12-1-2006

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Abstract

This ethnography explores teachers' perspectives of the cultural issues affecting academic performance in twelve public high schools in rural Mississippi and Louisiana. Fr om a thematic analysis of the tape-recorded interviews of forty-one mathematics teachers, five categories emerged, each comprising a qualitative aspect of teaching high school in an economically depressed area of the deep South: society, race, students, families, and schools. Each of these categories is discussed and explicated using exemplars from the interviews to show how each category emerged from the data. In addition, the relationships among these categories, which form a destructive cycle of poverty, low expectations, poor academic achievement, and inadequate opportunity, are discussed. Implications of this research for teachers and policy makers are explored.

Keywords

Poverty, Race, Expectations, Apathy, Achievement, and Public Schools

Southern Rural Public Schools:
A Study of Teacher Perspectives

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This ethnography explores teachers' perspectives of the cultural issues affecting academic performance in twelve public high schools in rural Mississippi and Louisiana. From a thematic analysis of the tape-recorded interviews of forty-one mathematics teachers, five categories emerged, each comprising a qualitative aspect of teaching high school in an economically depressed area of the deep South: society, race, students, families, and schools. Each of these categories is discussed and explicated using exemplars from the interviews to show how each category emerged from the data. In addition, the relationships among these categories, which form a destructive cycle of poverty, low expectations, poor academic achievement, and inadequate opportunity, are discussed. Implications of this research for teachers and policy makers are explored. Key Words: Poverty, Race, Expectations, Apathy, Achievement, and Public Schools

Public education in the United States has long been viewed as the hope for the future for all of our children. According to Oakes and Lipton (1999), "a hopeful, democratic future depends on whether all students learn and experience academic rigor and social justice in school." Educators are aware that all public schools are not created equal. A recent book by Jonathan Kozol (2005) highlights these continued inequities between public schools across the United States. Rural southern public schools, with high percentages of poor and minority students, have been identified as particularly low performing, with a myriad of problems (Harmon, 2001; McCullough-Garrett, 1993; McLaughlin, Huberman, & Hawkins, 1997; Moses & Cobb, 2001).

Gay (2000) noted that "too many students of color have not been achieving in school as well as they should (and can) for far too long" (p. 1). Rumberger and Willms (1992) attributed much of the lack of achievement of minority students to "contextual effects" of the community's racial and social culture. Hatfield (2003) further defined this "culture of failure" as implicit in the school, the home, and the community. Farkas (2003) concluded that racism and differences between the culture of the school and the culture of students are likely factors in the Black/White learning gap. Teacher perceptions and expectations of students from low income and minority backgrounds are thought to have a great impact (Campbell & Silver, 1999; Oakes & Lipton, 1999). Findings from a long-term ethnographic study, in a high school, concluded that differences in racial achievement are accepted among teachers, but are never talked about (Pollock, 2001).

The influence of race and poverty on school achievement is clear and at the same time not well-understood.

In order to provide a quality education for all students, it is imperative that we fully understand and describe the cultural and contextual issues impacting the success of students in all schools, including the high minority, low income public schools of the rural south. This paper describes the findings of a study of teacher perceptions of achievement and culture in rural southern public schools. I will first detail the methodology for data collection and analysis, then consider the findings in terms of five major themes, and, lastly, present overall conclusions.

Methodology

The goal of this study was to provide insight into the reasons for the low achievement in southern rural public schools from the perspective of teachers in those schools. While the standardized tests give an overview of the achievement outcomes in these schools, this study sought to shed light on the social and cultural processes involved within the schools that influence these outcomes. In short, the large-scale tests tell "what" happened in these schools in terms of test scores, and the goal of this study was to describe the teachers' perceptions of "how" and "why" in terms of the processes of teaching and learning.   The research question to be answered was "What are the issues in these schools, according to teachers, that impact teaching and learning there?"

