically, i.e., not to put forth maximum effort to achieve, on the assumption that their teachers understand the pressures, challenges, and disappointments they have had or will encounter because of their race. The issue here is the unspoken assumption that individuals with like experiences share something without its ever being verbalized. My question is, does the relationship that black students have with black teachers result in less effort to achieve because of shared racial experiences?

Specific Questions Related to Question One:

1. Does the fact that you share the same race with many of your teachers carry any special meaning for you?

2. Do you think that your black teachers think about the fact that you are both African-American? If so, how? If not, why not?

3. Does the fact that you have a black teacher provide an incentive for you to put forth more effort or less effort in the classroom?

4. Do you think having black teachers contributes to the academic failure of black students? If so, how? If not, why not?

5. Do you work equally as hard for both black and white teachers? If so, why? If not, why not?

General Question Two:

"Does the racial identity shared by black teachers and black students create a classroom context and teacher-student relationship in which minimal achievement on the part of students is viewed(by students) as permissible?"

What I was interested in finding out in this area was whether or not the dynamics between black teachers and black students are such that students feel that it is okay to "just get by" academically in class.

The issue here is "effort." The questions I asked in relation to this issue were designed to find out if the racial identity that black teachers and students share is in any way tied to the effort they exert to achieve and avoid the mediocrity, under-achievement, and failure that is so prevalent among this group of students. I raised this question because of the comment that was made by the student in my class who said, "...with a white teacher I have something to prove." He suggested he would have put forth more effort in my class

to behave in appropriate ways and to complete his work had I been white. Given his position, my question then becomes why the skin color of the white teacher is an incentive for him to "prove something." Conversely, I wanted to ask what it is about the black skin color of a black teacher that makes him feel he does not have to prove anything. In the context of what this student said, inferring that he has nothing to prove to black teachers suggests that he feels that he has no need to try to excel academically for black teachers.

If student responses to this question reflect an ideology similar to that of the young man in my classroom, then we may be a step closer to understanding why student achievement levels among black male students in inner-city schools remain low in spite of the presence of a large percentage of black teachers.

Specific Questions Related to Question Two:

1. Do you always put forth a lot of effort in your classes?

2. Does the amount of effort you put forth in your classes depend on your teacher?

3. Does the race of the teacher act as an incentive for students to put forth greater effort to achieve in the classroom?

4. Does the race of the teacher have anything to do with the amount of effort that you put forth in the classroom? If so, Why? If not, why not?

5. Is it easier not to put forth effort in a class with a black teacher or a white teacher? Explain?

6. Who makes you put forth more effort, a black teacher or a white teacher? Explain?

7. Who do you usually want to put forth more effort for, a black teacher or a white teacher? Explain?

8. Do black or white teachers seem to allow you to take it easy in their classroom? Why do you think they allow you to do this?

General Question Three:

"Does the shared racial and cultural identity between black teachers and black students in inner-city schools sometimes position teachers to become too sympathetic to the problems of black students and thus begin to view them more as victims than as capable of achievement?"

This general question focused on whether or not the dynamics between black teachers and students positions teachers to "go easy" on students and not demand that they achieve academically.

The specific questions that I asked students focused on whether shared experiences (around the issue of race) with black students positions teachers to be too sympathetic and thus demand less of them. The assumption behind this question is that black teachers are so familiar with the emotional pain and struggles associated with being black that if they sense they are contributing to or pressuring a black student--even if it is to complete work for school--their tendency is to back off.

Specific Questions Related to Question Three:

1. Do you think that black and white teachers equally understand the experiences and struggles of black students and their families?

2. Who has shown you that they understand your daily struggles as a black student, black teachers or white teachers? Both? Neither?

3. Do you think that the fact you share the same race with your black teachers makes them "go easy" on you from time to time? If so, give an example of how this happened?

General Question Four:

"Does the shared racial identity between black students and their black teachers create a classroom situation in which students begin to manipulate or take advantage of the fact that their teacher understands their racial and economic struggles?"

The purpose of this question was to find out if the black teacher and student relationship creates a dynamic that positions black teachers in such a way that they can be manipulated by their students into not pushing them to achieve academically.

An assumption associated with this question is that black teachers identify closely with the struggles of black students because they share the same race. The question I have is whether or not this understanding could also position black students to be able subtly to coax or manipulate black teachers into "going easier on them"

academically because of all the other pressures outside of school that they have to deal with.

Perhaps this is another factor that may be contributing to continued under-achievement by black male students in inner-city schools despite the presence of large numbers of black teachers.

Specific Questions Related to Question Four:

1. Have you ever taken advantage of the fact that you and your teacher share the same race? If so, how? Why? If not, why not?

2. Do you think it is easier to manipulate or take advantage of a white or black teacher? Give examples.

3. Has the fact that you share the same race with your black teachers gotten you out of any work? Explain?

General Question Five:

"How do black students perceive of the differences between black and white teachers? How does this perceived difference (if there is one) affect their classroom experience?"

What I wanted to discover through this question was whether black students perceive their black and white teachers differently. Finding out how these perceptions differ or are the same can provide insights as to which group of teachers, black or white or neither, appear to be more closely associated with academic success and

which group is more closely associated with academic failure or other sorts of school related issues.

If the comments of black students about their black instructors do not focus on issues related to academics, then assumptions can be challenged about how closely tied the presence of large numbers of black teachers is to overcoming scholastic under-achievement so prevalent black male inner-city students.

Specific Questions Related to Question Five:

1. Does it feel different in a black teacher's classroom than it does in a white teacher's classroom? Explain.
2. Who do you generally trust more, white teachers or black teachers?
3. Do black and white teachers treat students the same? If so, how? If not, why not?
4. Who makes classroom work harder, black teachers or white teachers? Why is this so?
5. Does the race of the teacher affect how well you do academically in class? Explain?
6. Does the race of the teacher affect how you behave in class?

Research Setting

The general geographic setting where most of the interviews in this study took place was the city of Detroit. However, within the

city, the interviews took place in several different places. For example, one interview took place at a United Auto Workers Union Hall (UAW). One of the students who agreed to participate in the study had a mother who worked for an automobile company and who had signed him up to participate in a summer youth-recreation program. One of the adult art and photography instructors for this program was my uncle. When I contacted my uncle about whether he knew of high school male students who might agree to participate in this study, he mentioned a young man in this program. After meeting with the young man and explaining what I was doing, he agreed to participate.

I interviewed this young man two times in this setting, which is located on Detroit's east side. This was the only interview I conducted there. The interviews went fairly well, there, although there was a problem in finding time to conduct the interviews. The summer program was fairly structured and instructors were sometimes reluctant to let students leave their classes to go with me for the interviews. We worked around the class schedules for doing the interviews, which actually went well. We were only occasionally interrupted by another summer school student who became curious about what we were talking about with the tape recorder on. After

several said, "Can I get interviewed, too?" the other students eventually wandered away and we completed the interview.

Another setting where five or six of the interviews took place was at participants' homes. In these situations I would set up a time to meet with the student and I would bring my recorder and questions to their home. These interviews were among the longest; other interviews could only be conducted before a football practice or in between or after a church service. Another reason I think that both the quality and length of the home interviews exceeded the others was that there were limited distractions. The only interruptions I experienced respondents' homes were an occasional curious parent or younger sister or brother who wanted to sit in and listen to the dialogue between myself and their son or brother. Most of the time the onlooker appeared quite pleased at the responses of their family member.

A third setting where I conducted at least two interviews was the football field before afternoon practice began. About half of the students I interviewed in this study were student-athletes, and most of these were football players. Therefore, at the time I was conducting these interviews, many of the high school teams were preparing for the upcoming fall season. This meant that most of the young men would be too tired to do interviews in the evenings. So, I

had to schedule interviews with these student athletes either before their morning practices or before their afternoon practice. At one high school I conducted five interviews during a one-week period in the football locker room after the team's morning practices. Given the fact that these young men agreed to talk to me in the early morning prior to practice or immediately after a morning practice session, I think I hurried the interviews somewhat understanding that many had afternoon jobs or other familial responsibilities.

At another high school on the same side of the city, I was simultaneously interviewing another group of high school student athletes who were also preparing for the fall football season. Many of the interviews conducted with this group took place in the high school gymnasium, through which the players had to walk to get to the practice field located in the back of the school. Many of these interviews also had a rather hurried quality to them, in much the same way and for many of the same reasons as the interviews with the players from the other school. However, the interviews were even more abbreviated than the others, simply because many of the students who agreed to talk with me would rarely make it to school early enough to sit and talk with me without being in a hurried state. On average we had only about 10 to 15 minutes to talk before the head coach required them to be on the field. Sometimes this hurried

quality did not allow for the kind of follow-up questioning necessary I wanted to engage in. On two occasions I even had to talk to a student-athlete as he made his way to the practice field.

Procedures Used in Contacting Students

I was familiar with many of the students who participated in this study prior to the time that I interviewed them. After I made a decision to interview a certain student, I would either contact him by phone or drive to a place where I could have a face to face conversation with him to explain to what I was doing, why I was doing it, and what I wanted from him. If the prospective participant said he was interested in participating, I gave him a parental/student consent form to sign and return to me on a date agreed upon for conducting the interview.

Most of the parents were very cooperative in agreeing to allow their sons to participate in this study. A few even asked if they could see the final copy of the study once I finished.

Problems in Carrying out This Study

Most of the students who agreed to participate in the study were quite cooperative. The only problem I encountered was getting students to remember to return consent forms. On several occasions I

was unable to carry out a scheduled interview because a student had not returned the form to me. I had to eliminate two students who had agreed to participate in this study because they continued to forget their consent forms. In spite of their protestations, I did not interview them. Otherwise, for the most part all of the young men who agreed to participate cooperated with me fully.

Limitations of This Study

A study of this nature has its limitations. In particular, it is important not to over-generalize the findings. For example, this project established a connection between academic effort by black male students in urban schools and the fact that they share the same race as many of their instructors. However, the existence of this relationship does not necessarily mean that (a) all black males in urban schools are "at risk" if they have a black teacher; (b) black males in urban schools will perform better academically if they have a teacher who is not black; (c) academic effort and performance among black males will increase if white, Hispanic, or Asian teachers are present in high numbers; (d) predominantly black school districts need actively to involve themselves in recruiting of non-blacks to fill teaching vacancies; (e) all-black school districts need to guard against the formation of all-black teaching faculties in "special schools" like

all-black academies, etc.; or (f) all black school districts need to discourage and actively seek to disassemble any predominantly black faculties in their schools.

