Examining Teachers' Beliefs About African American Male Students in a Low-Performing High School in an African American School District

MARVIN LYNN

University of Illinois at Chicago

JENNIFER NICOLE BACON
TOMMY L. TOTTEN
THURMAN L. BRIDGES III

University of Maryland, College Park

MICHAEL JENNINGS

University of Texas, San Antonio

Background/Context: The study examines teachers' and administrators' perspectives on the persistent academic failure of African American male high school students. The study took place between 2003 and 2005 in a low-performing high school in Summerfield County, a Black suburban county in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States with a poverty rate below 8%, according to the 2000 United States census. At the time of the study, there were a number of initiatives across the state designed to address what was being referred to as "the minority achievement gap." The researchers—most of whom were African American faculty and graduate students at the University of Maryland—were interested in understanding what teachers and other school personnel such as counselors and administrators would have to say about why African American students, particularly males, tended to persistently underperform on standardized measures of achievement, had higher rates of suspension and expulsion from school, were overrepresented in special education, and had significantly

higher dropout rates than all other subgroups in this mostly Black and middle-class subur-
ban school district.

Purpose and Research Questions: *In the present article, we build on the work of scholars of*
critical race studies in education and scholars concerned about teachers' impact on student
achievement to explore teachers' beliefs about African American students, and we discuss the
possible implications for African American males in troubled schools. We used critical race
ethnographic methods to collect data on the following research questions: (1) How does a
low-performing high school in a low-performing school district cope with the persistent prob-
lem of African American male underachievement? (2) In particular, how do teachers and
administrators understand the problem? (3) How might this impact their ability to work suc-
cessfully with African American male students?

Setting: *The study took place in Summerfield County, a majority-Black suburban county in*
the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The county is known as the wealthiest Black
county in the nation. With over 100,000 students, its school district is one of the largest and
lowest performing in the state. At the time of the study, the district was ranked 23rd out of
24 districts in the state in measures of standardized achievement. The research took place in
a midsized all-Black high school in a section of the county that is contiguous with one of the
poorer sections of a nearby city. The high school, with a 99% Black population of slightly
fewer than 1,000 students , was one of the lowest performing high schools in the district.

Participants: *The main participants in the study consisted of two groups: (1) a sample of*
50 teachers, administrators, and counselors, and (2) a subsample of 6 teachers in art,
music, technology, social studies, math who participated in ongoing individual inter-
views, a focus group, and classroom observations.

Research Design: *This study involved a series of focus groups, formal and informal inter-*
views with teachers, counselors, and administrators, and 18 months of ethnographic obser-
vations in the school.

Conclusions: *Researchers found that school personnel overwhelmingly blamed students, their*
families, and their communities for the minority achievement gap. In short, the school was
pervaded by a culture of defeat and hopelessness. Ongoing conversations with a smaller
group of teachers committed to the success of African American male students revealed that
the school was not a safe space for caring teachers who wanted to make a difference in the
lives of their students.

> All the black school-age children were gone. They had simply dis-
> appeared. No one in authority could tell the frantic parents what
> they already knew . . . black children, every one of them, had van-
> ished (Bell, 1987, pp. 102–103). . . . The children were never
> found, their abductors never apprehended (p. 107).

In "The Chronicle of the Sacrificed Black Schoolchildren," prominent
critical race legal scholar Derrick Bell (1987) wrote a fictionalized para-
ble about how desegregation affected the lives of African American chil-
dren in the United States. These fictionalized parables—referred to in

the critical race literature as chronicles or storytelling—often appear in the form of conversations between attorneys who are engaged in a debate over some issue of major political and legal importance. In the chronicles, Bell has conversations about the role of the law in promulgating racism in the United States. The chronicle referred to here is one of 10 in this book that address issues ranging from education and voting rights to relationships between Black men and women.

In the chronicle, Bell (1987) wrote about the dire consequences of desegregation for many African American children. This is a counternarrative that begins with the notion of African American children having simply vanished on the "implementation day for the new desegregation plan" (p. 102). He does not explain how they vanished or where they went. He explains the impact of this legislation on Black schools: They were closed, and Black teachers and principals were fired. He noted that it was Whites, not Blacks, who stood to gain the most from the losses experienced by African American children, who would become "invisible" or lost in all-White schools where they were not wanted or appreciated. In schools that were created with White children in mind, African American children's culture and language were misunderstood and pathologized as deficient, and these students were ultimately framed as oppositional. In this sense, Bell is using the parable to argue that *Brown v. Board of Education* did not significantly improve the lives of African American children; instead, it made them even more invisible. It could be argued, then, that the problems identified by Bell help to explain the current crisis facing many African American children in U.S. schools today. Critical race theorists in education have used Bell's work as a foundation from which to argue that African American schoolchildren are systematically marginalized and miseducated in an educational system that seeks only to highlight what they lack and that disregards the "cultural wealth" they bring to bear (Howard, 2008; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Yosso, 2005).

In the present article, we build on the work of scholars of critical race studies in education and researchers concerned about teachers' impact on student achievement to explore teachers' beliefs about African American students and discuss the possible implications for African American males in troubled schools. We used critical race ethnographic methods to collect data on the following research questions: (1) How does a low-performing high school in a low-performing school district cope with the persistent problem of African American male underachievement? (2) In particular, how do teachers and administrators understand the problem? (3) How might this impact their ability to work successfully with African American male students?

We attempt to contextualize the first question by drawing on the achievement literature. In particular, we explain the achievement patterns in the school district and in the state where the study took place and explain how they may affect this problem. We then provide a review of relevant literature on the role of teacher beliefs and their possible influence on student achievement. Finally, we report results of a lengthy ethnographic study with teachers, counselors, and administrators at a low-performing school in Summerfield County[2] that addressed our research questions. As the study got under way, we also became interested in examining teachers' beliefs about what worked well. As a result, we did spend some time talking to a smaller group of teachers and administrators about the best ways to promote the achievement of low-income African American male students. This article also discusses the limitations of our research, and the challenges we faced.

In recent years, a series of research reports have exposed the chasm between African Americans and Whites with respect to academic achievement (Maryland State Department of Education [MSDE], 2001a, 2001b; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2001a; Nettles & Perna, 1997). The state where the present research was conducted exemplifies these trends in a number of ways. Black students across the state account for 37% of the school-age student population, yet they make up 54% of all school suspensions and 40% of those receiving special education services. Additionally, African American students also score below the standard on nearly all measures of school achievement (MSDE, 2001b). In 2005, according to the state department of education, students in the county performed miserably on the High School Assessments (HSAs). Only 42% of high school students in the county passed the English II test, and only 31% passed the algebra test. When the data are disaggregated, one finds that the performance of African American males on these tests is well below that of other already low-performing students. Next to a medium-sized poor urban area, Summerfield County is one of the lowest performing districts in the state. Thus, African American males in the Summerfield County Public School System are among the lowest achieving students in an already low-ranking district.

We examined several different explanations for these persistent gaps in achievement. Ultimately, we focus mainly on the social context of schooling for African American males, the quality of teachers, and the impact of teacher beliefs. University of Chicago researcher Melissa Roderick (2003) cited several studies that suggest that "minority males have the greatest academic difficulty following the move to middle-level schools and high school" (p. 540). She conducted a longitudinal qualitative study involving 98 African American male adolescents as they transitioned

from the end of eighth grade to the end of 10th grade. Drawing from the data she gathered at an all-Black elementary school and high school in Chicago over a 2-year period, she found that although African American male students had varying degrees of support from parents and other caretakers, almost none of them excelled in high school. She concluded that high schools are not organized to support the academic advancement of African American males, particularly if they are from urban communities. In short, for most Black males, high school is an "arena of risk and failure" (p. 580) because most high schools do not provide a supportive and safe context for these students to learn. Studies by Polite (1993, 1994) corroborate these findings but suggest that parents, students, and school officials, including teachers and administrators, each have a role to play in the persistent underachievement of African American male high school students. Polite emphasized, however, the role of teachers and counselors—whom many students perceived as uncaring—as central to the formation of Black male high school students' noncommittal attitude toward school. In that sense, Polite (1993, 1994) concluded that African American male students are less likely to feel motivated to invest in school when they don't feel as if the teachers care about them.

Research on the experiences of African American male high school students provided a firm foundation for our research which took place in a majority-Black suburban school district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Ascher and Branch-Smith (2005) and Polite (1993) both found that schools in African American suburbs experience as many challenges as those in nearby urban districts. According to Polite (1993), African American males in suburban areas "experience economic conditions not at all unlike those of other African American males around the country" (p. 349). Additionally, Ascher and Branch-Smith found that one of the factors that influences the systematic underachievement of Black students in suburbia is the lack of caring teachers. The authors argued that teachers often view their students as "urban" and therefore tend to associate them with all the negative connotations of urban, such as dangerous, disorderly, and unmotivated. Teachers' low expectations yielded poor results. Polite's research in suburban Detroit confirmed this. Additionally, although John Ogbu's (2003) book on the experiences of suburban African American students in Shaker Heights, Ohio, which mostly blamed parents for the low achievement of African American students, also found that teachers generally lacked a caring attitude toward their students and were uncertain about whether they could teach them successfully. This glimpse into the schooling experiences of Black students in suburbia led us to explore more deeply the literature on teacher quality and its impact on student achievement.

TEACHER QUALITY

A growing body of evidence has shown that there is a relationship between teacher quality and student outcomes (Darling Hammond, 2000; Peske & Haycock, 2006; Presley, White, & Gong, 2005). Furthermore, minority students, particularly poor African American and Latino students, typically do not have access to the most qualified teachers. Haycock (1998) described the results from several studies that examined the relationship between teacher quality and student outcomes. In the studies she examined, high-quality teachers possessed excellent verbal and math skills; were content experts, especially if they were middle or high school teachers; and possessed excellent pedagogical skills. Some studies, such as one conducted by researchers in Tennessee, drew from a statewide database to "group teachers into quartiles based on their effectiveness on the learning of different types of students, from low- to high-achievers" (Haycock, p. 3). The study, along with another conducted in Dallas, also examined the cumulative effects of 3 highly effective or ineffective teachers on a group of fourth graders. Students who consistently had high-quality teachers made significant gains, whereas students with ineffective teachers only made modest gains. The difference in outcomes was even more pronounced for low-income and minority students. The Dallas study, for example, illustrates that students who are consistently taught by ineffective teachers can show precipitous drops in academic performance (Haycock).