Data Collection

Narrative data from interviews with mathematics teachers were collected from twelve public high schools in rural Mississippi and Louisiana. These particular schools were selected because they had a high percentage of minority (Black) enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001a), students on free and reduced lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001a), and low academic performance (Louisiana Department of Education, 2003; Mississippi Department of Education, 2003). Of the twelve schools, four were schools in which I had previously conducted teacher inservice workshops on mathematics pedagogical methods and materials. In those schools, the administrators and teachers were known to me. In others, I walked in and asked the principal if any mathematics teachers were free to meet with me, and then worked through them to reach their departmental colleagues. When I visited the schools, I attempted to observe and interview all teachers in each mathematics department. A few teachers were unavailable because of scheduling and other duties, but a large percentage of mathematics teachers in all of the schools were included in this purposive sample. Following guidelines from the Wake Forest Institutional Review Board, from which I received university approval to conduct this research, I secured an informed consent from each teacher prior to beginning the interview.

Forty-one teachers were interviewed individually and in small groups about their experiences and perceptions. Participants were asked to respond to general questions such as "What is it like to be a teacher in this school?   What issues influence teaching and learning at your school? What are the best and worst aspects of teaching? What would

you like to change about your school?" Interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes, and all interviews were audio-recorded for later analysis.

Data Analysis

Over the course of two years and multiple school visits, a large number of interview tapes and observation field notes were collected. Qualitative methods guided the consideration of data. After each field visit, the tapes were transcribed.   The teachers' ideas and quotes from the interviews were written on index cards and the cards were grouped into categories.   Field notes from observations were similarly recorded onto index cards and either fit into an existing category or formed a new category.   This procedure was repeated with additional data from subsequent interviews and observations.   The categories were considered and reconsidered by closely examining and regrouping the sets of index cards to be certain that each data "stack" made sense as a theme. After several iterations, both in the intermediate stages as new data were added, and repeatedly at the end as the full data set was examined, the cards were finally grouped into five categories.   After further analysis of these five narrative data sets, the five descriptive themes were labeled: society, race, students, families, and schools. These themes encompassed all of the data from the interview quotes and field notes, and provided a framework for describing the teachers' perspectives of issues that impacted teaching and learning in their schools.

Credibility

Credibility of the results was assured by several procedures. First, all findings were triangulated with multiple data sources, including different teachers as well as different schools. As the categories were being considered, a number of data sources were used and member checking verified the accuracy of my interpretations. Categories were checked with new interviewees as well as with earlier participants in formal and informal follow-up interviews. I spent several days in each school, observing, interviewing, and just hanging out with the teachers during and after school hours. As the study neared completion, I organized a peer debriefing meeting with three colleagues who were also involved in inservice work in the Delta. We discussed the findings, and they asked some good questions that were incorporated into the final paper.

Society: "Society Is Broken in my Town."

The schools included in this study are located in rural areas of the Mississippi River Delta in Mississippi and Louisiana. None of these communities were without major economic and social problems. While some teachers had more to say about community culture than others, they all expressed concerns about economics and crime. They acknowledged problems within their schools, and attributed them largely to the problems of their communities.

Many of the communities are geographically isolated. Economic problems plague these communities, and there is a pervasive air of despondency. Young men congregate on the street corners to play cards and buy and sell drugs. They are bored and listless.

They have nothing else to do and no place else to go. The few businesses in operation are small and limited in quality and quantity of merchandise. Many stores have closed and boarded up. Homes are run-down with bare yards and broken windows. Churches and schools continue to function and to valiantly offer hope in a hopeless town.

Prospects for full-time, stable employment that earns a living wage are dismal. There is no industry, and the best that young men and women can hope for are jobs as farm workers, store clerks, or security guards in prisons. Most young people do not want to leave home. They want to stay in the community where they grew up, even though it has nothing to offer but the comfort of familiarity. In one Louisiana parish, four prisons have been built in recent years. The symbolism is not lost on the people who live in that parish. A teacher there said, "Our state government people disrespect us so much that they send us all the bad criminals in the state." The prisons provide the few low-paying jobs that are available in that small town, which was identified by the 1990 census as the poorest place in America (White, 1994).

Crime is a problem. Drug sales are attractive because they produce immediate gratification, and provide one of the few ways that young people can make money. Teachers in small rural communities reported that drug problems there have "spread out from the cities." They blamed the prisons and the influence of inmates' visitors, in the community, for the increase in crime in their rural areas.