On the other hand, the establishment of such a connection does compel serious attention to assumptions about the role of teacher/student racial congruity in overcoming academic failure. Up to this point most of the research in this area has centered on (a) changing demographics within urban communities, or (b) racial, economic, and cultural differences existing between black students and their teachers. Few if any studies have questioned whether or not racial similarities shared by black students and black teachers may in some way contribute to poor effort and thus lack of achievement among students in inner-city schools. If this possibility is borne out by additional research, a serious gap in our understanding of black student under-achievement will have been revealed. The purpose of this study has not been to dismiss established explanations for under-achievement among black students, nor to study achievement directly, but rather to bring a new perspective to an old problem from a documentation of what one set of inner-city black male students said about the relation of their views of white versus black teachers to how much effort they put into achieving in school.

Part Two: Context and Participants in This Study

Schools Attended by Participants

Jefferson High School

This school is a part of the Detroit Public School system. It is a predominantly black school, although some white and Latino students do attend. The student population is around 800-850.

Jefferson is a college preparatory high school. All students who wish to go there must pass a test and have at least a 3.5 GPA. It is also considered a "magnet school" because there are several special programs in which students can get involved, such as athletic teams or social and academic clubs.

Roosevelt High School

Roosevelt High School has a predominantly black student body of approximately 2200-2300 students. Unlike Jefferson or Wilson High School, Roosevelt has no academic requirements for entry. Students attending this school have an array of after school clubs or athletic teams that they can become involved with. One special feature of this high school is its ROTC program. Many students throughout the city attend Roosevelt specifically to get involved with this program.

Kennedy High School

Kennedy High School has a student population of around 2200-2300. Kennedy is a predominantly black school. There are no special academic requirements for entry. Like Roosevelt and some of the other public high schools, students can choose to become involved in many after school clubs and/or athletic teams. Many students are involved in vocational education programs, which means that they attend school for half of the day and then go to a specific work site in the afternoons. Also, the Art Department offers students special training.

Washington High School

Washington High School has a predominantly black student population of approximately 2200. The school is home for students from poor, working-class, and some middle-class backgrounds. There are no academic requirements for attending this school. There are many after school clubs and athletic teams for students to participate in.

Truman High School

Truman High School also has a predominantly black student body of about 2000. This school serves a community with many poor

families, though there are pockets of both working-class and middle-class families. There are no academic requirements to enter this school. There are many after school clubs and sports teams that students can involve themselves with. There is also large and well established ROTC program that draws students from all around the city's west-side.

Eisenhower High School

Eisenhower High School is a comprehensive high school in Mapleville, near Detroit, with an array of extra-curricular activities. The changing demographics of this suburban city have also brought about changes in the student population. Once predominantly Jewish and white, it is now a heterogeneous mix of students from an array of cultural and economic backgrounds.

Garfield High School

This school is also near Detroit, in Cedarville, and is a large comprehensive school that houses about 1800 students. The student body could be described as working class. The racial make up of both the city and the high school is predominantly white.

Hoover High School

Hoover High School is a small all-male Catholic school located in the city of Elmville. It is a private school and students that attend must meet certain academic standards. It houses about 1000 students in grades nine through twelve. A significant percentage of this school's graduates go on to attend college. The student body is mostly white, though some young men of color do attend. The majority of the students are from middle and upper-middle class families.

Adams High School

This school is one the newly created Schools of Choice in the Detroit Public School System. It is a small high school compared to the other major secondary schools. Student enrollment is around 800. There are also certain academic standards that students must meet to be admitted to this school. Students who wish to gain entry have to apply and go through an interview process individually and with a parent.

Taylor Middle School

This school has a student population of around 850. Most of the students are from low SES or working-class families; the majority are black (90%). About ten percent of the school's population is white.

This middle school has the reputation of being a good school academically.

Summary of School Characteristics

Of the ten secondary schools attended by students in this study, seven are a part of the Detroit Public School District. Six of these are senior high schools and one is a middle school. One of the high schools is a School of Choice and another requires that students meet strict academic standards before they will be considered for admission. The other five institutions, considered neighborhood schools, have no formal admission standards or procedures and are attended primarily by students in their communities. The majority of students in these seven schools are black, and most are from poor or working class families. Only one of these schools has a significant number of students who would be considered solidly middle class.

The other three schools attended by students in this study are outside the Detroit Public School System. These schools are all located in Detroit's suburbs. Though somewhat close in proximity, they were also different. Two of the three are public high schools and one is private. The racial and social class make-up of each is distinct from the others. For example, the student population of one of the schools consists primarily of white students from working class and poor

families. A second school population is made up of mostly black and Caldean students from working class and middle class families. The third high school's student population is made up of mostly white students from solidly middle class families.

Portraits of the Students

The following are short biographies of each of the students whom I interviewed for this study. Some of the student biographies are slightly longer than others because of prior knowledge. For example, I had either coached or taught several of the participants prior to my interviews with them. There were also several participants with whom I was not familiar at all before my interviews with them.

Kenny

Kenny was a 16 year-old 10th grade student at Jefferson High School in the Detroit Public School system. Prior to coming to Jefferson, he attended a Detroit middle school for grades six through eight.

Kenny is a good student. He carries over a 3.0 grade-point average. His favorite class is English. He says that he enjoys writing and stimulating class discussions. He is also a member of the varsity

football team and the varsity track teams. He says he wants to get an athletic scholarship and attend either a Big Ten school or a black college in the south. At this point he would like to be an English or Journalism major in college and be a writer for a newspaper. Both of his parents work for the city of Detroit.

This was Kenny's second year at Jefferson High School. He says that he enjoys Jefferson High School because it is small and easy to get to know people.

Mark

Mark was a 12th grade student at Jefferson High School during the 1995-1996 school year. He arrived at Jefferson High during the middle of his eleventh grade school year. He transferred to Jefferson from another Detroit high school.

Mark is a very good student. He carries over a 3.0 grade-point average. He wants to attend college on an athletic scholarship. Even if he does not get a scholarship in athletics he says that he will go to college. He says that he is interested in studying business or law. He is also a member of the school's varsity football and track teams. He now lives with his mother, who is employed by the city of Detroit.

Justin

Justin was a 17 year old senior at Jefferson High School. He attended a private catholic before coming to Jefferson High. He does well academically in school. He has over a 3.0 grade-point average and is focused on attending college. He is also a member of the school's varsity football team.

Justin lives with his father and mother in a middle-class community. His father, who served in the armed forces, is a police officer. His mother has a Masters Degree and is the director of a community organization in Detroit. Justin says that he has thoroughly enjoyed his years at Jefferson High School. He says that the school's "spirit" is what has inspired him to do well in school and in athletics.

Jerome

Jerome was a 16 year old sophomore during the 1995-1996 school year at Jefferson High School. He is an excellent student. He has over a 3.3 grade-point average. Jerome says that he would like to attend college on an athletic or academic scholarship. His preference would be to attend an Ivy League school (Harvard or Yale). At this point he says that he is not sure what he would like to major in, though he enjoys mathematics.

Both of Jerome's parents are graduates of an historically black college in the South. His father is a manager in the Detroit Public Schools. His mother has a Masters Degree and is a mathematics instructor at a Detroit middle school.

Jerome said that what he enjoys most about this high school is the fact that teachers truly care about students and are always more than willing to give them extra help if they need it.

Bobby

Bobby was a 16 year old sophomore at Jefferson High school. He is an excellent student. Currently he has a 3.7 GPA. His favorite classes in school are Science and Mathematics.

His father has been a teacher in the Detroit School System for 22 years and holds both a Bachelors and Masters degree.

Bobby says that he has thoroughly enjoyed attending Jefferson High School up to this point. His long range goals are to enter MIT or the Air Force Academy and major in engineering.

Marcus

Marcus was a 17 year old senior at Hoover High School during the 1995-1996 school year. He and his family live in an upper-middle class community. His father is an middle management

executive in the automobile industry. He also has a Masters Degree in Business Administration. His mother is an elementary school principal. She has a Masters Degree in Educational Administration.

Marcus attended a middle school in the Detroit Public Schools before entering Hoover High School. He graduated from Hoover High School in June of 1996 and will attend Western Michigan University in the fall, where he will major in Engineering/Computer Science and Music. He said he enjoyed both the students and teachers during his high school years. His favorite teacher in high school was his music instructor, Ms. Johnson. He said he enjoyed Ms. Johnson because she saw his potential, worked with him, and pushed him to be the best he could be.

Lamar

Lamar is a 16 year old junior at a new School of Choice. He said that at this point he was not sure where he wants to go to college or what he wants to major in.

Lamar is the brother of Marcus. As I stated above their family lives in an upper-middle class neighborhood. Both of his parents are college educated. His father works for an automobile company and has an MBA. His mother is an elementary school principal and has a Masters Degree in Education.

Michael

Michael was a 15 year old freshman at a high school in Cedarville during the1995-1996 school year. He lives with his mother and his high school age brother in the city of Cedarville. Before moving to Cedarville about three years ago, Michael's family lived on the east side of Detroit.

Michael is an average student. He says that "school is okay" but that he enjoys doing other things more. He is not active in any activities at his school. Michael's mother is not a college graduate but has a well paying job with an automobile company.

Chad

Chad is a freshman at Washington High School. He is an Honors Student with a GPA of approximately 3.7. He lives in a low income housing project. He lives with his mother, who is unemployed. Upon graduating from high school, Chad plans to attend a four-year college or university. He does not have plans for a specific career path.

Antonio

Antonio is a senior at Washington High School. He is a good student with a 3.3 GPA. He lives with both parents in a quiet, solidly

middle class neighborhood. His father is a technical writer for an automobile company, and his mother is a full-time homemaker. He will attend a four-year college in the fall. His career plans are to become an engineer or a commercial artist.

Steven

Steven is a sophomore at Kennedy High School. He is in the school's honors program and carries a 3.8 GPA. Steven lives in a low income area. His father is employed by a newspaper as a laborer, and his mother is a secretary. Steven plans to attend a four-year college upon graduation from high school, and his goal is to become an attorney.

Theotis

Theotis is a sophomore at Eisenhower High School in Mapleville. He is an average student with approximately a 2.2 GPA. He lives with both parents in a middle-class neighborhood in Mapleville. At this point he is unsure of his plans following graduation from high school. He stated that attending college or some sort of trade school are available options.

Quinton

Quinton is an eighth-grade student at Taylor Middle School. He lives with both parents in a working-class neighborhood. His father is an hourly employee for one of the Big Three auto makers and his mother is a secretary. Quinton is a fairly good student with a 2.7 GPA. At this point he is unsure of his plans following graduation from high school. He said that attending a four-year college or university is an option he would consider.

Tony

Tony is a junior at Roosevelt High School. He lives with his mother in a quiet working-class neighborhood. His mother is a legal secretary for a large law firm in downtown Detroit. He is a good student, having maintained a 3.0 GPA. After graduation from high school, he plans to attend a four-year college. His career plan is to attend law school and become an attorney.