The Education Trust has continued to publish reports examining these large-scale studies that continue to show the positive effects of high-quality teachers on minority and low-income learners (Carey, 2004; Peske & Haycock, 2006). Recent research by the Illinois Education Research Council corroborates these findings. The Illinois Education Research Council has developed the Teacher Quality Index (TQI), which consists of six different characteristics that "have been shown in previous research to make a difference for student performance" (Presley et al., 2005, p. 5). These characteristics include ACT English score, number of attempts to pass the Basic Skills Test in Illinois, certification status, relative ranking of teachers' undergraduate institution, and years of experience. When researchers at the Illinois Education Research Council measured a school or school district's TQI against overall student achievement in that school or district, they were able to determine that there was a correlation between the number of high-quality teachers in a given school or district and student achievement. Schools, particularly underresourced ones, with a higher percentage of high-quality teachers had greater gains in student achievement than schools with low numbers of high-quality teach-

ers. In other words, in underresourced schools, good teachers matter the most. For Darling-Hammond (1997, 1999), quality teachers tend to be more experienced teachers who received their licensure through traditional certification programs. She also described a number of studies showing that there is a strong correlation between teacher quality and student achievement. The research illustrates that good teachers can push students to achieve even when there are other mitigating factors such as poverty and lack of resources and support from home.

Ladson-Billings's groundbreaking work (1994, 1995) has also shown that although a teacher's aptitude, credentials, and experience are important factors in determining his or her potential to be successful with poor and minority students, it also matters whether teachers are culturally competent. Her research shows that teachers who were the most successful with African American students respected and valued students' culture and possessed sophisticated understandings of their own culture and its relationship to the construction and implementation of a liberatory approach to teaching in humane and equitable ways. There is strong evidence to support Ladson-Billings's claims. A number of researchers have explored the important links between teachers' cultural and racial competence and their ability to be successful with African American students (Foster, 1995, 1997; Howard, 2001, 2008: Irvine, 1991; Lynn, 2002, 2006). In short, according to this perspective, high-quality teachers of African American students respect and value the culture of their students and see themselves as being connected to their students in very important ways.

As we can see, researchers have a wide range of approaches to defining teacher quality. However, they all agree on one thing: High-quality teachers, regardless of how they are defined, are not easily found in poor minority schools. On average, minority students who attend schools that are underresourced do not have access to high-quality teachers. Darling-Hammond's (2004) extensive policy research has illustrated that "much of the difference in school achievement found between African American and others is due to . . . disparate access to high quality teachers and teaching" (p. 613). To conclude, good teaching matters, especially in underresourced schools. Unfortunately, the children who need good teachers the most do not have access to them.

Although there is a strong positive relationship between high-quality teaching and minority student achievement, teacher efficacy also matters. Not only do African American children have teachers who tend to be the least experienced or the least qualified, but they also tend to have teachers who have a low sense of self-efficacy or lack the cultural competence that Ladson-Billings so aptly described in her research. In other

words, even when teachers of African American children are "highly qualified," the literature suggests that they don't always believe they can successfully teach African American students. This may be due to a lack of cultural competence or to a variety of other factors that may be external to the student. This is especially important because other research shows that teachers' *expectations* greatly influence students' academic performance (Muller, Katz, & Dance, 1999). For example, Noguera (2007) argued that "of all the factors most consistently cited as influencing the achievement and motivation of students of colour, teacher efficacy consistently ranks the highest" (p. 45). Unfortunately, teachers who are otherwise qualified but have a low sense of teaching efficacy can also demotivate and discourage students (Ferguson, 2003).

TEACHERS' EFFICACY BELIEFS

Research on teacher beliefs suggests that far too many teachers who would otherwise be deemed qualified lack confidence about their abilities to teach African American students successfully (Pang & Sablan, 1998). Even more alarming is that experience is not necessarily a mitigating factor. According to Pang and Sablan, more experienced teachers are less confident than their inexperienced counterparts about teaching African American students. This, of course, contradicts research that shows that more experienced teachers are more likely to be successful with minority students. Additionally, Ferguson (2003) revealed that teachers' expectations for success were higher for White students than for African American students. Davis and Jordan (1994) have shown that this problem is particularly salient for African American male high school students. They illustrate that the academic performance of African American male high school students decreased when they encountered teachers who did not believe in their ability to master the course content. Irvine's previous research supports this (1985, 1990). She found that studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s also found that "teachers, particularly white teachers, had more negative beliefs about Black children than about white children regarding such variables as potential for success in college, initial impression, deviant behavior, ability and certain personality characteristics" (Irvine, 1985, p. 339). In 1983–1984, she conducted her own large-scale study in which she obtained data from nearly 70 elementary classrooms in 10 schools. She found that in general, teachers communicated more often—whether it was positive or negative—with boys. However, she also found that teachers had more negative comments about Black male students' behavior than they did about any other group and that a teacher's perception of that behavior heavily influenced

how they rated these students academically. In addition, she found that teachers' initial impressions about Black male students' academic potential was negative and remained stable over time despite the students' performance (Irvine, 1985). In other words, even when African American male students showed strong evidence of the ability to meet high academic standards, it did not change teachers' negative beliefs about these students. These beliefs shape teachers' dispositions about students' ability to perform at persistently high levels in an academically rigorous classroom. Consequently, teachers who lack confidence in their ability to teach children successfully tend to implement strategies and practices that emphasize speed and precision rather than meaning and understanding (Good, 1987). As a result, these teachers fail to provide low-achieving students with opportunities for individualized instruction, the ability to work closely with smaller groups, teacher support, and constructive criticism (Chester & Beaudin, 1996).

LOW TEACHING EFFICACY BELIEFS BASED ON STUDENTS' PRIOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Teacher beliefs about teaching African American students are also greatly influenced by their perceptions of students' prior academic performance, socioeconomic status, and race (Muller et al., 1999). As early as 1970, Brophy and Good illustrated that teachers formed their expectations about student future performance as early as kindergarten. Rist's (1970) classic study clearly illustrated that teachers used skin tone, manner of dress, and other indicators of students' socioeconomic backgrounds as a way to create castelike ability groups in their classrooms. Children relegated to the lowest groups mostly because of their teachers' perceptions about their abilities were more likely to experience academic hardships later on in school. More recently, Anyon (1997) demonstrated that race and class continue to influence teachers' perceptions and their subsequent attitudes and behaviors toward their poor African American students. Teachers' race did not mitigate these effects. A study by Tettegah (1996) also suggests that some White in-service teachers believe that African American students are innately less intelligent than their White students. Consequently, negative attitudes, coupled with lowered expectations of African American students, can drastically impact teachers' instruction (Bakari, 2003; Cabello & Burstein, 1995). Student achievement and performance are affected by teachers' sense of self-efficacy for teaching African American students and teachers' expectations for student achievement. Low expectations beget even lower results in achievement for African American students (Ferguson, 2003). For exam-

ple, a study by Jussim, Eccles, and Madon (1996) found that the influence of low efficacy and negative perceptions by teachers to be almost three times as great for African Americans as compared with Whites. Teachers who had positive perceptions of their students' ability to be successful tended to have students who invested more effort in completing homework and participating in class. Moreover, students with teachers who had high expectations for teaching them were more likely to stay focused during class (Muller et al.). In other words, African American male students are heavily influenced by their teachers' perceptions of their ability to be successful.

TOWARD A CRITICAL RACE ANALYSIS OF BLACK MALES' SCHOOLING EXPERIENCES

Although we focus on the schooling conditions of African American male students, we recognize the importance of paying attention to larger social, political, and economic factors that shape the lives of African American males. Critical race theory—a theory about the endemic nature of race and racism in the broader society and in the law—provides a framework for understanding the conditions of Black males and other racially oppressed peoples in a racist society (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). In the last decade, education scholars have illustrated the specific ways in which race and racism have influenced both the form and function of schooling in the United States (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Tate, 1997). In doing so, scholars of critical race studies in education have drawn attention to how race and racism work as mechanisms to limit racially marginalized students' opportunities to learn. For racially marginalized students, schools without caring and competent teachers and adequately resourced classrooms can create further barriers to success rather than opportunities for social and economic advancement. As such, critical race scholars in education argue that schools may in fact advance racial inequalities (Lynn & Parker). Drawing from the work of Paulo Freire, critical race scholars Duncan and Jackson (1996) argued that African American males face "limit situations" in U.S. schools. In the seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire described limit situations as a set of conditions that limit the possibility for true transformative change in the lives of the oppressed (1970/1997). In particular, Freire suggested that our larger social, economic, and political system inherently disempowers people with the least amount of power and control over the system. Duncan and Jackson elaborated on this notion in an ethnographic study of African American male students in a high-performing urban high school. They argued that limit

situations are "the psychological, material, political, or social conditions that hinder" the progress of African American males in our nation (p. 4). We would argue that African American males face these conditions in schools and in the larger society.

Recent data on African American males illustrate the existence of material and social conditions that constrain and limit their possibilities. First, African American men have the highest infant mortality rates and the shortest life expectancy of any subgroup in U.S. society (Jordan & Cooper, 2003). They are more likely than any other group to spend significant amounts of time in jail or drop out of school (Jordan & Cooper), thus earning consideration as "an endangered" social group (Gibbs, 1988). For sure, the endangerment of African American men is related to the complex web of discursive social and racial formations ("limit situations") facing African American males because of their race, their class, and their gender (Omi & Winant, 1994; Polite & Davis, 1999). Although it is outside the scope of this article to fully describe these conditions, we do want to acknowledge the widely documented and entrenched social, political, and economic barriers to the success of African American males in the larger society and suggest that understanding these barriers is a necessary starting point for any conversation about the achievement of African American male students. That is, the experiences of African American males in the broader society are integrally connected to issues of schooling and inequality in education. Although we acknowledge the broader issues that impact African American males' ability to participate fully as democratic agents in society, through our research, we have also discovered the important role that teachers play in the lives of their students. As such, this research focuses mainly on the beliefs and characteristics of teachers of African American male students. Because the literature suggests that there is a strong link between student achievement and teacher beliefs, we set out to explore this question in a preliminary investigation of teacher beliefs at a low-performing school in Summerfield County.