Young people congregate into gangs and cause a myriad of problems in the community. In one small Louisiana community, a few summers ago, teachers reported that there was such a gang fight in the streets that the National Guard had to be called in to restore order. In that same community a few years earlier, a student arsonist burned the high school. A teacher said that the student was "a good kid," but "he got mixed up with the wrong crowd and set fire to the school on a dare." He is now serving time in one of the local prisons, and a new school has been constructed. However, the frustrations of hopelessness continue to be manifest in criminal behavior by the community's young people.

Community culture has a profound effect on the culture and the success of schools (Campbell & Silver, 1999; Howley, 2003). A study by Mickelson (2003) identified community forces, such as wealth and health of the area, as influencing the aspirations and achievement of poor minority students. The teachers who were interviewed in the Delta reported overwhelmingly that their communities did not look optimistically toward the future. One teacher said that "society is broken in my town." Another said, "There is no hope. Students cannot see the light of the future." Still another said, "Schools reflect society. Morals have degenerated and we see it every day in school." In a different small town a teacher said, "The whole town is apathetic."

In one school, I interviewed a mathematics teacher who was also the pastor of one of the churches in town. He told me that he had been approached by the School Board because he was one of the few local residents with a college degree, and he agreed to teach in addition to his Church duties. He felt that almost all of his students were "in a bad place." He explained that they are in "a state of hopelessness," and unable to see a way out of the poverty, they will continue the cycle. He felt that education was the only answer, and he was trying to contribute to that, but he often felt "overwhelmed." He said that students who have lived their entire life in such environments come to school

uninterested. They have no focus. Education is not appreciated and succeeding in school is not a priority.

Race: "Race Is a Problem for Me."

It is impossible to avoid the issue of race and prejudice in the rural South. Even today, many of the small communities remain segregated. Black and White residents often live very separate lives. In one small town in Mississippi, a middle-aged White store clerk, after asking my reason for visiting her town, asked me, "What are they like?" She was referring to the Black public school teachers who had lived within a few miles of her home for her whole life. She did not know them.

The U.S. Supreme Court outlawed school segregation in 1954 with the Brown vs. Board of Education decision. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964, President Johnson forced integration by withholding funding and filing lawsuits against segregated districts (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Eight of the twelve Delta schools observed in this study were 98 to 100 percent segregated, fifty years after Brown vs. Board of Education. In these communities, the Blacks go to the public schools, and the Whites attend the private academies. Teachers told me that if poor Whites are unable to pay the tuition, they are given financial assistance so that they do not have to attend the all-Black public schools. The Black public schools are tax supported, and it is no secret that the schools in these southern states are among the lowest in public tax support in the country. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2001b), for the 2001-2002 school year, the Mississippi per pupil expenditure was \$5,354 (50th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia), and the per pupil expenditure in Louisiana was \$6,567 (38th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia).

Attitudes of both Blacks and Whites are deeply embedded in the past, and the civil rights history that surrounds them, but teachers and students of both races seemed unaware. In a large mixed-race high school in Mississippi, a collection of class graduation pictures hangs prominently in a lobby area. Examination reveals that the pictures before 1970 show all White graduates. There are no pictures from the early years of forced integration (early to mid 1970s). The pictures resume in 1977 with integrated graduation classes. No photos of the all-Black graduating classes in the pre-integration segregated schools are included. This pattern was observed in several mixed schools, some of which inhabit old buildings, while others enjoy very new buildings, where the pictures had obviously been recently hung. The students, teachers, and administrators who spent their days in these buildings did not seem to notice the photos or their implications.

Oakes and Lipton (1999) asserted that social justice is meant to be an integral part of each school classroom. They expected that teachers would actively work toward social change and this ideal would be fully integrated into their interactions with students. These kinds of communications were not observed in the Delta schools, either formally or informally. Civil rights history was seen as something in the past and did not seem to be used as a lever to motivate current students. A native Black teacher working in an all-Black high school in Mississippi related her experience with school integration. She was a high school student in the same community where she now taught when all segregation appeals were exhausted in 1969. This meant that the school she attended had to integrate.

