

The widening minority student achievement gap will continue until educators respond to the cultural differences that teachers and minority students bring to the classroom.

# Poverty: The Assumed Link to Low Minority Student Achievement

Derrick L. Campbell, Ed.D.

Despite numerous reforms efforts to close the student achievement gap for minority students, such efforts have remained highly ineffective and the achievement gap continues to increase. Increasing minority student achievement will require alternative strategies that take into consideration the culture of individual schools. Individual schools are influenced by internal forces which include the classroom relationships between teachers and students. Minority student achievement trends will not advance until the classroom relationships between teachers and minority students improve.

For decades educational reform efforts designed to increase minority student achievement have focused on economical differences instead of cultural differences. Some educators believe stereo-type threat causes academic

performance challenges among poor minority students. Stereo-type threat results in inadequate academic performance among students who know about the historical performance of their group. Past experiments indicate that when Black and White students were told that they were being tested on their academic abilities, White students outperformed Black students. However, when the control group was told that the tests were irrelevant the results indicated that the difference in achievement was nonexistent. While stereo-type threat has provided education with insightful information, the performance differences among minority and White students results from the cultural differences that educators and minority students bring to the classroom.

Other educators believe low

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### Poverty:

#### The Assumed Link to Low Minority Student Achievement (Continued)

minority student achievement results from the inadequate knowledge base that poor students accumulate before they begin school. Schools have developed early intervention programs to close the achievement gap with little success. The Black student achievement gap continues to increase as they progress through high school. However, the gap narrows for Hispanic children, especially after they learn the English language. While there are many theories that attempt to explain the increasing achievement gap for minority students, it remains a fact that minority students and educators have cultural

differences that cause low minority student achievement. The widening minority student achievement gap will continue until educators respond to the cultural differences that teachers and minority students bring to the classroom.

Teachers and minority students have cultural differences in nonverbal behavior that present challenges in the classroom. Nonverbal communication includes three interacting systems, the visual, auditory, and invisible communication systems (Leathers, 1997). Individuals use facial expressions such as eye contact to visually communicate.

However, the cultural differences in acceptable eye contact behavior may present challenges for teachers and minority students. For instance, Whites believe maintaining eye contact in face-to-face communication is most desirable (Asante & Davis, 1985). This presents a challenge in the classroom since some Blacks and Hispanics are taught that maintaining eye contact is a sign of disrespect. The nonverbal behavior differences between teachers and minority students can result in classroom clashes which will inhibit student progress.

Cultural Differences in

## Poverty:

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verbal behavior present challenges for teachers and minority students in the classroom. Non-instructional debates are the precursor for many confrontations between a White teacher and a Black student. During a debate, Whites debate the idea while some Blacks not only debate the idea, but they also debate the person to evaluate the person's intentions. In many instances, debating the person becomes offensive and results in a clash between the teacher and the Black student.

Some Hispanics exhibit verbal behavior that can present challenges in the classroom. Some Puerto Ricans are taught to make decisions as a group where one person speaks and others join in and respond until the group makes a decision. Anglo Americans value one person speaking at a time to indicate respect for the individual. Teacher and minority student classroom clashes can result from the differences in cultural verbal behavior.

Cultural differences in teacher and student nonverbal and verbal behavior contribute to the widening minority student achievement gap. Other contributing factors include teacher discrimination, the beliefs that minority students bring to schools, the racial disparity between schools and minority students, and discrimination in the classroom which all contribute to the existing culture of the individual school. Improving minority student achievement requires eliminating the impact that the cultural differences between students and teachers has on the widening achievement gap. Leaders who desire to eliminate the cultural challenges between teachers and students should:

- ▶ Scientifically evaluate the cultural differences that exist between teachers and students in the individual school.
- ▶ Recruit an appropriate

leadership team to develop and implement strategies that will eliminate the adverse effects that the cultural differences between teachers and students have on the school.

- ▶ Use a scientifically proven change process that improves organizational relationships.

#### References

Asante, M., & Davis, A. (1985). Black and White Communication: Analyzing Work Place Encounters. *Journal of Black Studies*, 16(1), 77-93.

Leathers, D. (1997). *Successful Nonverbal Communication: Principles and Applications (3<sup>rd</sup>)*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.