

# Beneath the Apathy

*Black and Latino students in a low-performing high school identify the school factors that keep them from engaging in learning.*

**Gail Thompson**



**E**ach year, in countless K-12 schools throughout the United States, a common phenomenon occurs. Teachers start the school year with high hopes, but many—especially those in low-income, predominantly minority schools—soon become disillusioned and discouraged in the face of widespread student apathy.

When they encounter apathetic students, educators often blame either the students or their parents. This attitude of blame is especially strong in the case of black and Latino students. Many educators believe that when minority students perform poorly on tests and earn low grades, it's because they are lazy, they don't value education, and their parents don't care (Hale, 2001; Thompson, 2004).

We should remember, however, that almost all children are eager to learn when they first start school. Contrary to the stereotypes, numerous studies have

shown that most black and Latino students value their education and want to attend college, and most black and Latino parents are concerned about their children's schooling (Horn, Chen, & Chapman, 2003).

Educators who place the onus for student apathy solely on the shoulders of students and families fail to recognize the school factors that can lead to disengagement, frustration, and low achievement. Often, these educators' perceptions about what goes on in school differ greatly from those of their students.

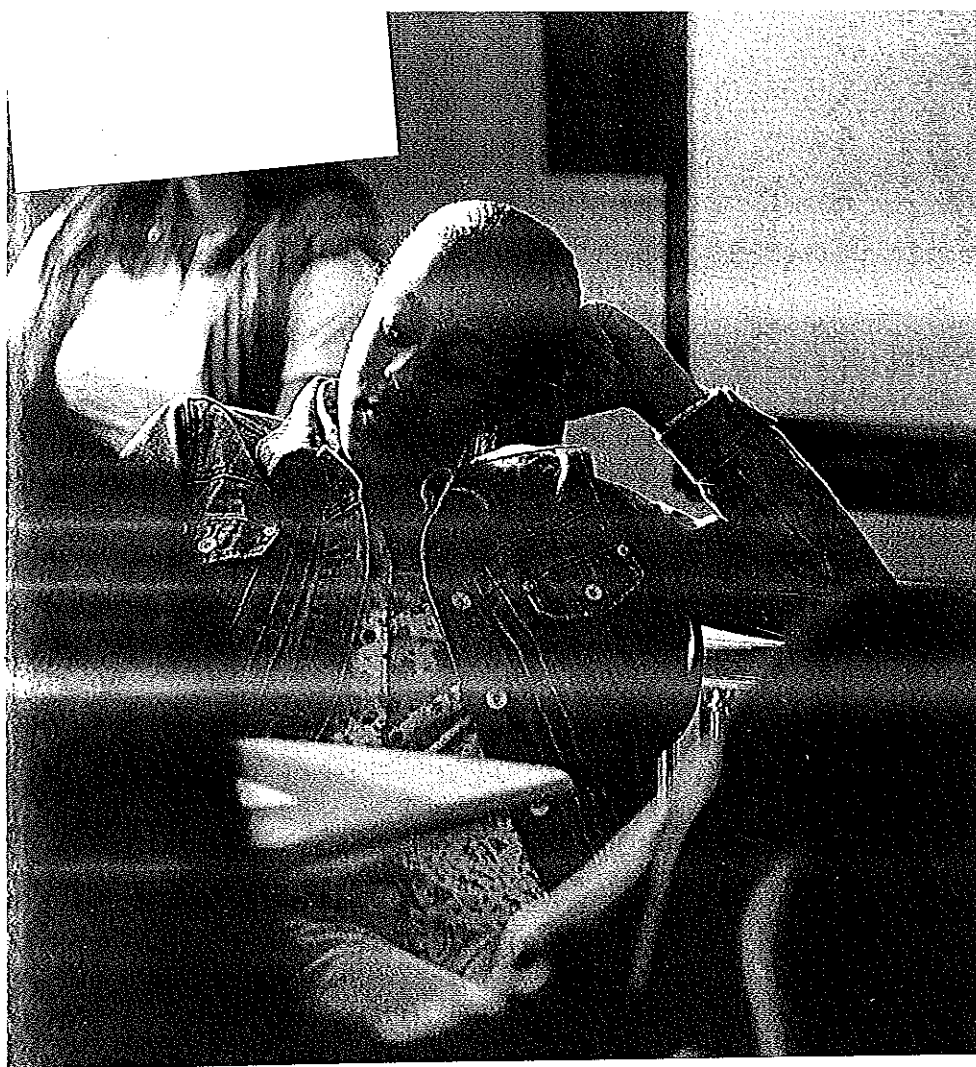
## **Student Perceptions in a Low-Achieving School**

