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Author(s): Martin J. Wasserberg

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High-Achieving African American Elementary Students' Perspectives on Standardized Testing and Stereotypes

Martin J. Wasserberg **University of North Carolina–Wilmington**

This study uses a theoretical framework rooted in stereotype threat theory to investigate the perceptions and experiences of high-achieving African American students at an urban elementary school that had implemented a test-centered curriculum. The investigation utilized data from six focus group interviews conducted with a purposefully selected group of four African American fourth grade students, supplemented with data from 30 hours of classroom observations. Findings revealed four themes regarding how high-achieving African American children perceive their educational experiences at the school: (a) a narrow perception of education as test preparation, (b) feelings of anxiety related to the state test, (c) a concern with what White people think, and (d) the rejection and acceptance of stereotypes. Implications for practice and policy are discussed.

Keywords: *urban education, stereotype threat, African American, standardized testing, achievement gap*

Standardized test score gaps between African American and White students, particularly in urban America, have long been a serious concern and source of debate among educational researchers (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Yeung, 2012). Much of the popular discourse (e.g. Payne, 2005; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003) has used a cultural deficit framework to contextualize such disparities (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Nasir & Hand, 2006). Within this discourse, negative judgments on the academic capabilities of African American students in urban schools are often presented within the context of their standardized test scores (Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008). Judgments based solely on test scores are problematic in that they downplay the effects of school climate and other social contexts, implicitly framing children as a homogenous group (Sleeter, 2004). The resulting stigmatization of African American students has limited their access to the best educational programs within a school (Noguera, 1996, 2003a) to the extent that Ladson-Billings (1999) called the standardized testing movement “a movement to legitimize [the notion of] African American students’ deficiency under the guise of scientific rationalism” (p. 23).

At the elementary school level, research has shown that a multitude of non-academic factors —economic, sociopolitical, familial, psychological, and contextual—have an influence on the racial test score gap (Burchinal et al., 2011; Ford & Moore, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006; J. Lee & Bowen, 2006; Matthews, 2011; Wasserberg, 2014). Nonetheless, proposed school-based solutions have focused largely on increasing the level of test-centered instruction (Kozol, 2005; Meier & Wood, 2004; Moon, Callahan, & Tomlinson, 2003). The resulting pedagogy is often rote-based and focused on matching practice questions to specific tested content standards (Diamond, 2007; Kozol, 2005; Orange, 2014). Time is spent on drill and repetition, and little time is available for non-test related activities (Russell-Bowie, 2009). This model is disproportionately implemented in schools serving greater numbers of African American children (Ahlquist, 2003; Carnoy & Loeb, 2002; Kozol, 2005; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006). These pedagogical shifts persist despite the fact that they have done little to decrease racial test score gaps (Braun, Chapman, & Vezzu, 2010; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012), have been demonstrated to offer no student achievement benefit (Welsh, Eastwood, & D’Agostino, 2014), and have been shown to lead to student boredom and disengagement (Moon, Brighton, Jarvis, & Hall, 2007).

Additionally, test-centered instructional models have been demonstrated to lead to teacher stereotyping and underestimation of students' academic abilities (Crawford, 2004). Decades of research has indicated that African American students in particular feel stereotyped in their school environments at all age levels (Delpit, 2012; P. W. Lee, 1999; McGee & Pearman, 2014; Nieto, 1994; Noguera, 2003b). Howard (2008) highlighted a high school student who offered the following commentary:

What are they thinking about me? If they think I am going to gang bang, rap, and act stupid, then I just work on doing the opposite. So when they see me on the honor roll, they seemed surprised, and I just trip off that. (p. 970)

However, these perceived experiences of racial discrimination at school predict declines in grades, academic self-concept, academic identification, and mental health (Wong, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2003). Demonstrating this, Matthews' (2011) examination of low-income African American elementary students' revealed their school experiences to be oppressive, with students allocating energy to self-preservation, rather than academics.

Beginning in elementary school, high-achieving African American students in particular have reported a constant feeling of being stereotyped as academically inferior and being compelled to prove their intellectual worth (McGee, 2013; McGee & Martin, 2011; McGee & Pearman, 2014). These high-achievers are less likely to view standardized test scores as valid measures of achievement (Wiggin, 2014). Albeit, negative perceptions by teachers based on standardized test scores have implications for their racial identity (Ford, Harris, & Schuerger, 1993), and the prospect of being viewed stereotypically has been shown to lead to their underachievement (Ford & Harris, 1997; McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Wasserberg, 2014).

