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Conversations About Academic Success: Developing Supportive Context for High Achieving Black Students

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The racial academic achievement gap in America's public schools persists and there is solid research explaining the elements that have led to and support it. Much of this research is deficit-based and highlights the vulnerabilities of those who fall at the bottom of that gap. Not enough research is invested in celebrating, highlighting, or exploring the experiences of the Black students who perform well academically. This article represents research designed to provide a strengths-based, anti-racist view of a marginalized portion of America's public-school students. The goal of this study was to uncover the common factors that contribute to academic success for Black students who attend public schools in the suburbs surrounding the south Chicagoland area. The findings indicate that self-efficacy, school counselors, and resilience, among other factors, are characteristics held in common by the participants of this study. The practices and conditions highlighted help these students overcome the challenges of over a century of institutionalized racism and decades of factors that contribute to the racial academic gap between Black and White children who attend American public schools.

Keywords: Racial Congruence, Rosenthal Effect, Critical Race Theory, Pygmalion, de facto, de jure, segregation, integration

Introduction

The education system in America is an imperfect entity with a significant degree of research, planning, initiatives, and funding being invested in addressing the issues that pervade the institution. One particularly large area of concern is the performance of Black public-school students. The racial achievement gap is a nationwide issue and the study of it has uncovered many contributing factors that have had a negative impact on the performance of Black American students. Interventions at the federal and state level such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and Race to the Top were designed to improve the academic outlook for poor and minority groups (Klein 2015; School Improvement, 2019); however, it is difficult to completely eradicate harmful elements that have been embedded in an institution.

Identifying the barriers to academic success for Black students has been valuable work, yet most research takes a deficit-based approach when examining the state of the racial achievement gap and offering discourse emphasizing why Black students fail. In contrast, the present study takes an anti-racist approach by acknowledging and exploring the experiences of Black students who

meet and/or exceed academic expectations. These students are demonstrating through strong enrollment, high performance in honors and advanced placement courses, strong standardized test scores, and/or grade performance the misconception that Black students are wholistically underachieving is false. The research question for this study explored what conditions impact Black students' ability to be academically successful; however, before attempting to discover how Black students overcome obstacles in America's education system, time was spent outlining some of these difficulties and their origins. This helped to establish the context in which Black public-school students exist and function and painted a picture of the various challenges to be faced and overcome on a journey to academic success.

Despite being involved in a system that has been overwhelmingly biased, data suggests that high achieving Black American students exist and have demonstrated the ability and capacity to compete academically with their peers. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2017), 13% of Black 8th-grade students are proficient in math nationwide, with 2% of Black students scoring as Advanced. Reading results are somewhat better: 60% of 8th-grade Black students have a basic grasp of reading, 18% are proficient, and 1% are advanced (NCES, 2018). Regardless of the percentages, this data reinforces what we already know: Black children can learn, and they are capable of academic excellence.

The existing research that uses an anti-deficit approach to the analysis of the education of Black students, however, is limited. In addition, research overall that honors student voice is far outweighed by the adults in the room- and many times, adults who are not only not in the classroom, but have extremely limited or no experience there whatsoever. There are far too few accessible studies that allow the topic to be explored from the viewpoint of the demographic in question: Black public-school students. Those in authority all too often drown out this critical resource of first-hand experience. This study focuses on these students, gives them the agency to share their experiences, discover what they have in common, and develop best practices for all Black children in similar backgrounds. Instead of dwelling on ways in which challenges faced by Black children lead to academic failure, we shift the focus to Black American students who are meeting and exceeding academic standards. The goal was to learn how they are able to overcome their existing challenges, and what their teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders can do to replicate these practices for more, if not all, Black students. Beginning with a historical overview, this research examines the foundations of the systemic and structural biases and changes that have impacted the development of the Black high achiever.

An Overview of Schooling in Black Communities

The success of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was considered a moment of great triumph to many in the African American community and their supporters. Yet, *Brown* led to mixed results for the Black community. The newly integrated schools did not include the integration of Black teachers and staff in their interpretation of the law, and the NAACP knew that the end of segregation would threaten leadership patterns and economic arrangements (Fairclough, 2009). Fairclough (2009) described in depth how during integration efforts, White schools absorbed Black children but failed to hire Black teachers and administrators. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision focused on the students but failed to address the integration of faculty which led to a loss of support, community, and reinforcement in the classroom. *Brown v.*

Board was a social and political decision pursued on principle for the progression of the Black race. Unfortunately, in many ways, Black children suffered as a result of this decision.

Over the years, other researchers have questioned the good accomplished by *Brown* due to the impact on Black children and their communities. Jackson (2007) questions whether the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was necessary at all, pointing out that quality desegregated education has never been a reality for African Americans and inviting readers to consider whether *Brown* should be credited with the decline of thriving African American schools. Further, Bell (2004, as cited in Rosiek, 2019) argued that the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision did a disservice to Black children by morally legitimating a school system that had not addressed underlying structural inequalities. Research has demonstrated how Black children were removed from their communities and prohibited from having any significant access to both resources and Black representatives inside of their classrooms

Similar to times before schools were ever integrated, Black students continue to miss out on the bulk of educational resources along with other disadvantages. Data shows that Black children in racially homogeneous schools perform worse than their White counterparts: their standardized tests are lower, their graduation rates are lower, and college attendance is lower (Rosiek, 2019). In addition, Rosiek and Kinslow (2016) discovered in a 10-year field study that students interpreted their “racial isolation and relative lack of resources as the community’s low regard for them” (p. 10-11). DeConto (2011) cited a U.S. Department of Education national report that stated that “in 2009-2010, inexperienced teachers were twice as likely to work in mostly African American schools as in mostly White schools” (p. 31). Rosiek (2019) cited reports that found that White students take Advanced Placement courses at twice the rate of Black students, and “the relative rate of White students taking International Baccalaureate (IB) courses was nearly three times that of Black students” (p. 10), while Grissom, Rodriguez and Kern (2017) found that schools with more Black teachers or a Black principal had greater numbers of Black students in gifted programs. These disadvantages lend their effects to the data demonstrating that Black children perform comparatively worse than their White counterparts on standardized tests, graduation rates, and college attendance (Rosiek, 2019). The evidence here points to the considerable impact a diverse faculty may have on Black students.

