



Deficit Thinking and the Effective Teacher

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Abstract

This research was a qualitative study of 10 elementary school teachers working with predominantly African American students in a large urban school district. The primary focus of this study was to analyze the teachers' perceptions of their African American students. The hope is that the data presented in this study will initiate trends that assist in effectively preparing teachers to attain successful outcomes with African American students.

Keywords

multicultural education, teachers, urban education

Introduction

Although the achievement gap persists for African American students, some teachers have been successful in preparing African American students to meet accountability standards. State education systems, school districts, and campus administrators often consider teachers to be effective when their students are successful on standardized or high-stakes tests. The No Child Left Behind Act has initiated a trend toward using standardized test scores for defining teacher effectiveness. When performance standards are not met on standardized tests, some campuses have undergone sanctions mandated at the state and local levels. In response to the data regarding the achievement gap that persists for students of color, scholars (Delpit, 1995; Scheurich,

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1998; Valencia, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999) have held that the problem with student achievement lies mainly with the educational system rather than with the students, families, or neighborhoods. These researchers have suggested that public school educators typically operate from a deficit thinking perspective when examining the achievement issues associated with students of color. Further, some scholars argue that standardized testing is not a sufficient measure of academic achievement (Lattimore, 2005). Others have challenged the assumption that deficit thinking is not a characteristic for teachers whose minority and poor students achieve well academically (Weiner, 2006). Based upon interviews with 10 elementary school teachers, nominated by their principals as effective teachers of African American students, this study examines teachers' perceptions of their students. The teachers' perceptions were defined as the lens through which they view or evaluate their own ideas or behaviors (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Without predetermined criteria, principals gave their own rationales for nominating teachers that they considered to be effective with African American students. The following research questions guided this study: (a) What are teachers' perceptions of their African American students' cultural backgrounds? (b) What are teachers' perceptions of their cultural competence in the classroom? (c) What is the relationship between teachers' effectiveness and their perceptions of their African American students' cultural backgrounds?

Deficit Thinking

Deficit thinking theory refers to the labeling of poor minority students and their families as disadvantaged, at risk, and uninvolved (Johnson, 1994). Deficit thinking theory blames school failure for these students on the students' lack of readiness to learn in the classroom, the parents' lack of interest in their education, and the families' overall lifestyle. The deficit thinking paradigm has several implications for public school educators. Authors contend that those who practice this paradigm use the students' backgrounds as an excuse for failure (Delpit, 1995; Valencia, 1991). In addition, they hold that compared to the students of the more affluent dominant culture, students who are culturally different innately have less competence, less intelligence, less capability, and less self-motivation (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004).

With the deficit thinking paradigm as one of the foci, McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) conducted a qualitative study that involved the behaviors and thinking patterns of eight white teachers at a small low-income school located in a large urban city. Along with data used to show that many students of color are performing at lower levels than white students, this study

provided awareness among educators regarding the equity traps that exist in public schools. When asked why students of color are performing at lower levels than their white counterparts, the teachers' answers had characteristics of four equity traps: "the Deficit View," "Racial Erasure," "Employment and Avoidance of the Gaze," and "Paralogic Beliefs and Behaviors."

Public school educators who operate within the deficit thinking paradigm contend that unless students of color change background factors such as their culture, values, and family structures, they encounter minimal or no opportunities to have successful outcomes in school (Weiner, 2006). Teachers who accept this paradigm are also saying that their methodologies, pedagogies, teaching practices, and school systems are not responsible. Therefore, as these educators continue to utilize deficit thinking, the students, then, must adapt to the resources and programs in place or run the risk of failure (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). According to this approach of deficit thinking, the solutions for improvement or reform are beyond the teachers' and school systems' control and influence.