Ethan

Ethan is a senior at Roosevelt High School. He is a good student and carries a 3.2 GPA. He lives with both parents in a middle-class community. His father is an engineer who works for a local firm in the Detroit Metropolitan area, and his mother is a full-time

homemaker. Ethan plans to attend a four-year college upon graduation from high school. Like his father, he plans to become an engineer.

Rasheed

Rasheed is a junior at Roosevelt High School. He is a good student and has over a 3.0 GPA. Rasheed lives with his mother in a poor neighborhood. Rasheed was reluctant to share information about his mother's employment or her employment status. Though he is unsure of his plans following graduation from high school, he stated that he would like to attend a four-year college or university.

Reggie

Reggie is a senior at Roosevelt High School. He is an average student, with a GPA falling within the 2.0 - 2.5 range. He lives in a working class neighborhood with both parents. Reggie plans to attend a junior college following high school graduation and then pursue a bachelor's degree at a four-year university. He is uncertain of his career plans.

Curtis

Curtis is a senior at Roosevelt High School. He lives in a working-class neighborhood with his mother. Curtis is a good student, having maintained a 3.0 GPA. He plans to attend a four-year historically black college after graduation from high school. He wants to pursue a career in business or computer science.

Lawrence

Lawrence is a senior at Roosevelt High School. He lives with both parents in a working-class neighborhood. He is an average student having maintained a 2.5 GPA. Lawrence wants to attend a four-year college, although he stated attending a junior college initially would be an option to help improve his GPA. He wants to pursue a career in business.

Daniel

Daniel is a freshman at Truman High School. He lives with his mother and sisters in a poor neighborhood. His mother is employed as a waitress, and his father works for an automobile company as an hourly employee. Daniel is an average student. He has a 2.2 GPA. At this point, Daniel stated that he does not want to attend college; rather, he plans to apply for entry into the police academy with the

city of Detroit following high school graduation. If he is not accepted at the police academy, he plans to join the armed forces.

Summary

There were both similarities and differences among the students in this study. First of all, in terms of their similarities, all are black; all were in some way associated with the Detroit public schools; and most were involved in some extra-curricular activity at their school, such as participation in team sports, playing in the school band, or active involvement in the school's ROTC program. Only one of the 20 students said that he was not involved in any non-academic activity or academic related club.

Another similarity among these students was that all were moving towards graduation. Obviously all of the students were in school. Yet the comments clearly suggested that some are more interested in school and doing better academically than are others.

The differences among these students were primarily in relation to their social class backgrounds. Ten of the students in this study were from middle class families. Either one or both of three parents of these students had a college and/or graduate degree. Descriptions of their parents occupations suggest that most had individual or combined salaries that exceeded 50,000 dollars. The

parents of the students from middle class families were employed but did not have as much formal education. Most were at least high school graduates. Some students said that they thought that their parents may have attended college for a couple years. These student's descriptions of their parent's jobs suggested that most had secure forms of income.

Some of the parents of students in the low SES cohort worked and some did not. The students who had parents who worked described their employment as inconsistent. Though none of he parents of students in this social class had college degrees most had completed high school. Some mentioned that their families periodically receives government assistance.

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In Chapter 4, I will discuss what I learned from my data. My findings will focus on the comments of student about their perceptions of their teachers. I will pay particular attention to the patterns that emerged with respect to the students' SES backgrounds in relation to their comments about the race of their teachers. I will highlight this information by focusing on the comments of three students from different SES backgrounds.

In Chapter 5 discussion will center on whether the "effort" or "lack of effort" that black male students put forth in the classroom is

in any way connected to the race of their teachers. I will discuss this issue in relation to the comment of the student in my class who said he felt as if he had more "to prove" to white than black teachers. Again SES differences among the students will be an important factor when analyzing their comments on this issue.

Chapter 4

THE STUDENTS' VIEWS OF THEIR WHITE AND BLACK TEACHERS

The Overall Argument

The main argument of this thesis addresses the contradiction between what black students say about black teachers and their apparent lack of effort to achieve academically, as documented by studies of student achievement in predominantly black urban schools.

I became interested in how black students perceive their teachers by what a student in my eighth grade government class said:

> Yeah, you're right, Mr. Robinson. If you were white, we would have quieted down and done our work, 'cause with a white teacher you've got something to prove.

This comment suggested that his lack of effort to complete his work was tied to the fact that I was black and not white. In fact, he asserted that if I had been white he would have sat quietly and completed his assignment. The question this raised was whether

other black male high school students in urban schools shared his perspective. This led me to conduct a study to help me better understand the perceptions of black students about their teachers. Ultimately, my interest is in whether perceptions like those of my student about black teachers--particularly their race--is in any way connected to the under-achievement so prevalent among black students in urban settings.

What I found was that these black students' perceptions of their teachers were consistent with research in some ways and inconsistent in others. Their views about white teachers were not surprising; they were consistent with the research in this area, in that there was not a feeling of trust in their relationships with white teachers. Research on the experiences of black students with white teachers often depicts students struggling to achieve academically and teachers spending inordinate amounts of time disciplining them (see Chapter 2).

Conversely, I initially found puzzling how these black students viewed their black teachers, in light of the pervasive under-achievement among black students in urban schools. With students in such settings doing so poorly, one would assume that positive comments about teachers, black or white, would be few, even from those students doing relatively well in school. Yet surprisingly, these

black students generally made positive statements about their black teachers and said they believed these teachers generally perceive them in positive ways. These comments puzzled me because research usually associates positive perceptions of teachers with academic environments and negative perceptions with less-achieving environments, such as the district where I conducted my study. Yet, my data suggest the opposite for such an environment, even with increasing numbers of black faculty in urban schools. How could this apparent contradiction be explained?

The argument I have extracted from my results focuses on what I have identified as the paradoxical nature of the black teacher-student relationship. Specifically, the positive perspective and feelings black students hold about their black teachers may actually contribute to the under-achievement that persists among black students in urban schools, through the factor of effort. This position evolved from my student's comment, as a challenge to the widely accepted view that schools should ensure a high degree of cultural and racial congruity between teachers and students. His comment raised for me the possibility that cultural and racial congruity might actually produce unintended consequences.

Consider, in the context of the many positive statements that the black students in this study made about their black teachers, that

part of my student's comment that he would have quieted down and completed his work if I were a white teacher. Assuming that he felt, like many of his peers, positive about black teachers, why would he say to me, his black instructor, that he would have quieted down and completed his work if I were white? The answer I believe this study compels us to ponder is that it was the precisely our shared racial identity that allowed him to do what he wanted to in my classroom, that is, to interact with his peers rather than complete his work. This line of reasoning further suggests is that his and the others' noise and inattention to their work were not signs of disrespect or ill feelings towards me, but rather were signs of trust.

Consider also the last part of his comment, about having nothing to prove to me but feeling he has something to prove to a white teacher. I suspect that the positive feelings he and other black students experience in classrooms with black teachers encourages them to feel free to be themselves and not obligated to disprove any stereotypes they may assume white teachers have of them. Thus, his comment about not having anything to prove to me was perhaps an acknowledgment of his belief that I did not stereotype him in relation to his race, because race is a characteristic he and I share. Consequently, there was less "on the line" or "to prove" each day with a black teacher than with a white teacher. Black students may

assume that not completing an assignment or getting an average or poor grade from black teachers will be defined as "refusing to complete one's work" or failing to meet one's potential. By contrast, they may also believe that not performing well in a white teacher's classroom will confirm suspicions that they are incapable of doing better.

How the Findings Are Organized

The argument sketched above is developed below in a set of assertions that emerged from my interviews. The order in which I present the assertions mirrors my overall argument about how black students' perceptions of their black and white teachers might inadvertently contribute to reduced effort.

The first group of assertions concerns the black students' perceptions of white teachers. The second group focuses on their perspectives on black teachers. These sets of assertions provide the backdrop for a final assertion to be presented in this chapter, which addresses differences in what black students feel they have to prove to black versus white teachers. This latter analysis leads to possible ways of reconciling the apparent contradictions between what black students say about black teachers and how much effort they actually exert academically.

Of the seven assertions that emerged during my analysis, only two (the first and the seventh) resulted from students responding directly to a question. For example, the basis of the first assertion to be presented below was the direct question I asked all the students participating in this study: "Do you think that there are differences between black teachers and white teachers?" Each student responded by answering either "Yes," "No," or "I'm not sure." Because I asked this question directly, I knew precisely how many students responded in the affirmative to it and how many responded negatively.

Assertion seven also emerged as a result of a question I directly asked each student: "Do you feel you have something to prove to white teachers that you do not have to prove to black teachers?" Again, there was no guesswork involved in determining whether or not a student responded to this question, because I posed it to each of them.

However, assertions two through six were generated in a much different fashion. These assertions did not emerge from questions asked directly to each student. Rather, they came about as a result of similarities in student responses to very general, open-ended questions, or across a variety of questions. Thus the interpretation of these assertions is much more problematic, because there was not a

one-to-one correspondence between questions asked and student responses, as was the case for assertions one and seven. For example, assume that 12 of the 20 students said they think white teachers have negative views of black students. The fact that such responses were not generated by a specific question (e.g., "Do you think white teachers have negative views of black students?") means that their actual statements in support of this notion may have emerged at any point during the interview. It is also possible that these responses emerged as "side-bars" to conversations focusing on different questions. For example, a student may have been talking about the his perceptions of differences in how black and white teachers discipline black students, when he suddenly commented, "You know, when I think of it, I think I do believe that white teachers have negative views of black students." This kind of discontinuity between interview questions and the assertions formulated from the students' responses is a natural consequence of the open-ended, conversational style of interviewing I used.

Why is this important to note? If all the students were not asked the same questions, then we cannot be sure where those students stand on the topic in focus if they did not express an opinion one way or the other on the position I eventually articulated in the assertion. For example, assume that during the course of the

interviews only eight of the 20 participants stated that they believe white teachers hold negative views of black students. Also assume that the point of view of the eight becomes formulated as an assertion. What we can then be sure about is that at least eight of them feel that white teachers view black students negatively. But we cannot be so sure of what the other 12 students feel about this, because if they did not offer an opinion during their interview, that could be because I did not ask them about it directly--not because they do not share that belief with the eight who did express it. In short, whether or not the 12 believe white teachers hold negative views about black students cannot be determined without talking with them about this further, and explicitly.

Some might consider this to be a serious weakness of my study. They could argue that this study's results are inconclusive or misleading, because the actual numbers of students who agree or disagree with what an assertion articulates may be higher or lower than what I am presenting. On the other hand, the positive aspect of generating assertions from across all of what these students said, whether or not they were asked directly about what each assertion addresses, is that many of the views I am presenting were offered to me spontaneously and unsolicited, which strengthens the possibility

that what they said reflects what they believe, rather than their second guessing of what I wanted them to say.

