# High Expectations: Increasing Outcomes for Black Students in Urban Schools

Erin L. Lewis
*The University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

Brittany Hunt
*The University of North Carolina at Charlotte*

*The underachievement of students in the United States is alarming and calls for more attention to solutions that will increase college and career readiness. In addition, the continuing narrative of the underachievement of students of color still thrives as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores consistently report gaps between White and Black students. Although studies have been conducted on the achievement of students of color, the data reveals that more research is needed to promote higher achievement for Black students. When thinking about high achievement for Black students, the impact of the multiple factors hindering increased student performance also needs to be considered. This article is concerned with re-visiting proposed solutions for increasing academic outcomes for Black students while providing concrete examples of how those solutions can move from proposals to practice.*

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The National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2015) has reported that 37% of 12th grade students are considered college and career ready in reading achievement. This data is aligned with the reading results for 4th and 8th grade in 2017 where 36-37% of students scored at or above proficiency (NAEP, 2017). In addition, NAEP (2015) reported that 25% of students were at or above proficiency in mathematics in the 12th grade. NAEP (2017) later reported that 40% of 4th grade students and 34% of 8th grade students were at or above proficiency in mathematics. Low national proficiencies have negative implications for urban schools that serve larger populations of minoritized students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, as socioeconomic status has been deemed a significant indicator of student achievement (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015; Scott & Holme, 2016). The current NAEP data also advances preexisting notions about Black students who have been labeled as underachievers dating as far back as the 1800's (Scott et al., 2016; Seay, 2011). While a multitude of factors contribute to the lower academic outcomes experienced at urban schools, it is consistently reported that Black children are achieving at lower rates than their White peers (Mendoza-Denton, 2014; Toldson, 2018). The most recent NAEP (2015, 2017) reading data reveals that 45%-47% of White students were proficient in reading in comparison to 17%-20% of Black students that were at or above proficient on the NAEP reading assessment.

Labels applied to students based on academic achievement are some of the adverse effects of a struggling educational system (Baldridge, 2014; Gorski, 2011a; Milner, 2011). These labels also help sustain deficit narratives that may already be applied to certain groups based off of their racial identity (Toldson, 2018). However, students of color also have other social influences that can negatively influence their self-concept and self-esteem (Middleton, Coleman, & Lewis, 2011; Wormeli, 2016). Students of color are increasingly exposed to traumatic happenings in our current society such as the persecution of unarmed Black males at the hands of police officers and the separation of migrant families at the U.S. border through the proliferation

of media (Howard, 2016). These current events reveal the systemically ingrained racism that flourishes through the U.S. justice system and society. Subsequently, many incoming teachers and veteran teachers enter classrooms with negative biases and racist ideologies based off these same narratives that they are unconsciously reinforcing through their interactions with students (Grinage, 2011; Simson, 2014).

Teachers and school administrators need to empower students of color to embrace their diversity and intellect despite stereotypes about student achievement based off of racial and ethnic backgrounds. In addition, researchers should consider how multiple factors such as school culture, curriculum, and biases work together to hinder higher outcomes for Black students. As a result, previously implemented solutions such increasing professional development for teachers, data-driven instruction, and the use of culturally responsive pedagogy that have been recommended as ways to improve the academic outcomes for Black students are in need of a reevaluation (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008; Milner, 2016; Scott &Holme, 2016; Slavin, Cheung, Holmes, Madden, & Chamberlain, 2013). This research aims to evaluate proposed solutions that address the instructional practices that have been implemented to improve the academic outcomes of Black students in urban schools. While many recommendations have considered the influences that can contribute to negative school experiences for Black children, there is still a need for research that outlines concrete strategies for implementation.

## Literature Review

Moore, Ford, and Milner (2005) assert that researchers must investigate all impediments that contribute to the underachievement of Black students. Moore et al. (2005) examined the cultural, social, school, and psychological/individual factors that led to negative school outcomes. Due to the continuity of the underachievement of Black students, the four factors that will be examined fall under all the categories Moore et al. (2005) deemed necessary focus areas, but provide a deeper and more current analysis of the problem. The four contributing factors that will be evaluated are low expectations for Black students, inequitable school discipline practices, the outcomes of asset-based pedagogies, and the achievement gap between Black and White students. The following sections will provide a review of these issues as well as an evaluation of existing solutions that call for the use of asset-based pedagogies and equitable disciplinary school practices.