Although several studies document illustrations of deficit thinking among public school educators in urban schools, few studies have focused on how teachers who exhibit characteristics of deficit thinking are also considered effective teachers of African American students. Weiner (2006) found that an ability to prepare students academically does not automatically result in equity practices. Subsequently, public school educators might lack awareness of the deficit characteristics in their discourse or actions. Further, educators must focus on reframing deficit attitudes and behaviors by acknowledging deficit explanations and examining them critically (Molnar and Lindquist, 1989). There is currently a paucity of literature that focuses on deficit thinking characteristics among teachers considered by their principals to be effective with African American students.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Researchers have asserted that culturally relevant pedagogy is a clear example of a teaching practice that is effective with African American students. Considered a form of multicultural education, culturally relevant pedagogy has not only been effective with African American students, but it has also been effective with other minority and poor students (Banks, 1994; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995). According to Ladson-Billings (1994), culturally relevant pedagogy uses cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes while empowering students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically. Moreover, this manner of using

students' culture transcends the negative effects of the dominant culture (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Through the stories of eight teachers in *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*, Ladson-Billings (1994) discussed how the use of culturally relevant pedagogy in a classroom setting is significant to the education of African American students. Further, Ladson-Billings (1994) defined the common conceptions of self and others, social relations, and knowledge that are consistent among successful teachers of African American students, deeming them culturally relevant teachers.

In *Crossing Over to Canaan: The Journey of New Teachers in Diverse Classrooms*, Ladson-Billings (2001) discussed indicators of the three criteria that define the theoretical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Culturally relevant teachers who demonstrate an ability to develop students academically exhibit the following characteristics (Ladson-Billings, 2001):

1. The teacher presumes that all students are capable of being educated.
2. The teacher clearly delineates what achievement means in the context of his or her classroom.
3. The teacher knows the content, the learner, and how to teach content to the learner.
4. The teacher supports critical consciousness toward the curriculum.
5. The teacher encourages academic achievement as a complex conception not amenable to a single, static measurement.

Culturally relevant teachers exhibit a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence through the following characteristics (Ladson-Billings, 2001):

1. The teacher understands culture and its role in education.
2. The teacher takes responsibility for learning and students' culture and community.
3. The teacher uses student culture as a basis for learning.
4. The teacher promotes a flexible use of students' local and global culture.

Culturally relevant teachers foster the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness through the following characteristics:

1. The teacher knows the larger sociopolitical context of the school-community-nation-world.

2. The teacher has an investment in the public good.
3. The teacher plans and implements academic experiences that connect students to the larger social context.
4. The teacher believes that a student's success has consequences for his or her own quality of life.

Ladson-Billings' work with culturally relevant pedagogy serves as an extension of earlier studies that focused on the significance of students' culture in student achievement. For instance, Mohatt and Erikson (1981) conducted a study that investigated the differences in classroom interactions between Native American students and their white and Native American teachers. These authors used the term culturally congruent to describe the teachers who had the most effective interactions with students through adjustments in their own speech patterns, communication styles, and classroom participation structures to resemble more closely those of the students' own culture.

Further, Au and Jordan (1981) conducted a study in which teachers worked with Hawaiian students to improve their reading performance by focusing on reading comprehension rather than by using phonics and decoding strategies. Instead, the teachers employed "cultural appropriateness" by placing an emphasis on telling stories through use of their home communication called "talk story."

More recent research employs how teachers' knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds contributes to student success (Irvine & Armento, 2001; Howard, 2002). Utilizing the context of culturally relevant pedagogy, Howard (2002) conducted a qualitative case study that examined African American elementary and secondary students' descriptions of teaching practices and learning environments within urban contexts. Although the study did not measure student achievement as a variable, the student interpretations identified three central teaching strategies that had a positive effect on student effort, engagement in class content, and overall achievement. The three key strategies were described in the findings: (a) teachers who establish family, community, and home-like characteristics; (b) teachers who establish culturally connected caring relationships with students; and (c) the use of verbal communication and affirmation. Few studies, however, have directly examined how teachers, considered by their principals to be effective with African American students perceive their students and their cultural competence through the theoretical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Method

The primary focus of this study was to analyze teachers' perceptions of their African American students. In this study, the teachers' perceptions were defined as the lens through which they view or evaluate their own ideas or behaviors (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The following research questions were investigated in this study:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of their African American students' cultural backgrounds?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of their cultural competence in the classroom?
3. What is the relationship between teachers' effectiveness and their perceptions of their African American students' cultural backgrounds?