The impact of a diverse faculty and administration in racially homogeneous schools on Black children cannot be understated. There is a considerable amount of existing and developing research on student-teacher race matching that is reminiscent of many emergent concerns of the Black community leading up to the *Brown v. Board* decision. Several researchers have produced studies that support the concept that students perform better when taught by teachers who look like them (e.g., Andrews & Gutwein, 2017; Bell, 1976; Burt, 2013; Fairclough, 2009; Jones, 2014; Pringle, 2010; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Ladson-Billings (1994) completed a comprehensive study describing how and why minority teachers may be more favorably perceived by students compared to their White counterparts, including their ability to relate to minority students. Cherng and Davis (2019) concluded that Latino and Black teachers are more “multiculturally aware than their White peers” which leads to improved classroom environments (p. 416). Black leaders and families worried over the loss of Black role models and support for their children inside of the classroom, and studies can perhaps be utilized to justify many of their fears.

The data gathered from the research points to the conclusion that Black teachers provide support, understanding, and encouragement that many Black children do not find throughout their educational experience. The research above also suggests that there is far too small a percentage of Black teachers in American public schools - less than 20% according to Cherng and Halpin (2016), Karp (2015), and Warren (2015). The question of whether the value of racial congruency overrides the benefits of diversity will be reviewed in the following section. While some progress has been made, there remain some residual effects of this complicated history that still impact Black student achievement.

Ongoing Challenges for Black Students

Many of the issues that existed when *Brown* was first enforced have only adapted to their social constructs over the past several decades. While the aforementioned hostilities directed toward Black children may have diminished and appear less obvious, the resistance has emerged with other faces and different tactics. The byproducts of integration included the immersion of Black children into a setting and education system that appeared to see no value in teaching a diverse, culturally aware curriculum. The National Education Association (NEA) stated that integration “produced the obliteration of Black identity” (as cited in Fairclough, 2009, p. 403). Toldson (2014) describes how racism is perpetuated most profoundly through the education system (p. 101) and points out how children are taught to revere historically racist people such as Christopher Columbus and George Washington, leaving children with the belief that Blacks played a miniscule role in the development of the nation. Ogbu (2003) contended that schools and White teachers do not support African American learning and that some White teachers fail[ed] to “fully acknowledge the humanity of African American students” (p. 109). These students do not reach maximum potential due to the process of “schooling, whereby students are forced to learn skills without connecting them to broader social, political, and economic processes in society” (Ogbu, 2003, p. 110). While the symptoms of these issues may not have a negative or lasting impact on all Black children, that it hinders the success of or wellbeing of any is an ill that needs to be addressed.

There are some instances where attempts have been made to address the eclipse of Black voices in favor of Eurocentric points of view; however, many of these attempts have been documented as flawed or incomplete. According to King (2017), school districts in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Philadelphia have requirements put in place to ensure that Black history classes are taught at all grade levels and Illinois is one of a few states that have passed laws that Black history be taught in public schools with special K-12 Black History oversight committees (p. 16). The Amistad Commission is a mandate in Illinois, New Jersey, and New York that emphasize “curricula that explains how the African slave trade and enslavement in the U. S. connect to the contemporary realities of African Americans” (King, 2017, p. 16). Despite this impressive accomplishment, however, citizens in Illinois and New York have complained that the mandates are in name only, “based on lack of curriculum enactment, enforcement, and financial assistance” (p. 16).

There are largely segregated schools where Black children are either the minority or the majority and some of those students experience success. Some Black students matriculate through the public-school system and never have a teacher who looks like them, yet they do well. In every

possible circumstance, there have been, are, and will be Black students who do well. All of these factors together contribute to ongoing research that seeks to explain where and how Black students achieve academic success. In light of this understanding and need for knowledge, this research sought the answer to the question of how Black students circumvent these obstacles and succeed in spite of them. Stakeholders can benefit from knowing what the existing factors are for Black students who achieve academic success despite these barriers.

An Anti-Deficit Approach to Black Student Success: A Developing Framework

This research utilizes an anti-deficit approach as defined by Harper (2010) in its exploration of factors present in schools where Black students achieve the most success. The anti-deficit theory approaches analysis from the viewpoint of what has gone right, instead of what has gone wrong. It works to highlight factors that can be replicated or implemented for positive change, as opposed to looking for things that lead to failure. Harper (2010) highlights the tendency of researchers to use a deficit approach when analyzing specific phenomena. The focus is usually on what is wrong in a specific case or example, presumably so work can be put forth towards a solution. While an anti-deficit approach is useful in many disciplines, it is especially appropriate in the research at hand that focuses on education and the challenges faced by Black students. Many theories have been developed explaining the achievement gap between Black students and their peers. Specifically, for the purposes of this research, Critical Race Theory (CRT), the Pygmalion/Rosenthal Effect, and Racial Congruence will be used to explore the context in which Black students achieved academic success.

Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1976; Chapman, 2013; Jay, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Leonardo, 2013; Su, 2007; Taylor, 1998) in education is a framework that enables researchers to analyze inequalities in education through a racially conscious lens, so solutions can be developed to eliminate challenges and barriers faced by Black students. The anti-deficit approach to Critical Race Theory recognizes and “empowers” (Harper, 2010, p. 71) Black students as experts on their own experiences and gives them the opportunities to provide counter narratives about their successes.