METHOD

CRITICAL RACE ETHNOGRAPHY AS A CRITICAL METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The study draws from Duncan's (2002, 2005) notion of critical race ethnography (CRE) as an approach to understanding the specific context in which African American male students experience forms of subordination in school because of their race and gender. CRE attempts to

tease out the ways in which race, gender, and other factors such as social class become salient as both markers of identity and tools of domination and subordination for oppressed and marginalized groups (Duncan, 2002, 2005). CRE draws heavily from critical ethnography, which seeks to politicize the social contexts of human life and social activity. Thomas (1993) wrote, "Conventional ethnography describes what is; critical ethnography asks what could be." In that sense, critical ethnography "has a political purpose" (p. 4). Critical ethnographers are chiefly concerned with using their research as a means to empower their subjects and foster important forms of social change on their behalf. They do not propose to speak *for* their subjects, but their goal is to be in solidarity *with* them (Thomas).

It is important at this point to describe our research team and our stance on our work. All the authors are African American researchers and former educators. The first author, an African American male, conducted research on the impact of African American male teachers in urban schools and found that they expressed a commitment to teaching as a form of social change (Lynn, 2002) and also sought to improve the life chances of African American male students in their classrooms (Lynn, 2006). The other authors are African American males (Tommy Totten and Thurman Bridges) and an African American female (Jennifer Bacon). The first author conceptualized this study with the belief that he could find teachers committed to the well-being of African American male students even in a low-performing school. In short, the original goal of the study was to capture portraits of "goodness" (Lightfoot, 1983) and illustrate how these qualities, if highlighted and described in rich ways, might improve the overall quality of teaching in the school. The first author was the lead researcher, and he participated in all aspects of the data collection, including developing interview protocols, interviewing participants, conducting observations, collecting demographic and achievement data on the school and on the district, and analyzing the data. A group of five student researchers, some of whom are coauthors, participated in various aspects of the research process. Two of these student researchers (an African American male graduate student, A. Dee Williams, and a White male undergraduate honors student, Ramsey Haver-Deiter), who are not included as authors in this publication, participated in the collection of the ethnographic observation and interview data early on in the study. They also helped with the management and storing of data. Three additional graduate student researchers (two African American males, Tommy Totten and Thurman Bridges, and one African American female, Jennifer Bacon, were doctoral students in an urban education program) were hired at a later date to help with the

transcription of interviews and the analysis of the data. One of these students was also assigned the principal task of conducting the literature review on teacher beliefs for this article. Finally, an additional researcher was brought in (an African American male professor) by the lead researcher to help with the research report. This helped us find a unified voice and raised questions about issues that the research group had not previously considered.

The original research team, which included Marvin Lynn, A. Dee Williams, and Ramsey Haver-Deiter, set out to conduct an ethnographic research study that would not only make people aware of the schooling conditions of African American male students, but also foster positive change on behalf of these students in the school and in the district. Like critical ethnographers, critical race ethnographers are interested in documenting through rich ethnographic study the daily experiences of students of color who experience various forms of subordination in school. Our use of CRE for this article focuses on the perspectives of those with the responsibility for shaping and influencing the lives of these students, namely, their teachers. As critical race ethnographers, we came to the study with an acute awareness of the social, political, and economic challenges facing African Americans in schools and society. However, we also came to the study with an interest in documenting not only the day to day experiences of low-achieving students in this school but also the perspectives, views, and attitudes of teachers who were primarily responsible for educating these students. In short, we used a critical race ethnographic approach to gather data regarding (1) teacher beliefs about why Black students failed or succeeded in school; (2) the history of school-based and countywide efforts to improve the learning conditions of Black male students; and (3) the views of teachers regarding the best ways to improve conditions for Black male students. As we will explain, we spent time observing in various places throughout the school. In addition, we conducted several large focus groups, group interviews, and individual interviews during our time at the school.

THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

The study took place in a low-performing high school in Summerfield County. The high school is located near the dividing line between southern Summerfield County and the southeastern portion of a neighboring urban area. This southeast part of the city has long been known for its harsh environment due to poverty, crime, and urban blight. Much of this urban blight has spilled over into what has been historically called "suburbia" even though the two areas are geographically quite similar. As one

moves farther away from the invisible border between the city and the county, the scenery indeed begins to change: One finds an abundance of tree-lined streets buttressed by modest single-family homes. As one enters the school environs, the scene is almost picturesque: It is located at the bottom of a hill that includes more modest-sized but well-kept single-family houses. The school building itself is like the homes that surround it: modest but fairly well maintained. It is not the typical towering stone structure that one finds in a large urban city, with obvious signs of decay and neglect.

At the time of the study, the high school had a population of 953 students. Ninety-nine percent of those students were African American. According to the principal, the school had a reputation for being "the Blackest school in the county." According to achievement data published by the district, it was also known for being among the five lowest performing schools in the district. Forty percent of the students qualified for free and reduced lunch. Although the school had a graduation rate of about 84% and a dropout rate of less than 3%, the school has a 20% mobility rate. As a result, fewer than half of the school's graduates went on to a four-year or two-year college in the year that we studied it. Even worse, fewer than 30% of those who graduated found gainful employment or entered the military after they graduated. We could estimate that more than 50% of the African American male students dropped out, transferred, or graduated at or near the bottom of their class, with few opportunities for gainful employment as they embarked upon the next phase of their lives.[3] At the time of the study, the school was entering its first year of "school improvement," which meant it had been flagged by the state because it had not met state achievement goals for 2 consecutive years. As we entered the school, we were invigorated by a sense of hope that our research might begin to make some difference in the lives of these chronically underperforming students.

ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS WITH TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Once we arrived at the school, we immediately began to meet with administrators, counselors, and teachers—formally through focus groups and informally on an individual basis—to discuss their beliefs about why African American students in their school were persistently failing to meet their achievement standards. We interviewed the school principal three times. Researchers took notes on the interview because they were not recorded. These interviews were 30–45 minutes in length. In the first principal interview, we asked in open-ended fashion for the principal to

describe her school and tell us what she could about the school's history. She informed us that the school was considered "the Blackest and the lowest performing school" in an already low-performing district. She expressed frustration about the lack of support and resources available to her. In subsequent interviews, she focused on the challenges facing her students and talked a great deal about how she firmly believed that parental disengagement led to low achievement for African American students.

   Although there were a number of informal interviews with other school staff, the main method of investigation was a series of structured focus group conversations with about two thirds of the teachers, counselors, and administrators working in that school during that school year. Over a 2-week period, the principal arranged for us to have school staff meet with us during their preparation periods to talk about the minority achievement gap. Although she encouraged teachers to attend, she did not require them to do so. However, we realized that some teachers might have felt somewhat persuaded by the administration because announcements were made about the meetings, and we were asked to keep an accounting of the number of teachers who participated.

   We began every discussion with teachers by asking their permission to record them and providing them with the institutional review board waiver, which stated that the objective of the study was to understand the factors that impact the pervasive underachievement of African American males and that they could choose not to participate. Over the 2-week period, we met with seven differently configured groups of teachers, counselors, and administrators. The groups ranged in size from 4 participants to about 25 participants. Although we preferred not to have focus groups with 25 participants, we were constrained by teachers' availability and interest at the time of the study. We were fortunate to have high-quality recorders that allowed us to record everyone's comments clearly even when they were among a larger group of school staff. Focus groups were asked to reflect and respond to these questions: (1) What is the minority achievement gap? (2) How do you explain the persistent academic failure, particularly among African American students, in your school? (3) Why do you believe this exists? (4) What do you think should be done about it? We asked many follow-up questions and probed teachers to be more specific by providing examples of the challenges they presented. Depending on the size of the group, most of the discussions went on for 45 minutes to an hour. Overall, 50 school personnel out of a total of approximately 75 staff in the school participated in these focus groups.

   After completing the focus groups, we identified a subsample of 5 teachers who expressed a commitment to working in the classrooms and

in other settings to improve the life chances of African American male students. Teachers were selected from the focus group conversations to be part of the subsample if they made statements such as, "I work hard to make sure my African American male students are successful," or "I do a lot of additional things to help my underperforming students." This smaller focus group was asked additional questions, and their classrooms were also observed at least once. Realizing that the focus group process may not have yielded the largest and most diverse pool of possible interviewees, we then used a snowball sampling technique to find other teachers and staff who shared similar interests. We found at least one other teacher using this method. Overall, we conducted six individual interviews with full-time teachers and one assistant principal who expressed a commitment to working closely with African American male students and their parents to help these students be successful in school. We only interviewed these teachers and administrator once. We asked them to talk with us in greater detail about the history of the achievement of African American males in the school and in the district. We also asked them to provide us with examples of the types of strategies or practices they used to help low-performing students. We also asked them to provide further explanation about why they believed these problems persisted. Table 1 shows the racial and gender breakdown of administrators, and Table 2 shows the breakdown of teachers participating in our study.