Research Design

This interpretive qualitative study utilizes the naturalistic paradigm to define the transactions between the researcher and the respondents (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Further, a constructionist approach was used to make or "construct" meaning of what the selected teachers said in their interviews (Crotty, 2003; Merriam, 2002). The small sampling size will make drawing generalizations problematic. However, purposive sampling was used to ensure information that is rich in intensity and experiences.

Participants

Purposive sampling maximizes the researcher's ability to devise a thick description of the qualitative analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The participants attended an undergraduate elementary teacher preparation program at a highly selective public university in Texas. The participants for the study were purposively selected using the following criteria:

- Teach in an urban K-5 public school,
- Teach predominantly African American students, and
- Have at least three years of teaching experience.

Ten elementary female teachers at 5 different elementary campuses participated in this study. The average age of the teachers was 33.6 years old.

The average years of teaching experience was 11.7 years. The racial breakdown of the 10 teachers is as follows: White, 4; African American, 2; Hispanic, 2; and biracial as Hispanic and White, 2.

Nomination Process

Using the Academic Excellence Indicator System available at the Texas Education Agency (TEA), state criteria were used to identify urban schools that have been effective with African American students. The nomination phase of participant selection included a letter that described the study, the criteria, and the nomination process. Without using predetermined criteria, elementary school principals at the selected schools used nomination forms to identify teachers that they considered to be effective with African American students. Further, the school administrators used their individual judgment in determining the criteria for nominating teachers identified as “effective.” Reasons for nominating teachers as effective with African American students included incorporating best practices in teaching and learning, standardized test scores, professional training, and data-driven instruction.

Data Collection

After the researcher reviewed the elementary principals’ nomination forms, teachers who met the following selection criteria were contacted to schedule an initial semistructured interview: (1) Teach in an urban K-5 public school; (2) Teach predominantly African American students; and (3) Have at least three years of teaching experience. After verifying that the teachers met the selection criteria, the researcher interviewed each of the 10 teachers by using open-ended questions in two semistructured interviews. During the initial semistructured interview, a questionnaire was provided to the nominated teachers asking them to identify their university teacher preparation program, years of experience, teaching experience at specific grade levels, and beliefs regarding their effectiveness with African American students. An interview protocol was used during both semistructured interviews to ask general questions first before moving on to more specific questions. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed.

Open coding was used to identify common themes that emerged from the interviews. By giving attention to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, several techniques were used in this study to establish its trustworthiness. Prolonged engagement, a reflexive journal, and member checking were essential in producing a useful audit trail. The hours spent

with the participants assisted in clarifying data and addressing distortions. Extensive field notes and the reflexive journal were useful in recording thoughts about the participants, places, data, and documents.

Data Analysis

Open, axial, and selective coding processes were used to identify themes in the transcribed interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined coding as the “operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized, and put back together in new ways” (p. 56). Open coding is used during conceptualization, the initial phase of analysis, to determine which concepts are identified, grouped, and categorized (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 123). Axial coding is the process of making connections between the categories identified during the open-coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Selective coding involves organizing the categories around central themes that emerge during the open- and axial-coding processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Theoretical Framework

As a part of data analysis and interpretation, one tenet involving cultural competence within Ladson-Billings’ (1995, 2001) theoretical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy was used to examine teachers’ perceptions, which are evaluations of their own ideas or behaviors, about their students. Although this is an interpretative qualitative study (Merriam, 2002), Ladson-Billings’ (1995, 2001) theoretical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy requires a critical approach to data analysis.

Interpretation of Emergent Themes

Several themes emerged as the elementary teachers articulated their perceptions of their African American students in unique ways. The teachers’ perceptions were defined as the lens through which they view or evaluate their own ideas or behaviors (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The most salient commonality emerged in the teachers’ perceptions of their students’ culture. The teachers attempted to put forth an ongoing effort to understand the students’ cultural backgrounds at various levels and used that knowledge to assist in facilitating successful outcomes. Some of the principals who nominated the teachers talked about how the teachers used best practices in teaching

and learning, standardized test scores, professional training, and data-driven instruction. However, none of the principals nominated teachers because they were skillful in understanding students' cultural backgrounds to aid in student success.