Given these detrimental effects, there has been a continuous call for the inclusion of student perspectives in research surrounding racial inequities in schools (Nieto, 1994; Wiggin, 2007). At the middle and high school levels, minority students have long expressed boredom and frustration with the test-centered rote pedagogies prevalent in their schools (Nieto, 1994; Schmackel, 2008; Schultz, 2011). At the elementary level, Kozol (2005) explained how African American students in a school that had adopted a test-centered model identified themselves by test scores, "Reginald is a Level One. . . Melissa and Shaneek are Level Threes. . . I'm just a Level Two" (p. 74). However, the research on student perspectives is limited, particularly with respect to elementary school students. Howard (2001) argued that "the scant attention paid to students' voice is inexcusable given their role as the primary clientele" (p. 132). The present study intended to fill a gap in the existing literature by examining these school experiences from elementary students' perspectives.

STEREOTYPE THREAT

The present study's theoretical framework was rooted in *stereotype threat*. Stereotype threat refers to a situation in which a member of a group fears that his or her performance will be judged according to an existing negative performance stereotype (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). The prospect of being judged according to a stereotype of African American intellectual inferiority has been shown to significantly depress the test performance of African American students at college, high school and elementary levels (McKown & Strambler, 2009; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Wasserberg, 2014; Wong et al., 2003). Steele (1997) suggested that negative academic stereotypes may be most deleterious to high-achieving African American students. More specifically, Wasserberg (2014) demonstrated that for African American elementary students, negative stereotype threat effects on performance are most pronounced among high-achievers.

Test-preparation protocols create an evaluative environment conducive to stereotype threat effects (Steele, 1997; Wasserberg, 2014). The negative effect of stereotype threat on the test performance of African American elementary students has been made clear (McKown & Strambler, 2009; McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Wasserberg, 2014), however researchers have

yet to investigate the phenomenon in a school context from children's perspectives. The present study investigated the experiences of high-achieving African American elementary school students as they contend with societal stereotypes in a school that has adopted test-centered instruction. The purpose was to provide a basis for re-contextualizing test-based evaluations of African American elementary student achievement.

METHOD

The author conducted this study at an urban elementary school in a major metropolitan area in Florida. Approximately 600 students were enrolled at the school when the data were collected. Eighty percent of the enrolled students were African American, 19% were Hispanic, and 1% were White. Over 90% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. At the time the data were collected, the school was designated as low-performing, had never made adequate yearly progress (AYP) by federal standards, and had implemented several test-preparation curricular protocols (particularly in third through fifth grades) in an attempt to improve student test scores. These characteristics are typical of many schools in urban centers in the United States (Kozol, 2005).

Guided by narrative analysis procedures (Creswell, 2012), the author used focus group interviews and classroom observations to create a record of student experiences. According to Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000), focus groups have four specific strengths, to:

- explore and discover concepts and themes about a phenomena about which more knowledge is needed,
- add context and depth to the understanding of the phenomena,
- provide an interpretation of the phenomena from the point of view of the participants in the group, and
- observe the collective interaction of the participants. (p. 64)

The focus group interviews were semi-structured, which allowed the interviewer and the interviewees the flexibility to probe for details or discuss issues (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

Participants

With the help of their teacher, the author selected four high-achieving African American fourth grade students as participants according to the following criteria:

- achievement levels in the upper quartile on the previous years' state standardized test, and
- achievement of high honor roll (A average) on their most recent report card.

The author focused on high-achievers because stereotype threat theory assumes that high-achievers are the most negatively affected by the prospect of being negatively stereotyped (Steele, 1997; Wasserberg, 2014). The participants were all nine years of age: Two were boys (who chose the pseudonyms "Floyd" and "Johnny"), and two were girls (who chose the pseudonyms "Asia" and "LaTonya").

Data Collection

The author conducted focus group interviews with the participants at six points during the school year. Prior to beginning these interviews, signed consent forms were received from participants' parents or legal guardians. During the interviews, participants were asked questions related to their experiences with test-centered instruction and factors associated with stereotype threat. A former educator at the school, the author (a White male) was a member of the school's community. It is likely that the participants' willingness to discuss issues of race with the author was at least in part a product of this insider status. The interviews took place in the participants' classroom, while the rest of the class was at lunch or attending a special area class. A framework for each interview was developed beforehand, and all interviews were audio-recorded. The interviews averaged 42 minutes.