### Low Expectations and Deficit Thinking

The first contributing factor to the continuous underachievement of Black students is low expectations (Jamil, Larson, & Hamre, 2018; Milner, 2011; Rotheram-Borus & Phinney, 1990; Vega et al., 2012). In an essay calling for the improvement of instruction for Black students, Milner (2011) asserted "Even when teachers have good intentions, they sometimes do not really believe in the abilities and capabilities of particular students" (p.61). Milner (2011) referred to this negative perception as "deficit thinking" which not only impacts what teachers think, but how they develop the curriculum and how they teach. The "particular students" that Milner (2011) referenced are Black students (p.61). Vega et al. (2012) later contended that many urban school teachers have negative perceptions about the academic ability of Black students. Thus, low expectations can be attributed to deficit thinking where teachers' lack of belief in the academic capabilities of Black students leads to lower expectations for those students.

Baldridge (2014) revisited the notion of "deficit thinking" while analyzing its effects on after school programs in wake of current neoliberal educational reforms. Baldridge (2014) concluded that perpetual deficit labeling hinders opportunities for social mobility for Black

youth. Solutions to negate "deficit thinking" applied toward Black students at urban schools have focused on teacher reflection practices and professional development (Baldridge, 2014; Landsman, 2011; Milner, 2011). Years prior, Garrison-Wade and Lewis (2011) recommended that teachers "Establish high expectations and standards for all students and they will meet the challenge" (p.146). Having high expectations can still improve student engagement and achievement. However, teachers and other educational stakeholders need to continue to educate themselves on how to maintain high expectations for all students.

**Inequitable School Discipline Practices**

Research on discipline in schools has brought salience to racial inequities in student discipline data, which can attribute to the underachievement of Black students (Beck & Muschkin, 2012; Cartledge, Gibson, & Keyes, 2012; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Losen, 2014; Vega et al., 2012). In their study on special education and discipline data for students, Cartledge, Gibson, and Keyes (2012) found that the disproportionate representation of students of color labeled as special education students was also reflective of disparities in student discipline data as Black males with special education labels were often suspended at higher rates. Cartledge et al. (2012) called for culturally responsive academic and behavior management through intervention, teacher reflection, and social skill instruction, but limited their argument by mostly stating these practices as needs versus suggesting ways to incorporate these practices. More recent studies that have analyzed interventions to decrease racial disproportionality in student discipline also found racial disproportionalities towards students that were targeted for interventions, the need for teacher reflection on biases for both infractions and interventions, and the lack of cultural competency in intervention strategies (Gregory et al., 2018; Reno, Friend, Caruthers, & Smith, 2017; Slate, Gray, & Jones, 2016).

Based on recent data from the Office of Civil Rights Report (OCR), Black students had higher rates of in-school suspension, out of school suspension, and expulsions in the United States, particularly in urban school environments (Office of Civil Rights, 2018). In addition, other urban school districts such as Los Angeles Unified Schools, New York City Public Schools, and Chicago Public schools also had higher rates of Black students suspended or expelled even though their schools are mostly populated with Latinx students (OCR, 2018). The higher numbers of disciplinary infractions for Black students, not only reveals that the racial disproportionality in student discipline is still an issue, but also serves as an explanation for the continuous Black-White achievement gap and lower academic performance. Losen (2014) argued that the academic achievement gap could not be closed without focusing on resolving the school discipline gap. Without even considering the data, Losen's statement is logical as suspension and expulsion both result in missed instructional time. In addition, low quality instruction can lead to disengagement or simply misunderstandings of the material (Price & Steed, 2016). Preventative solutions are needed to decrease racial disproportionality in discipline data. Decreasing the racial disproportionality in school discipline data will increase instructional time and ultimately lead to higher achievement for Black students in urban schools.

**Asset-Based Pedagogies**

Researchers aiming to improve the academic outcomes for Black students in urban schools have taken unique approaches to addressing issues preventing higher achievement that can be categorized as asset-based pedagogies. In their edited text on culturally sustaining pedagogies, Alim and Paris (2017) describe asset pedagogies as practices that "repositioned the linguistic, literate, and cultural practices of working class communities…as resources and assets to honor…"(p.4). One asset-based pedagogy recommended to improve instruction for

minoritized students was to apply a multiculturalist approach to curricula to make the material more accessible for students of color (Grant, 2014; Sleeter & Grant, 1988). The purpose of applying multiculturalism to the curriculum is to provide students exposure to the contributions of all American cultural groups to promote inclusivity (Grant, 2014). In addition, Gorski (2011b) asserted "Multicultural education's underlying goal—the purpose of this critical analysis—is the elimination of educational inequalities" (p.79). As a solution aiming to increase student achievement, multicultural education is beneficial to all students by increasing students' understandings of power, privilege, and equality. However, the application of multiculturalism to school curricula has not resolved issues of underachievement for Black students.