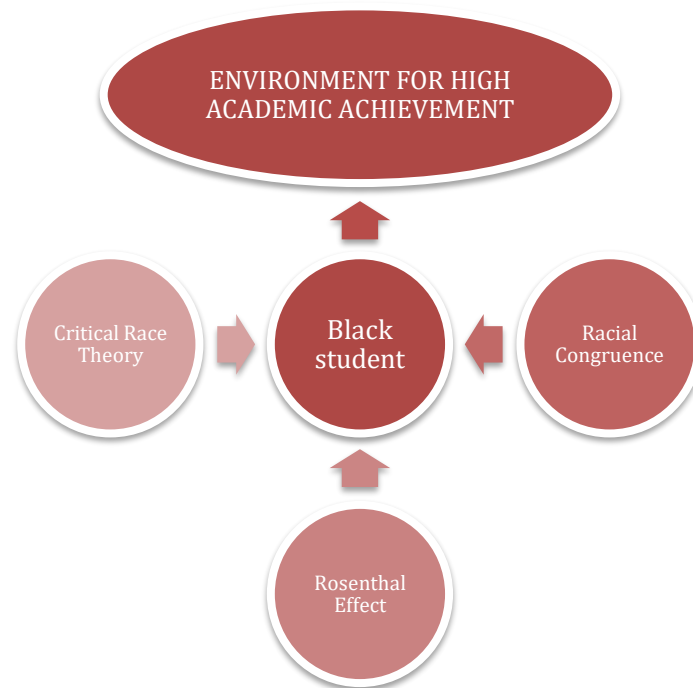
The Pygmalion or Rosenthal Effect (Bell, 1976; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) theorizes that students perform the way that they do in large part due to what their teachers believe they can achieve. Students tend to internalize what others believe about them and then live up or down to those expectations or beliefs. The anti-deficit approach to this theory would examine ways that Black students may have been able to overcome challenges or remain positive in the face of difficulty, doubt, and discouragement or lack of encouragement from their teachers.

Racial Congruence (Oates, 2003) is explored here in two categories: teacher to student and peer to peer. Racial congruence between teacher and student has been found to be a significant element in student success. Oates (2003) conducted research discussing evidence of “anti-black bias” (p. 520) among white teachers and the negative impact this bias had on Black student academic performance as demonstrated on standardized test scores. This theory is also relevant in the discussion of Implicit Bias and how its effects contribute to the educational experience of Black students.

The anti-deficit approach would explore how academically successful Black students circumvent these challenges and achieve their academic goals in this climate. The peer-to-peer element of Racial Congruence ties into a discussion about present day segregation, referred to earlier as de facto segregation or racially homogeneous settings. Research by DeConto (2011), Eaton (2010), Rothstein (2019), and Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg (2011) presents compelling data for the benefits of true integration (neighborhoods, schools, and classrooms) for all students. The anti-deficit approach to this particular theory may be to learn how the experiences of Black students in this population aid them in persevering towards their goals (see Figure 1). As with the anti-deficit approach to several other theories, the Black student is the authority on their experience and their counter-narrative provides insight into how policy can be used to reinforce the positive aspects of the Black student's experience.

Figure 1

Factors to Consider for Black Student Academic Success



It is our contention that Critical Race Theory, the Rosenthal Effect, and Racial Congruence are foundational to understanding the experiences of Black students in American schools. In some way, most of the factors found to hinder Black academic success are connected to these theories. The institutional racism highlighted in CRT is reinforced or resisted by the Rosenthal Effect which can be directly influenced through Racial Congruence. The data collected in this study will seek to uncover how Black students navigate the obstacles present in their public-school education and find success.

Methods and Analysis

A grounded theory methodology was chosen to understand what conditions impact Black students’ ability to be academically successful and the process by which they adapt to or overcome their barriers.

Participants

Homogeneous sampling was utilized to recruit students who have been identified as successful based on their grades, enrollment in honors and advanced placement courses, and/or standardized test scores. Six Black students identified as academically successful by their school administration from three suburban high schools participated in the study. The students also shared several characteristics: a strong degree of independence/autonomy, only moderately involved family, strong reliance on school counselors as a support system, inspired by success of others, self-starters and problem solvers, self-care as common practice, confidence and self-regulatory practices. Table 1 provides an outline of the study participants.

Table 1
Students’ Information and School Demographics

School & Student (Year)	Student Demographic	Teacher Demographic	Location	School Population
<u>School A</u> Angel (Senior) Brian (Senior)	Black 96.1% Hispanic 3% White 0.4%	Black - 14% White - 71% NR* - 15%	Dolton	1089
<u>School B</u> Candace (Junior)	Black 83% Hispanic 12% White 1.7%	Black - 13% White - 81% NR* - 6%	South Holland	1780
<u>School C</u> Danielle (Sophomore) Eric (Sophomore) Frederick (Junior)	Black 80% Hispanic 10% White 10%	Black – 17% White – 66% Pacific Islander – 1% NR* - 16%	South Holland	42

Note: Data not reported is represented by NR

Data Collection

The study relied heavily on questions which explored demographic diversity, educational experiences in and outside of school settings, investment in education at home, access to racially congruent teachers and culturally sensitive curriculum and instruction (see Table 2 below). Questions of demographics explored the extent to which a homogenous environment or lack of diversity impacted a student’s ability to approach content from multiple perspectives and think critically on a global scale as suggested in research by Eaton (2010), Siegel-Hawley and Frankenberg (2011), Rotberg (2014), and Rothstein (2019). Particular questions may support findings in research regarding elements of student success—examples include, but are not limited

to questions about a student’s educational experiences in gaining access to advanced and/or challenging coursework, the Rosenthal Effect, racial congruence, time invested in student’s learning as a young child, attitudes about literacy and involvement in academic extracurricular activities, and investment in future goals of school settings. Finally, questions probing into curriculum/unit topics, classes, and cultural experiences inside of school highlighted a degree of cultural relevance and sensitivity in the school system, supporting Critical Race Theory and its importance in Black students’ education.