The interview data were supplemented with field notes from classroom observations. The classroom observations took place in one hour blocks over a four-month period, for a total of 30 hours. The author observed and recorded notes on daily classroom activities including test practice protocols, student–teacher interactions, student–student interactions, and classroom visits from administrative personnel. During later classroom observations, special attention was paid to situations related to comments made by students during focus-group interviews. Observations were also referred to during subsequent focus group interviews.

Data Analysis

Focus group interviews were professionally transcribed verbatim. After reading each transcription thoroughly, the author deconstructed the interviews into similar statements of experience that developed a framework for codification. This was accomplished through a detailed line-by-line analysis (Creswell, 2012). In order to systematically analyze the data, codes were then applied. Once each transcript was coded, the coded passages were reanalyzed to develop cogent categories related to experiences with the test-centered curriculum and processes related to stereotype threat. The initial codes included:

- feelings of boredom,
- descriptions of test preparation and practice testing,
- displays of test-related anxiety,
- statements of self-efficacy related to test performance,
- mentions of race,
- challenging stereotypes,
- subscribing to stereotypes, and
- descriptions of schools and students.

Participants were permitted to listen to highlighted excerpts from the passages and suggest any changes to their comments that they deemed necessary. (No major changes were made; however, terms were defined and unclear sentences were clarified.) This member checking, as well as the classroom observations, served as forms of triangulation.

FINDINGS

This section describes the findings from the data and offers some general commentary about how test-centered curricular protocols in the elementary school context can lead to an environment susceptible to stereotype threat for African American students. Specifically, this section explores four themes that emerged from the data: (a) a narrow perception of education as strictly test preparation, (b) feelings of anxiety related to their state test, the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test) (Florida Department of Education, 2017), (c) a concern with what White people think, and (d) the rejection and acceptance of stereotypes.

Education as Test Preparation

Findings from the focus group interviews indicated that the participants in this study perceived test preparation as a primary purpose of education. The participants spoke largely of standardized test preparation in descriptions of their day. Asia clearly explained, “We have to do this book, ‘FCAT Advantage,’ in math and reading, and it helps us to understand more about the FCAT . . . almost every day for the whole year.” During seven of the 30 hours of classroom observations, the author observed students taking practice tests. Floyd described vividly what his reading class was like under the test-centered model, “[The teachers] will never let you get up, not even to get your paper or pencil . . . it takes mostly all of the day.” LaTonya agreed, and offered the following, “Sometimes you can’t even get up to use the bathroom.” Asia added, “You can’t even get water. I was so thirsty . . . for an hour.” In this context, teachers followed strict protocols dictated by administration in which low-performing schools were mandated to document a certain amount of test-practice throughout the year. The teachers at the school in this study, and

at similar schools nationwide (Meier & Wood, 2004), were required to use test practice books and scripted curricular protocols. Field observations made it clear that a large majority of the assignments written on the board were tied to an FCAT Benchmark or an FCAT Strategy listed with a corresponding page in the test practice booklets. The state test was a salient part of the students' day-to-day lessons.

The participants believed that without the state test, it was likely that no real education would take place at their school. LaTonya stated, "The school, without FCAT, would be—I don't know how the kids would go on to the next grade if they don't know anything. They'll be kind of slow, and they won't know the stuff." Asia predicted, "School would be just messing around all the time." Johnny added that there would "be kids bouncing off the walls." Floyd explained, "We need [his emphasis] the FCAT to determine that you are going to the higher grade." Data from the focus group interviews clearly indicated that this group of students viewed the test as the driving force for the curriculum and the purpose for their education.

Another indication of the salience of the state test occurred when asking the students to describe the work they do in their reading class. They answered in terms of state benchmarks. Field observations indicated that teachers displayed the weekly benchmarks on the board for each subject in each classroom, as required by administration. For reading class, on one typical day the board read, "LACC4.RI.1.1: Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details. FCAT Benchmark: Main Idea." This indicated a fourth grade Common Core English Language Arts Standard (Common Core, 2017) adopted by Florida, and a simplified FCAT Benchmark referred to frequently by the class. Asia explained, "The questions are asking about the pictures, and you have to do Records and Research, or it might be asking about Plot Development." Records and Research and Plot Development were two FCAT Benchmark question categories used by the teacher, derived from state test-preparation materials previously provided by the district. LaTonya chimed in, "and all different benchmarks. . . Cause and Effect, and mostly, Main Idea." During the author's classroom observations, students were often asked by their teacher to phrase their oral answers in these "FCAT terms."