Although there are three tenets within Ladson-Billings' theoretical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy, the indicators of one tenet were used to examine teachers' perceptions of their students' culture: a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence. According to Ladson-Billings, the four indicators of cultural competence are as follows:

1. The teacher understands culture and its role in education.
2. The teacher takes responsibility for learning about students' culture and community.
3. The teacher uses student culture as a basis for learning.
4. The teacher promotes a flexible use of students' local and global culture.

Several of the teachers indicated that they have a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence; however, some of the teachers did not clearly acknowledge cultural differences or reach all four of the indicators that determine cultural competence.

By speaking with these teachers, it was the researcher's hope and intent to identify the teachers' perceptions of their students and examine them to address the assumptions of deficit thinking. As the data were analyzed, six themes became evident and are presented in the following manner: (a) definitions of culture, (b) colorblindness, (c) incorporating culture in the curriculum, (d) poverty, (e) family dynamics, and (f) building relationships. The similarities and differences reflected in the emergent themes are reported using a descriptive narrative approach.

Definitions of Culture

Within their definitions of culture, the majority of the teachers did not acknowledge ethnic or racial backgrounds as being a part of a student's culture. Most of the teachers focused on the beliefs and experiences that are acquired from family such as religion, food, music, language, and values. Brenda and Gloria were the only teachers who mentioned that culture involves ethnic backgrounds. Ladson-Billings (2001) asserted that "culture is a complex concept that affects every aspect of life" (p. 98). Rita defined culture

simply as “who you are.” However, Rita was reluctant to acknowledge race as a cultural difference among the students in her classroom. Brenda acknowledged that “culture means everything” and had the most comprehensive definition of culture:

Culture means everything. It’s a huge word to me. I think it has to do with not only your race and your ethnicity, but it’s also the culture that you are living in. It’s what you know, what you’ve seen, and what you’ve been taught. It’s a huge word to me. I don’t even know that I can break it down. It’s part of our everyday lives, really and truly.

Understanding culture and its role in education is one of the indicators of cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 2001). The lack of depth in understanding was a commonality among the majority of the teachers when they talked about culture. Several of the teachers disclosed that they identified cultural differences between their students and themselves such as life experiences, group commonalities, and socioeconomic status. However, only Jennifer clearly acknowledged any cultural biases, even though she is African American like the students in her example and chose teaching because she saw a need to diversify the field:

I’m African American, and yes, I have told a child or two that you are embarrassing me. I am an African American woman, and you are making me look bad, and you need to stop that. I didn’t just say that. I explained what they were doing and how that made us look bad.

Jennifer’s response is consistent with cultural assimilationist ideals that perpetuate the status quo and hegemonic perspectives (Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997). Jennifer is essentially holding the students accountable for how others view not only her as an African American woman, but also her entire race.

Colorblindness

When thinking about cultural differences, some of the teachers rendered notions of colorblind ideology by failing to “see” color. Maria, Gloria, and Rita discussed how they “teach children” and avoid paying attention to their racial backgrounds. Even though Rita expressed how she experienced prejudice attitudes as a biracial Hispanic, Rita was the most adamant about her

beliefs when thinking about the racial backgrounds of her students and said that it would be difficult to do:

I would have to stop and actually think about each one of my kids and what their ethnicity is, and I don't do that. I teach children. I don't teach a culture, a color, a sex preference. I teach kids.

Ladson-Billings (1994) called this practice of colorblindness “dysconscious racism” which is an “uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (p. 31-32). Although Ladson-Billings did not suggest that the teachers were “racist,” she asserted that the teachers were not conscious of the ways in which some students are privileged and others are disadvantaged in the classroom. These teachers, therefore, fail to challenge the status quo by accepting the given as the inevitable. These teachers attempted to justify their colorblindness by saying that they see individual students instead of color. Further, these teachers all acknowledged that the achievement gap exists for many African American students and that poor African American students' educational experiences in public schools differ when compared to white students' educational experiences.