The questions asked during data collection were developed to tell a story about what Black academically successful students have done or experienced throughout their academic career and whether it is possible that those elements have contributed to their performance in any way. Many of the responses seem to confirm existing theories and findings, while other trends have presented themselves in a way that could pave the way for future studies. In this section, the students’ responses will be presented in a way that highlights the trends that have emerged. The questions aligned with previous research about racial congruence, the Rosenthal Effect, diversity in the classroom and curriculum, and Critical Race Theory, and were designed to attempt to understand the academic experience of the student. Table 1 outlines the alignment of the research framework with the data collection.

Table 2
Interview Answers Alignment to Research Framework

Interview Question	Interview Question Focus	Connection to Framework
In your opinion, is it important that schools make a concentrated effort to provide a diverse curriculum for their students?	Importance of diversity within school curriculums	Racial Congruence
How has the coursework you have experienced in your Social Studies, History, English, and Reading classes consistently included perspectives from multiple ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds?	Examination of experienced diversity in current curriculum	Racial Congruence
What does a teacher have to do for you to consider them to be a “good” teacher?	Evaluation of quality teachers	Rosenthal Effect
How impactful has the diversity of your teachers been for you as a student and person?	Exposure to diverse teachers	Rosenthal Effect Racial Congruence

How has diversity of your peers/classmates over your educational experience impacted you as a student and a person?	Exposure to diverse classmates/peers	Racial Congruence
How would you describe the highlights/lowlights of your elementary, middle, and high school experience up to this point?	Highs and lows of academic career	Critical Race Theory
When you have encountered struggles in school, what did you do or who helped you to get past them?	Coping with academic struggles	Rosenthal Effect Critical Race Theory
Outside of family, who are some people who have motivated you to do well in school?	Academic support	Rosenthal Effect
How is your family involved in your education?	Family involvement	Critical Race Theory
How does your educational performance impact your personal future goals?	Expectations/Evaluation of long-term educational value	Critical Race Theory

Note: Student feedback alignment to the research framework.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2011), the grounded theorist uses a procedure “involving the simultaneous and sequential collection and analysis of data” (p. 433). The authors employed the emerging design in their process of data collection; whereas they immediately analyzed the data and used the results to inform decisions about what data to collect next (Creswell, 2011, p. 433). In the coding process, the authors analyzed transcripts and memos while looking for patterns, expecting that certain themes would be presented that would align with current research, and categorized them under major topics such as Familial Support, Mentorship, and Academic/Supplemental Programs. Early in the course of the interviews, similar themes presented themselves in the students’ responses and in line with the grounded theory process, recurring words or phrases that could develop a pattern were documented. This constant comparative data analysis allowed the researcher to stay engaged with the data throughout the

collection process, “sorting it into new categories” and “comparing new information with emerging categories” (Creswell, 2011, p. 433). The results confirmed factors that research had already presented and exposed areas for further exploration. The next sections review details about students’ perspective on the research topics and offers places where they share commonalities with respect to their beliefs and experiences attending schools void of anti-racist, diverse education.

Findings

Importance and Presence of Diverse Curricula & Classrooms

Students were asked about the importance for schools to provide diverse curricula. Only Angel considered her school content to be “diverse” in nature, but she emphasized coverage that she described as “shallow” and “watered down.” While Candace discussed this in more detail, highlighting that most material she has been exposed to has been mostly “shallow,”

Certain topics don’t get touched on, but I feel like we should touch on them in school. Like police brutality, most of my [White] teachers don’t really talk about it - they try to steer away from it. We don’t really talk about how it feels to be Black in society like you would talk with a Black teacher, so it’s like little conversations we should have in class, we don’t talk about it. And when it comes to the Black History portion of the year, it’s really cut small.

Alternatively, Brian—who grew up in classrooms with mostly Black classmates and teachers—stated that he appreciated the diversity within his curriculum:

Mainly because although students are usually stuck in a certain atmosphere averagely, I would say - my experience, I can say that I was kinda in a certain environment most of my life, so having - in curriculum - a different cultural or ethnic background would prepare students for the future, wherever that may be. If that’s college, if military, trade - because once you decide to continue in your life, you’ll probably encounter people who aren’t the same as you who don’t think the same as you religion-wise, politically, or don’t even have the same background as you, but you kinda have to learn what things to do and not to do and how to conduct yourself in certain environments and cultural settings.

The remaining three students (Danielle, Eric, and Frederick) stated that the material overall has not been diversified, and when it is, it is only in specific classes and/or their lessons or texts have gradually become more varied with age/grade level.

All six students cited diversity as an important element of school curriculums and emphasized how diverse curriculums in school prepare them to interact and function in the world. Half of the students made comments suggesting that their educational experiences lead them to feeling/being limited: “we don’t learn enough about each other,” “we don’t understand each other, especially what’s going on now,” and Angel referred to an interest in studying abroad, stating that she and her peers barely received enough instruction in languages to “get by.” Brian described growing up in racially homogeneous schools as being “stuck in a certain atmosphere.” He went on to state

that he and his peers would “encounter people who aren’t the same and don’t think the same,” and that they would “kinda have to learn what things to do.” In discussion of how they needed to be prepared, Angel, Brian, Candace, and Frederick used language hinting at how they viewed diverse curriculums as something they need to survive in society and in the future. Phrases like “get by,” learning how to “not be like your ancestors,” and “how to conduct yourself in certain environments” conveyed the students’ concerns about their place in society and how they should navigate within it.