How Student Responses Were Selected for Quoting

For a number of the assertions I present below, I have chosen to present the comments of three students, one from each of three different social class backgrounds, in order to illustrate the role that social class plays in how the student's views were similar and different. For other assertions, I did not have sufficient comments from these three, so I also quoted other students whose views reflected the perspectives captured in those assertions.

My overall rationale for highlighting the comments of some students and not others was dictated by what students actually said. For example, in some instances a student's responses were not extraordinary in any sense--such responses were often terse or evasive. In these cases it was difficult to sort out precisely what a student was intending to say. I do not mean to convey, however, that these students' views are not important, for they certainly are. Nonetheless, some students were simply clearer and more thorough in expressing their thoughts, and so I highlighted them.

The three students I chose to highlight were among those who were clear and thorough. In addition to these characteristics, these

three also held views that were consistent with other students who shared their social class background, they appeared to have a solid grasp of the questions I was asking, there was usually little hesitation in their responses and few requests to have questions repeated, and they were willing to respond candidly to what I was asking. At no point with these three students did I detect a hidden agenda or any attempts to please me by giving me the answers they thought I was looking for. They were consistently concise and to the point. The final reason for my selection of these three student to highlight was their extensive experiences with both black and white teachers.

The three students I have highlighted are Kenny, Steven, and Rasheed. Kenny is currently a student at Jefferson High School and is from a middle-class background. Steven is currently attending Kennedy High School and comes from a working-class family. Rasheed attends Roosevelt High School and is from a low socioeconomic background. Table 4.1 below shows the social class backgrounds of all the students I interviewed.

Table 4.1

Middle Class	Working Class	Low SES
Kenny	***Steven***	***Rasheed***
Antonio	Lawrence	Chad
Bobby	Michael	Curtis
Ethan	Quinton	Daniel
Jerome	Reggie	
Justin	Tony	
Lamar		
Marcus		
Mark		
Theotis		

How These Students View Their White and Black Teachers

The following are the main assertions that emerged from my interviews with the 20 black male high school students who participated in this study. The questions that produced these assertions centered on whether and how students perceived the differences (if any) between their black and white teachers.

Assertion One

First and most generally, concerning these black male students' opinions about black and white teachers, there was clearly an overall

consensus that black teachers differ from white teachers in fundamental ways. My first assertion, therefore, is that these **black male high school students believe that there <u>are</u> significant differences between black and white teachers.**

This is an assertion that emerged from responses to a question I asked each student directly: "Do you think that there are differences between black teachers and white teachers?" The problematic aspect of trying to get at what these students actually believe about black and white teachers was figuring out a way to ask this question without suggesting that differences necessarily exist. I attempted to avoid saying to students, "Tell me about the differences that you see between black and white teachers," or asking, "What do you think are the differences between black and white teachers?" I attempted to phrase the questions in such a way as not to suggest there was a preferred answer or even that the question was relevant. Asking questions this way allowed the students to state what they really believe about differences between black and white teachers.

My analysis of their responses to this topic showed that a majority in fact believe that black teachers and white teachers differ. Eight of the ten middle-class students in the study made assertions to this effect, as did five of the six working-class students. Three of

the four students from low SES families also held views about differences between black and white teachers. In all, 16 of the 20 students made statements suggesting they believe black and white teachers differ. Only four students made statements contrary to this assertion.. Two of these four students were from the middle-class, one was from the working-class, and one was from a low SES background.

Kenny is an example of a middle class student who believes that white and black teachers differ:

> There's a huge difference in the way black teachers and white teachers relate to students.

Kenny's point of view was more or less representative of the majority of the other middle class students except for two of them. One of the middle class students who did not agree totally that black and white teachers differ from each other was Mark. He stated that though he believe there are some differences between the two groups, he was not willing to say unequivocally, as did other students in this group, that black and white teachers are different. He appeared to be more comfortable with the position that the individual differences that exist between black and white teachers are less a matter of race and more a matter of basic differences in the personality or beliefs of the individual teacher.

The other member of this middle-class cohort who did not think black and white teachers differ was Justin. When asked about this, he quickly responded, "I don't see any differences in black and white teachers."

The comments of Steven, of the working class cohort, suggest that he believe differences do exist between the two groups. For example, Steven said,

> Some black teachers are not as extreme as others, but they let you know (in the beginning of the year) who is in control. They tend to talk about rules more...White teachers in the beginning of the year are very timid.

Steven's responses were representative of the majority of other working-class students with the exception of Lawrence. Lawrence's comments suggest that he views both in very similar ways. In making this point, he commented,

> I don't accuse white teachers of doing what a black teacher wouldn't do...It all depends on the teacher. I've had some white teachers come into the room and did not teach us anything, but I've had some come in and take time and teach us some things...the same is true for black teachers.

He concluded by saying, "Naw, it's not a matter of race."

When the question of differences between black and white teachers was asked of Rasheed, a member of the low SES cohort, his response was, "There is a difference in black and white teachers. He went on to say,

> Black teachers want to see everybody learn. White teachers care about you, but if you show no effort they will leave you alone...white teachers care but they give up quickly.

Rasheed's responses were similar to those of two other students in this cohort, Curtis and Daniel. The only low SES student to disagree with Rasheed, Daniel, and Curtis was Chad. When asked about differences between black and white teachers, Chad replied,

> I don't feel that there are differences between black and white teachers. White teachers (like black teachers) are just trying to teach. They don't hold grudges against black students.

These findings suggest that a significant number of these black male students do believe that white and black teachers are different, and that race as a factor that makes a difference in how teachers behave towards students, particularly black students. Finally, these findings show that the belief that black and white teachers differ is not necessarily tied to the social class of the student. Clearly, there were enough poor, working-class, and middle-class black students who believe that white and black teachers differ to support the assertion that perceptions of race in relation to teachers is fairly homogenous along social class lines.

Although their comments clearly suggest that these black students believe black and white teachers differ in a general sense, a close analysis of their comments also revealed that they believe these two groups of teachers differ in very specific ways.

Assertion Two

Unlike the first assertion, the second assertion did not rise from responses to a specific question, but rather it emerged from extended conversations related to assertion one. In listening to student comments about differences between black and white teachers, one theme that continued to appear in their comments was that most believed **white teachers generally harbor negative views of black students**. Although not all the students made statements to this effect, a significant number did. Specifically, seven of the ten middle-class students made comments consistent with this assertion.

For example, Kenny said, "White teachers place stereotypes on black young men," and Jerome said,

> A white teacher may look at me (black student) and say `he doesn't look like a braniac...but rather like a B or C student.'

Ethan said,

> White teachers really think black students come to school to socialize.

The other three middle-class students did not make statements that clearly denoted that they perceive white teachers in negative ways.

Only two of the six working-class students of the working class made comments to this effect. Steven did not make comments in support of this belief. Michael, however, said,

> White teachers sometimes see black students entering their classroom and assume that he's probably from Detroit, a trouble-maker and probably has a weapon.

Among the low SES students, three of the four said they believe white teachers hold negative views of black students. For example, Rasheed said, "White teachers don't want black students to waste their time."

Although the students in this study were not directly asked, "Do you think white teachers have negative perceptions of black students?" just over half (12) said that at some point in their school experiences they had observed white teachers make comments and/or behave in ways that were negative. More specifically, they said they believe that white teachers generally think of black students as being more social than academic in their orientation less academically capable than white students, and lazy. Again, the issue of race appears to be an important factor the shaping of black male perceptions of teachers.

The social class patterns were also quite interesting. Seven of the 12 students who held this belief were from middle class backgrounds; two were from working class families; and three were from the low SES cohort. These numbers suggest is that students from middle class and low SES backgrounds tend to be more acutely sensitive to issues related to white teachers, racism, and the impact

on their school experiences than students from working class families.

It was not surprising that the students I interviewed made statements that gave rise to this assertion. It would have been surprising if they had not. In a great deal of the research focusing on black under-achievement in inner-city schools, issues related to racial and cultural incongruity are fairly common. The implication, of course, is that racial and cultural differences may be antecedents of the academic problems that students experience.

Assertion Three

The students' comments about black and white teachers gave rise to a third assertion, **black students believe that white teachers care little about them and act in distant and unfriendly ways towards them.** This perspective on white teachers is consistent with assertion two and with the research on black student under-achievement in inner-city schools. Also like assertion two, assertion three did not emerge as a result of a direct question, but rather from comments made by students across my interviews with them.

This issue was discussed by several of the middle-class students, including Marcus, Bobby, and Theotis. Two students from

working class backgrounds who addressed this issue were Steven and Tony, as did two students from the low SES cohort, Rasheed and Daniel.

However, those making this point were only seven of the total of 20 students in the study, which means that 13, or the majority did not speak to this issue during the interviews. The question then is whether the 13 students who were silent on this topic in agreement with the other seven but simply did not speak about it? Or does their silence suggest they disagreed with the seven students from whose responses this assertion arose? Without knowing more information, it is difficult to be certain about these 13 students' views on this issue.

Assertion Four

Yet another assertion is that **black male students believe that white teachers watch black students closely in their classrooms and are distrustful of them.**

The comments that gave rise to this assertion, although not widely held, are again consistent with the general belief among these black students that white teachers have negative views of them (assertion one) and that they care little about them and act in unfriendly ways (assertion two). These comments suggest that those making them believe white teachers spend an inordinate amount of

time focusing on black students--particularly black males--in the classroom are very distrustful of them and assume they will make trouble if not closely monitored.

The theme of this assertion was addressed by only three of the 20 students in this study. None of the middle-class students spoke to it, only two of the six working-class students mentioned it, and only one low SES student said they agreed with this view. The small number of students holding this view suggests that it is not a widespread belief.

The general sense I get about these students' views of white teachers is not positive. Their comments suggest they generally believe that white teachers do not perceive or interact with them in positive ways. However, the views of these same students of perceptions of black teachers were much different, as I will now demonstrate.

Assertion Five

In closely analyzing the comments of these black students about their black teachers, one of the first contrasts we see with their views of white teachers is the belief that black teachers are generally more familiar with black students' thinking and personal experiences. Collectively, comments of this nature led to a fifth

assertion, which is that **these black male students believe that black teachers are knowledgeable of the mind-set and experiences of black students.**

This assertion was not generated from the responses of students to a specific question. I did not ask students, "Do you think that black teachers understand black students better than white teachers?" The assertion was instead developed by looking at similar student responses to the general question, "Do you think that there are differences between black an white teachers?" In all, 13 of the 20 student participants in this study said they believe their black teachers better understand their feelings and how they think about issues than do their white teachers. Five, or one-half of the ten middle-class students made statements to this effect. Five of the six working-class students also made such statements, as did three of the four students from low SES backgrounds.