Instead of not acknowledging that these differences exist, the three teachers wanted to convey that they do not form prejudice attitudes toward their students or hold the belief that they cannot learn at high levels because of their racial backgrounds. It is interesting that two of the three teachers who expressed colorblind ideology identify themselves as Hispanic. The researcher was African American, so it is possible that the teachers did not want to seem prejudice in any way since the topic involved African American students.

Incorporating Culture in the Curriculum

When teachers were discussing cultural differences, incorporating culture into the curriculum emerged as a subtheme. According to Ladson-Billings (1995, 2001), possessing cultural competence is one of three criteria that culturally relevant teachers exhibit. All of the teachers demonstrated some level of cultural competence; however, the majority of them could be considered in the beginning stages of possessing cultural competence. Three of the four indicators of cultural competence were evident as the teachers discussed how they incorporate culture in the curriculum.

Taking responsibility for learning about students' culture and community is one indicator of cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Gloria was

the only teacher who discussed how she immerses herself in the school community to learn more about her students:

The most important way to reach children is to develop an interpersonal connection with them. I'm pretty well knit into the community here. I go to volleyball games. I go to basketball games. I go to my kids' soccer games. I go to parties that parents throw. I think it's really important to try to immerse yourself in the community in which you work.

Using culture as a basis for learning is a second indicator of cultural competence that was consistent among all of the teachers at some level. All of the teachers gave examples of how they incorporate culture into their students' learning. For instance, Rebecca, Cassandra, and Constance considered that using students' names and experiences in their reading selections or assignments was an act of incorporating culture. Brenda expressed that she incorporates students' personal experiences in their lessons to help them understand unfamiliar content or lesson objectives. Rita and Martha discussed how they incorporate history and traditions related to cultural backgrounds into their lessons throughout the year. Constance, Jennifer, Gloria, and Rebecca indicated that they make sure that the students see themselves in the literature that they provide and in the displays in their classrooms.

Promoting a flexible use of students' local and global culture is a third indicator of cultural competence. When culturally relevant teachers exhibit this indicator, they understand that "cultural affiliations are nested and multifaceted, and the cultural categories we use are crude approximations of individuals' cultures" (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 100). Culturally relevant teachers do not use a cultural event or activity to represent every member of that culture, assuming cultural affiliations that students do not share. The majority of the teachers did not indicate that they use cultural events or activities to represent every member of a certain culture. Rita was the only teacher who talked about recognizing cultural traditions around the world, but she did not elaborate on her approach. Her commentary was mostly about exposing students to historical backgrounds and cultural traditions:

I think culture is important. I think you are who you are, and you bring that to the table. If you only have an experience of one culture, you are boring. I'm sorry, but you have nothing to offer. We try to hit as many cultures and holidays around the world as we can such as the Chinese New Year, Mardi Gras, and Lent. November and December is a perfect time for that. That's when a lot of them start saying this is what I am.

This is what I want to talk about. . . . Food works. Sharing of the food is really what it's all about. I'm trying.

Poverty

When thinking about how culture affects the teaching and learning process, several of the teachers discussed how poverty affects students. All of the teachers recognized that both similarities and differences exist between their students' culture and themselves. For instance, Maria, Gloria, Constance, and Martha all discussed how they share similarities to their students, for they grew up in low-income households. Rebecca, Brenda, Jennifer, and Cassandra discussed how they recognized differences in their schooling experiences of attending white, middle-class schools and having college as an expectation in their families unlike many of their students who live in poverty. Several of the teachers noted that students' socioeconomic status have a role in their experiences at school. Cassandra, Brenda, Rebecca, and Jennifer all observed that socioeconomic status is a cultural difference that exists between their students and themselves. Maria, for instance, shared how the students "don't have those Leapfrogs, those trips that they take over to camp over the weekend, and these great experiences that they've experienced before they even get to school." Jennifer expressed that poverty seems to be generational at her school among many of the African American students:

What I have noticed is that there have been more Hispanic, Indian or African families that will actually move in and out of here. They will come in, get their lives together, and move on. African Americans will stay here generation after generation. There, of course, are some Hispanic families like that. There are far more of them that move on to live in a house or to move into an apartment complex as opposed to staying in government housing.