In addition, LaTonya talked about why her reading class was so long, "We don't do social studies anymore because our teachers, they want to do the basic ones that they know that we're gonna get on the FCAT, like math and reading." This unfolded as true. During several field observations, it became clear that reading class often stretched through the time allotted for social studies instruction.

When asked how they would teach the content if they were the teachers, however, the participants explained that they would follow the same procedures as their present teachers. Johnny said that if he were a teacher, "If [students] score high or low on the benchmark [tests], they're bad and good, and I'd put them in groups with the benchmarks that they're—which they're struggling in." This is a practice commonly used in their classes. For example, the author observed that during math, the students were grouped according to the types of questions they got wrong on the previous practice test (geometry, number sense, or measurement). LaTonya explained, "I think I would give them stuff that related to the FCAT, so they could be more focused." The other students indicated their agreement. When asked what kind of stuff, LaTonya replied, "I don't know—whatever's on the FCAT." This comment suggested that this group of students believed that passing the FCAT was the primary reason for their education. Data analysis revealed several instances where students agreed that their coursework could be characterized as FCAT preparation. In all, the focus group interviews clearly indicated that the students perceived their reading and math classes largely in the context of a diagnostic testing situation. This context creates an environment susceptible to stereotype threat effects (Steele, 1997; Wasserberg, 2014).

Feelings of Anxiety Related to the State Test

In the first focus group interview, Floyd shared the following: "The FCAT is the most important thing in the world. You can't even drop the thing! If you drop it, how you gonna breathe, man, how you gonna breathe!?" With this quote, Floyd vividly captured the participants' feelings

toward their state's standardized test. Interviews revealed that the prospect of the upcoming state test made the students anxious to the point of negative physiological consequences. As the standardized test date approached, Asia explained, "I got butterflies in my stomach—it's going to feel like I got to go to the bathroom." Similarly, LaTonya shared, "I'm going to feel kind of nervous. I think I'm going to feel queasy." Floyd put it more vividly, "Like I feel nervous in my stomach, and this crazy sensation turning and turning. When your stomach is turning . . . it's turning so much, it turns into butter!"

For decades, researchers have provided empirical evidence of a link between anxiety and the academic performance of children (Hill & Wigfield, 1984; McDonald, 2001). African American children report more academically related anxiety than their White peers (Silverman, Greca, & Wasserstein, 1995). Anxiety research with African American children reveals that this may be due to a difference in socio-evaluative concerns (Neal, Lilly, & Zakis, 1993), and related to African American children's encounters with negative racial stereotypes concerning their academic abilities, which in turn may serve to increase the children's fears of evaluative situations (Steele, 1997; Wasserberg, 2014). For African Americans, stereotype threat has been hypothesized to elicit an anxiety response that undermines test performance (Steele, 1997). Wasserberg (2014) has provided evidence that this may specifically be the case for high-achieving African American elementary students.

In the present study, the participants related much of their anxiety to the constant references to the state test by their teachers. LaTonya explained:

If I was a teacher, I wouldn't talk about the FCAT at all. I would scratch out the word FCAT out of every test that [has] it . . . [the students] wouldn't be as nervous because they don't see the word FCAT.

Asia said that if she were a teacher, when the students were being tested she would tell them "that it's not an FCAT practice test, that it's just a regular test that we do. It would make things feel, like, less nervous." Her suggestion is consistent with stereotype threat theory, and past research (McKown & Strambler, 2009; Wasserberg, 2014) suggesting that the performance of African American children is depressed when a test is characterized as diagnostic. Asia explained that the practice tests were "putting too much pressure on your brain." Below she shared her theory on why frequent references to the FCAT were detrimental to student performance:

Like when the teachers say, "Okay kids, it's time to take the test, you have to get ready for the FCAT;" they be like, "the FCAT!?" and that's when they whisper, "Are you nervous?"
"No, are you?"
"Yeah!"

And then, that puts a lot of pressure on their brain and they won't focus on the practice. Then, if they don't do well on the practice, why are they gonna do it on the FCAT? Because when they get pressure, they might get a question wrong, and then they might get most of the questions wrong.

Data support past research (e.g. Townsend, 2002) indicating that, particularly for African American students, feelings of anxiety can be tied to perceived failure.