Research reveals that multicultural education has not effectively increased student achievement as a result of poor implementation of the educational approach. The application of multicultural education in schools has been shallow and reduced to quick fixes such as the promotion of multiculturalism on school bulletin boards or the addition of some minority historical figures to textbooks (Gorski, 2011b; King, Swartz, Campbell, Lemons-Smith, & Lopez, 2014). Wiggan (2012) made the claim that: "...it is possible for one to embrace multiculturalism and simply become a liberal racist" (p.76), to argue that the implementation of multicultural education has had little impact for teachers. In a study that examined how a group of urban teachers adopted multicultural education practices, Castagno (2013) found that multiculturalism led to colorblindness and power-blindness in education, where White teachers avoided discussing race and power in classrooms. While critiques on multicultural education varied in ways to resolve the ineffective uses of multicultural education, the solutions mostly suggested alternative educational approaches as opposed to practical strategies for improved implementation. Current NAEP (2015, 2017) data indicates that practical strategies are needed to increase the effectiveness of the use of multicultural educational practices to increase student achievement.

Another proposed solution toward improving the academic outcomes for Black students was for educators to utilize Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995) first introduced the concept of "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy", which she described as a "continuum of teaching behaviors" where teachers base their instructional practice in consideration to "self and other, social relations, and knowledge" (p. 483). Ladson-Billings (1995) also argued that culturally relevant teaching must aim to improve academics, nurture cultural competence, and foster socio-political consciousness development in order to improve student achievement for students of color. Ladson-Billings (2011) later posited that democracy must become the central principle in a teacher's pedagogy in order to successfully be a culturally relevant teacher.

Since then, research on culturally relevant pedagogy has expanded to equip teachers to apply this pedagogy to various content areas (Baines, Tisdale, & Long, 2018; Berry III & Walkowiak, 2012; Gay, 2018). In an essay on the quality of mathematics instruction for Black students, Berry III and Walkowiak (2012) advocated for the use of culturally relevant pedagogy in mathematics instruction and suggested incorporating this practice by having students solve mathematical problems that are socially and politically based. Gay (2018) recently released her third edition of *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, which revisits her notion of culturally responsive pedagogy that emphasizes the need for cultural knowledge to increase the relevance and effectiveness of student learning. Lastly, in a more recent study, Baines, Tisdale, and Long (2018) explain the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and reported their findings on outcomes for students that participated in various culturally relevant lessons that helped students explore their community, learn about different dialects, and participate in various reading and writing projects.

Culturally relevant pedagogy was and still is a necessary approach to improving the academic outcomes for Black students. However, Milner (2012) acknowledged that the success of culturally relevant pedagogy cannot be revealed simply through standardized test scores; teachers and school personnel can use other qualitative measures such as increased student engagement to determine how well they incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy into school practices. Thus, one limitation of culturally relevant pedagogy has been varying descriptors for success of the approach. In addition, research has also emphasized that becoming a culturally responsive teacher/school official is an ongoing process (Carter & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Landsman, 2011; Milner, 2011). Therefore, the most effective adaptation of culturally relevant pedagogy should require educational practitioners to be in a constant state of learning while applying culturally responsive approaches to instruction. School systems should be responsible for the implementation of continual learning policies for their personnel.

## The Achievement Gap

The final factor that contributes to the lack of higher achievement for Black student is the achievement gap. The achievement gap has been described as "the most infuriating problems afflicting education" (Singham, 2003, p.586) and continues to be an ongoing educational issue. Ansell (2011) defined the achievement gap as "the disparity in academic performance between groups of students"(p.1). Lewis, Chambers, and Butler (2012) referred to the achievement gap as "the standardized test score gap between African American students and their ethnic group counterparts, in specific, White students" (p.23). The achievement gap can also refer to a test-performance gap between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, but is mostly applied to the performance gaps between Black students and their White peers.