Another strongly emphasized point between all six students is the importance of being able to acknowledge that people are different while valuing their history and culture. A curriculum that includes multiple perspectives would teach them how to understand and empathize with others. Most of the students agreed that “getting to see different sides of the story,” and “feeling each other’s pain,” would give people a “better understanding” of others and encourage people to “stand with” others when they “go through hard times.” The students equated a diverse curriculum with an improved society with better people.

The students’ responses to the question about whether having diverse peers is impactful align with many of the themes that emerged from their answers about the importance of diverse curriculums. Similar trends present themselves: preparation, survival, understanding/empathy, and learning about others. In addition to these themes, appreciation of self, identity, culture and community, and inspiration by peers present themselves as matters to consider. Angel, Brian, and Candace, students who have not had significant experience with diverse teachers, gave responses that expressed their desire and/or intent to seek out diverse settings in the future. They see going to school and working in diverse settings as a need. Angel stated that she wants to meet new people and learn new things, and that she “wants to avoid becoming a bigot due to being surrounded by like-minded individuals.” She said, “I need to be a little more diverse.” Candace expressed that being around/in diverse groups of people is “important because I don’t know what they go through; I only hear what they talk about in the books or on social media.” Common across the responses is the acknowledgement that having diverse relationships results in learning multiple perspectives, empathy, language, and culture. The students view diversity as a positive and responses collectively imply that the experience impacts world views, approaches, and opinions.

Angel, Brian, and Danielle, who mostly attended racially homogenous schools or classrooms, expressed appreciation and pride in self and community. Brian stated that being around mostly Black peers pushed him to learn more about his culture. He also expressed that “seeing people who look like me doing the same things and trying to meet a certain goal” inspires him.

Frederick describes how he has “learned to navigate different settings.” He used the term “code switch” and explained how he’s learned to avoid certain conversations and recognize “trigger words.” He knows “what you’re not supposed to say if you’re in a predominately white school,” and cites this experience as positive because he is prepared for the future: “when I go into the workplace, and I’m the only Black man, I know what not to say to make them mad or uncomfortable.”

Exposure to High Quality, Diverse Teachers

The responses to the question of what makes a teacher “good” seemed to fall under three main themes: student connection, skilled delivery, and student engagement. Apart from Danielle, all the students gave responses that communicated some desire for authentic care/respect from their teachers. These students used the terms/phrases “get to know us,” “dedication,” and “love me and my classmates.” Some students shared personal experiences to describe how their teachers’ connection to students (or lack thereof) impacted their learning experience. Candace explained that her teachers’ lack of connection impacted her “because certain topics don’t get touched on... most of my [white] teachers try to steer away from it and we don’t really talk about how it feels to be Black in society like you would talk with a Black teacher, so it’s like the little conversations we should have in class, we don’t talk about it.” Candace’s experience having mostly Black or mostly White teachers at various times of her education seemed to give her a certain clarity about her connections with her teachers and the frustration she felt during times when she needed more than they were able to offer.

Skilled delivery means that the teacher in question has mastered their subject and the phrase “know how to teach” was a recurring theme among five out of six students, along with the expectation that the material is or is made timely and relevant. Student engagement was extremely important to these students. They expressed the desire to be challenged, understood their need for differentiated instruction (even if they did not use the terminology) and expressed a strong dislike for “boring” lectures and “busy work.”

The question of whether having or not having diverse teachers was impactful to these students provided responses that did not necessarily match up with the explanations and stories they told. Most of the students attended schools that were mostly White or Black at some point in their lives. All but Danielle and Eric—both first generation African Americans—emphasized that in their experience, White teachers found it difficult to relate to their Black students and that they tend to avoid certain topics and minimize their cultural importance by neglecting events such as Black History month. For example, Angel stated that it is “really difficult for a Caucasian male teacher to appeal to an African American male student” even though “they try.” She noted a marked lack of Black male teachers and equated this with a lack of role models for Black male students.

Other students mentioned that most of their White teachers did not really talk about “difficult topics,” but “try to steer away from it.” Candace stated that “we don’t talk about how it feels to be Black in society.” Frederick explained that specifically “White females” have difficulty teaching certain topics. He stated that they “may not know exactly how to teach a subject, like the Civil war or the slave trade.” This student also described his experience with teachers who don’t know “how to be considerate of families not in a good financial state,” citing an example of a teacher who expected his family to purchase supplies for a science project without thinking “that maybe that costs a little bit too much money that the student does not have.” It may be interesting to note that the two students who did not bring up the issue of White teachers relating to students have had very different experiences than the other four. Danielle has attended schools with all Black staff until high school, where the teachers are fairly diverse (Black, White, Pilipino, Asian, and African), and Brian has always attended schools with fully diverse staff.

The students describe their experience of having Black teachers as positive, making comments about having teachers that “look like me” who provide mentorship and are a positive influence. They also describe the comfort of sharing a connection with their Black teachers, stating that it is “easier to relate.” When they reflect on times/classes without the presence of Black teachers, a theme of missing out seems to emerge. They miss having the “comfort of having someone” that they “share that connection with.” Each student feels that school is the place for them to discuss difficult topics and are disappointed when their White teachers avoid these topics.

Danielle and Eric, who have extensive experience in schools with a diverse group of teachers, find it to be a positive experience: one stating that “it’s kinda exciting to look forward to new people,” and both expressing that they experience a lot of cultural exposure to other people. Ironically, both students initially answered that they do not think the diversity of their teachers is impactful. They also both gave responses that suggested that even with the benefits of their diverse backgrounds, they may be missing the benefit of learning about their own culture.