A Concern with What White People Think

When discussing what people thought about her school, Asia shared, "White people gonna be thinking that it's just an F. White people gonna be thinking maybe to themselves, forever, [our school] is gonna get an F." The academic achievement of African American students has often been associated with racial identity salience (Davis, Aronson, & Salinas, 2006; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Townsend, 2002). State initiatives label schools as low-performing based on standardized test scores. During the time of this study, schools in Florida were graded A through F based on these standards. Because large numbers of African American children are enrolled in the schools labeled D or F, such a practice jeopardizes healthy racial identity development for these students. Analyses of the focus group interviews revealed that the participants expressed a high level of concern about what other people might think about their school, especially

outsiders. “They think that it’s a boongy school!” Asia exclaimed. (Johnny later explained, “boongy means lame.”). Race was an integral factor in this concern. It was salient for the students that many people from outside the area, who were White, fostered negative opinions toward their school. Whereas, Johnny said, “Black people think that we are going to bring [our school] to the top.” The group expressed a belief that White people held negative opinions about them because of the school’s test scores. Floyd explained, “They think it because it’s a D school, and going to an F.” LaTonya agreed with Floyd’s statement, “Because . . . this is a D school, people might think it’s bad. They might think we have a lot of fights and stuff. They think that you’re dumb, and you fight a lot.” Also, Johnny explained, “White people . . . they might think that since we’re a D school, we might be writing on the walls. We might be writing cuss words on the walls.”

The group was bothered by White people’s perceptions of their school. Asia explained, “I think it’s bad because they’re talking about my school, the school where I go to, and if they [*sic*] talking about my school that offends me.” LaTonya offered,

It makes me feel kind of sad because—well it kind of makes me a little *mad* [her emphasis] because just because I go to a D school, that does not mean that I’m a D student, or a D average student.

These remarks are consistent with stereotype threat theory in that the students expressed a desire to not confirm negative stereotypes against them. Steele (1997) explained that when individuals from stigmatized groups are placed in a situation where stereotypes about them become salient or relevant (whether or not they believe the stereotype to be true), efforts to disprove the stereotype can be debilitating.

Perception of others’ opinions is the mechanism behind stereotype threat. Data from the focus group interviews revealed the students’ awareness of how easily outsiders can find information to develop negative opinions of them. The local newspaper publishes state test scores every year, and this information is easily found online. The fact that they attended a D school was a point of salience. “Have you seen the grade on this school?” Floyd asked. “They have the grade right on top of the school . . . What if they put a ‘D’ right on top of the roof of the school, and helicopters could see it!” A grade of D on the roof of the school was a vivid metaphor for how the students felt their school grade was presented. Johnny explained that when someone looks at their school online, they can also find information about the school’s demographics. He said, “It’s on the Internet . . . You see schools and everything, and then you see this school. You see the grade, and then you see where it’s at, the population.” The population surrounding the school is low-income and largely African American. Asia continued, “They might think, let me see your address, you don’t go to an A school because you should be at [a local low-performing school].” Johnny’s later quote typified how race was highlighted in the interviews: “There’s some White people that are still angry with Black people . . . they still are hating Black people, so they still think that Black people are stupid and dumb.”

The Rejection and Acceptance Stereotypes

Data analyses revealed that race became a salient part of discussions on standardized test scores. Additionally, although race was not always directly mentioned, race-based stereotypes were also a salient part of these discussions. Most often, the focus group rejected negative stereotypes of their school. “Just because [some students at our school] wear pants below they [*sic*] waist, that doesn’t mean they have to get a bad grade,” Asia commented when asked to elaborate about what outsiders thought of her peers. The wearing of pants below the waist was a common style of dress for African American boys in their school. “I have a cousin in senior high school. Even though he wears his pants below his waist, he still do [*sic*] good!” The participants felt a responsibility to raise the school’s grade, thereby repudiating stereotypes. McGee and Martin (2011) have suggested that feeling this burden is an emotionally draining process. “I’m trying to bring the scores of my school up, man!” Floyd said adamantly. “We want our school grades to come up so [we] are going to put maximum effort into this FCAT,” Johnny explained. He expressed that this was counter to what the outside world believed about them:

I don't know what *they* [his emphasis] think, but [doing well in school] will help me with my life, so when I get to college, I can do the four years, get my degree; I'll go on and be whatever I want to be.

Not only did the students express the anxiety associated with the high-stakes tests, but the extra burden of saving their school. Asia said clearly, "we are going to put maximum effort because . . . [we] don't want the school to be teared [*sic*] down." A nearby elementary school was recently shut down by the district for consecutive years of poor test scores.

