

Denial of Research Privileges in a Black School: Implications for Researchers¹

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A CRUCIAL problem in research is how to gain access to Black communities. Previously, researchers had a "field day" in Black communities. Hostility toward research activities has steadily increased because of Black pride, community cohesiveness, and the outspoken criticism by concerned white and Black scholars² and citizens³ of the resultant research reports. The purpose of this article is to utilize an unsuccessful attempt to gain research access to a Black community to illustrate the following crucial issues concerning research in Black schools:

1. Do the conventional methods of gaining research permission in Black schools need reevaluation? Conventional methods mean seeking central administration clearance, principal approval, and sometimes teacher approval for data collection.

2. How can one tell in approaching a com-

munity whether or not the traditional methods are appropriate? If these methods are no longer useful, what is a feasible alternative method?

3. What does the trend against research activities in Black communities mean in relationship to achievement?

Research Project. This report is the result of an unsuccessful attempt to obtain research permission in a Black elementary school. Initially, the school was to be part of a study of school social environment (Brookover *et al.*, forthcoming). A growing body of research (Coleman *et al.*, 1966; Wilson, 1969; McDill, Meyers, and Rigsby, 1967; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968; Brookover *et al.*, 1967) gives testimony to the increasing emphasis on school social environment (climate) as a probable factor in school achievement.

The main research objective was to identify the environmental differences in elementary schools, both white and Black, which had similar socioeconomic status, but significantly different levels of achievement (see Table 1). Listing of the elementary schools by achievement level, percent minority, and socioeconomic status was provided through the cooperation of the Michigan Department of Education. A systematic appraisal of the social-psychological dynamics within the

¹ Special thanks are reserved for the parents and former principal who conveyed to me the insights about the school revealed within this article.

² See: William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*; Charles Thomas, *Boys No More: A Black Psychologist View of Community*; and Stephen S. Baratz and Joan C. Baratz, "Early Childhood Intervention: The Social Science Base of Institutional Racism."

³ Newspapers have disseminated reports of research on Blacks and other minorities. Community leaders and parents react violently to this continual denigration of their children and themselves. If researchers could envision themselves psychologically in the position of their respondents, perhaps an understanding of the reaction among Blacks concerning research could be realized.

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Social Class and Racial Composition	Quality of School Performance	
	High Mean Level of Achievement	Low Mean Level of Achievement
Predominantly* white High SES	2 schools	2 schools
Predominantly white Average SES	1 school	1 school
Predominantly white Low SES	2 schools	2 schools
Predominantly black High SES	1 school	1 school
Predominantly black Average SES	1 school	1 school
Predominantly black Low SES	1 school	1 school
White rural and small town Highest SES	Number of schools will depend on size of enrollment in selected schools	Number of schools will depend on size of enrollment in selected schools
White rural and small town Lowest SES	Number of schools will depend on size of enrollment in selected schools	Number of schools will depend on size of enrollment in selected schools

* Predominantly is used to mean 80 percent or more.

Table 1. Classification of Schools for Sample Selection

schools was sought via a questionnaire administered to principals, teachers, and students in the fourth through sixth grades. It was hoped that investigation of the school climates would suggest factors that enhance or mitigate against achievement in elementary schools.

Of particular interest were high achieving Black elementary schools. Only two Black elementary schools in the entire state of Michigan scored above the state mean of fifty.⁴ Thus, the loss of one school placed serious handicaps on the entire study.

Research Access Procedure. To deal adequately with the first crucial issue cited (that is, whether the usual methods of seeking research permission need revamping), a recapitulation of experiences in the high-achieving Black school will be presented. First, contact was made with the central administration, where clearance was granted after an interview with the assistant superintendent. Second, a meeting was arranged with the principal and the faculty. A verbal agreement had been obtained from the principal, but clearance from the faculty was needed.

⁴ An index score of fifty was considered the state norm.

This meeting, which had been envisioned as just a formality, was in effect a revelation. The teachers would not allow any research activities without community approval, regardless of what the central administration had approved. All attempts to justify the study or to put the teachers at ease were an exercise in futility.