This message became clear to me when I conducted a study in a low-performing, predominantly minority high school in southern California. The school's student population of 3,200 was about 18 percent black, 40 percent Latino, and 37 percent white. A group

of 121 teachers and 268 students completed questionnaires; in addition, 146 students participated in focus groups. An analysis of the survey and focus-group results revealed a number of areas of school life about which educators and students had vastly different perceptions. Awareness of these differences can guide educators in improving the school experiences of black and Latino students.

## **Relationships**

Starting in elementary school, the quality of students' relationships with their teachers can strongly influence their behavior and their perceptions of school. Researchers have found that all students need caring and competent teachers (Gunn Morris & Morris, 2000; Stipek, 2006) and that positive relationships between teachers and students can improve students' achievement and the likelihood that they will attend college (Wimberly, 2002).



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Most teachers strive to have good relationships with students. But even when teachers believe they have achieved this goal, their students may disagree. For example, almost all of the teachers responding to the survey (97 percent) agreed with the statement, "I care about my students' academic and personal welfare both inside and outside of school." But many students did not perceive this caring. Only 61 percent overall agreed that "Most of my teachers care about me." Black students (56 percent) and Latino students (57 percent) were less likely than white students (70 percent) to say that most of their teachers cared about them.

### *Expectations*

A culture of high expectations for students, teachers, staff, administrators, and parents is a hallmark of high-achieving schools. Unfortunately, low expectations are common in high-poverty, predominantly minority schools (Thompson, 2004). In fact, even in high-achieving schools, black, Latino, and low-income students may be subjected to low expectations through tracking, which disproportionately places them in low-level classes (Landsman, 2004; Oakes, 1999).

These problems surfaced in the study. The majority of black and Latino students (86 and 64 percent, respec-

tively) said they wanted to attend college. But many of the responding teachers disagreed with the statements that most of their students would attend college (49 percent); that most students deserve a college-preparatory curriculum (39 percent); or that most of their students could succeed at college (22 percent). Most alarming, 17 percent of the responding teachers agreed with the statement, "I believe that students' race-ethnicity has some bearing on their aptitude."

The behavior of school counselors also conveyed low expectations: Many of the student focus-group participants said that they had received incorrect advice from counselors, that they had been placed in the wrong classes, or that counselors had urged them to plan to attend two-year rather than four-year colleges and universities.

### *Instructional Practices*

Research has clearly shown that teacher quality is one of the most important factors affecting student engagement and achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Teachers in the study perceived their own level of efficacy positively. A large majority (87 percent) ranked themselves as outstanding; 86 percent believed that their students viewed them as outstanding; 96 percent said that they were willing to answer questions; and 97 percent said they were available to give extra help to struggling students.

Their students, however, had a different perception: More than half of the black and Latino students (58 and 54 percent, respectively) said they wished that they had better teachers. Fewer white students responded this way (38 percent). Black and Latino students were more likely than white students to say that teachers were

impatient with them when they didn't understand an assignment and that their teachers didn't make the coursework comprehensible. They were less likely (67 percent of each group, compared with 86 percent of whites) to say that their teachers were willing to give them extra help and answer their questions.

### **Curriculum**

Research has documented that many secondary school students view the school curriculum as boring and irrelevant. Because textbooks and teachers often ignore, minimize, and misrepresent the history, culture, and contributions of blacks and Latinos (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Hale, 2001), it's little wonder that so many students tune out.