At the same time, the focus group sometimes perpetuated negative race-based stereotypes onto students in neighboring schools. Johnny referred to students in the closest neighboring elementary school, with almost identical demographics, as "from the streets." He said that "they act like little thugs." McGee and Martin (2011) found that African American students buy into similar stereotypes of African American youth in their home neighborhoods. LaTonya described the kids at the neighboring school as "very bad and misbehaving." Johnny described the misbehaving students as "ones who wear their pants below their waist—pants be [*sic*] hanging, and boxers be showing." Interestingly, this was the same stereotype they rejected as indicative of failure for the students in their school. When asked, all participants admitted that they had never been to the neighboring elementary school. LaTonya explained that whereas D and F schools "have kinda tough kids and gang bangers, 'good' schools have nice clothes, nice shoes, nice supplies." At the end of a later focus group interview, Asia indicated a belief in some negative stereotypes about her own school, at least in terms of standardized test performance. She asked, "Have you seen the kids here? It's bad—like, 'I don't care about no [*sic*] FCAT.'" The interviews suggested that students had internalized some of the same stereotypes they struggled against.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In conducting this study, the author sought to understand the perceptions of high-achieving African American elementary school students as they contend with societal stereotypes in a school that has adopted test-centered instruction. Findings revealed that the selected participants largely perceived education as test preparation. The participants spoke not of memorable interactions with their teacher in descriptions of their day, but instead of monotonous interactions with test-practice protocols. Statements like "[the teachers] will never let you get up," and "you can't even get water," highlight their frustration, and are similar to what has been discovered in middle and high school minority populations (Nieto, 1994; Schmakel, 2008; Schultz, 2011).

Findings also revealed that a focus on test-centered instruction made racial stereotypes salient for the participants, creating an environment susceptible to the detrimental performance effects outlined by stereotype threat theory. Because of their scores, the participants perceived White people as believing that their school was "just an F," and believing that the students in it probably wrote "cuss words on the walls." As African American students get older, they begin to attribute these beliefs to their teachers (Delpit, 2012; Noguera, 2003b). The participants also reported a desire to actively disprove stereotypes and prove their intellectual worth. This is similar to what has been reported by high-achieving African American high schools and college students (Howard, 2008; McGee, 2013; McGee & Martin, 2011) and has been shown to be emotionally debilitating (Solórzano et al., 2000). This is alarming in that it is the performance of high-achieving students that is most sensitive to negative stereotype threat performance effects (Wasserberg, 2014). The voices of the students in this study describe school experiences that may contribute the emotional shutdown of low-income African American elementary students reported by Matthews (2011).

The findings of the present study therefore raise important questions about the impact of high-stakes testing on educational equity; African American children are more likely to attend low performing elementary schools (V. E. Lee & Burkham, 2002), and low-performing elementary schools are more likely to focus their instruction on testing (Meier & Wood, 2004). This pedagogical shift discounts the children in those schools that are high-achievers while

creating a context for perpetuating stereotypes by framing test scores as the sole basis for judgments about the academic abilities of African American students. As evidenced in this study, the students themselves may come to subscribe to the very stereotypes they struggle against.

CONCLUSION

Although children in all elementary schools are necessarily subjected to some diagnostic testing conditions, it is clear that the consequences of such conditions may depend on race, the salience of stereotypes, and the achievement level of students. When discussing the FCAT, stereotypes became a primary focus of conversation for the participants in this study. When testing makes stereotypes salient, the performance of African American elementary students—particularly that of high-achievers—is negatively affected (Wasserberg, 2014). This is of particular importance to teachers of African American children in that attention to the environmental details surrounding standardized testing situations can potentially mitigate such effects. Positive intervention has been demonstrated in middle school populations by teaching students to view intelligence as malleable rather than fixed (Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003), by having students reaffirm their sense of self-worth (Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009), and through positive in-group role models (Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009).

Importantly, Steele (2003) has suggested that trusting relationships between teachers and students are a prerequisite for any successful stereotype threat-based intervention. If educators are interested in ameliorating racial test score gaps, implementation of interventions to help prevent the negative performance consequences evoked by stereotype threat is essential at earlier ages. Therefore future research in an elementary school setting examining the effectiveness of these interventions on student perceptions is critical. Finally, while the study described is small and qualitative in scope, large scale studies of African American elementary school student experiences are required to present a generalizable picture of students' experiences.

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AUTHOR

MARTIN J. WASSERBERG, is an Assistant Professor, Department of Elementary, Middle Level, and Literacy Education, Watson College of Education at University of North Carolina-Wilmington.

All comments and queries regarding this article should be addressed to wasserbergm@uncw.edu