After considerable deliberation, the senior investigator and the writer decided a "grass roots" approach⁵ might have some merit. Although it was realized that this method might also prove futile, the school was too valuable to give up without an effort. Nonetheless, despite several personal contacts and meetings in the community, the result was the same. However, many other important factors concerning this school's high level of achievement were revealed. These aspects will be presented shortly.

About a year later, the second phase of the quest to enter the school was begun. The rationale was that perhaps emotions had receded from their crest position of the previous year. A meeting was arranged with the parents to apprise them fully of the study's objectives. The parents expressed verbal support for my intentions and indicated they believed in my sincerity. However, the unforgivable transgression had already been committed—contacting the central administration first. In order to understand the nature of this error, it is necessary to examine the relationship between the school community and central administration.

*School Community and the Central Administration.*⁶ The relationship between the school in question and the central administration had been hostile. From the viewpoint of those community people interviewed, the stance of the central administration was denigration, repudiation, and exploitation. The following factors were cited to support this contention.

⁵ This type of approach involves working through the community.

⁶ Information in this section was obtained via meetings in the community and interviews with school personnel. Interpretation and conclusions are exclusively those of the writer.

1. The white school district as a whole did not want the school of interest in the district because its population was Black and mainly lower socioeconomic status children. The state intervened and placed the school in the district. The white district's rejection became a rallying point for the unification of the Black community.

2. Even though some members of the central administration wanted to improve the school of interest, some of their actions were counterproductive.⁷ Two salient examples were resistance to parent involvement in the school and the belief that any teacher could be successful.

3. Research proposals and reports were a particularly bitter aspect of the chasm between the school's community and the central administration. Pathological aspects of the school and surrounding community were a constant theme reiterated in newspapers, journals, and dissertations. Coupled with this, proposals for grants often described the children and community in terminology which left a lot to be desired. Adding insult to injury, the Black community came to believe that grant monies allocated for their children were spent elsewhere in the district.

This setting is by no means a typical situation. However, analogies to the urban scene can be envisioned, especially the aspects concerning the continual dissemination of pathologically based literature about Blacks. Trends seem to indicate that the usual methods of gaining research access in Black schools, if not already difficult, may soon be impossible. Some researchers (Williams, 1972) have even suggested a moratorium on research in Black communities. Since conventional methods of acquiring research permission may prove futile, alternative strategies should be developed to allow meaningful research⁸ to be undertaken.

Research Permission in Black Communities. At issue is the method by which research privileges can be obtained in Black communities/schools at a time when the

credibility of researchers in many communities is virtually nil. Additionally, suggestions for ascertaining the community mood toward research are offered. The flavor and intensity of feeling against research endeavors are captured in the following statements gleaned from visits to Black communities:

"We feel like a test tube, that someone constantly keeps dipping in."

"We are tired of people who come in with a sweet song, then say damaging things about our kids such as they do not know the difference between an apple, orange, and banana."

"Everything written about us describes how dumb and low class⁹ we are."

"We have been tested to death. So the kids have gotten to the point of answering any way they please. It's a standing joke how wild they answer questions. You know, enee, mence, mini, mo!"

Therefore, in light of conducting research that is in the constituents' *best interests*, the following guidelines are suggested.

1. If personal contacts are available, researchers should obtain the following information: an appraisal of community attitudes toward research, the names of community leaders, and the community nuances regarding research permission.¹⁰ This is necessary, primarily, because school district administrators grant research privileges and the Black community either rejects or distorts the data

⁹ Social scientists who are knowledgeable in the nuances of low socioeconomic status Blacks (income as the criterion factor) are cognizant of the difference in connotation between poor and lower class from a Black perspective. Nothing is more insulting than to be called lower class. This means a person who exhibits a life-style which morally and behaviorally leaves a lot to be desired. A poor person, though, is one who lacks monetary means, but lives a decent and respectable life.

¹⁰ These suggested prerequisites are presented with full realization of the difficulty involved in obtaining such information. However, the actions of prior researchers have created an atmosphere where such preliminaries are sometimes necessary. Therefore, if researchers intend to collect data in Black communities, strategies to obtain information must be developed, which will increase the probability of success.

⁷ Such actions often were the result of unfamiliarity with Black and/or poor people which produced a reliance on stereotypes.