The fact that I did not directly ask each of the students if they thought that black teachers understood black students better than white teachers, means that I cannot be sure of the positions of the other seven students who did not speak to this issue. Although they, too, may have believed that black teachers understand black students better than white teachers as well, the fact that I did not ask them directly means that this can only be an assumption, not a

certainty. Still, the numbers of these black students who believe that black teachers understand black students better than white teachers do may be more substantial than I have shown.

The following are examples of the sorts of comments that students made in relation to this assertion. During a general discussion of perceptions of black and white teachers, Kenny said:

> Ms. Davis was my favorite teacher. She taught African American History and sociology. She relates well to students particularly black students. She knows what we're going through at this point in our lives.

Kenny also stated,

> Black teachers can relate to black students better than white teachers...white teachers don't know what (us) black students are going through...or what we like to do.

And,

> White teachers are not well informed about the lives of black students...black teachers know where we are coming from...they have done some of the same things that we have done.

Four other students in this social class supported the notion that black teachers understand black students better than white teachers do. One of the four was Lamar, who said, "I relate better to black teachers . . . I think they understand me more." Another was Jerome, who commented, "Black teachers can relate to you." The other five students in this social class were silent in relation to this assertion.

In the working class cohort, Steven's comments were representative of five of the six students who believe that black teachers understand black students better than white teachers do. For example, Steven asserted:

> Black teachers are more relaxed with black students because they grew up in a black city...white teachers grew up in a white city...they are raised differently.

He went on to say, "Black teachers know how black kids act."

The only student in the working class category who was in disagreement with the theme of assertion three was again Reggie.

Among the students from low SES backgrounds, Rasheed's comments were representative of the point of view of three of the four students in this group. Rasheed made the following statement:

> Black students feel more comfortable and at home with black teachers.

The only student in this social class that disagreed with the majority opinion was Chad.

As mentioned above, 13 of the 20 students in this study made statements that supported this assertion, which was 65% of the total number of participants. This is important because it represents over half of the black male students interviewed. Once again, the factor of race appears to be significant in explaining how black male students view black and white teachers. In looking at this assertion in relation

to the students' SES background, we again see a rather homogeneous pattern, in that their responses did not vary by SES status.

The fact that black teachers are perceived by black students as being more knowledgeable about their experiences and mind-set is certainly a more positive viewpoint than their position on white teachers. From this, one might assume that the presence of a teacher whom the student believes understands him better would create the kind of interpersonal help and classroom atmosphere in which a student would flourish academically. Yet, these positive viewpoints may not be enough to motivate black students to achieve, but may instead be part of the reason why black students have continued to exhibit average or poor academic performances in classrooms, even when the instructor is black. A belief by a student that the teacher cares and understands many of his disadvantages will not necessarily inspire that student to greater achievement. It can, as I am suggesting, instead, invite the student to put forth less effort in class, on the rationale that an understanding teacher will always give the student the benefit of the doubt in relation to grades and behavior whenever these are brought into question. The understanding that the teacher has of the student's home life and life experiences can be turned into a tool of manipulation by a clever student. If schoolwork is not completed or if a student's behavior is

less than desirable, the student can always depend on the teacher or the administrator understanding their circumstances, thus getting them more time or otherwise excusing their actions.

Again, we must consider the possibility that racial and cultural congruity between teachers and students may be functioning in a paradoxically to create negative instead of positive results.

Assertion Six

Another set of comments from my conversations with these black students suggests the assertion that **they generally believe that black teachers care about them, have high expectations for them academically, and work to ensure that they will have an opportunity to learn by running very disciplined classrooms.**

As with assertions two, three, four, and five, this one did not come about as a result of student responses to a question that I posed directly to them. Rather, it emerged from an analysis of responses to the general question I asked all of the participants, "Do you think there are differences between black and white teachers?"

The results of my analysis showed that only three of the ten middle-class students said they believe that black teachers are more demanding academically than white teachers. Seven of the ten

students in this cohort were either silent or said that there were no differences. Only two of the six students in the working class group said they believed that black teachers work students harder than white teacher do. Only among students from the low SES cohort did half or more of the students agree that black teachers worked students harder than white teachers. In all, only seven of the total number of student participants made comments to support this assertion.

Kenny, the student I have been featuring among the middle class cohort, made no comment in relation to this assertion. Six other students from this social class were also silent on this issue. There were, however, three middle-class students who made comments which showed their support of this assertion. One of these was Marcus, who said,

> Black instructors are harder on black students...they challenge you more than white teachers.

Another was Bobby, who said, "Black teachers won't let you give up."

Among the working class cohort, two of six students made comments reflecting their agreement with the idea that black teachers are harder academically than white teachers. One of these students was Steven, who commented,

> Lots of women don't have control but black men...the kids will always listen to black men...they don't even have to say nothing...black men have that strong look at the beginning.

The other working-class student who made comments supporting assertion four was Tony, who said,

> Black teachers in Detroit Public Schools control their classrooms . . . black students just run over white teachers in the Detroit Public Schools, white teachers don't say nothing back to black kids so they just run right over them and think nothing of it.

Of the other four students in this cohort, the one who expressed a dissenting opinion was Reggie, who said,

> In a white classroom, you walk in and know that the white teacher will have you working, but in a black classroom, you don't know what to expect.

The other three students in the working-class cohort made no comments in support of this notion.

Of the four students in the low SES cohort, both Rasheed and Daniel made comments that expressed their support of this assertion. For example, Rasheed said,

> Black teachers get upset quick (in the classroom) because they get sick of black students acting ignorant and not wanting to learn.

Daniel commented:

> Black teachers keep the hard (students) in line like a sheep dog and a stick.

This assertion not only affirms the general notion that black males view black and white teachers differently, it also specifically

suggests that some see the two groups differently in terms of their academic expectations and the management of classrooms. Several of the students said that black teachers have high expectations academically of black students. Others stated that black teachers do not allow a lot of mischief in their classrooms.

Without taking into account the 13 students who were silent on this issue, some interesting findings emerge in relation to the SES background of the seven students who spoke to this issue. Three (of 10) were from middle class backgrounds; two (of 6) were from a working class families; and two (of 4) were from the low SES cohort. These numbers suggest that the notion of black teachers being more demanding academically and running very structured classrooms is an ideology that is less important among middle class and working class black male students than among those from poor families. (I assume this interpretation of the data might change significantly if we knew the opinions of the 13 students who did not speak to this issue.)

An explanation of how a belief among some black students that black teachers are both harder on black students academically and run more disciplined classrooms might result in lower academic achievement is a question that needs to be addressed. To believe that black teachers are academically more rigorous and run more

disciplined classrooms does not necessarily mean that black students will enter a black teacher's classroom and work harder and behave better than they would in a white teachers room, though the logic for this occurring is certainly present. The statistics on black student achievement are certainly a testament to the fact student beliefs alone do not necessarily mean higher achievement.

Again, I argue that the relationship between black teachers and students is in some ways paradoxical. What one assumes that racial congruity and positive student perceptions of teachers may produce is not necessarily what happens. The fact that black students believe that black teachers are harder academically and run more disciplined classrooms also suggests that these teachers care about their job and the students that they teach. Though this perspective of a teacher may inspire some students to work harder, it can also produce a different result. For example, some students may see this kind of dedication within a teacher (or teachers) as an opportunity to put forth less effort. The rationale of the student here is the fact that the teacher cares, positions me to be able to both do less academically and behave as I want. The student's assumption may be that the caring nature of the teacher will lead him/her to be long suffering and patient. In effect, the student takes advantage of the fact that teachers care.

In and of itself, this is not hard to believe. In fact it probably happens all the time. However, when this phenomenon is used as a framework for making sense of academic under-achievement among black students with caring hard working teachers, it is easier to understand how the fact that black teachers and black students share the same race might create a complex relationship that can be quite paradoxical in nature.

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In comparing these black students' perceptions about white teachers with their perceptions about black teachers, I have argued that one might assume black students would experience a greater degree of academic success in the classrooms of black teachers, since it stands to reason that any student should perform much better academically with a teacher who they believe is more knowledgeable about how they think, who understands them in a personal sense, and who runs a disciplined classroom to ensure that all students achieve academically. Conversely, one might assume that students in general would do poorly academically in the classrooms of teachers who they believe have negative perceptions of them, who care about them very little, and who are very distrustful of them as people.

The black students I interviewed, as shown in the presentation of assertions above, described their white and black teachers in ways that are consistent with what the literature suggests happens in classrooms with white teachers. If the majority of teachers of the students in this study had been white, then the under-achievement of the black students in this district more generally would make sense as well. But a large percentage of teachers in this district are in fact black. Assuming that the larger population of students in the district shared with the students I studied the latter's' positive beliefs about black teachers, then one would expect higher academic achievement in the district than is the case (see Chapter 2). This raises what has been the key question for this study, how to explain this level of under-achievement among students who might hold the kinds of positive views of black teachers as the students I interviewed.

I have suggested earlier that this apparent contradiction may be, at least in part, the result of these positive views. Although, again, I did not study directly the relation of views about white and black teachers to achievement and failure per se, what I will present below, about their views on "proving" something to white teachers, is central to the link I am proposing may exist between racial congruity and efforts to achieve academically.

Assertion Seven

A way of making sense of this apparent contradiction between positive views of black teachers and academic was suggested by the responses of the students I interviewed to the question of whether they feel they have more to prove to white teachers than they do to black teachers. These students' responses to this question--which was asked to each of them directly-- were similar in some respects to the ideas expressed by my student whose comment started the thinking that led me to this study. .

A total of ten (50%) of all the students said that they do in fact feel they have "something to prove" when they are in classes with white teachers. Six of the ten students (60%) from the middle class said that they feel this way, as did three of the six (50%) of the students from working class backgrounds. Only one (25%) of the four students from the low SES group said that he feels he has something to prove to white teachers.

Among the middle class students, this assertion appears especially to have support. When questioned about this, Kenny said,

> I strive towards excellence always with all my teachers but you do feel that you got to push a little harder for a white teacher.

Kenny went on to say,

> This is a subconscious thing...you feel that white teachers feel that you are incompetent to carry-out many of the skills that students should be able to do.

Aside from Kenny, five other students in the middle-class cohort made statements suggesting they too feel they have something to prove to white teachers. The other four students within this cohort took the opposite position; all four said they have "nothing to prove to white teachers."

Within the group of students from working-class families, Steven made the following statement when asked if he feels he has something to prove to white teachers: "Yes, I want to prove to white teachers that I'm not dumb." Steven went on to say that he thinks in these terms because the only B's that he received the past school year were in the class taught by his only black instructor. Along with Steven, two other students in this working-class cohort said they feel they have something to prove to white teachers. The other three students in this group said they have the same things to prove to both black and white teachers.