She remembered the ruling that the Black students were to join the White students at the public high school. On the night before the integration was to be implemented, the White public high school was burned to the ground by an unidentified arsonist. The Black students returned to their former high school, and the White students went to the beginnings of the White academy in Church basements of the town. When I asked how she felt about this she said, "That was a motivation to me. Segregation made us try harder." When I asked if she shared this story with her students, she said "No" because "they wouldn't be interested." This seemingly passive stance appears to be consistent in these schools. There is an air of acceptance of the social conditions in the community. There is no evidence of what King (1993) called emancipatory pedagogy, teaching about social justice and inspiring students to action.

While Black teachers seldom mentioned race, interviews with White teachers, at both mixed schools and Black schools, almost always resulted in some critical reference to their Black students. The fact that I am White may have encouraged this negativity. The worst extreme was during a dinner with two White teachers, where one of the teachers told a joke about children using the "n-word." Racial comments never came up at similar dinners with Black teachers or with mixed groups of teachers.

Some teachers revealed that they do not get along well with their colleagues of a different race, and they are very aware of racial differences. In one mixed school with several White teachers, a teacher identified a Black colleague as "racist." She was unwilling to give further details. At a Black school, a White teacher said that she did not collaborate with her Black colleagues because she was the "wrong color." At that same school, an elderly Black teacher told me that she taught all the children their math, because other (White) teachers "just don't understand these children like I do." These attitudes appear to reflect the general discomfort between Black and White adults working in a mostly segregated society.

Several White teachers referred to students as "these kids" in their interviews, clearly separating themselves from the students' blackness and their low economic status. The subtlety of "these kids" thinly disguised what I view as their ingrained prejudice. One White teacher in a mixed school, who appeared to be very competent in most respects, related an incident about a student who had a behavior problem, and she mocked his voice in an exaggerated Black dialect. It was clear that she felt his race was a major part of the story, and she wanted to make sure that I knew it.

A White male teacher in an all-Black school admitted his troubles. "Race is a problem for me because I am White in an all-Black school. Kids do not respond to me. I can't connect. I'm not part of this." Another White teacher in a nearby high school said, "They don't listen to me. They're just here. I pass them on because I don't want that headache again next year." Another White teacher suggested, "They need a big old coach to physically make them work. Maybe a stick could motivate them."

Students: "Our Kids Just Don't Want to Do."

The teacher interviewees often mentioned issues related to the students and parents in their schools. While no parents or students were interviewed, the teacher perspectives of their actions and motivations were significant. The teachers were unanimous in saying that students today are different from their students of a few years

ago. One teacher said, "Students have no morals, no initiative, and no ambition. They are only interested in eating, sex, and money." Another described them as the "microwave generation." "They want everything fast, and they don't want to work for it." Teachers related a number of student problems that impacted their schools. The most common were student apathy and lack of parent involvement.   Teachers reported that many students were lacking in basic academic background skills. Problems that began in early years had multiplied many times by the time students reached high school, which according to the teachers in this study, placed some students in a position of "huge deficit." This cumulative effect often resulted in behavior problems and continued failure, eventually leading to the student dropping out, as also suggested by Oakes (1990). A few teachers mentioned "good" students in their classes. When asked to elaborate on what made them "good" students, they said they were well-behaved and cooperative. None mentioned academic achievement in relation to these students, and there did not seem to be a sense of academic rigor. Advanced Placement courses in mathematics were not offered at any of the twelve high schools. Teachers reported that some of their students would go on to college. While no college enrollment data were available, they talked about nearby small colleges, and some teachers expressed their beliefs that most of their students were "just not college material." A few teachers talked about gifted athletes, and how they would not be able to play at the college level because of NCAA academic requirements that required a combination of high school grade point average and ACT or SAT test score. None of the teachers said that their students were inherently incapable of achieving, but most said that their students were not achieving for various personal and social reasons.

One Black teacher said she felt that students were routinely disrespected because their needs were not met. As she put it, "the child is doing his or her best, and it is not good enough. And no one is able to have self-respect in that condition." This is a kind of institutional disrespect that was observed to some degree in all of the schools in this study. Nearly half of the forty-one teachers mentioned their desire to help students build self respect. Several described their belief that the best way to build self esteem would be to maintain high academic expectations and to help students achieve them. A young Black teacher in a small, all-Black high school described her job. "I have to relate to each child and make them feel loved and try to teach them about life as well as mathematics." She said that her ultimate goal was to model hard work and success, and to have her students rise to this expectation. Observation of three of her classes confirmed that her students worked hard and appeared to learn mathematics.