Coping with Academic Struggles

All six students acknowledged some type of struggle with a subject in school at some time. Brian, Candace, and Danielle attributed their difficulties in school to social adjustment relating to the transition from middle school to high school, and health issues early in their academic career that led to poor grades. What is common among most of these students is self-confidence in their ability and intelligence as well as a personal drive or determination. The students made statements about “shifting mindsets,” acknowledged their ability to catch on quickly, stating, “I’m usually pretty sharp,” and even though a subject may be “very, very hard,” declared “I have to learn the lesson.”

It is not surprising that these students have experienced challenges academically; challenges are expected as they contribute to growth and skill development. What is interesting to note is the degree of confidence or self-efficacy and their resilience. None of the students ever seemed to consider or suggest that they were unable to understand the subject or grasp the concept. It was always a matter of how to do it or even a consideration of if it was something they even wanted to do. The belief in their inherent ability, however, always seemed to be intact.

All the students have a strong support system: only Candace did not specifically use the phrase “support system” when referring to the individuals she turns to when facing difficulty at school. There are four main categories of resources for these students: a support system that consists of friends, family/parents, teachers, and counselors; accountability and collaborative groups such as the mutual support of peers and members of clubs/extracurricular activities; and all of the students demonstrate a large degree of independence, Angel stating that she “takes matters into my own hands and figure it out myself.” These students take the time to do self-reflection and problem analysis, they are self-motivated and determined, teach themselves when necessary, and engage in self-regulatory practices: eliminating distractions and decreasing time spent on the phone or with friends. Another interesting trend is that of self-care. Brian, Danielle, and Frederick describe that they take the time to “meditate,” listen to music, vent to trusted individuals, or “find time to get out of [their] head.”

Non-Familial and Family Involvement in Education and Future Success

Danielle, Eric, and Frederick attend a smaller school that does not have a full-time counselor on staff. The other three students all spend a lot of time noting the extensive support and assistance provided by their school and program counselors. These counselors “push” them to keep going and provide guidance when the students need guidance or direction. Angel, Candace, Danielle, and Frederick emphasized the impact of their peers/friends motivating them to do well. Three of these students state that they are inspired by the success of others- particularly those who looked like them.

In addition to school counselors, students mentioned support from an array of sources. The adult friends of parents provided support and encouragement. A pastor provided a listening ear as they bonded over similar interests. The adults in extracurricular activities were also sources of support and guidance. No matter what these motivators looked like or where they were, each student had at least one who came to mind when asked this question.

In our discussion about family involvement, again all of the students made remarks about their independence and what they viewed as very little support. It is important to note that they identify independent as they “don’t really ask for help” or “I’m really on my own.” The students don’t seem to view their parents or family as a viable source for academic assistance. Their parents’ involvement comes into play when there is a need for reinforcement or intervention with a teacher. Family involvement is described as “they pay” and “they bring me to school.” Mothers are also cited as being willing to email teachers or call when a teacher will not “fix my grade.” Overall, the various reasons that parents are not more involved with the academic aspect has to do with parents “didn’t really go to college,” received their formal education in a different country, or the student simply “forgot” to tell them and handled the issue on his own.

Overall, the students view their current performance in school as preparation for their future. What they do in high school specifically helps them plan and figure out what they want to do in the future. Angel described their educational performance as her “key to success.” For some of these students, their education is the one thing that can help them accomplish their goals. Danielle and Eric, the youngest, didn’t have a concrete view of the future or their place in it. Candace seemed to grasp on to her success in high school as her only means of survival and escape.

The students who were nearing the conclusion of their high school careers seemed very decisive about the paths that they would take reaching their future goals. They had a clear understanding of what they needed and actively worked to achieve or prepare for these inevitabilities (participating as officers on the Student Board, distancing themselves from friends who were distractions, investing time and focus in school subjects that would support career choices). These students were very intentional about their day-to-day activities and choices.

Discussion

Student Reflections on Support Context

The findings offer elements that students in this study desire to support them to navigate the existing barriers in America's public education system. The tools identified through the data collection in this research include the following: peer collaboration, deferential familial support, self-determination, forward thinking, self-efficacy, resilience, school counselors, intrinsic motivation, self-care practices, and autonomy. The aim of this study was to highlight Black students who excel in the public-school setting despite deficit-oriented and racist environments and allow them to give voice to factors and experiences that contribute to their success in the face of all we know about the racial academic achievement gap. The product of this research was to contribute valuable data for education stakeholders with the goal of improving the educational experiences of this demographic.

The words of many of the students in this study echo the experiences documented in existing research. Waxman (2020) told the story of a teen feeling lost as one of a few Black students in an honors class: "She felt as if Black perspectives were also in the minority and that her teachers were tiptoeing around hard race-related questions about history" (p. 15). This statement is reminiscent of statements included here by Candace and Frederick. The reluctance or fear of teachers that is being perceived by Black students is a reality in many classrooms. Ohito (2016) described this as a "pedagogy of discomfort" which is caused by a "tight but invisible hold that White supremacy maintains on teacher education" (p. 454). Ohito (2016) described the broader issue that teacher education programs have struggled with for years, "how to adequately prepare these White preservice teachers to attend to students with cultural and racial identities that are different than their own" (p. 455). In a system where the percentage of Black students in classrooms is rising, but the percentage of White teachers remains stagnant, this is a relevant matter. Ohito (2016) asserted that "these teachers [need] to feel some tension, some discomfort" (para 4). Ohito (2016) wrote of a White preservice teacher who reflected, "If I avoid conflict, discomfort, dissonance, how will I engage in conflict in a way that results in meaningful and transformative learning experiences for the students?" (p. 461). This concern is not only valid, but the question should be considered carefully when determining requirements for preservice teachers (Santaro & Kennedy, 2015). This point is especially relevant as the students interviewed in this study were actively witnessing social uprisings and protests in their communities following the controversial death of a Black man at the hands of the police. Several of the students referenced the incident and their desire to discuss current events in their classes but stated that these discussions were not welcome or allowed. Some of them were aware and stated that their teachers were uncomfortable addressing these topics.