Researchers have explained the continuation of the achievement gap as a result of standardized test biases, ineffective reading programs, and failure to address other systemic issues contributing to the gap (Mendoza-Denton, 2014; Slavin et al., 2013). More recently, in a text that analyzes the Black-White achievement gap through a Duboisian Framework, Toldson (2018) made the claim that "indicators of the academic achievement gap are used to help oppressors *create* social inequities" (p.192). Toldson (2018) also highlights two main reasons as to why the achievement gap still exists. Toldson (2018) argues that there is a need for "good" data to be used to truly assess issues with student achievement as opposed to "bad statistics" (p.193). "Good" data would provide a full understanding of the issue being analyzed because the data would include multiple factors that contribute to the unfavorable outcomes (Toldson, 2018). The achievement gap between White and Black students is one factor that contributes to the lack of higher academic achievement for Black students, but it is not independent of the other contributing factors. Rather, the achievement gap is a consequence of the lack of resolve for lower quality/disengaging instruction, inequitable school discipline practices, and low expectations. Ultimately, the achievement gap cannot be resolved unless the other lingering issues are resolved as well.

## Methodology

The aim for this study was to explore reasons why Black students in urban schools continue to endure lower academic outcomes. This research specifically focused on reading achievement as reading and literacy are significant components of college and career readiness (NCES, 2018; Pyne, 2012). NAEP is an assessment administered by the National Center of Educational Statistics to collect student achievement data nationwide (NCES, 2014). The 2015 NAEP reading datasets for 4th and 8th grade were used in this study to determine the percentages of students at proficiency and above on the NAEP reading assessment. The analysis

of the 2017 NAEP reading dataset for 12th grade was used to determine college and career readiness for 12 grade students. The NAEP 2015 and 2017 reading results filtered by racial/ethnic groups for White and Black students were used to show current achievement gaps in reading.

The Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) results were used to determine the percentage of students at or above proficiency on the NAEP 2017 4th and 8th grade reading assessments from larger districts that predominantly serve students of color. TUDA is a program facilitated by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), National Assessment Governing Board (Governing Board), and the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) that collects NAEP data from specified urban school districts in order to provide a comparative analysis on achievement for school districts with similar populations (NCES, 2018). The TUDA results were used in this study to highlight performance on the 4th and 8th grade reading assessment for White and Black students from urban districts in comparison to each other. Only reading data from TUDA was used to determine solutions based off the recommendations of the Southern Regional Education Board (2011) that suggested that increased literacy improves college and career readiness. This study sought to rationalize the continued gaps in achievement between White and Black students and if the proposed solutions have closed those gaps and increased academic outcomes for Black students

## Findings

NAEP data from the 2017 4th and 8th grade reading assessment data revealed that fewer than 40% of 4th and 8th grade students were at or above proficiency in reading. There was also a 22% gap between White and Black students that were at or above proficiency. Thus, according to the data, more White students are performing as proficient on the NAEP assessment than Black students. TUDA (2017) revealed that between 5%-42% and 7%-36% of students in 4th and 8th grade were at or above proficiency on the NAEP reading assessment with an achievement gap between White and Black students as well (TUDA, 2017). The 2017 TUDA data indicates that students at urban schools have lower academic outcomes than students from non-urban schools. In addition, the data implies that Black students have lower academic performances on standardized tests than their white peers at both urban and non-urban schools.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze national data to determine if systemic factors and implementation of previously proposed solutions have decreased the gap in reading proficiency between Black and White students. Each of the four factors contributing to the lower achievement for Black students have been extensively researched and a range of solutions have been proposed. However, recent data reveals that more White students achieve proficiency in reading than Black students (NCES, 2015, 2017). The data is evidence of a continued need to increase academic outcomes for Black students. While the four factors indicate a systemic flaw in the education system towards Black students, the data also gives an indication that some of the solutions proposed still not effectively increasing outcomes for Black students.

As previously stated, Toldson (2018) argued that all factors contributing to the issue must be considered together in order to implement effective solutions. While many researchers attempted to address all factors, their solutions often applied to only one specific factor. In addition, the solutions focused mostly on "what to do" or "what approach to follow" instead of "how to" apply these approaches or strategies. Previous recommendations for increasing academic outcomes for Black students are strong theoretically. However, the lack of clarity around implementation made these solutions less effective and thus issues and deficit outcomes

still exist for Black students. The following recommendations include practical strategies that can be used to promote high expectations, decrease inequitable disciplinary practices, and improve classroom instruction to ultimately decrease the achievement gap and increase achievement for Black students.