Table 1. Race and Gender of Administrators Interviewed

Principal	Black female
Assistant principal	Black male
Counselor	Black male

Table 2. Teachers Who Participated in Focus Group Interviews by Race and Gender

White females	2	White males	0
Black males	8	Black females	40

ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATION OF THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

The study included 18 months of focused ethnographic observation in the school. Marvin, A. Dee, and Ramsey participated in this part of the study. The principal often introduced us to teachers and school staff as researchers from the University of Maryland who were trying to understand how to improve the achievement gap. Ramsey, however, (the young White male), was often stopped in the hallways and in the office by staff and asked for his "I.D." He also tended to get less recognition as a

researcher even after he was introduced to administrators and staff by the lead researcher. As a research team, we talked about how we were often perceived based on our identities. We were surprised to learn that he was having this degree of difficulty. However, we all eventually agreed that because Ramsey was closer in age (about 21 years of age at the time) to the student population and also tended to dress and talk in a style that was similar to students at that school, he was more readily perceived by school staff as a student, or even worse, an interloper whose goal was to cause trouble in a school that he didn't attend. We found it quite ironic that his skin color, along with his "hip-hoppa" style of dress and talking, made him a bit of a target for harassment and that teachers and administrators regarded him with suspicion. After making a few initial visits and interviewing a couple of teachers, he stopped making visits to the schools. The experience of this young researcher alerted us to some the possible challenges that might face students at the school who dress or talk in a manner that could be construed as offensive or suspicious by adults in the schools. We continued to observe classes and spent time walking and observing in the hallways and the main office throughout the study. In doing so, we sought to understand the cultural norms, patterns, and behaviors that shaped the school environment. We visited the school one to two times per week during this period (excluding summers, winter and spring breaks, testing periods, and the end-of-the-year activities). Our observations were systematic but were often guided by the principal's directives. At times, we were allowed to roam freely throughout the hallways. At other times, we were confined to the main office and focused on the interactions between visitors and office staff or between troubled students and the administration. As we spent time observing the general environment of the school, we noticed a steady stream of "hallway walkers" at all times of the day. Noticeably absent were teachers or other adults in the halls to curtail loitering students, except on the first floor near the main office. During our time in the school, we observed only one parent in the school during school hours. At no time did we witness or even hear about a violent incident such as a shooting or even a fight. We did not witness anyone being arrested or taken away by the police. After some time, we came to the conclusion that although many students were chronic hallway hangers, they generally did not resort to engaging in violence with each other or with teachers. Many of them seemed genuinely disengaged from school.

We did not study classrooms in great detail. However, we did become interested in getting a sense of the overall climate in the classrooms because of the chronic problem with hallway hangers. We wondered if this phenomenon was occurring because of problems with the quality of

instruction in the classrooms, but we did not investigate this in any systematic way because it was beyond the scope of our study. As the study got under way, 6 African American teachers—5 men and 1 woman—became part of our subsample. Students in these six classrooms typically spent the majority of their time either engaged in conversations with the teachers about their work or completing assignments provided by the instructor. We engaged in usually one or two unstructured observations of each of these classrooms. During our observations, we noticed high levels of engagement in each of these classrooms. We also noticed that students did not leave these classrooms at any point. However, we could not make a determination about the impact of the teachers' instruction because we did not try to compare these classrooms with other classrooms that appeared to be less organized. We did, however, believe that our observations of the classrooms of teachers who expressed a commitment to helping young African American males succeed taught us something about the possible link between teachers' beliefs and practices.

DATA ANALYSIS

Coauthors Marvin, Jennifer, and Thurman worked collaboratively to analyze the data from the study. After completing the transcription of all the interview data and typing up observation data that were handwritten, we examined the data for repetitive themes. We used the same approach to examine the focus group and interview data. We first asked, "What are some repetitive themes that occur in each of these conversations?" Once we found repetitive themes in each interview, we compared the themes across focus group interviews first. The themes became salient if they held up across three or more focus groups. Once a list of salient themes was identified across the seven focus groups, they were chunked into broader categories. Based on our analysis of achievement discourses in urban education (Lynn, Benigno, Williams, Park, & Mitchell, 2006), these broader categories were societal, community based, school based, family based, or student based. Individual interview data were analyzed similarly. However, we focused on the historic factors shaping and influencing the achievement of this group and drawing out ideas about specific approaches to solving the problems facing African American male students.

Most individual interviews and all focus group interviews were digitally recorded and stored on a desktop computer housed in a private office. In a few cases, participants asked not to be tape-recorded. In these cases, individual interview notes were handwritten and transferred to an electronic format.

RESULTS

TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT BLACK STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

When asked to explain why African American students in the school were persistently failing to meet academic standards set by the state and the county, teachers and administrators tended to have three main explanations: (1) student behavior and attitudes about school, (2) "community forces," and (3) lack of parental commitment to student growth. The overwhelming majority of teachers, about 45 out of the 50 interviewed, said that students and their families displayed a lack of involvement in, and commitment to, school.

One of the questions for the focus group research asked teachers for their views on why African American students in their school were not faring as well as other students, particularly White students. What explanations would teachers offer when asked, "What are the possible explanations for the achievement gap?" Would they blame parents and the community? Would they take responsibility for the role that they play as teachers? Would they blame the administration or other teachers? Even more important, what might be the relationship between their views about why students fail, and how well they can teach them?

Teachers in this study offered a range of responses to this problem. However, almost none of the teachers who participated in our focus groups said that they themselves were responsible for the limited achievement of African American students in their schools. A few even became somewhat hostile once they discovered that we were interested in examining the achievement of African American males. After reading the title from the "permission to participate in research" form, one teacher exclaimed, "Oh no! I didn't come here to talk about this!" and swiftly left the room.

In the results that follow, we use data from two of our focus group sessions to illustrate themes that emerged more broadly. In a focus group session conducted in May 2003, teachers expressed several beliefs about why African American students continued to lag behind their White counterparts in terms of academic achievement. They overwhelmingly suggested that two main factors greatly impact the learning of African American students: home/neighborhood factors and student characteristics. In the following paragraphs, we construct a narrative that explores teachers' perspectives in greater detail.

Negative student behavior as the key to student failure. As we indicated, about 80% of the teachers we interviewed at the school felt that African American students could be held primarily responsible for their own fail-

ure to meet academic standards. In four focus group interviews and several formal and informal individual interviews, about 80% of teachers argued that African American students' failure to achieve was primarily shaped by their lack of motivation to learn, their failure to attend classes, their lack of interest in learning, their lack of preparation for school, their inability to focus, their participation in street culture, and failure to behave appropriately in class. One teacher argued that "failure causes students to act out" and that the problems were not necessarily particular to Black male students. Another teacher commented,

> They are frustrated because of things that go on at home. A lot of them don't think that what they feel or what they say is going to have an impact. I've never run across so many children who were just negative—negative in thinking, negative in acting. They don't see a future.

In a different session, teachers argued that students' lack of preparedness, lack of appropriate skills, negative dispositions toward learning, and lack of effort largely contributed to their failure to achieve at high levels. Teachers suggested that "a great majority of students lack math skills" or "time management skills" or "critical thinking skills." Several teachers argued that the students simply "don't know how to study"; one said, "There's no preparation prior to class. The majority of them do not do their homework, and personally, I don't think they are held accountable for the way they prepare themselves and the way they want to achieve academic success." The previous point explains teachers' beliefs about students' lack of commitment to academic excellence. In these teachers' eyes, the students are not only unprepared to participate in class but also have faulty notions about how to achieve success in school. Other teachers pointed to students' inability to focus: "I always felt like they need individual shields at their desks or something so maybe they will focus because there is just too much interaction between the students, and so it takes away their ability to zoom in and learning something." In this teacher's view, the urge for students to interact socially is so strong that they simply cannot focus on learning. In an earlier comment, the same teacher alluded to "unrest" in the community or home as a possible source of this inability to focus. Her comment about "shields" also assumes that if students could not see one another, they would no longer be compelled to interact with each other in "inappropriate ways." Other comments focused on students who "don't dedicate enough time to studying because they are working" after school. This was somewhat contradicted by other teachers, like the following teacher, who contended

that African American students had no work ethic:

> I think the students need to develop a sense of work ethics to know that they come to school to work hard to become successful. We are talking about African Americans and the achievement gap, and we make a lot of reference to African Americans being a minority group. But we have Jews and Asians as minority groups, but they perform extremely well; even in some cases, they perform better than Anglo-Saxons. A lot of students I've noticed come into my classroom and they just don't wanna work! They don't.

There seemed to be a disjuncture between the perception of students working to earn money and their willingness to work to earn grades. This teacher was a Black male from the Caribbean who explicitly racialized the notion of the academic "work ethic" by suggesting that "other minority" groups project productive attitudes about school whereas African Americans do not. He summarized his views by saying "African Americans refuse to work." This comment is consistent with the stereotype that African Americans are lazy and will do what they can to avoid having to work hard. In this sense, the failure of Africans Americans to achieve parity with Whites in academic achievement results from their own laziness and unwillingness to work hard in school, according to this teacher. In concert with this perspective, another teacher said, "They [African American students] don't apply themselves!" In sum, according to these teachers, African American students lack motivation, do not respect school as an institution, and tend to have misplaced priorities.

Community forces and parental lack of commitment. When asked why their African American students failed to achieve at the same rates as White students, teachers were eager to cite both home and school factors as the primary cause for the gaps in achievement, rather than their teaching. In general, they defined home factors in two main ways. First, parents were identified as a chief source of the problem. Second, they argued that cultural mores inconsistent with school values were nurtured in the home and in the broader community. One teacher, a middle-aged African American female, said, "White students come from environments where they are encouraged to excel in school." This exemplified the idea that the biggest concern about African American parents was their "lack of involvement" in their children's learning. For example, during the focus group session, one teacher exclaimed, "*Parents* don't spend enough time on homework." Another teacher said, "Our students don't get to sleep. Most of them don't eat breakfast. They only eat the chips they buy in

school. Then they don't sleep." These comments suggest that African American parents do not provide children the proper nutrition in the home necessary to support their learning. This is consistent with some teachers' stated beliefs that parents are generally uninvolved in their children's learning. Another teacher linked these ideas to the notion that "somewhere down the line, Mom and Dad stopped being Mom and Dad." In other words, the idea was expressed that many of the students lacked the proper guidance and support needed from their parents to be successful. For other teachers, Black parents are involved, but their involvement is primarily negative. One teacher explained, "So, it's convenient when it's the third or fourth quarter for students to tell their parents that the teacher doesn't like me. Then the parent tries to twist your arm to change their grade. They are not going to ask."

In summary, although teachers address parents as a primary cause of Black students' low achievement , it is not clear whether these teachers desire more input from parents in their children's learning. One teacher offered a solution to the dilemma: "We are going to have to start teaching kids at a young age how to be parents; how to have parenting skills." Surprisingly, none of the other teachers expressed any disagreement with this comment, which could be interpreted in a number of ways. Another teacher had a different solution: "I will say this before President Bush," she quipped excitedly: "There should be some type of institution that is put in place—not necessarily from the school teacher or from the board of education or superintendent. If he can say 'No Child Left Behind,' there should be a mandate that says 'No Parent Left Behind.'"