Race and Racial Equivalence

All of the students interviewed had experienced the educational inequalities defined by Critical Race Theory (CRT) whether they recognized the occurrence and were able to articulate it or not. The difficulties experienced in the students' classrooms were highlighted through their testimonies. Candace described the histories and novels that she has been exposed to in her English and History classes as "one sided" and told from a "Caucasian perspective across the board." While all of the students stated that at some point their classes covered Black history or read Black stories, most of them specified that these instances focused on slavery and the Civil Rights movement. Angel and Candace emphasized that the coverage was "shallow" or "watered

down." Unfortunately, these experiences are the reality for many Black children due to the discomfort or dissonance of those who teach them.

In general, it seems that Black stories are seen through the lens of trauma, slavery, and Civil Rights. While there is a place where the topics should be covered, the Black experience should not be relegated to this category or reserved for specific units and/or times of the year. The human experience includes all people, and as diverse as the world is, the content of school curriculum should reflect this reality. Unfortunately, this need is not often met, and students are impacted by the lack. Some of the experiences described carry over to the second theory in the framework.

Teacher Expectations, Perceptions, & Diversity

The Rosenthal Effect has the central idea that a teacher's expectations have a significant influence on student performance (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Bell, 1976). The nature of this study makes it impossible to assess the beliefs of the teachers in question. All we can do is make some logical assumptions and conjectures based on the experiences communicated by the students in this study. While this section focuses on portions of the story that highlight the issue that exists for Black students, it seems reasonable to point out that it is likely that their experiences are not linear. While it is likely that they have been assigned to teachers who have directly or indirectly doubted their abilities, they have also had many positive experiences with their teachers.

Several researchers link academic outcomes to how much teachers care or how much students perceive they care (Bottiani, et. al, 2018; Vega, et al., 2015; Warren, 2015). The students in this study told stories of teachers who cared and identified them as "good" teachers. Angel, Brian, Candace, and Frederick made statements about "comfort" in relation to their teachers; what they have been willing to teach and discuss and how this makes them feel. Frederick also highlighted what he viewed as insensitivities displayed by his white teachers who may not have fully grasped their students' economic realities. Finally, every student's language expressed a desire for their teachers to care about them enough to not only do a good job teaching, but to build relationships as well.

The insight demonstrated by the students regarding the diversity of their peers was impressive. The research shows plainly that there are pros and cons to both diverse and racially homogeneous classrooms (DeConto, 2011; Eaton, 2010; Rothstein, 2019; Siegel-Hawley & Frankenberg, 2011). The students interviewed in this study highlighted truths in both perspectives. There was a definite appreciation for the comfort available in learning and playing with people with similar experiences and cultures, as expressed by Brian and Frederick - and the ability to be inspired by people who look like them had been powerful - but the importance of diversity was acknowledged by most of the students. Not only did five of the six students explain how much they learned any time they were in a position to have diverse peers, but Angel actively planned her post-secondary pursuits with the intent of being immersed in diversity.

Teacher to student racial congruence seems to be a divided issue. The realities of implicit bias, as well as teachers who are simply too uncomfortable to create the learning experiences needed and

desired by Black children are relevant to the discussion (Baer et. al., 2010; Fiarman, 2016; James & Brookfield, 2014; Oates, 2003). The reality is, however, that multiple things can be true: racial congruence between teachers and students does have value and lead to significant gains as well as a staff that is truly diverse. It is not that one race is more adept at teaching than another, but that historically, White teachers have not collectively demonstrated the ability to empathize with or teach Black students effectively. Until this changes, it becomes necessary to fill more classrooms with Black teachers who Black students feel they can trust, be understood by, and look up to.

With this in mind, the students' responses reflect an appreciation of both realities regarding the diversity of their teachers. It is interesting to note that in many cases, they seem to define diversity as simply having a Black teacher. Angel, who actively seeks diversity, says that her Black female teachers are a "positive influence" and that it's "easier for them to relate". She noted that there are more White males than Black male teachers, which she says makes it "difficult because [White male teachers] try [to relate to Black male students], but it's a matter of the culture." She equated this to there being a "lack of role models" for Black students. The students who attended a school where the staff was truly diverse seemed satisfied with their experience. They learn about people, cultures, and perspectives. When it comes to these students, it is important to note that their "diverse" staff includes Black teachers.

Supportive Contexts

The ways and extent to which adults need to be prepared to assist students with their endeavors will vary from child to child, but the research seems to connect student success to independence. Vega, Moore, and Miranda (2015) published a study where the majority of participants reported that they did not seek help from others with their school work, "Some shared that their families were limited in ability to help due to limited education or low English language proficiency" (p. 45). Ironically, while Schunk and Meece (2006) outline many ways in which self-efficacy can be influenced or developed, they state that "adolescents benefit from home environments that encourage self-reliance and autonomy" (p. 89). In addition to this study, Benner, Boyle, and Sadler (2016) find that "increased academic assistance through homework help and other more intrusive parenting techniques can compromise achievement" (p. 1061). This need to be independent may indirectly produce students who have higher degrees of self-efficacy.