**Culturally Responsive Professional Development**

The research revealed that the deficit thinking of teachers and administrators remains a prevalent issue (Carter & Darling-Hammond, 2016; Milner, 2011). In order to resolve low expectations and inequitable school discipline practices towards Black students, school districts and administrators should require participation in culturally responsive professional development. Professional development that trains school personnel on culturally responsive school practices must occur continuously in order to be effective. Devine, Forscher, Austin, and Cox (2012) created a list of five steps that people can take to reduce implicit bias. Devine et al. (2012) recommends that people 1) replace stereotypical responses with responses that reject stereotypes, 2) counter-stereotypical imaging with more positive images of diverse groups, 3) practice individuation by learning more about different groups, 4) practice perspective taking by putting themselves in the first person role of a person from a diverse group and considering their perspective on a situation, and 5) increase contact with diverse persons. These broad steps can be achieved through various situations such as attending cultural events, self-education, and increased interaction with diverse groups from school personnel. In addition, culturally responsive professional development should cover many different topics such as culturally relevant classroom management, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and unconscious bias trainings that could be provided by human resource professionals (Abbate-Vaughn, Frechon, & Wright, 2010; Carpenter, 2018; Lindsey, King, Membere, & Cheung, 2017).

**Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: Student-Centered Instruction**

Previous recommendations to increase the academic outcomes for Black students have called for the uses of multicultural education and culturally relevant instruction. The research revealed that there has been a lack of clarity as how to effectively use multicultural curricula and culturally relevant instruction (Gorski, 2011b; King et al., 2014). A new approach that could decrease the lack of clarity around those two approaches is to adopt the use of culturally sustaining pedagogy that aims to preserve the culture of all students while tapping into student-centered learning (Alim & Paris, 2017). Student-centered learning places students at the forefront of learning as opposed to the teacher (Crumley, 2014). In addition, student-centered learning "exhibits knowledge, experience, and beliefs across and throughout the group" (Crumley, 2014, p.6). The sharing of knowledge, experience, and beliefs constitutes student-centered learning as a form of culturally sustaining instruction. Three ways to implement student-centered learning in the classroom would be to utilize collaborative learning groups or group work, classroom discussion, and case-based learning (Crumley, 2014).

Another strategy that can be used to promote student-centered learning is to incorporate learning activities that elicit student voice. While discussion can prompt student-voice, other engaging strategies include storytelling, journaling, poetry writing, or technology-based writing platforms. Geres (2016) recommends storytelling as a strategy because it is a tradition that is important across all cultures. Storytelling is also a form of reflection writing that is often a component of college-level courses across disciplines. Teaching Tolerance Magazine (2018) also shares strategies such as using close and critical reading and community inquiry to help students engage in critical discussions. These strategies should utilize texts that feature characters from diverse backgrounds as well as characters that overcome some sort of challenge or hardship.

Close and critical reading are strategies used to help students analyze texts for deeper meaning, which is also skill needed for engaging with college-level texts (Pyne, 2012). In addition, Share, Funk, and Kilner (2016) created a framework for incorporating Critical Media Literacy in classrooms, which allows students to engage with different forms of media to learn how to analyze covert messages as well as cultivates a social-consciousness for students. Teachers should increase opportunities for students to analyze and engage with texts from a socially conscious perspective to help students improve their understanding of their role in society, which Ladson-Billings (2011) has deemed an outcome of culturally relevant pedagogy. Teachers should also provide students the opportunity to choose between multiple tasks that achieve these same goals as a way to sustain students' cultures and identities in the classroom. The use of these strategies empowers students to become leaders of their own learning.

## Conclusion

Multiple factors contribute to low academic achievement for Black students. These factors are interconnected, as one factor often leads to another factor and vice versa. In that regard, all four factors must be considered in order to create the most effective solutions toward increasing academic outcomes for Black students. Previously recommended approaches to improving the academic outcomes for Black students failed to adequately equip school personnel with concrete strategies that can be implemented immediately. The outcomes of this study aimed to equip educational stakeholders with practical solutions that will help negate and replace deficit narratives about the academic ability of Black students for both school personnel and students through specified professional trainings and instructional strategies. In addition, school districts and administrators need to ensure that they are trained on how to use culturally responsive approaches to educational practices by learning and implementing the recommended strategies. Professional development can be used to remove low expectations and inequitable disciplinary practices toward Black students in urban schools. School districts should adopt policies that will ensure that teachers and staff are trained on culturally responsive educational strategies at least once a year, as research has recommended the continual learning and practice of this approach. Lastly, students can be used to make classroom instruction culturally sustaining. By providing students' choice in their learning activities as well as prompting student voice, the pressure to create new culturally sustaining lessons is relieved for teachers. The implementation of these simple solutions can have massive impact on the academic outcomes for Black students in urban schools.

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