Because studies have shown that *No Child Left Behind* punishes poor and working-class children in low-performing schools (Ginsberg, 2005; Meier & Wood, 2004), it can be inferred from this teacher's comment that sanctions for parents beyond the walls of the school would perhaps be useful.[4] At the time of our study, the principal had a relationship with a nearby apartment complex where children who "acted up" in school consistently could be evicted from their homes. Perhaps the teacher who commented on "No Parent Left Behind" would extend this policy to parents of children who consistently fail to measure up on standardized examinations of achievement. Families with children who consistently fail in school could be forcibly removed from their homes or forced to transfer to a different school under a similar "No Parent Left Behind" policy. In sum, concerns about parents' lack of involvement (or their negative involvement) could be linked to discussions about home and community factors that contribute to the presence of the achievement gap.

Teachers not only expressed concerns about parents' attitudes and involvement, but also were also concerned about what they termed the

general "lack of structure" in the homes and surrounding neighborhoods. The lack of structure they discussed can be defined in many ways. One teacher exclaimed, "I try to share my experiences with them and try to create a positive environment as much as I can, but they are dealing with so many situations from home." For this teacher, sharing her experience as a middle-class person was important because the children did not have the necessary structures in place at home to help them develop broader understandings of important issues. For other teachers, the primary concern was in regard to the absence of fathers in the home. "The environment at home—you find a lot of broken families. The father's not there. The mother is raising the kids," one teacher lamented. Although she did not explain the possible explanations for why these families were "broken," it seemed clear that she was offering the traditional "too many single-parent households" explanation as a reason why children in her classes did not succeed. Her comment also suggests that the particular challenges she faced with male students might have been a result of the lack of male role models. As noted, problems with African American males were particularly acute in this school. They were the most likely to be suspended, they were expelled more often than others, and they had dropout rates that were 2–3 times higher than those of their female counterparts.

Closely related to teachers' concerns about the home environment of their students was a concern about the particular culture of African American families. One teacher expressed a concern about the "emphasis on church over school." She argued that in some African American families:

> What we have here is no balance. The environment says things will get better if you go to church. So we are not offering balance—so if you go to school then it will get better. That has nothing to do with *them* [emphasis added]. Mom and Dad say if I could just make it to church, there is some hope. So we are working with an imbalance here.

According to this teacher, African Americans have more faith in religion than in schools. We interrogate this idea more deeply in our discussion section.

Another teacher claimed that Black culture does not value education or show pride in learning. She talked specifically about how she believed that Blacks do not prepare their children to learn and that this lack of preparation results in significant knowledge gaps that children from other cultures do not experience. Yet she was not specific about what a parent would *do* to prepare a child to learn. This point was supported by

an expressed belief that African American culture is anti-intellectual. One teacher exclaimed,

> This goes way back and as time goes on, a lot of Black students feel that it is not necessary. I can get what I want without having to go the extra mile to study . . . don't need English, I don't need math if I'm gonna be a singer or play ball or whatever.

In other words, because Black students believe that they will not pursue careers that involve intellectual work, they do not feel that it is important get a sound education. In this teacher's view, these beliefs represent deeply ingrained, if stereotypical, ideas within the African American community. Put another way, because African Americans value sports and entertainment, students only value those ideas and activities that could lead to a successful career in sports or entertainment.

According to another teacher, African American students struggle to overcome academic difficulties because they are not allowed to think critically in their homes and in their neighborhoods, and this, in turn, is related to students' "inability to think critically." The same teacher commented, "We have to raise their level of critical thinking. Now, it's back to the home because I find in many neighborhoods, kids are not allowed to have an opinion—they cannot respond back and forth because they are not allowed to be themselves." The teachers felt that there are a number of community- or culturally based factors that shape and influence students' ability to excel in school and to simply focus on being a student. One teacher linked students' inability to focus to the idea of "unrest" in the home or the community. She suggested that students are so stressed or anxious about what they are experiencing at home or in their communities that they simply cannot focus on learning.

As this section shows, many African American teachers had a range of ideas about why African American students, particularly males, failed to meet high academic standards. Not only did African American teachers support ideas about African American students linked to race and class, but they also had little confidence in their own abilities to teach these students successfully. This points to a state of crisis, at least locally, that questions the ability of the school system to properly educate hundreds of thousands of African American youth. It also raises concerns about the quality of teaching for Black students in the school and the dispositions of the teachers. This is especially important because, as we have already stated, the quality of teachers can and does greatly impact the ability of schools to affect children's lives in positive ways (Darling-Hammond, 2004).

DISCUSSION: EXPLORING TEACHERS' "CRISIS OF FAITH" IN THEIR
STUDENTS

We began this article with a reference to Derrick Bell's critical race coun-
ternarrative about a group of African American schoolchildren who sim-
ply vanished into thin air. In many ways, this narrative of the missing
schoolchildren reflects the status of the children who are subjects of our
research: They are lost. If we believe that the status of African American
education has some relationship to the overall quality of instruction
received by African American students, then we must consider what it is
that accounts for the ways that the mostly African American teachers
studied here view their students.

As African American researchers with backgrounds as successful ele-
mentary and secondary teachers, we were puzzled, if not stunned, by
these findings. As researchers, we found that African American teachers
generally tended to express positive beliefs about African American stu-
dents and were often advocates for them. African American teachers
often demonstrated a "cultural connectedness" (Foster, 1994; Foster &
Peele, 1999) with their students and often saw themselves as "othermoth-
ers" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999) with the responsibility to use their posi-
tions as teachers to transform African American communities.
Nevertheless, when we thought about the power of these teachers' words
within the context of a critical race analysis of schooling for African
Americans, we were reminded of the classic book, *Words That Wound:*
Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment, which was
written and edited by a team of critical race legal scholars (Matsuda,
Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993). In producing this volume, these
scholars communicated a concern about the U.S. Constitution's ambigu-
ity regarding the nature of, impact of, and methods for dealing with, what
they called racist hate speech. This form of speech, they argued, is often
propagated by prominent members of the Ku Klux Klan or other
avowedly White supremacist leaders and organizations.

While the term *racist hate speech* evokes images of a hooded other
attempting to incite fear in the poor, isolated masses, much of the lan-
guage used by teachers in this study to discuss and describe African
American students and their families seems tantamount to racist hate
speech. It not only condemns these students for engaging in "the wrong
behaviors" and having "the wrong attitude," but it also condemns them
for being African American.[5] When a teacher described Asian and Jewish
students as hardworking and then described Blacks as lazy and unwilling
to work hard, he was simply reinscribing racist ideologies about the link
between race and motivation. In other words, "lack of motivation"

becomes a distinct racial/cultural stereotype that can be used to explain these students' failure to meet certain standards. Other statements regarding the interference of African American community and religious values with educational values also pathologize the role of religion in the lives of students and once again take a deficit view of African American cultural values and practices. This is especially true given that it is well known that religion is a central feature of any culture. Even though the teachers share the same race as many of their students, they characterized them as lazy, unmotivated, and oppositional rather than as victims of some of the more complex and interactive factors that lead to the alienation of African Americans in the public school system. According to critical race theorists, this construction of polarizing racial dichotomies is a classic feature of racist ideologies that has developed over time in Western societies: "Racist ideology replicates this pattern of arranging oppositional categories in a hierarchal order; historically whites have represented the dominant element in the antimony, while blacks came to be seen as separate and subordinate . . . each negative image of blacks correlates with a counterimage of whites" (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. 113).

Given this historical context, the teachers' characterizations of African American students in our data appear consistent with racist ideologies constructed about African Americans in general, and African American students in particular. Because many of the teachers we studied were the same race as their students, their perceptions might best be viewed as a result of internalized oppression, in which oppressed people can easily become what Freire (1970/1997) called "the oppressor within." This could be one of the many psychological effects of internalized racism: African Americans can freely use racist hate speech as a way to castigate, put down, and possibly control other African Americans who fail to adhere to tightly constructed social norms. In other words, teachers who display animosity toward their students may in fact be hosting a form of self-loathing that is evident in racially oppressed peoples who have failed to deconstruct and disrobe White supremacist constructions of non-Whites (Woodson, 1933).

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2003) argued that racist ideologies must be situated within the context of a post–civil rights social, political, and cultural milieu that eschews overt, aggressive, and violent forms of racism and promotes more symbolic forms. He identified this as color-blind racism. Color-blind racists (who are usually White) use racial frames to explain their views about Blacks. The frames are abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. Bonilla-Silva (2003) described the four frames in some detail:

> The frame of *abstract liberalism* involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., "equal opportunity," the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice individualism) in an *abstract* manner to explain racial matters. . . . *Naturalization* is a frame that allows whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting that they are natural occurrences. *Cultural racism* is a frame that relies on culturally based arguments such as "Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education" or "Blacks have too many babies" to explain the standing of minorities in society. (p. 28)

The *minimization of racism* frame requires no explanation because it is self-evident. The frame of *cultural racism* seems particularly useful in helping us think about teachers' beliefs about academic failure among African American students in our data. "Culture of poverty" explanations were the predominant way in which teachers we studied explained persistent school failure (Lynn, 2006). Bonilla-Silva (2001) attributed Black people's "blame-the-victim" rhetoric to the pervasiveness of "dominant ideologies" about race that can "affect, influence, and partly shape the consciousness of subordinated groups" such as African Americans (p. 168). In other words, although the majority of Blacks do not typically subscribe to racist beliefs about other Blacks, they are in fact influenced by the overwhelmingly racist messages in the media and other social and cultural arenas that construct a view of all Blacks, especially those in the working class and the poor, as lazy, unmotivated, and culturally deficient.