Most of the teachers in the study seemed unaware of this problem. A large majority (91 percent) said that they made the curriculum relevant to their students' lives. Students disagreed: Most black students and Latino students said that their classes were boring (66 and 57 percent, respectively); that they wanted to learn more about their own culture in their classes (75 and 57 percent, respectively); and that most of their classes weren't preparing them for the real world (60 and 61 percent, respectively). One complaint from a black focus-group participant summarized what many black students said:

You learn about negative black culture. You learn about slavery. You don't learn about positive black people.

Most focus-group participants also agreed with the Latina who said,

I've already learned a lot of American history, because I've lived here my whole life. So it would be nice to learn something about my culture, too.

### **Testing**

One of the strongest messages emerging from the study is that current testing practices contribute to student apathy.

While teachers and administrators struggle to improve test scores, some students wage a passive-aggressive war of resistance.

In the focus groups, students complained that they were required to take too many tests, that they didn't see the benefits of some of the state-mandated tests, that they didn't believe their teachers had adequately prepared them for the tests, and that the classroom environment in which the tests were given wasn't conducive to serious test taking. On the survey, nearly half of the black and Latino students

## **Improving the school experiences of black and Latino students must begin with effective professional development.**

(compared with 34 percent of the white students) admitted that in the past, they hadn't done their best on the state-mandated test because they believed the test was a waste of time. Additionally, nearly 60 percent of the Latino students (along with 45 percent of black students and 42 percent of white students) said they hadn't been taught most of the information on the state test.

### **Discipline**

Students' perception of unfair discipline practices and policies is another cause of student apathy and frustration in many schools. The study confirmed this problem. Almost all of the teachers (96 percent) agreed with the statement, "I treat my students in the same way that I would want my own children's teachers to treat my children." Although 86 percent of white students agreed that their teachers treated them fairly, only 78 percent of black students and 81

percent of Latino students did. Blacks and Latinos were also less likely than whites to say that they got along with their teachers (78 percent of each group, compared with 90 percent of whites).

### **Racial Tension**

As in U.S. society in general, race relations can be rocky in schools. The high school in the study, in fact, appeared to be a powder keg waiting to erupt. Student-to-student racism was common among the different ethnic groups. White students appeared to perceive

more racism among students than black or Latino students did: 68 percent said on the survey that they had experienced racism from other students, compared with 54 percent of black students and 48 percent of Latino students. But black and Latino students were more likely to perceive racist attitudes in their teachers: 45 percent of blacks and 37 percent of Latinos said they had been subjected to racism from teachers, compared with only 24 percent of whites.

In the focus groups, students complained that many teachers and school security personnel engaged in overtly or covertly racist practices that contributed to the racial tension on campus. For example, a Latina student commented,

If it's a group of my Hispanic friends, and we're sitting in the back talking, and there's a group of white girls in the front talking, the teacher will yell at us and tell us to shut up. But the two girls up in the front don't get told anything.