Among the group of students from low SES families, Rasheed made the following statement when asked whether he felt he had something to prove to white teachers:

> I don't agree with this statement...with white or black teachers you gotta show respect.

Two other students in this group took the same position as Rasheed. Each said he does not feel he has anything more to prove to white teachers than he does for black teachers. Only one student within the group of working class students said he feels he has something to prove white teachers.

When looking at the overall pattern in the data on the issue of feeling one has something to prove to white teachers, these students are divided: half(10) of the 20 students said they have something to prove to white teachers and half(10) said they do not. Given my argument about that we might expect black students not to do as well in white teachers' classrooms as in those of black teachers, it is significant that so many of the students I interviewed feel they have something to prove to white teachers. The pattern on this issue among the middle-class students is similar to what was found more generally (five of ten), and the pattern was even stronger for the working-class group (four of six). Only among the members of the low SES cohort was there not strong support for the idea of having something to prove to white teachers. To the extent that the patterns I found might prevail for inner-city black students more generally, we have here the basis for how positive feelings about black teachers might actually translate into under-achievement.

Chapter Summary

The comments I have presented in this chapter generally show that the students I interviewed view black and white teachers differently: they are more trusting of black teachers and they believe black teachers have a greater understanding of "their world" and their experiences than do white teachers. For the most part, these students enjoy their informal relationships with their black teachers far more than they do with their white teachers.

However, I have also shown in this chapter that a substantial number of the students I interviewed feel they have more to prove to white teachers than to black teachers, which is revealing about the otherwise apparent contradiction that under-achievement might be associated with positive feelings about black. To develop this argument further, I will now turn, in Chapter 5, to the related issue of what these students said about the level of effort they exert for white versus black teachers. There and in Chapter 6 I will argue that we should seriously consider whether efforts to insure positive teacher-student relationships (i.e., through racial and cultural congruence) for the purpose of improving achievement have paradoxically resulted in less effort on the part of minority students to achieve.

Chapter 5

DO BLACK STUDENTS PUT FORTH MORE EFFORT FOR WHITE TEACHERS THAN FOR BLACK TEACHERS?

A great deal of the research in Chapter 2 suggests that much of the academic failure that black students experience is a direct result of cultural, racial, and economic incongruity that exists between teachers and students. Consistent with the way in which research has defined this problem, the push to recruit greater numbers of black teachers began. The assumption was that greater numbers of black teachers in classrooms with black students would result in greater academic success.

In some of this nation's larger predominantly black urban school districts, the numbers of black teachers has indeed increased. Yet, despite the increased numbers of black teachers, the incidence of academic failure has remained high. Why is this the case in spite of larger numbers of black teachers? Although I did not address this question directly in my study, the answer my results suggest is that higher numbers of black teachers in predominantly black inner-city

schools might not be resulting in curtailment of academic failure because their presence is itself a part of the problem. This possibility occurred to me as a result of pondering the meaning of my study participants' responses to the question, "Do you feel you have anything to prove to white teachers?" This question, in turn, originated from what the student in my government class had said:

> Yeah, you're right, Mr. Robinson. If you were white, we would have quieted down and done our work, 'cause with a white teacher you've got something to prove.

Taken in context, this student's feeling that he has something to prove to white teachers appears to be synonymous with the idea of putting forth more effort. His comment suggests he would have expended more effort to behave in an appropriate fashion and to complete his work if I were white, as a consequence of feeling he has something to prove to the white teacher. Conversely, the reason that he and his classmates were engaging in inappropriate behaviors and not completing work was because I am black, and thus they felt they had nothing to prove to me. This student's level of effort, in short, is related directly to the race of his teacher.

After giving this student's comment a great deal of consideration, I decided to conduct this study to find out if his position on "putting forth more effort for white teachers" was shared by other black male students in urban schools. Perhaps what he said

only reflected his opinion and not something more widespread. However, if this point of view turned out to be part of the mind-set and behavior of a great number of black male students, then this discovery could serve to alert to reconsider consider the larger problems of academic under-achievement, delinquency, and discipline among black male student in this nation's urban schools.

In order to get some idea of how widespread this notion of "working harder for white teachers" was among the group of black male high school I studied, I decided to address this issue specifically in my conversations with them. What follows are the patterns that emerged what these 20 students said when I asked them if they "put forth more effort for white teachers than for black teachers."

When students were asked whether or not they put forth more effort for white teachers in the classroom, nine of the, or 45%, said they do in fact put forth more effort when the teacher is white. Eleven, or 65%, said they would not put forth any more effort for a white than for a black teacher.

When I looked at their in terms of social class, I found that half, or 5 of the 10 students in the middle-class group said they would put forth more effort for white teachers than for black teachers; the other five said they would <u>not</u> put forth any more

effort in the classroom for a white teacher than they would for a black teacher.

Of the six working-class students, two, or 33%, said they do in fact put forth more effort for white teachers than for black teachers. Conversely, the other four, or 66%, said they would not work any harder for a white teacher than they would for a black teacher.

Finally, within the low SES group, again there was an even split in responses about the race of the teacher and the amount of effort put forth in the classroom. Two of the four students in this group (50%) said they do put forth more effort when their teacher is white, while the other two said the race of the teacher does not effect the level of effort they put forth in school.

I will now provide evidence as to how students within the various social classes responded when asked about the relationship between race of their teachers and effort they put forth in the classroom.

Among the students in the middle-class cohort, here are Kenny's comments in response to this question:

> I strive towards excellence always with all teachers, you do feel that you got to push a little harder for a white teacher.
>
> You feel that you have to strive harder just to prove that you can do it....I think this(mind-set) is prevalent among all black students.

Four other students in this middle-class group in ways very similar to Kenny's. Conversely, the other five students in this social class group said they put forth the same effort in class for both their black and white teachers. For example, Justin responded.

> I see no differences in black and white teachers...I prove myself to everybody white or black....It doesn't matter.

Within the working-class cohort, only two of six students said they put forth "more effort" in the classroom for white teachers than for black teachers. Here is how Steven responded when he was asked if he puts forth more effort for white teachers than for black teachers:

> I definitely feel this way. You want to work harder for white teachers to show that you're not dumb.

> I had one black teacher last year and I got B's in her class...I got A's in all my other classes. With her [black teacher] I didn't have the extra incentive I got to work hard for white teachers....They don't think I'm good enough.

Only one other student in the working-class cohort agreed with Steven. The majority of the students in this cohort (66%) disagreed, saying that the teacher's race is not an incentive to put forth more or less effort in the classroom. An example of a student with this mind-set was Michael:

> I perform the same for both(black and white teachers)..I id the same amount of work.

> I don't work harder or lesser for either(black or white teachers)....I just do my best.

Finally, when the four students from the low SES group were asked to respond to the question of effort in relation to the race of the teacher, Rasheed was one of two who said he does put forth more effort for white teachers than for black teachers:

> With a white teacher you've got to be more on top of things . . . I feel this way.

Two other students in this social class group had a different perspective on this issue. One of the students was Daniel, who said,

> I mean if I'm gonna work I'm not gonna write differently because its a white teacher...I really ain't got nothin' to prove to them.

As noted above, a higher percentage of these black students (11 out of 20, or 55%) disagreed with the notion that black students put forth "greater effort" for their white teachers than the percentage (nine out of 20, or 45%) who agreed with it. Therefore, the notion of black students "putting forth more effort" for white teachers is not the majority opinion of these students. However it would be incorrect to assume nine out of 20 (or 45%) is not noteworthy, for a substantial proportion of these students do claim they expend more effort for white teachers.

The picture we get concerning "working harder for white teachers" changes a bit when we look at the responses for the

different the social classes. For example, among the middle-class students we saw an even split between those who put forth more effort for white teachers and those who do not. Yet because half of these students agreed with this notion, this is an important finding worthy of further investigation.

The same argument can be made about students in the low SES cohort, among whom we also see an event split between students who put forth greater efforts in classrooms with white teachers and those who do not. Again, the percentage of students agreeing with this notion suggests this may be a widely, if not universally, accepted notion among black male students from low SES backgrounds.

It is among the students in the working-class cohort that we see the most opposition to the idea of putting forth more effort in the classroom for white teachers than for black teachers. Only two of six, or 33%, said they agreed with this notion. A higher percentage (four out of six, or 66%) had a different opinion. The concept of black students working harder for white teachers was far less prevalent popular among this group of students than for students in the other two social classes.

However, in analyzing the issue of "effort" among the different social classes, another important distinction needs to be made, concerning what students meant when they said they put forth more

effort for white teachers. A closer analysis of their statements suggests that what is meant by "putting forth more effort " may not be the same for all students, and the difference fall along social class lines.

For example, a student from the low SES group and one from the working-class group were quite similar in what they meant when they said they said they "work harder for white teachers." Steven, a member of the working-class cohort, made the following statement when he was asked if he put forth more effort for white teachers than for black teachers:

> I definitely feel this way..I want to work harder to show them that I'm not dumb.

Steven also said,

> I got to work hard because they (white teachers) don't think I'm good enough.

Curtis, who was a member of the low socioeconomic group, gave the following response when he was asked the same question:

> I feel like I have to try a little extra harder for white teachers because they'll take only the best from(from the inner city schools).

The responses of both these students suggests that the focus of their efforts is academic in nature. Steven said he puts forth more effort with white teachers to show that he is "not dumb," which I take to mean that he works hard to achieve academically. Curtis said

he tries a little harder for white teachers because they will only take "the best." My assumption is that he meant "academically" when he said "the best." For both these young men, then, the "extra effort" they talk about centers on academic achievement.

On the other hand, when students who are members of the middle class made statements about "extra effort," they appear to have focused less on factors related to academic achievement, and more on issues related to student behavior. The following are examples of responses from the middle-class cohort that focus on effort and behavior instead of effort and academics:

Lamar commented,

> Black students really try to prove that they are not the things that they(white teachers) assume them to be.

Marcus said,

> (White teachers) see the stereotypic black person and (black students) feel that they more to prove (because of this).

The comments of both Marcus and Lamar are examples of how the meaning of "trying harder" or "putting forth more effort" differs among students from different social classes.

The findings of this study on the issue of racial and cultural congruity suggest that the fact that black teachers and black students share the same race (and in many instances the same cultural orientation) may not be sufficient incentive for students to put forth

greater efforts to achieve academically or to behave in ways considered appropriate for the school setting. The comments of these students suggest that black students more generally may feel they have "something to prove" to white teachers, and put forth "more effort" in their classrooms.