Although the frame of cultural racism was apparent in the beliefs about academic failure among the teachers we studied, it was also clear that social class differences between teachers and students provided a steady undercurrent for their conversations about what Black students "lacked." The social class cleavage between middle-class African American teachers and their poor and working-class students has been examined by both Anyon (1997) and Rist (1970). These authors argued, for example, that teachers' comments about the preponderance of "single-parent households" and the overreliance on "grandmothers" or parents' lack of "parenting skills" signal an underlying belief about the impact of social class on schooling. It seems that for the teachers we studied, social class interacts with race to create a unique set of "limit situations" that make it impossible, at least in their own minds, for them to teach these students well. Their beliefs constitute a type of "poverty of thought" that inevitably leads toward the construction and practicing of "pedagogies of poverty" (Haberman, 1995) and the subsequent disorientation and displacement for the majority of students who come into contact with these teachers. It

also explains why numerous students spent their time walking the curved tree-lined streets surrounding the school or traversing the hallways during instructional time. In addition, it makes it clear why the principal would need to stand in the hallway with a bullhorn and shout in a loud military voice, "Two minutes!! You got 2 minutes!!" and then systematically announce, "Time is up!! You should be in class or else!" after the bell rang. As this illustrates, teachers' and administrators' "crisis of faith" in their students produces and reproduces the limit situation that we described earlier. Not only does it engender a sense of hopelessness among teachers, but it also has the impact of demotivating students. It is our assessment, based on our data, that when teachers and administrators display a lack of faith in students, it impacts students' interest in school. And of course, a lack of interest in school can contribute to school failure.

Although our study suggests that teachers, even those who may be members of racially oppressed groups, can sometimes harbor racist and classist beliefs about students that can in turn lead them to lose hope about the prospects for their students to be successful, we cannot draw the conclusion from our data that the teachers' expression of their frustration represents a lack of concern for the welfare of their students. As we searched for answers to some of the teachers' problematic expressions of their beliefs about their students, we were reminded of the words of Cornel West (1993), whose discussion of African American prophetic leaders sheds light on this issue. According to West, African Americans who work tirelessly on behalf of the community do so out of a commitment to the humanity and wholeness of the Black community. We find the same commitment to be true of Freire's (1970/1997) "cultural workers," who sometimes lashed out against poor people and expressed an overwhelming sense of disappointment about the slow pace of community involvement and engagement in the political process. Otis Graham, author of *Our Kind of People* (1999), reminded us of a strong tradition of upwardly mobile African Americans who fought tirelessly, sometimes behind the scenes, to right the wrongs of the society while sometimes publicly chiding the community. These sometimes contradictory stances could be attributed to middle-class Black people's heightened sense of "double consciousness," as described by DuBois (1929), that forced them to provide "tough love" to their own while they worked to support and improve conditions for them. This sense of double consciousness could also be found among African American teachers in the South (Fultz, 1995), who sometimes had to quit the NAACP and even publicly disavow it in order to keep their jobs. These Black teachers were viewed as "sell-outs," but they often worked surreptitiously on behalf of the community.

In short, the problem we describe in this article is complex and multifaceted. It is not sufficient to simply say, "Black middle-class teachers don't care about Black working-class and poor children." As our conversations with a small group of teachers we interviewed will illustrate, structural constraints in the school and in the district prevented caring teachers from building and practicing transformative humanizing pedagogies.

CARING TEACHERS IN AN UNCARING ENVIRONMENT

Although the primary goal of our study was to understand teacher perspectives on the persistent academic failure of African American students, we also wanted to understand teachers' perspectives on what worked well with African American students, males in particular. As we spent more and more time in the school, we eventually discovered a small group of mostly African American male teachers who worked effectively with African American male students. We interviewed and observed several teachers, a counselor, and an administrator. Most of them were African American males. We also interviewed and observed one African American female art teacher. (We do not attempt to convey the notion that African American male teachers in the school were the *only* caring teachers of African American male students.) Overall, we met individually with, and observed the classrooms of, 6 teachers and conducted an in-depth interview with one assistant principal. When asked why African American male students persistently failed to meet high academic standards, they focused on broader systemic issues and school factors that contributed to the failure of African American male students to succeed.

In a focus group session with 5 Black male participants and 1 Black female teacher, one teacher stated, "I wonder about poor White students and their achievement. Are they comparing our students to more middle-class students?" In other words, he was concerned about the nature of the discourse on the achievement gap. In short, he questioned whether issues of class were being fully considered. Another teacher talked about the mismanagement of school funds and the inequities that are built into the system, and he argued that they present a constraint that is difficult to overcome. He suggested, "When you have people cutting the budget, you're fighting an uphill battle." Another teacher argued, "Education is never gonna get the funds that it needs. It seems like an uphill battle because of all kinds of historically based . . . racism, lack of funding." Although these comments do indicate low efficacy beliefs among these caring teachers, they also illustrate that teachers view the problem as structural in nature and not merely the fault of students. This has broad implications for their beliefs about *what* can be changed.

Another Black male teacher said, "Public education is under assault. They are trying to do away with it. They are underfunding it, and they expect us to make all these corrections. They are taking the power away from the teachers. You are no longer free to think." Another teacher argued,

> Until we get proper funding . . . until every school, whether it's in a high-class neighborhood or low-income neighborhood, gets proper funding and can offer the type of education that each student deserves, we're always gonna have the schools that are low-achieving and that no one really wants to go to. It's a vicious cycle. It starts with the funding.

In that regard, this small group of teachers seemed more willing to look at the combination of factors that impacted the ability of their African American students, particularly males, to be successful in the larger society. They were especially concerned about funding inequities between rich schools and poor schools and were concerned that their students were too often being compared with students in schools and communities with many more resources. They argued that teachers and administrators in low-performing schools must adopt a more holistic view of African American male student achievement in order to have more success with this population.

The teachers who expressed a commitment to the development of Black male students also had specific ideas about the best ways to ensure the success of these students in the classroom—many of whom may be at risk of dropping out. An algebra teacher commented, "I use real-life application. I talk about life. It's real. When I teach algebra, I use a balance of life and teaching." Other teachers also emphasized the importance of "real-world application" in classrooms. Another teacher commented, "They need more activities. They love ideas." We also observed these strategies in practice in their classrooms. We observed the classrooms of the art teacher and a music teacher.

In both classrooms, the teachers talked extensively with students about "life" and offered lessons about honesty, responsibility, and following through on their promises. They challenged students to see classroom assignments as important building blocks for life. In the art class, students engaged in a vigorous conversation with the teacher about their own lives and how the assignments helped to redefine this for them. In music class, the teacher spoke with students about the problems that exist in the community and discussed how they might be instrumental in fostering positive change on a broader scale. In both instances, students

"talked back" to their teachers by offering their opinions, asking questions, and pushing the teachers to be clear. In all the classrooms we observed except one, there was an infusion of life lessons into daily instruction. This finding is consistent with previous research that suggests that African American teachers do not just teach content; they teach about life (Foster & Peele, 1999; Lynn & Parker, 2006). We did observe one classroom where students were busily engaged in classwork throughout the period; there was little discussion about life lessons, for example. However, we noticed that this teacher spent significant amounts of time talking with students in the hallways, in the lunchroom, and in his own classroom during breaks. He talked with students about their own personal lives. He offered them advice on a range of issues. He also encouraged them to pursue their goals and personal interests. The teacher saw this as an important way to remain connected to his students while focusing his classroom time on making sure students mastered the content. The students seemed to value all these approaches.

In individual interviews, many of these teachers talked about the need for developing mentoring programs and involving African American males in some gender-segregated activities. They noted the importance of "listening to parents" and offering them advice on how to best help their children at home without talking down to them. They also suggested that it was important to understand the social and economic circumstances facing many parents. One teacher exclaimed, "Parents are just trying to make it." He stressed the importance of having teachers develop a level of sensitivity to the problems that parents face in their personal struggles to care for their children. These teachers also argued that schools should do more to accommodate the interests and needs of parents. One teacher suggested a shift in the planning of teacher–parent conferences to have them on days when parents don't have to work. The teachers had a range of suggestions about how to include parents and help African American males gain a greater awareness of how to be men.

Although these teachers had progressive ideas about how to improve the lives of African American students, they did not feel free to express these ideas openly. When being interviewed, several of the teachers closed their doors, looked around suspiciously, or refused to be audiotaped. They wanted to be certain that they would remain anonymous. The research team was baffled by this because none of the teachers expressed any ideas or beliefs that could be considered inflammatory or radical. As we spent more time in the school, we learned that the teachers believed that their principal simply did not support this kind of dialogue about what teachers and schools should do to improve the education of African American children. One teacher exclaimed,

"There's no support for this kind of talk here. One has to be careful." Unfortunately, teachers who cared about their students were afraid to express it aloud for fear of retribution, and teachers who did not particularly understand or project that they cared for these children were brazen about their beliefs and often found support for their ideas. In short, these teachers conveyed that the organizational culture of the school did not support progressive social and pedagogical thought.

Conversations with the principal led us to conclude that she may have influenced teachers' perceptions about their work and how to best meet the needs of failing students. Overall, although our data appear to suggest that the majority of the teachers we interviewed accepted little responsibility for the success or failure of African American students, we would argue that many of them probably felt trapped by an environment that they perceived as being unsupportive of progressive thought or work on behalf of African American students, particularly male students. In an examination of the ways in which the organizational culture of schools affects African American teachers, Madsen and Mabokela (2000) found that because "African American teachers perceived the institutional culture of their school as not supportive to [sic] their use of culturally relevant practices" (p. 867), they often did not attempt to use these practices for fear that they might be criticized by unsupportive administrators or colleagues. In addition, they argued that teachers, minority teachers in particular, often feel a strong push to "conform" to prevailing norms and values lest they be punished or dismissed from service (Madsen & Mabokela). Like the teachers in the school we studied, teachers seemed to capitulate to the whims of the administration rather than risk isolation or dismissal. In this regard, we learned a great deal about how a disempowering school culture can shift, constrain, and limit the possibilities of students through strict control over teachers' behaviors.

LIMITATIONS

Our results are limited by the small sample of teachers studied in one district in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. We make no attempts to generalize beyond this school, apart from raising questions about the extent to which findings such as ours might be more widespread, and expressing the hope that future research address this question. Our data are further restricted by the open-ended nature of our questions and our inability to sample and observe teaching systematically in this school.

Another limitation of our long-term study was that we were not able to do active member checks with subjects who participated. There were

several reasons why this occurred. After data collection was completed, the lead researcher sought and received permission from the principal to return to the school to present the "findings" to the school community. One day he arrived for the scheduled presentation, and the principal said, "You're a month early." We were subsequently unable to reschedule the meeting with teachers and administrators to discuss the findings of the research.

As a result of this experience, the research team systematically interrogated our own assumptions about the African American students in this school, about urban school students in general, and about conducting research in African American communities. Because the lead researcher had conducted research on African American male teachers, we also interrogated the extent to which our findings might somehow be tainted to support previous research findings on the importance of African American male teachers in reaching African American male students. We forced ourselves to think deeply about issues of representation and fully considered whether we were in some way tainting the findings with our own views.