The other teachers who mentioned self esteem did not relate it to academics, but talked about issues of dignity and respect. One elderly Black teacher was about to retire from the all-Black high school where she had taught for nearly 50 years. During our interview in her classroom at lunchtime, there was a steady stream of students stopping by to say hello. Many greeted her with hugs. They were polite when she introduced me, and there was a clear mutual affection toward this grandmotherly lady. I observed two of her classes, both of which were very dull. The teacher did a few example problems, and the students worked at their seats, but there was no spark of interest in the mathematics. It seemed that her role was that of counselor or maybe even surrogate parent. She was outstanding with relationships, but she did not exhibit much interest in academics, and her students seemed to model this attitude.

In response to the interview question "What would you like to change about your school?" Nearly all of the teachers mentioned that they would like students to be more motivated. Several teachers described their students as lazy. Others called them apathetic. A teacher said, "Our kids just don't want to do. About 5 percent do homework. We just can't reach them." Still another teacher said, "Students have no hope for the future, no motivation." However the teachers described it, they conveyed their perception that students were not interested in learning. This appeared to be a larger problem at some of the schools than at others, but it was clearly an issue of concern for nearly all of the teachers. The reasons for this apathy are not clear, but most of the teachers were quick to say that the problems were outside of school. They cited the community and family problems, and tended to cast themselves as fellow victims.

Most of the teachers reported encountering only minor behavior problems. They described students as "attention-needy," and said that they seek social reinforcement at school. Their peers are extremely important to them, and they may disrupt the class just to gain attention. This behavior does sometimes reach the stage of serious problems. One teacher stated, "Some kids come to school loaded on alcohol, pot, crack. And that causes them to behave irrationally and may lead to violence." Another teacher said that she felt "an angry undercurrent" in students. She felt that they were frustrated in their personal lives, and they sometimes took these frustrations out on each other, resulting in serious confrontation.

Families: "Home Lives are Broken."

A large number of the teachers reported that one of the major sources of problems with students is instability in their home life. As one teacher put it, "Whatever is going on at home frustrates kids." Another said, "Kids are on an emotional roller coaster. Home lives are broken." One teacher estimated that 80 percent of his students come from dysfunctional homes. He said that parents are unstable and do not accept responsibility. They have little involvement with their children, and morals have degenerated.

Another teacher said that a majority of the parents of her high school students were themselves still children, who were raising children. At the other extreme, teachers reported that many of their students were being raised by grandparents. In some cases, the parents were incarcerated. In other cases, the parents had grown up and left the community for the city (Jackson or Baton Rouge or Memphis). When they had children, and the children began having problems, they sent them back home to live with the grandparents. Grandparents were often old and in poor health, and unable to provide adequate supervision for them.

Most of the teachers expressed regret that families were not more involved in the school. Parental involvement and expectations are widely recognized as important factors in academic success (Delpit, 1995; Ogbu, 2003). A study by Roscigno and Crowley (2001) found that parents of rural students in general had lower educational expectations for their children. One teacher stated that many parents have to work 2 or 3 jobs, and have lost control of their children because they don't have time for them. A teacher said, "Teachers are the only parents they've got." In some cases, the parents come to school for social occasions such as sports events, but do not show up for academic meetings. An

experienced teacher expressed her frustration at trying to meet the many needs of her students. "I cannot teach, mentor, mother, counsel, and pray all at the same time, and you've got to. Everybody expects too much from a teacher. They expect you to do the impossible."

A teacher from the local community talked about her own parents.

> My parents had a fourth grade education. They pushed us to go to school and to do well. They taught us what work is about. My students are missing this. Parents now are complacent. We worked hard. Now they just strive for big shoes and a new car.

Schools: "Low Expectations. It's the Culture of the School and the Community."

The teachers reported a number of personal, interpersonal, and operational issues that influence the culture of their schools. These include school facilities, school administrators, teacher retention, teacher professionalism, and teacher expectations.