Only one student during the course of all of the interviews said that he puts forth more effort in classes with black teachers. The question this raises is why none of the other students in this study shared this perspective. Why did half of the students in this study state that they feel they have something to prove to white teachers?

One possible explanation has to do with the issue of trust. If some black students do not trust their white teachers because they feel those teachers are in some way mistrustful of them because of their race, these students may believe that in order to do well academically and to gain some sense of acceptance from the teacher, they must exhibit the sorts of behaviors and perform academically in ways that will deflect attention from the fact they are black, in an effort to lessen negative views that they may believe white teachers have about them. This argument may account for why most of the reposes of the middle-class students to the question of whether or not they feel they have something to prove to white teachers referred to changes in behaviors. This sort of psychological

maneuvering that is often carried out by black students is the central focus of a study reported by John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham (1983) in their article "The Burden of Acting White."

Another possibility why some black students may put forth more effort for white teachers than for black teachers has to do with the students' perceptions of who represents a genuine authority figure. Mark, one of the students from the middle-class cohort, said he noticed that at the high school he attended before transferring to Jefferson, students would generally act up and waste time in classes with black teachers but be generally well-behaved in a white teacher's classroom or if a white teacher walked into a black teacher's classroom. Mark said he believed this had a great deal to do with how students perceived power and authority. He said,

> When you look at the T.V. and laws or businesses what do you see?..You see white...But when you look at the crime and the ghetto what do you see? You see black.

Mark's point is well taken. What he suggested is that black students put forth more effort in classrooms with white teachers because white skin-color is what they associate with "true authority." Consequently, when a white teacher or other white administrator enters the room, the message projected by the individuals presence and by that person's white skin is that what is being said at this point has value. The antithesis is also true of the black teacher,

because of negative perceptions of black skin-color that have been internalized by students. From this perspective a black teacher in an all-black school must overcome racial stereotypes about the intellectual inadequacies of the black race in the minds of black students in much the same way they would deal with this issue if they were teaching in a predominantly white setting.

The discussions I have had with other black teachers at the school where I work not only validate Mark's notions, but have also suggested that many teachers are aware of how racist ideologies have impacted black student behaviors and efforts to achieve academically with black teachers. For example, one afternoon I was talking with several colleagues about discipline problems we were experiencing in our building and about the issue of student failure, when one of the teachers interjected, "They [students] treat you like you dress."

What she meant was that if she dresses in a professional manner, students will treat her better than if she came in wearing jeans and a t-shirt. She went on to say she has noticed that students even treat her differently when she wears her hair "down," accentuating its length, versus when she wears it "up." She said she discovered that the days where she wears her hair "down" have been times when she has had the fewest problems and has had the best

opportunities to accomplish the most in the classroom with the students. In essence, the point this teacher was making was that the more she distances herself from her blackness and associates herself with the dominant race and culture (such as wearing her hair at shoulder length), the better the students treat her and behave in class.

A third reason that black students may feel they have less to prove to black teachers than to white teachers may have to do with the fact that black students trust black teachers more because of the assumption of shared experiences. The notion here is that the sense of familiarity that black students have with their black teachers produces a sense of trust that assures the students that these teachers believe they are intelligent and there may be legitimate reasons and circumstances why they have not excelled academically. The problem with this sense of trust is that what it enhances relationally can sometimes detract from the student's academic performance. I am suggesting that racial and cultural congruity between teachers and students can in some instances produce a relationship that is too comfortable for producing excellent results. In essence, the familiarity and trust takes away the "edge" in the relationship, thus undercutting the black teacher's ability to demand

that their black students perform to the best of their ability, regardless of the circumstances.

I am not suggesting that black teachers do not make such demands. However, what I am arguing is that positioning oneself in this fashion becomes more difficult the more one is aware of the circumstances and obstacles that a student must overcome. In these situations, a teacher's compassion can, if not checked, become an excuse for students not to perform to their full potential.

This is where the issue of black students putting forth less effort for black teachers enters the equation. Knowing that the teacher understands the struggles one faces in completing a task or performing to one's potential can sometimes lead students to eliciting sympathetic responses from their instructors if they are not meeting standards, when more of a demanding stance on the part of the teacher may have pushed them to complete their objective.

In this chapter I have presented what the students I interviewed said about whether they expend more effort for white teachers than for black teachers, and I have offered an interpretation for how the factor of effort might relate to their general feelings about white versus black teachers and, by extension, to the pattern of under-achievement so prevalent in our inner cities. I will now turn to Chapter 6 for concluding reflections on what I have learned.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter I will discuss the conclusions and implications I have drawn from my findings concerning the education of black male students in inner-city schools. The major issues I will address are

1. the concept of "cultural congruence";
2 affective education versus academic;
3. the complex relationship between black teachers and black students;
4. black teachers as "role models" for black students and hiring greater numbers of black teachers to work in predominantly black inner-city schools; and
5. further research on these issues.

My focus on these issues will center on what they suggest about teacher preparation programs, the practice of teaching, educational policy, and new research in the field of education.

Cultural Congruence

The findings of this study challenge some of the assumptions that are usually associated with having a high degree of cultural or

racial congruity between teachers and students. This study specifically raises a question about whether a classroom environment with teachers who understand the culture of their students and establish positive relationship with them will result in increased efforts by the students to achieve. Cultural congruity implies that the better the relationship between teachers and students, the more comfortable students will feel in the classroom setting. These feelings of comfort, in turn, may be prerequisite to increased efforts to achieve, which is otherwise lacking when students are uncomfortable, tense, and nervous. Certainly teachers and students from the same culture and race can have personality conflicts and not get along, thus making the classroom experience for the child negative. However, research on cultural congruence (e.g., Au and Mason, 1983; Mehan, 1980; Philips, 1972) overwhelmingly suggests that a teacher's cultural knowledge of students can lessen tensions and thus enhance learning.

An important aspect of this issue of cultural congruity has to do with trust. Henry Trueba (1989) suggests that trust is an essential aspect of the teacher-student relationship, particularly in the realm of learning. He cites the work of Vygotsky, who developed the concept "zone of proximal development." Vygotsky argued that there is a correlation between trust and learning. Thus how much a student

will learn is directly proportional to the level of trust that the learner has in the teacher. His assumption was that it is uncomfortable letting go of one's established pattern of thinking to embrace a new one. Therefore, the learner must trust the teacher in order to grow intellectually. Trueba argues that an important aspect of gaining the trust of another is understanding who that person is, both individually and culturally. Would the celebrated mathematics teacher Jaime Escalante have been as successful in his work with Latino students in East Los Angeles if he had not been familiar with their language or culture? He developed a close relationship with these students, and they had a high degree of trust in him because of his knowledge of both math and their culture. Those who support the importance of cultural congruity would argue that he would not have been successful without this cultural knowledge. Thus a key aspect of Escalante's success with his students was the cultural congruity he had with them.

Given the evidence that links culture to learning, the question becomes why these same results have not manifested themselves in the predominantly black school district where I am currently teaching. Why have we not observed the increases in achievement which tend to occur in settings where cultural and racial congruity is high? My findings suggest that racial similarities between black

teachers and students may presuppose a wider range of common identity, and thus trust, that may not necessarily exist.

Growing diversity within certain black communities can create teacher/student relationships much like the one described in Rist (1970), where the teacher's SES background and cultural orientation differed from many of her students, despite shared racial identity. Rist's study suggests that the kinds of inequities that black students sometimes experience in classrooms with white teachers who have different economic backgrounds from their own can also result with black teachers who do not share those backgrounds. Consequently, even when racial and cultural congruity between black students and teachers creates positive relationships, we cannot assume there will be an increase in student efforts to achieve academically. Although increased academic achievement is a plausible expectation, my study brings this notion into question.

Chapter 4 reported that the black male students I studied do by and large trust black teachers and view them in a much more positive way than they do white teachers. Overall, it appeared that these students and their black instructors carry on positive relationships. These are the kinds of teacher/student relationships that Trueba (1989) suggests will produce the most favorable academic results. Although I did not directly address the issue of

these students' academic achievement as a correlate of their attitudes about black and white teachers, the views of these students about the differential effort they exert with white versus black teachers did provide me with the foundation upon which to develop my broader argument. Positive feelings towards black teachers may not result in improved academic achievement among inner-city black students.

What this suggests in relation to teacher preparation and the practice of teaching is that we cannot assume that merely placing black teachers with black students will increase efforts to learn. The common assumption seems to be that increasing the number of black teachers will enhance effort and learning among at risk black students. This may not be the case, however. The racial congruity between black teachers and black students may paradoxically be contributing to the lack of black students' efforts to excel. Consequently we need to move cautiously before moving to more black faculty in predominantly black schools. Further research is needed on this issue.

A second explanation for why under-achievement has persisted within black school districts, despite high degrees of cultural and racial congruence, may be the lingering effects of racism on the psyche of black students. The argument here is that beliefs

about the inferiority of the black race override the potential effects of cultural congruence on the "effort" that black male students put forth in the classroom. None of the students in this study said that the fact that a teacher is black is an incentive to do less academic work, but neither did any of them say that this is a factor that inspires them to put forth "more of an effort" to achieve academically. The question then becomes, why is the fact that a teacher is black not an incentive for some black students to exert "more effort" to do well in school?

I am arguing that this may have something to do with some students' perceptions of what black skin color represents, as implied by the student in my class whose remark about having something to prove to white teachers got this study going originally. As you may also recall, one of the students I interviewed said he believes black students often feel as if they have something to prove to white teachers because white skin color represents power and success, whereas black skin carries with it many more negative stigma. The internalization of these views about what black and white skin represents could result in black students perceiving black teachers as less of an authority figure or as being less knowledgeable than a white teacher.

What we basically have here is a situation where cultural congruity and racism intersect, resulting in situations in which students and teachers have positive, comfortable relationships, but in which efforts to achieve academically may be compromised. Perhaps this is what the student in my class meant when he said he had little to prove to me. He and I had a very positive relationship, but I could do little to push him to work to his potential in school. Of course, he could have just been a lazy student--but he did say he would have completed his work if I were white. I now suspect, from both his statement and what I found in this study, that it was perhaps more who I was, or more specifically, who I was <u>not</u>, that may have been shaping this student's ideas and his lack of effort school.

A third explanation of why a classroom setting with a high degree of cultural congruity may continue to produce under-achievement is that at some point congruity may "turn on itself." In other words, the same factors that researchers argue create a deeper level of understanding between teachers and students can militate against greater efforts to achieve. In this sense, the effects of "cultural congruity" can be quite paradoxical.