Jennifer's comments about how African American families at her campus typically live in low-income housing while Hispanic families tend to move out of low-income housing are consistent with institutionalized racial inequalities that uphold the assimilationist norms of middle-class whites (Lewis, 2003). As an African American woman, Jennifer seemingly has internalized racist ideology. Instead of confronting the racial inequalities that surround her, she is allowing racist outcomes to be reproduced.

When Cassandra compared the experiences of her two sons at a school where the students are predominantly white and from middle-class backgrounds to her current campus, she discussed the distinct differences in

parental involvement, funding, and support services. Cassandra indicated that the parents at her sons' school lobby for what they think needs to be at the campus, and they contribute donations. From Cassandra's perspective, the difference between the two schools is socioeconomic status:

I know I've had some fabulous parents that if they weren't working or had the time or money to be available, they would. When you are working two or three jobs and have babies at home with nobody to keep them, it's hard to be available. It breaks my heart when I have a kid with fever, and I can't get a phone that works, or mama won't answer the phone because then she would have to leave work. To me that's economic.

When discussing the concern with the underachievement of African American students, Cassandra, Gloria, Brenda, Martha, and Maria all attributed the achievement gap to the effects of poverty. For instance, Martha discussed her observation with assessment data involving African American students:

I look at my data that I'm given at the beginning of the year, and it breaks my heart. We have our numbers in front of us of our Anglo students, Hispanic students, and our African American students, and a lot of times our low socioeconomic status numbers are closely tied to our African American numbers. I think that one of my biggest struggles as a teacher is how to remedy that. I can give them everything I have while I'm here, but when they go home, there's not much I can do.

Several of the teachers also mentioned that students lack educational experiences when they enter school. Martha, Jennifer, Brenda, Rita, and Rebecca discussed how they provide experiences for their students at school in order to enrich their learning. Ladson-Billings (2001) asserted that one of the indicators of cultural competence involves using culture as a basis for learning. Further, "culturally relevant teachers understand that learning is facilitated when we capitalize on a learners' prior knowledge" (p. 99). Although several teachers mentioned that they provide experiences to enrich learning, only a few teachers clearly discussed how they use students' prior experiences to acquire the content and skills required by the curriculum. Rebecca, Cassandra, Brenda, and Constance considered that using students'

experiences in their reading selections or assignments was an act of incorporating culture to enhance learning.

Several of the teachers attributed the concern with African American students' underachievement to poverty, but they did not see that part of their students' culture as an impediment to learning. This type of deficit thinking attributes learning outcomes to students' environments. The lack of students' educational experiences was an instructional concern that the teachers had and indicated that they needed to compensate for what the students were lacking at home. Although the teachers did not seem to be capitalizing on the culture of poverty to enhance their knowledge and skills of the curriculum, they did not see socioeconomic status as a barrier to students' success while they are actively learning in the classroom.

Family Dynamics

The majority of the teachers associated family dynamics with culture. Family support for education was a challenge for all of the teachers. Cassandra, Rebecca, and Evette indicated that many of their students seem to lack self-motivation and aspirations to reach higher educational goals. With comments that seem to rely on students' environments to assist in determining performance outcomes, Martha and Evette noted that parents are influential in whether or not students put forth effort at school and complete their homework. For instance, Martha expressed that parents play an important role in whether or not students value education:

If the culture thinks that education is key and is very important, then it affects my teaching in that it makes it easier because the parents will feel more inclined to help with homework every day and read with their kid every day. More and more I'm finding, especially with my Hispanic and African American kids, that a lot of the parents leave it up to the school to educate their child. It should be a learning experience on weekends, too, and when you go home also.