The teacher interviews and the on-site observations of schools confirmed that most school facilities in this region are very poor. Many buildings are old and run-down. Desks look decades old and very well-used. One teacher remarked, "OSHA does not monitor schools, or they would shut us down. We don't have hot water, and the lighting is so poor that we can't read on a cloudy day." However, there were exceptions. Two beautiful new modern high schools were visited in Mississippi, and both of these served mixed-race student populations. The differences in public school facilities only a few miles apart were extreme.

Teachers also reported insufficient instructional materials, supplies, and equipment, similar to earlier findings for rural schools by Lee (2001). Some said there were not enough student textbooks, and others said they were unable to get a teacher's edition of their textbook. Many reported problems with not having enough computers and calculators for instructional activities. One teacher said that when the state tests were given "it is a struggle to find enough calculators to make a class set." They said that students were not able to buy their own calculators. Teachers complained of often-broken copy machines and being restricted in the number of photocopies they could make. One teacher called her school's library "pathetic."

Many of the teachers complained about their school administrators. As noted earlier, academic skills were not stressed at some schools. One teacher said that there was "poor enforcement of standards in both discipline and academics." At one school, several teachers said that the school was not academic enough, and that they were not allowed to give failing grades. A teacher said, "You can't be academically demanding because the kids know that homework is a joke and classwork is a joke. There is no retention. The policy is that everyone is passed, no matter what they do or do not do." Teachers at other schools did not explicitly refer to a "no retention" policy, but many stated their view that academics were not valued. When questioned further, some said that they just felt that it was best to encourage students by passing them if at all possible. Other teachers said that their belief was that self esteem could only come from success and that success in school should be defined as academic achievement.

Even when teachers stressed academics, there were problems. A teacher said that he was "tired, in a rut, and frustrated." He said that his classes were so far behind that they would never catch up, so he had given up on them. The logical outgrowth of this attitude is that the teachers feel and convey low expectations for their students, and this expression results in further low achievement (Bottoms & Carpenter, 2003; Gay, 2000; Goodwin, 2000; Rothman, 2001).

It seemed that the apathy had also enveloped many of the teachers. In contrast, one teacher stated her belief that all students can learn. She said, "Sometimes it takes more time and different techniques for diverse backgrounds and abilities." She regularly stayed after school to offer tutoring to any student who asked, and many did. She said her goal was to make mathematics relevant to students. Some teachers were seeking to engage their students in many and varied ways. At one school, the mathematics teachers regularly held "Saturday School" to give students remedial assistance. I asked the mathematics chair about funding, and she laughed and said it was not about money, it was about "saving the future." The teachers rotated the volunteer Saturday work, and a large percentage of the students at the school attended. This was a fairly new initiative, so they did not have data, but they felt that it was making a difference.

Most rural Delta schools struggled to maintain a qualified teaching staff. Many of the teachers were graduates of nearby historically Black colleges, and there were simply not enough qualified teachers to staff the schools. There were always some uncertified teachers because of teacher shortages. Teachers said that it was difficult to recruit new teachers because of the low pay and due to the remote locations of many of these schools. One teacher said, "No one qualified wants to live here." The other side of that is that many people who grew up in these small communities wanted to stay there. As one teacher said, "Our people don't want to leave. They are comfortable here." Another teacher said that it was very difficult to get rid of poor teachers in her rural school because they were so hard to replace.

Teacher pay in the rural south is very low. One teacher with 17 years experience reported that she made less than $25,000 per year. Another experienced teacher said that she worked evenings in a convenience store in order to "live decent." Some teachers coached sports at their school for a small amount of extra pay. Others relied on the salary of a spouse. Young teachers had an especially difficult time because their salary was the lowest. They often took an extra job that drained energy and creativity from teaching, and they either became mediocre teachers or left the profession entirely. One teacher told me that she "can't live on her salary." In the summer, she turns off the utilities in her house and lives with a relative because she cannot afford to pay the bills. While the pay for teachers is abysmal, many teachers are not in the profession for the money. As one veteran teacher recounted, "When I can help a child, and they come back and help their parents and the community, I own the world. Money does not matter." There is a high level of dedication and a number of teachers mentioned that they had a sense of calling to teach.