One of our team members, an African American woman, urged us to be particularly careful about how we were depicting African American female teachers relative to African American male teachers. She urged us to consider societal factors that might influence women teachers to have particular views about their male students. To alleviate some of these issues, we decided that we would present the work publicly to diverse audiences before submitting it for publication. We presented the findings at a symposium at the University of Maryland and sought feedback from our colleagues and students, many of whom were K–12 teachers from this school district. Our colleagues and students (some of whom were African American female teachers in this district) asked us to develop detailed explanations for our findings based on our theoretical framework. We also presented this work at a national conference, where we received valuable feedback. Finally, the lead researcher spoke with local media about the preliminary findings. As a result, a description of our findings was written up in a local newspaper. The article was forwarded to school officials in the district. The lead researcher subsequently spoke at length with the president of the school board for the district and with the chief education officer for the district. The school board president did express concerns about issues of representation; she argued that the public reporting of the data might make the district "look bad" but did not refute its accuracy. The new chief education officer of the district was not concerned about how the data made the district look. He acknowledged that the problem we identified was "widespread" in the district. He

invited the lead researcher to engage in further conversations about how to "fix the problem." We agreed that if the lead researcher could obtain outside funding to support the project, we would engage in a large-scale study of teacher beliefs and then create a certificate program at the university that would help teachers learn to be more sensitive to the needs of African American male students. In short, although we were not able to follow up with the individual participants in the study, we were able to get a significant amount of feedback on our findings from our colleagues and students, many of whom were teachers in this district, and from district officials responsible for making important decisions about teaching and learning in the district. We also presented this work at a major international conference. As a result, we were able to get considerable feedback on the manuscript before submitting it for publication.

CONCLUSION

REFRAMING QUALITY IN TEACHING

Despite the apparent limitations of this study, we believe that it raises some important questions that are worth further examination. First of all, how do teachers' beliefs about their students affect their ability to be effective teachers of African American male students? As we have shown, evidence suggests that there is a direct relationship between teachers' beliefs about their students and their ability to be effective with them. We also know that teachers—even those deemed to be of high quality according to a number of other indicators—are not as confident about their ability to teach African American students, male or female. In addition, some of the literature we reviewed even suggests that more experienced teachers are less confident about their ability to teach African American learners than are new teachers! Our study bears this out. According to the 2006 School Improvement Plan for the school that was part of this study, only a quarter of the teachers in the school were without certification, and more than 50% of them were experienced teachers. At least 3 of the 6 teachers who were part of our subsample had less than 5 years of experience in the classroom. Suffice it to say that teachers' "lack of faith" in their students could not be attributed to their lack of experience or expertise in their content area. Although we cannot attribute the pervasive academic underachievement of African American males solely to bad teachers, we agree with Darling-Hammond and others who suggest that teachers greatly influence the academic trajectories of their students—especially African American males who attend underresourced schools. We must focus more attention on improving the overall quality of

teachers and teaching in the United States. But first, we must begin to be more attentive to students' beliefs about what counts as quality teaching.

Sociologist L. Janelle Dance (2002) studies "the impact of street-culture on schooling" among Black and Latino male youth in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and found that African American male students have very specific beliefs about what quality teaching looks like. In defining a quality teacher, a student explained that the teacher (Ms. Bronzic) "used to always tell me I could do better." He went on to say that this teacher, whom he described as an old "Jewish lady," taught him to "always be better than the best" (p. 73). Not only did she believe in his ability to succeed academically, she expected him to excel. This teacher was referred to by the students in Dance's study as "a down teacher," or someone who understood her students' cultural standpoints and expressed care and concern about their general well-being as people. Like many of the teachers in our study, Ms. Bronzic was frustrated by her students' lack of attention to their own academic progress. However, she believed that all her students were equally capable of success. In addition, she took a personal interest in their lives. Dance's study corroborates evidence from dozens of other studies—some of which were discussed previously—that illustrate the sheer power of teachers in the lives of poor African American male students. The role that teachers play in the academic achievement or underachievement of African American students cannot be underestimated. In addition, we must begin to take seriously students' beliefs about what constitutes a high-quality teacher and use their assessments as part of the criteria for determining how we define high-quality teaching for African American male youth, particularly in urban contexts (Haberman, 1995). The work of reassessing how we define quality in teaching must go hand in hand with other important work at the national and local level to put Black males back on the policy agenda.

PUTTING BLACK MALES ON THE AGENDA, AGAIN!

The original goal of this study was to highlight portraits of successful teachers of African American male students in a low-performing high school. Past research conducted by the lead author and others in the field suggested that although it might be a challenge to find high-performing teachers in a low-performing school, it certainly is not impossible. Although we did spend some time talking with a few committed teachers, we spent the majority of our time talking to teachers who did not believe they could significantly improve the academic performance of most of their African American students, the males in particular. We

refer to this as a crisis of faith. We do not lay the blame for this solely at the feet of teachers or even the administrator, who, we concluded, had created a culture of fear among her teachers. We believe that this crisis of faith is prevalent throughout this nation in school districts, urban and suburban, where the majority of students are Black and Latino. Although we certainly want to heed Bonilla-Silva's warnings about the ever-shifting nature of racial politics in a White supremacist political and social structure, we also believe that in the United States, there is little commitment to addressing the most challenging problems in a progressive and non-punitive way. In a 1991 review on "School Programs for African American Males," Ascher found that there were a number of different programs, school based and non-school based, available to struggling African American male students. Many of the teachers in our subsample did talk about a brief period in the late 1980s and mid-1990s when there was vigorous debate in Summerfield County and in the state about the best ways to promote the academic achievement of African American males (Ascher, 1991). School- and district-based programs were developed and then subsequently abandoned because of a lack of funding or because of legal challenges brought on by those who claimed it was unfair to focus specifically on males. In fact, Ascher also reported that many national and local efforts to help African American male elementary and high school students were effectively destabilized by the political pressure from various groups that claimed it was unfair to have conversations about how to help Black males who were then, and still are, at the bottom of the educational well. As Tyrone Howard (2008) suggested in a recent article published in this journal, the United States is going to have to decide that the problems facing African American males are worth solving and that we will invest our time and our resources into finding workable solutions that help to move this nation further toward the goal of making the American dream a reality for everyone. Our children deserve no less.

Notes

1.   We mention that Ramsey was an honors student because it helps to shed light on why he was involved in the study as a researcher. Honors students at the University of Maryland are allowed to take a number of independent studies courses that are designed to help them develop advanced research skills. As part of his independent study, the student agreed to work closely with an experienced researcher to examine issues affecting the minority achievement gap in Maryland.

2.   Summerfield is a pseudonym. After much discussion with district leaders, the research team decided to conceal the name of the district to protect the identity of the participants.

3.   These data were obtained from the School Improvement Plan for the school. We will not cite it here because we want to protect the identity of the school, the administrator, and the staff who graciously opened their doors to us during this process.

4.   We refer the readers to a recent story in *The Washington Post* describing a Summerfield County School District policy that called for the arrest of parents who failed to have their children immunized (Hernandez, 2007). The story, dated November 17, 2007, begins, "The parents of more than 2,300 Summerfield County students who failed to get needed vaccinations could face fines of $50 a day and up to 10 days in jail if their children do not meet the state's immunization requirements, county officials said." Although this story was written 2 years after our research was completed, we believe that teachers' willingness to express such strong negative views about their students may have signaled a larger "threat in the air" (Steele, 1997), which seems to be manifesting itself in very real and dangerous ways at the moment.

5.   We recognize that it may be considered controversial to use the term *racist hate speech* to characterize the way Black teachers talk about their students. However, we believe that this characterization, although stark, is important given the changing and shifting nature of race relations in the United States (see the work of Bonilla-Silva cited here). Racist hate speech is typically the province of White supremacist organizations. However, as we explain later, there are ways in which people of color—even Blacks—do a great deal to propagate racist views about other Blacks who may be different from them in key ways.

References

Anyon, J. (1997). *Ghetto schooling: a political economy of urban educational reform.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Ascher, C. (1991). School programs for African American males. *Equity and Choice, 8*(1), 25–29.

Ascher, C., & Branch-Smith, E. (2005). Precarious space: Majority Black suburbs and their public schools. *Teachers College Record, 107*, 1956–1973.

Bakari, R. (2003). Preservice teachers' attitudes toward teaching African American students: Contemporary research, *Urban Education, 38*, 640–654.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (1999). A movement against and beyond boundaries: "politically relevant teaching" among African American teachers. *Teachers College Record, 100*, 702–723.

Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well.* New York: Basic Books.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2001). *White supremacy and racism in the post-civil rights era.* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2003). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States* (2nd ed.) Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Brophy, J., & Good, T. (1970). Teachers' communication of differential expectations for children's classroom performance: Some behavioral data. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 61,* 365–374.

Cabello, B., & Burstein, N. D. (1995). Examining teachers' beliefs about teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. *Journal of Teacher Education, 46*, 285.

Carey, K. (2004). The real value of teachers: Using new information about teacher effectiveness to close the achievement gap. *Thinking K–16, 8*(1), 3–32.

Chester, M. D., & Beaudin, B. (1996). Efficacy beliefs of newly hired teachers in urban schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 33*, 233–257.

Crenshaw, K., Gotanda, N., Peller, G., & Thomas, K. (1995). *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement.* New York: New Press.

Dance, L. J. (2002). *Tough fronts: The impact of street culture on schooling.* London: Routledge Falmer Press.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *Doing what matters most: Investing in quality teaching.* New York: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1999). *Teacher policy and student achievement: A review of state policy evidence.* Seattle: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, Washington State University.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2004). What happens to a dream deferred? The continuing quest for equal educational opportunity. In J. A. Banks & C. M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (2nd ed., pp. 607–630). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Davis, J. E., & Jordan, W. J. (1994). The effects of school context, structure, and experiences on African American males in middle and high school. *Journal of Negro Education, 63*, 570–587.

Duncan, G. (2002). Critical race theory and method: Rendering race in ethnographic research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*, 83–102.