Taking responsibility for learning about students' culture and community is one indicator of cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 2001). When thinking of positive interactions they have had with parents, several of the teachers spoke highly of the parents who willingly offer support and indicated that they would like more support from the parents who seem reluctant to support their children. Instead of only saying that some parents do not support their

students at school and finding the negative aspects of students' home environments, Cassandra and Rita clearly conveyed how they attempt to understand the family dynamics in their quest to find solutions. For instance, Rita discussed how she provides support for parents so that they can assist their children with homework:

There are a lot of times that our parents aren't on the level that our fifth graders are on. We appreciate them letting us know that and being honest with us, and we support them. We send home extra books and work. They call. It's fine. That's what it's all about. We are all about doing anything that we can to have parents connect with their children and with their education.

Building Relationships

Building relationships emerged as a subtheme because of its role in understanding students' culture and the dynamics of the school community. Understanding that parents are influential in their students' academic success, Gloria, Brenda, and Martha discussed how they foster positive relationships with parents in order to obtain their support. For instance, Brenda expressed her approach to obtaining parental involvement:

For the majority of my parents that I've worked with in the past and that I'm working with this year, school is just something you have to do. It's not something that is number one necessarily; it's a requirement. I try to make the parents understand. I try to be very involved with them and share what my goals would be for their child. I've seen both ends of the support at home. I've seen parents who are there all the time, and when they are not there, they have very strict rules enforced.

Several of the teachers focused on the barriers to building relationships with parents. For instance, Constance shared her challenges in building relationships with parents in order to obtain their support:

Some of the parents from my class think they don't have time to do all that is asked of them or that they don't have a responsibility to the school, but anytime that we can have a positive interaction, we can start to establish a symbiotic relationship. Some of the parents I work with had bad experiences themselves at school and try to avoid it to

their kids' detriment. That same feeling then comes out in the kids, which is sad at third grade. It's difficult to bring a student back from disliking school. I feel that many of my parents are used to putting up a fight for many things in life, and that isn't always necessary. I try to make good phone calls home just as often as bad ones, but anytime I call, the defenses are already up.

Ladson-Billings' (2001) emphasis on teachers taking responsibility for learning about students' culture and community is evident in Gloria's practice of immersing herself in the students' culture in order to understand more about the students and their families. This is one indicator of cultural competence that would assist teachers in understanding family dynamics and obtaining more support for the students' education from their parents.

All of the teachers indicated that building relationships with students was important to their success in school. Even though the majority of them identified cultural differences, they expressed that the daily interpersonal interactions they have with students are instrumental in learning more about their students and the community. Rebecca, for instance, declared, "I just have always thought that if you are comfortable around the kids, then they are going to be comfortable around you." Martha described one way in which she builds relationships with all of her students in order to help them be more successful in school:

With the program that we have here at our school, we really encourage community among the staff, the children, and the parents. It's so important for me to know where each kid is coming from because there might be reasons that they don't get their work done. There might be reasons that they are struggling. For example, I once discovered one of my families here didn't have electricity. That child would not have told me that if we weren't talking every day.

If you keep talking to your kids, they will share more with you so that you will know more about them. It's not just about science, social studies, math, and language arts; it's their life. If they are having trouble at home, they can't learn.

Although the teachers all emphasized the importance of building relationships and share mostly positive experiences with parents, the majority of the teachers talked about challenges with unsupportive parents not helping their students at home. Some of the teachers noted strategies for reaching those unsupportive parents. However, a few of the teachers were not optimistic

about their ability to build relationships with difficult or unsupportive parents due to challenges they have experienced. Taking responsibility for learning about students' culture and community would help them in their quest to build relationships with the parents that they view as unsupportive. On various levels, all of the teachers showed some cultural competence in building relationships. Learning more about students' cultural backgrounds and communities will assist these teachers in using culture as a basis for learning and building relationships with students and their parents.

Recommendations

After analyzing the perceptions of effective teachers of African American students, several possible recommendations for reframing deficit attitudes and behaviors in educational practice became apparent. Some of the teachers mentioned that they did not have the opportunity to work with diverse student populations within their student teaching assignments and felt as though they received an inadequate focus on diverse student populations in their university coursework. Having supportive administrators who provide ongoing professional development related to multicultural education and Ladson-Billings' (1995, 2001) three criteria of a culturally relevant teacher would be beneficial for all practicing teachers.