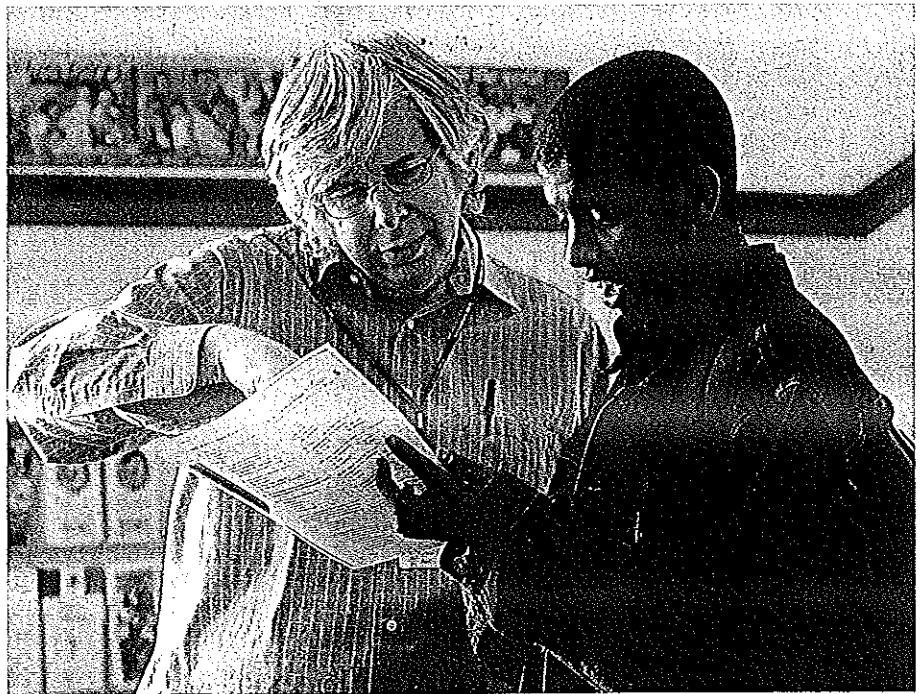
### What Teachers Need

This study illustrates the culture of low expectations and disrespect that prevails in the schools that serve many black and Latino families. The results underscore the fact that improving the school experiences of black and Latino students must begin with effective professional development that includes the following components: mind-set work, improving instructional practices and the curriculum, ensuring effective classroom management and fair discipline practices, and improving race relations in school.

The first component, mind-set work, must be intensive, ongoing, thorough, and done in a safe environment that invites honesty and self-reflection. It's urgent that we raise educators' expectations for black and Latino students, eradicate racist tracking practices, and find ways to ensure that all students receive encouragement and proper counseling about college. We must accept nothing less than educators who understand that most black and Latino students want to learn, that all students deserve a high-quality education, and that most black and Latino families care about their children's education.

Second, professional development should be targeted at instructional practices. Teachers must understand the importance of patiently answering questions and providing extra help to all struggling students. They must ensure that the curriculum is not only interesting and comprehensible, but also culturally relevant. Educators must understand why hearing about slavery year after year offends, embarrasses, and angers many black students, and why hearing and reading little, if anything, about their culture sends Latino students a strong message that European culture and history are superior.

Through professional development, educators must also learn innovative ways to improve students' test scores.



Despite the unfairness of state-mandated tests, the fact remains that teachers, administrators, and students can't escape from the high-stakes testing climate that prevails in schools. Professional development should therefore improve teachers' abilities to provide tutoring for low-achieving students, explain the benefits of doing well, offer adequate and relevant preparation for tests, strengthen students' math and reading comprehension skills, and reduce students' test anxiety and stereotype threat.

Third, effective professional development must give educators opportunities to uncover and address any discipline practices that might stem from stereotypes and fears and to create better alternatives. Through such activities as role-playing and group problem solving, professional development should help teachers strengthen their cultural responsiveness and assertiveness skills and learn specific classroom-management strategies—for example, developing course contracts that explain class rules, course objectives,

homework policies, and so on.

Finally, effective professional development must give educators opportunities to examine student-to-student and educator-to-student race relations in their school through such activities as research, small-group and large-group discussions, and writing and reflection. All students deserve to attend schools that are safe and free of racism and racial tension. After scrutinizing and discussing race relations schoolwide and within classrooms, educators should develop action plans. These plans could include establishing a schoolwide zero tolerance policy for racially offensive talk or behavior, adding explicit instruction about racism to the curriculum, and finding creative ways to help parents understand the vital role that they can play in reducing racial tension among youth.

### Clear Answers

The answers to the decades-old question, What does it take to close black and Latino achievement gaps? are simple: We must change our mind-sets about black and Latino students and

their parents, ensure that educators who work with these students understand and address their needs, and insist on the same high-quality schooling for all students. When these changes take place, the detrimental school factors that create student apathy will no longer impede the academic progress of black and Latino students who—like their teachers—start school with high hopes. ■

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