Duncan, G. (2005). Critical race ethnography in education: Narrative, inequality and the problem of epistemology. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 8*(1), 93–114.

Duncan, G. A., & Jackson, R. (1996). The language we cry in: Black language practice at a post-desegregated urban high school. *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education, 3*(1). Retrieved August 1, 2007, from http://www.urbanedjournal.org

Ferguson, R. F. (2003). Teachers' perceptions and expectations and the Black-White test score gap. *Urban Education, 38*, 460–507.

Foster, M. (1994). Educating for competence in community and culture: Exploring the views of exemplary African-American teachers. In Mwalimu Shujaa (Ed.)., *Too much schooling, too little education: A paradox of Black life in White societies* (pp. 221–244). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Foster, M. (1995). African American teachers and culturally relevant pedagogy. In J. Banks & C. A. McGee Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 570–581). New York: Macmillan.

Foster, M. (1997). *Black teachers on teaching.* New York: New Press.

Foster, M., & Peele, T. B. (1999). Teaching Black males: Lessons from the experts. In V. C. Polite & J. E. Davis (Eds.), *Black males in school and society: Practices and policies for effective education* (pp. 8–19). New York: Teachers College Press.

Freire, P. (1997). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (new revised 20th anniversary edition). New York: Continuum. (Original work published 1970)

Fultz, M. (1995). Teacher training and African-American education in the South, 1900–1940. *Journal of Negro Education, 64*, 196–210.

Gibbs, J. T. (1988). *Young, Black, and male in America: An endangered species.* Dover, MA: Auburn House.

Ginsberg, A. E. (2005). "No Child Left Behind" in urban education: Solving a crisis or creating one? *Penn GSE Perspectives in Urban Education, 3*(3), 1–14.

Good, T. L. (1987). Two decades of research on teacher expectations: Findings and future directions. *Journal of Teacher Education, 38*(4), 32–47.

Graham, O. (1999). *Our kind of people: Inside American's Black upper class.* New York: Harper Collins.

Haberman, M. (1995). *Star teachers of children in poverty.* West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi.

Haycock, K. (1998). Good teaching matters . . . a lot. *Thinking K–16, 3*(2), 3–15.

Hernandez, N. (2007, November 14). Get kids vaccinated or else, parents told. *The Washington Post*, p. B01.

Howard, T. C. (2001). Powerful pedagogy for African American students: Conceptions of culturally relevant pedagogy. *Urban Review, 36*, 131–149.

Howard, T. (2008). Who really cares? The disenfranchisement of African American males in prek–12 schools: A critical race theory perspective. *Teachers College Record, 110,* 954–985.

Irvine, J. J. (1985). Teacher communication patterns as related to the race and sex of the student. *Journal of Educational Research, 78*, 338–345.

Irvine, J. J. (1990). *Black students and school failure: Policies, practices and prescriptions.* New York: Greenwood Press.

Irvine, J. J. (1991). *Black students and school failure: Policies, practices and prescriptions.* Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood.

Jordan, W., & Cooper, R. (2003). High school reform and Black male students: Limits and possibilities of policy and practice. *Urban Education, 38*, 196–216.

Jussim, L., Eccles, J., & Madon, S. (1996). Social perception, social stereotypes, and teacher expectations: Accuracy and the quest for the powerful self-fulfilling prophecy. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 28,* 281–387.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dream keepers: Successful teachers of African-American children.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*, 465–491.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record, 97*, 47–63.

Lightfoot, S. L. (1983). *The good high school: Portraits of character and culture.* New York: Basic Books.

Lynn, M. (2002). Critical race theory and the perspectives of Black men teachers in the Los Angeles schools. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 35*, 119–130.

Lynn, M. (2006). Education for the community: Exploring the culturally relevant practices of Black male teachers. *Teachers College Record, 108*, 2497–2522.

Lynn, M., Benigno, G., Williams, A., Park, G., & Mitchell, C. (2006). Critical theories of race, class and gender in urban education. *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice, 19*(2), 17–25.

Lynn, M., & Parker, L. (2006). Critical race studies in education: A decade of research on K–12 schooling. *The Urban Review, 38*, 257–290.

Madsen, J., & Mabokela, R. O. (2000). Organizational culture and its impact on African American teachers. *American Educational Research Journal, 37*, 849–876.

Maryland State Department of Education. (2001a). *2001 school performance program report: State, school system and schools.* Upper Marlboro, MD. Metropolitan County Public Schools.

Maryland State Department of Education. (2001b*). Minority achievement at the millennium.* By the Achievement Initiative for Maryland's Minority Students Steering Committee. Baltimore: Author.

Matsuda, M. J., Lawrence, C. R., Delgado, R., & Crenshaw, K. W. (1993). *Words that wound: Critical race theory, assaultive speech and the first amendment.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Meier, D., & Wood, G. (Eds.). (2004). *Many children left behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is damaging our children and our schools.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Muller, C., Katz, S. R., & Dance, L. J. (1999). Investing in teaching and learning: Dynamics of the teacher-student relationship from each actor's perspective. *Urban Education, 34*, 292–337.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2001a). *Education achievement and Black-White inequality* (NCES 2001-061). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Nettles, M. T., & Perna, L. W. (1997). *The African American education data book, Volume II: Preschool through high school education.* Fairfax, VA: Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute for the College Fund/UNCF.

Noguera, P. (2007). Extended view: Race, student achievement and the power and limitations of teaching. *Sage Race Relations Abstracts, 32,* 44–47.

Ogbu, J. (2003). *Black American students in an affluent suburb: A study of academic disengagement.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Omi, M., & Winant, H. (1994). *Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s.* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Pang, V., & Sablan, V. (1998) Teacher efficacy: How do teachers feel about their abilities to teach African American students? In M. Dilworth (Ed.), *Being responsive to cultural differences: How teachers learn* (pp. 39–60). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Peske, H. G., & Haycock, K. (2006). *How poor and minority students are shortchanged on teacher quality.* Washington, DC: The Education Trust.

Polite, V. C. (1993). If only we knew then what we know now: Foiled opportunities to learn in suburbia. *Journal of Negro Education, 62,* 337–354.

Polite, V. C. (1994). The method in the madness: African American males, avoidance schooling, chaos theory. *Journal of Negro Education, 63,* 588–601.

Polite, V. C., & Davis, J. E. (1999). *African American males in schools and society: Practices and policies for effective education.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Presley, J. B., White, B. R., & Gong, Y. (2005). *Examining the distribution and impact of teacher quality in Illinois* (Policy Research Report IERC 2005-2). Edwardsville: Illinois Education Research Council.

Rist, R. (1970). Student social class and teacher expectations: The self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. *Harvard Educational Review 40*, 411–451.

Roderick, M. (2003). What's happening to the boys? Early high school experiences and school outcomes among African American male adolescents in Chicago. *Urban Education, 38*, 538–607.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Steele, C. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape identity and performance. *American Psychologist, 52*, 613–629.

Tate, W. F., IV. (1997). Critical race theory and education: History, theory, and implications. In M. Apple (Ed.), *Review of research in education* (pp. 191–243). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Tettegah, S. (1996). The racial consciousness attitudes of White prospective teachers and their perceptions of the teachability of students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds: Findings from a California study. *Journal of Negro Education, 65,*151–163.

Thomas, J. (1993). *Doing critical ethnography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
West, C. (1993). *Race matters*. Boston: Beacon Press.
Woodson, C. G. (1933). *Miseducation of the Negro*. New York: AMS Press.
Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 8*, 69–91.

MARVIN LYNN is associate professor of curriculum and instruction, and an affiliate faculty member in African American Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He conducts research on the work and lives of African American teachers in public schools. He also writes in the area of critical race studies in education. Two recent publications are "Education for the Community: Exploring the Culturally Relevant Practices of Black Male Teachers," published in *Teachers College Record* in 2006, and "Critical Race Studies in Education and the 'Endarkened' Wisdom of Carter G. Woodson" with Thurman Bridges in *The SAGE Handbook of African American Education*, edited by Linda Tillman.

JENNIFER NICOLE BACON is a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland in minority and urban education. She is currently a special education coordinator/department chairperson in Maryland and has served as a classroom teacher/instructor on the secondary and postsecondary level, as an educational consultant, and as a teacher trainer and supervisor. Ms. Bacon's research focus is on the lived experience of African American adolescent girl poets. She serves as a facilitator for culturally responsive poetry groups for adolescents and women with a focus on self-identity, gender, race, and culture. Ms. Bacon has presented at several conferences, including the American Educational Research Association, and has had poems published in such literary magazines as *Phatitude* and *Returning Woman*.

TOMMY L. TOTTEN is a doctoral candidate in the Minority and Urban Education program, with a cognate in mathematics education. He is currently the department's graduate student association president. His research interests include preparing teachers for diversity, transformative pedagogy, situated cognition, and culturally relevant mathematics teaching and learning for African American students in urban contexts. His current research explores African American secondary mathematics teachers' thinking about how to create mathematical tasks centered on students' lived experiences and interests.

THURMAN L. BRIDGES III is a third-year doctoral candidate and

research assistant at the University of Maryland, College Park, in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the Minority and Urban Education program. His research interests include the social context of urban education, critical race theory/praxis, African American student achievement, African American male teachers, social justice curriculum, and hip hop pedagogy. His current research explores participants' historical and contemporary experiences as African American males and as teachers within U.S. public schools. Mr. Bridges's publications include a book chapter (with Brown and Clark) entitled "Youth Teaching Teachers: Bridging Racial and Cultural Divides Between Teachers and Students," to be published in an upcoming book (Hampton Press). He has also cowritten a chapter (with Marvin Lynn) entitled "Critical Race Studies in Education and the 'Endarkened' wisdom of Carter G. Woodson," to be published in *The SAGE Handbook of African American Education.*

MICHAEL JENNINGS is associate professor of educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Texas, San Antonio. His research focuses on race and education and the experiences of Black faculty in higher education. He has recently published an article with Marvin Lynn entitled "The House That Race Built: Toward a Critical Race Analysis of Critical Pedagogy" in *The Journal of Educational Foundations*, and an upcoming article (with Bonner et. al.) entitled "Capitalizing on Leadership Capacity: Gifted African American Males in High School" to be published in an upcoming issue of the *Roeper Review.*