The teachers' conversations about culture showed that the majority of the teachers did not meet all indicators of cultural competence indicating a need for ongoing professional development on campuses. In addition to examining their own cultural biases and prejudices, the teachers needed to learn more about how to use the students' culture as a basis for learning throughout the curriculum and across disciplines. Providing ongoing professional development in this area would be helpful for both new and veteran teachers. Further, having neighborhood walks at campuses would be one way to assist the teachers in gaining more connections with the school communities and their students' families. It was evident that the teachers who participated in this study were proficient in assisting their students to achieve academic success, but several of them clearly had some concerns about their students' long-term goals due to their long-term environments.

Evident in teachers' conversations about their commitment to student success, the most predominant competency related to culturally relevant pedagogy was an ability to develop students academically. Commitment to academic success was one reason that the principals nominated these teachers as effective teachers of African American students. However, several of the teachers mentioned that oral language development and lack of educational

experiences were the only instructional concerns that the teachers had for not only African American students in poverty, but for all minority students in poverty. This indicates that their practices can be effective with all students, not just African American students.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research was an interpretive qualitative study (Merriam, 2002) of 10 elementary school teachers nominated by their principals as being effective with African American students in a large urban school district. The primary focus of this study was to analyze the perceptions of effective teachers of African American students. The following research questions were investigated and addressed in this study:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of their African American students' cultural backgrounds?
2. What are teachers' perceptions of their cultural competence in the classroom?
3. What is the relationship between teachers' effectiveness and their perceptions of their African American students' cultural backgrounds?

The hope is that the data presented in this study will initiate trends that assist in reframing deficit perspectives. Prospective and practicing teachers in various studies have disclosed their concerns about not being prepared to instruct culturally diverse students. Multicultural education is comprised of initiatives that are currently being debated in teacher preparation involving equity, diversity, and student achievement (Banks, 1994). Teacher education programs must make multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy an important component when preparing teachers for the classroom as they face the growing population of students who are rich in cultural diversity. Since Texas has been experiencing changing demographics with significant growth in minority and poor student populations, competence within the area of multicultural education is warranted and needed in teacher certification.

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews. The themes that emerged from data collected with the 10 elementary school teachers included (a) definitions of culture, (b) colorblindness, (c) incorporating culture in the curriculum, (d) poverty, (e) family dynamics, and (f) building relationships. This study utilized Ladson-Billings' (1995, 2001) culturally relevant pedagogy as a theoretical framework to examine teachers' perspectives.

Although this study used basic interpretive qualitative research (Merriam, 2002) to make sense of the teachers' perceptions and the naturalistic inquiry paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) to guide the research questions, Ladson-Billings' (1995, 2001) theoretical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy required a critical element, not typically associated with a constructionist approach. Data indicate that the achievement gap persists with many poor students of color when compared to their white peers (TEA, 2006). Even though data reveal that a disproportionate match exists between the percentages of students of color and the percentages of teachers of color, teachers of several racial backgrounds participated in this study and had the ability to develop African American students academically.

According to the findings in this study, some principals consider teachers to be effective based upon their ability to develop students academically, not because of their willingness to nurture and support cultural competence. In the context of high-stakes testing, it can be reluctantly concluded that effectiveness is measured by a teacher's ability to develop students academically. Although several teachers did not meet all of the indicators within the three criteria of Ladson-Billings' (1995, 2001) theoretical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy, this theory is still an important one as prospective teachers prepare for classrooms with culturally diverse students. While teachers are being considered effective based on their students' scores on standardized tests, this effect of high-stakes testing could contribute to the future detriment of students as they negotiate their cultural identities and challenges with the status quo. Since the ability to develop students academically was the most predominant criterion of culturally relevant pedagogy that the teachers possessed, the findings in this study indicate that their practices with academic achievement could be useful for all students, not just African American students.

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Bio

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