Many teachers in the Delta schools felt unappreciated by administration, by students, and by parents. They reported that they felt no real sense of professionalism because they were not treated as professionals. As described by their peers, some teachers were mediocre. They were tired of teaching and put forth little effort, prompting one teacher to refer to other teachers at her school as apathetic. Only two of the forty-one

teachers interviewed said that they were involved in professional organizations, both with the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. When asked about their professional development activities, most talked about inservice programs sponsored by their school district. I saw very little evidence that up-to-date standards-based methods were utilized.

Some teachers in this study reported that they knew current teaching methods, such as cooperative learning and constructivist teaching, but most chose not to implement these techniques. Their classes were traditional, and they often used lecture because it was "easier" than preparing more innovative hands-on lessons. A teacher talked about "old school" teachers who have low expectations and don't push kids to achieve. She said, "Most of our student problems are based on low expectations, and most teachers are from here and have the same low expectations. It's the culture of our school and our community."

Discussion and Limitations

This study involved teacher interviews and observations in twelve public high schools in the rural southern United States. Teacher volunteers were interviewed and the few teachers who did not participate may have had different interpretations. Two factors may have influenced the interviewer-interviewee relationship and the credibility of the data. All teachers, Black and White, were interviewed by a White researcher. Since race was a major issue in the study, teachers may have been more or less forthcoming due to this difference. Some of the teachers were known to me before the study, and this may have influenced their responses. As stated earlier, I had previously worked with some of the teachers. I believe that this was positive rather than negative because teachers were willing, even anxious, to share their thoughts with me. My personal bias was simply that I felt these teachers had a story that should be shared, and I wanted to understand the difficulties they faced in teaching in poor rural schools, and to tell their story.

Implications

The results of this study provide a look into some of the most troubled schools in our country. The poor rural schools of the American south are unique. This study provides insight into the interrelated issues that contribute to lack of success in these schools. These variables may be viewed as an inverted pyramid, with the outcome of low achievement at the bottom, poverty at the top, and apathy and low expectations in-between. It should be noted that these relationships are recursive, and influence flows in both directions throughout. A large number of the teachers interviewed identified student apathy as the greatest problem in schools. Further, the results of this study clearly reveal that this apathy was a product of low expectations for students by parents, peers, teachers, community, and society. Teacher interviews and observations suggested that these pervasive low expectations were closely tied to poverty, which was influenced by prejudice and social structure. See Figure 1.

The culture of poverty in these communities is unable to support or nurture the high expectations that are essential for students to thrive in the educational environment. Widespread economic and social problems, including racial prejudice and a history of poverty, have fostered a culture of hopelessness in the young people, and in their teachers

and parents. Economic depression is the norm, and even more serious is the personal depression that accompanies it. The cycle of poverty and poor school performance leading to more poverty is deeply entrenched. There is a disconnect between the business of day-to-day schooling and realistic aspirations. This was apparent in the apathy of students and in the difficulties of teachers and parents in motivating them. Clearly, these problems are larger than the schools.

Teachers confirmed that low expectations were the norm. Many students internalized this pessimistic view of education that was conveyed by parents, peers, the community, and the larger society. Dealing with their own economic and social difficulties, many parents were not involved in their children's education. Most teachers were quick to blame the students and their parents. Many seemed to see themselves outside the problem, almost as observers, without any power to effect positive change. They reported that school experiences often did little to improve students' academic self esteem, and instead, further disassociated them from the student role.