An example of what I mean here is visible in the comment of the student in my classroom who sparked this study. When he said to me that he would work harder for white teachers because he had

something to prove to them, he may have meant that his lack of trust in white instructors was itself incentive to achieve. Interpreting his comment in this way suggests that one reason he felt he did not have anything to prove to me was the fact that we were in a relationship with each other, that this was a good relationship, and that he trusted me. In this sense, cultural incongruity between teacher and students can result in positive efforts to achieve, and the presence of cultural congruity might actually result in less effort to achieve. Black administrators and faculty need to consider how trusting relationships between teachers and students might in some circumstances be inadvertently breeding a complacency that militates against maximum efforts to achieve in school.

Affective Education versus Academic Excellence

Ideally, the purpose of schools is to create a safe and challenging atmosphere that will help students grow and develop emotionally and intellectually. The assumption behind research in on cultural congruity suggests that in order for maximum learning to take place, there must first be a caring classroom environment for children. As shown by this study, over half of the black male students I interviewed said they believe that their black teachers generally understand them and their struggles. This suggests that

cultural congruity between black teachers and students does create a classroom environment in which black students feel comfortable.

Yet as we looked at the research on academic achievement among black students in the Detroit public schools, except for students at the academies and magnet schools, overall the students in this district are behind the state-wide norms. If the perceptions of the students in this study reflect the feelings of other black students in the Detroit public school system, then there would be evidence to argue that "feeling good" about one's relationship with one's teachers does not necessarily mean better academic performance among students. From comparing the comments from the students in this study to the overall academic performance of the students in the Detroit public schools, I am suggesting that this may be the case. It may be necessary to have distance, or an edge, or tension between a teacher and a pupil (or a coach and a player) for the teacher to be able to demand certain things from the student and get the desired results. Too much closeness and understanding might lead to complacency on the part of the learner. This may be an explanation for the poor achievement that is so prevalent among students in the school district where I teach.

The question then becomes, how best to deal with this paradox? I suggest there may need to be efforts to sever the link, or

drive a wedge (Floden, Buchmann, and Schwille, 1987), in the relationship between black teachers and students. In short, attention to cultural issues in school should perhaps be more balanced with an emphasis on achievement. A gradual distancing by teachers and administrators from ideas linked to cultural issues and a movement towards and emphasis on academic excellence may very well be needed to change these teacher-student dynamics and produce better academic results.

The Complex Relationship Between Black Students and Teachers

One implication that can be gleaned from this study is that black students and teachers do not constitute monolithic groups. An array of differences exist, not only between black male students from different social classes but also between students from the same SES background. What this means is that the ways in which black male students view their relationships with both black and white teachers can and does vary. Given this variety, the coming together of black students and teachers in the classroom often involves the intersection of the variable of social-class, culture, and race. This creates a fairly complex context for teachers to work in. One cannot assume that just because students are of the same race

that they will share the same culture. Differences in the student's economic background or the level of education of their parents may be key factors in shaping that child's views politically or culturally. I propose that the more eclectic the black community becomes, the more problematic it is to define problems such as school failure by applying concepts from cultural congruity studies.

Black Teachers as Role Models

The problems facing "at risk" black male students are a growing concern to many who are involved in their education. The establishment of black male academies has been one response to the growing problem of black male under-achievement in the public schools. The presence of these institutions has attracted much attention throughout the United States, and they are currently being operated in several predominantly black school districts. An example of one such academy is one that has been established in the public school system in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Certain features of the academy in Milwaukee are discussed by Sanders and Reed (1995), who talk about the fact that the city of Milwaukee is responsible for educating 80% of the black school age children in Wisconsin. They also provided statistics showing that although black males make up only 26.6% of the Milwaukee schools'

total population, they make up 50% of all students suspended, and 95% of all students expelled. Of the 5,170 black males in grades 9 through 12, more than 75% have grade point averages of less than 2.0 on a 4.0 scale. Statistics on black male-under achievement are similar and in some instances worse in other major metropolitan districts (Kozol,1992).

According to Sanders and Reed (1995), an important feature of the black male academy in Milwaukee has been the presence of successful black males as role models for the students there. They asserted,

> Successful and positive black role models in the Milwaukee community were involved in providing one-on-one mentoring for black male students in grades 3, 4, and 5. The majority of these role models were recruited from either black owned businesses or the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. In some instances, black owned businesses adopted an entire grade level and shared responsibility for mentoring the young black students in that grade. The mentoring activities were aimed at strengthening the students' self-respect, self-concept, intellectual achievement, positive attitude towards school, and self-awareness.

.

As Sanders and Reed suggest, those responsible for developing the concept of the black male academy obviously believe that the ubiquitous presence of successful black male role models is an important factor of these institutions, and is in effect an important characteristic that distinguishes them from regular public schools. The presence of only male students in these academies makes this

possible. The presence of male and female students in traditional public schools demands that there be equal numbers of both male and female role models, thereby decreasing the number of male role models observable to male students. Although the "successful black male role models" mentioned in relation to the Milwaukee academy were only tutors and business persons, it is reasonable to assume that this concept could be applied to hiring teachers. Academy administrators would certainly argue that instructors who share the same race or ethnic background with the students they teach provide daily reminders to students that success is possible for members of their race (Grant, 1989).

However, we must be careful not to over-generalize about the successes that the academies produce, for several reasons. First of all, the academies are usually smaller in size than regular K-12 schools. Given the smaller number of students, providing one-on-one attention for academic or discipline purposes is a much easier task for a teacher or administrator.

Secondly, there is an admissions process usually associated with academies. Unlike public neighborhood schools, parents are usually required to come to the school for an interview before their son is admitted. Consequently, academies have much greater control over whom they admit, as well as the ability to insure that there is

some consistency in the degree to which parents are involved in their sons' education.

Thirdly, academies are usually under a far greater degree of scrutiny than other public schools because they are defined as models for innovation in public school education. This high visibility demands that all aspects of a school be functioning at near capacity a great deal of the time.

Therefore, when looking specifically at the "role model" component of an academy and the probability there may be a high percentage of black teachers there, we must be cautious not to presume that these two factors are principally responsible for the academic achievement we might see occurring in these schools. As noted, there are other organizational and administrative factors that should be considered as well. Thus, if the public schools look at the internal structure of academies and the academic results they produce, and from that conclude they should hire greater numbers of black faculty, they may be disappointed by what they find, since generalizing from the experience of the academies may be risky, or at least premature. The absence of either a thorough analysis of why certain academic outcomes are being produced by academies, or a critical look at the literature on cultural congruity can lead to

miscalculations of the extent to which racial similarities between teachers and students may lead to academic success.

The findings of this study will ideally encourage school officials who are advocates for having only black teachers for black students to become more critical of their position. This study suggests that placing greater numbers of black teachers with black students may not always produce the results anticipated and desired. Therefore, we need to be more circumspect in the development and assessment of programs involving black students which also link the congruity of race between teachers and students to achievement.

The data from my study suggest that the relationships between black teachers and students are complex and may over time be as problematic as they are helpful. My hunch is that individuals who support institutions such as academies may not have considered questions such as those raised by this study. Conversation about the complex and sometimes paradoxical aspect of black student and black teacher relationships appears to be unexplored territory.

Hiring Practices

The findings of this study also have implications for practices of hiring teachers. I do not wish to convey with my findings and my interpretation of them is that any predominantly black school district

should go out and hire all white teachers. Clearly, many black teachers are doing wonderful jobs educating their students. However, the caveat I have to offer has to do with the presumptions that are sometimes made about relationships between black students and teachers. These relationships are not without their problems. Racial similarities do not necessarily mean experiential similarities; to share the same race, but nothing else, may not result in close relationships. This is one of the reasons why it would concern me if a district were to hire large numbers of black teachers on the assumption that this alone will lead to increases in academic achievement. Such an act would also assume that most black teachers are somehow better aquatinted with the culture of black inner-city youth than white teachers are, which may not be the case, given other differences in experience and background between a black teacher and his/her students.

This study suggests that black inner-city male students do believe their black teachers understand them better than white teachers do. However, perception and reality often differ. Though black male inner-city students may believe this, the reality of it is true only to the degree that black teachers have experienced "being black" in the same way as their students. In today's society, a black inner-city school teacher may share only racial identity with their

students, and may otherwise be far apart from them politically, economically, and culturally. In fact, some white teachers may be even be more closely linked to black inner-city youth experientially, given their cultural and economic backgrounds, than many black teachers might be. In any event, hiring black teachers to teach in inner-city schools because of assumptions relating race and academic achievement may be presumptuous. Even if black teachers and students have similar economic and cultural backgrounds, the data from this study suggest that this is no guarantee improved academic achievement will result.

Implications for Further Research

The notion of "working harder" or "putting forth more effort for white teachers" needs further explanation and discussion. The more fundamental questions that need to be answered are, "What does working harder mean?" and "What do black students mean when they say, 'I work harder for white teachers than for black teachers'?" From my conversations with students the notion of working harder for white teachers appears to be a defensive behavior or tactic on the part of black students that is utilized when they are skeptical about how the teacher feels about their academic abilities and potential.

Another question that needs further investigation is whether or not the "issue of effort" is mainly tied to academic issues or to the behaviors of students. Many of the students in this study mentioned being watched by teachers, that teachers were interested in their behaviors. How students behave in class is sometimes a separate issue from their academic performance. Consequently, when students talk about working hard in the classroom, they may not only be implying hard work in relation to reading and writing, but behaviors as well. For example, working harder for a white teacher may mean working hard at the kinds behaviors that will keep the white teacher from assuming the worst about you. It is the black student's way of avoiding being stereotyped. In essence, some black students feel that when they are in a classroom with a white teacher a lot is at stake, particularly if passing grades and GPAs are important. In these situations the black student often feels the burden of having to interact with the white instructor on the teacher's cultural terms. This burden of having to distance oneself from one's race often produces a great deal of anxiety for the student.

Concluding Reflections

This study has provided further insight into the complex relationships that exist between black teachers and black students.

The long-standing assumption that black students will somehow behave better and put forth more effort to achieve in school, if they are on good terms with their teachers, needs to be examined. It is reasonable to assume that students will feel better about going to school each day if they have positive relations with their teachers. However, we need to consider how these positive relationships may also be contributing to a lack of effort to achieve.

Failure to address these issues may simply reinforce stereotypic notions about a monolithic black community, when in fact the black race is richly diverse. Investigations and conversations about the complex set of factors that govern and effect the daily interactions of black Americans with members of their own race, as well as with others, can be an important step in eradicating these stereotypes. Most of the conversations in colleges of education focus on the relationships of blacks with members of the white race rather than the relationships that blacks carry on with each other. Unfortunately, the unintended outcome of exploring the race issue only in terms of blacks and whites is that relationships between members of the black race may be regarded simplistically because of the absence of analysis. It is my hope that this study will contribute to deeper understanding and appreciation of the complexity that characterizes relationships between black teachers and students.

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