Preparing adults to be able to serve in supporting roles for students in the classroom is as important as ensuring that prepared adults are available to serve students in other capacities. Angel, Brian, and Candace - who had access to school counselors, and the Black high school graduates in Vega, Moore, and Miranda's (2015) research expressed that "supportive relationships with school officials were influential" (p. 39), and that these relationships caused them to feel "supported and included" (p. 39). Bottianin et al. (2018) defines school support as an emerging construct theorized to fulfill student needs for belonging, competence, and autonomy (p. 1176). Rust (2016) cites Cummins (1986) in a description of "bicultural ambivalence" where "[Black] cultural roles, norms, and values are not reflected in their schools and how this may lead to "a lack of a sense of belonging or connection with ones' school as well as lower academic achievement motivation" (p. 1151). In short, the presence and availability of

school counselors may be a large part of what contributes to the overall academic success of Black students.

Limitations

The scope of our research focused on the mechanics of the student experience: as in what students saw, the content of their curriculum, and who they interacted with; and attempted to explore the impact this had on their overall experience and how they navigated specific challenges. This study did not ask the question or specifically attempt to assess how the students feel about school, as in do they enjoy it or are they happy there. This may or may not have had some significance in light of the research done by Froiland and Worrell (2016) that links “enjoyment of learning” with academic achievement. Some consideration of the matter was mentioned due to the self-determination factor that provides an out; however, this would be an interesting angle for future studies.

Also not addressed in this study is the parental perspective. It is well understood that adults are more capable of providing information – unobserved or unknown by the child – specific strategies, investments, etc. that have a significant influence on the way the child thinks and acts. The independence, or self-efficacy, demonstrated by most of the students could have been a characteristic that is the result of some form of conditioning- intentional or by circumstance. Studies into how to create conditions conducive to academic independence could be informative.

Conclusions

The existence of academic barriers to the students in question has been well established by many researchers and acknowledged in the former portion of this article. Our purpose with this study has been to address how Black students are able to excel in these environments. The results of this study have reaffirmed many things that perhaps we already knew, while presenting new elements for consideration.

When teachers left Brian, Angel, Danielle, Eric, Frederick or Candace to figure out their schoolwork on their own, they used their self-efficacy to do so. If that proved ineffective, Angel, Danielle and Frederick would collaborate with their peers, Brian would demonstrate autonomy by eliminating distractions and distancing himself from his peers. Angel, Brian, and Candace would seek out their school counselors for assistance navigating their school experience: social and academic. Candace and Brian knew that their families were available and prepared to step in when needed. When overwhelmed with difficult situations, Brian, Danielle, and Frederick would implement self-care practices by taking time for themselves, ranting and/or crying with friends, or listening to music. All of these students have exhibited resilience and determination by persisting and/or finding ways to navigate challenges as they presented themselves. Some favor specific tools over others, but all of the students have all of the resources in their own toolkits.

As educators and stakeholders, the responsibility lies with us to take the information that we gain and use it to move forward with improved pedagogy. We may not be able to impact the students’ experiences at home, but we can modify the responsibilities of our school counselors by reallocating or eliminating the work that hinders them from being available to students when

they need them. Perhaps we are moving into a new era where school counselors need assistants, or funding should be reallocated to allow for additional counselors to be available on campuses. If the suggestion seems costly or rash, it is important to keep in mind that the work school counselors do is critical and life changing for the students who are able to have access to them.

Another strategy to consider for educators is an intentional path towards creating opportunities to have candid conversations about race topics. Students want to be able to talk to their teachers, until they realize or assume that the feeling is not mutual. If they do not fully understand the reason why the adult in the room avoids certain topics of conversation, they will assume and sometimes this leads to negative experiences in the classroom for both teacher and student(s). Students are more willing to learn from teachers they feel understood by and/or connected to, so learning how to have what can be challenging (but appropriate) conversations is critical to being a more effective educator.

These opportunities could and should take place during teacher training programs, consistently and regardless of the goals of the trainees. The Black experience is a human experience and integral to the American experience. Being able and willing to teach and discuss it candidly, accurately, and openly is important for every demographic. As ongoing professional development is a requirement of the profession, training could continue throughout the educator's career. In addition, curriculum should be reviewed to ensure that it is diverse and reflects the truth of a diversity of experiences for every race, regardless of the demographic of the school or classroom in question. Experts who are well trained, and well read can be sought out to assist school districts and universities with these tasks.

In the meantime, while we continue to push toward the implementation of these interventions and programs, we as educators can take some of the initiative to improve students' experiences in our classrooms. We can take the time to create lessons that are meant to connect to our students and really listen to them when they respond. If we don't know the answer to something, we can be honest and think of ways to come up with answers together. We can treat our students like human beings- young ones who are growing and trying to make sense of the world and help them understand that learning is a lifelong process. Acknowledging our humanity does not have to lead to the detriment of our hard-won respect of classroom management. It may in fact lead to students who are more engaged, improved student-teacher relationships, and an overall improved educational experience for every student in the classroom.

It is the intent that this research adds to the growing evidence of the value of student voice (Defur, 2009; Elwood, 2013; Ferguson, 2011; Friend, 2012; Gunter, 2007; O'Neill & McMahan, 2012; Posti-Ahoras & Lehtonski, 2014). When students' voices and opinions are sought after and considered, they are more engaged and invested in their learning experience. These students defy the odds and have real time data that can be implemented in pre-service teacher training and school curriculums. The significance of this study lies in the process of determining how to replicate the experiences, resources, and habits of the individuals in this study for all students. Future studies on how to cultivate self-efficacy and autonomous behavior, how to normalize resilience in the face of resistance and difficulty, and intentional ways to utilize school services for the best interest of the student all have the potential to enhance the learning experiences of Black students. In addition to this, teachers – those who are well established, new to the craft, or

aspiring – all have critical work to do to prepare themselves to create classroom environments that are celebratory, supportive, and knowledgeable about every child. All educators have to be brave enough to admit to those things which they do not know, and model that behavior for their students regardless of their discomfort. As stakeholders in the field of education, normalizing empathy with and a desire to hear and learn from our students is essential to their future and our profession.

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