Figure 1. The cycle of poverty and low achievement.
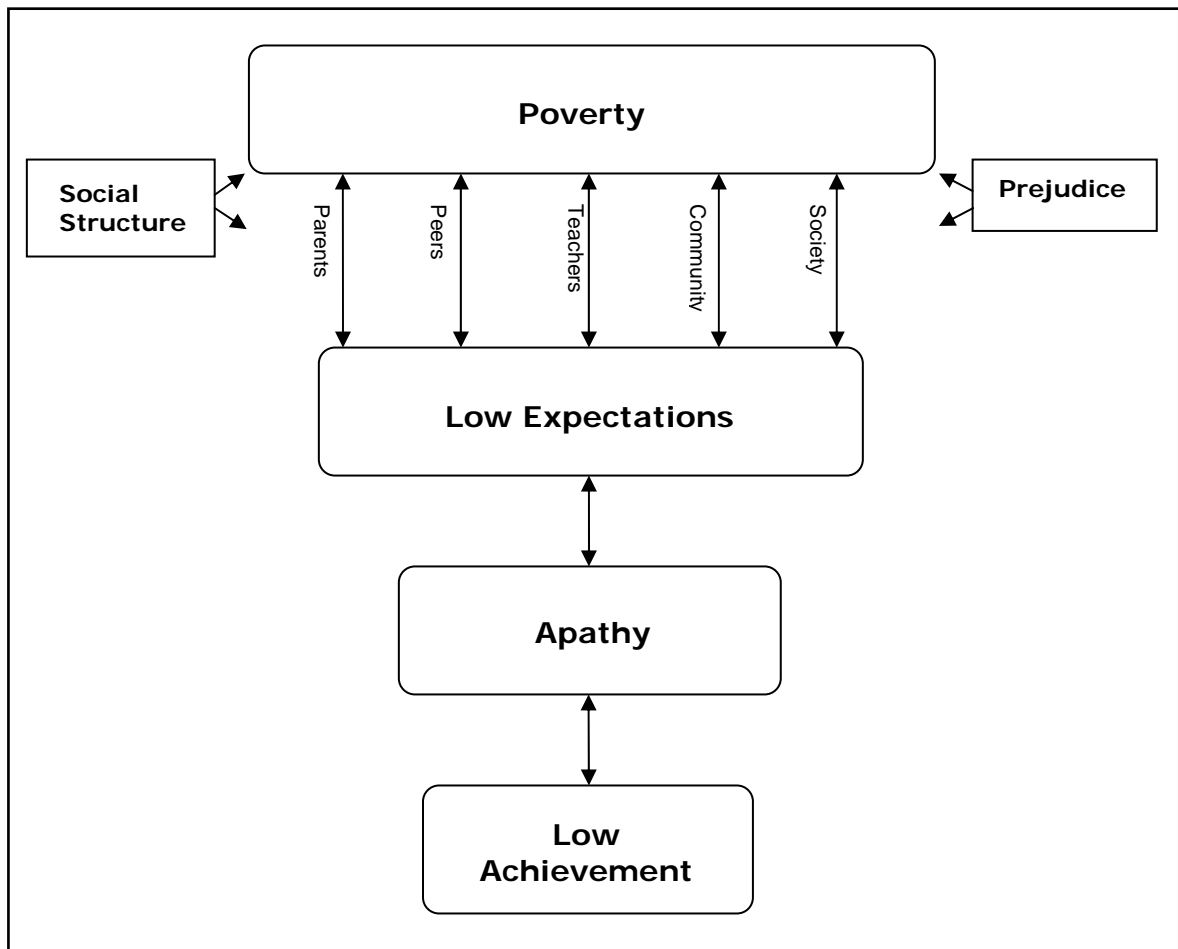
Race was an issue. Prejudice influenced attitudes and the education of students of color in both all-Black and mixed-race high schools. All of the twelve schools studied had a majority of minority students, and two-thirds of them had 98% or more African-

American students. The instances of racism were much more muted than in the past, but there was a clear division between the races. Segregation is no longer the law, but it is still the culture of these southern rural communities.   While the deeply ingrained social structures based on race are difficult for outsiders to comprehend, they still permeate all aspects of life in the rural South.

Finally, there is a great need for economic recovery efforts in these communities. In a recent essay, Berliner (2005) pointed to poverty as the major obstacle to educational reform: "In my estimation we will get better public schools by requiring of each other participation in building a more economically equitable society" p. 50.   The voices of the teachers in this study further support the basis for that assertion.   The issues that they identified as impacting teaching and learning in their schools all revolve around poverty. They described a community of poverty (in part caused by the social structure and racial prejudice), which leads to generalized low expectations, which leads to widespread apathy, which leads to low achievement. Poverty is the heart of the problem. This cycle of poverty cries out for intervention. The failing schools are only a reflection of the failing society in the poverty-stricken rural South. We cannot continue to lament the symptoms and not address the root of the problem. We must work toward building a more economically equitable society.

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Article Citation

McCoy, L. P. (2006). The southern rural public schools: A study of teacher perspectives. *The Qualitative Report*, *11*(4), 749-763. Retrieved [Insert date], from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR11-4/mccoy.pdf