⁸ Reference is to research that is needed in communities and schools to plan innovative strategies for improvement. Empirical verification of pathologically based premises have little usage other than verification of the researcher's bias.

collection. Rejection means parents or respondents will not cooperate. Distortion means that answering haphazardly is a common phenomenon.

2. Objectives of the research must have merit from the community's viewpoint. The researcher must convey the importance of his work to the community and to the school. If the intent of the research is to produce articles, books, and government reports without positive returns to the respondents, rejection will probably be inevitable. In simpler terms, salesmanship would be an asset if the product is worthwhile.

3. The research team should include an *aware Black researcher*; that is, one who operates from a Black perspective. If a Black researcher is perceived as not acting in the best interest of the community, he will be rejected, perhaps, even more vehemently than a white researcher.

4. If no contacts are available, it may prove useful to seek out public officials who may know key people in the community. Exploratory visits to the community may also provide preliminary contacts.

It should be apparent that going to central administrative personnel is not a *carte blanche* means of accomplishing research in Black communities. The best mode of entry is to establish credibility with the community. Only then will the researcher possibly obtain reliable and valid data.

A logical question to pursue is whether the Black reaction against research has any positive aspects. A reasonable hypothesis is that members of the research enterprise consider such actions ludicrous and counterproductive. However, whose conception of productivity and sensibility should be utilized as the criteria? Surely the subjects of research activities deserve dividends that are positive in the long run and not continually negative. Heretofore, most research has resulted in empirical verification of stereotypes. Only through research activities that unequivocally demonstrate positive returns for the community will this trend against research be reversed.

Backlash Against Research and School Achievement. Whether there is any causal or correlational aspect of these phenomena to school achievement is highly presumptuous and would entail rigorous empirical validation. However, the fact remains that the school of interest was one of only two Black elementary schools in the entire state of Michigan scoring above the mean in achievement. What makes this fact noteworthy is that a decade or so ago the school of interest was probably the lowest achieving school in the state. In fact, the school and surrounding community were prime areas of sociological, psychological, and educational research activities.

Why this school experienced the dramatic rise in achievement is a complex and, without research activities, unanswerable question. The only insights which are available are extrapolated from the meeting between the writer, parents, and the former principal during the futile negotiations for research permission. The purpose of presenting their explanation is for thought stimulation. Only the major points from these meetings are presented.

1. The school of interest, which is still a low socioeconomic status community, was annexed to a neighboring community by the state.¹¹

2. The principal had the final say over all staff appointments or termination. Additionally, the principal took a stand that any complaints against the teachers should be aimed at him, because teacher performance was his responsibility.¹²

3. The principal instituted activities that brought the community into the school and actually formed a School-Community Council. Examples of school-community activities were health programs, school painting, neighborhood conservation, carnivals, and recreation.

¹¹ Details of this annexation are not reported to provide anonymity for the school. However, the community ordered to take over jurisdiction of this school was all white and upper-middle class.

¹² This is particularly significant because many school principals will not take full responsibility for staff actions. In fact, most principals take a middle-of-the-road approach in teacher-community altercations, often opting for the position which seems most politically expedient.

4. Parents were encouraged by the principal to resist the central administration or anyone who attempted to prevent their children from learning. The principal expressed his feeling quite cogently in the following statement: "Do not let me or anyone else stop your child from learning."

What this brief dialog from the meeting with the parents and former principal really means in regard to achievement is highly debatable. Perhaps the reader can speak to the issue from a different stance. A statement from the principal indicates his perspective succinctly:

In a school which poor children attend, the community must have a voice. Contrary to belief, these parents want the best education for their children but they feel powerless in the means of obtaining it. When parents begin to affect the future of their child, this sense of powerlessness decreases. The role of the parents is not a capitulation to the school's authority, only a mutual pact in the education process. A key factor is the principal who, along with his staff, must determine the role of the parents. Community consensus will ensure the school staff of parent cooperation and, most important, the attention and interest of students.¹³

In conclusion, the event which initiated this article was the denial of research privileges in a Black elementary school. As indicated here, researchers will probably have to revamp their usual method of seeking research permission. Rules of thumb suggested for seeking research permission in Black communities can perhaps be used as a point of reference to adjust to varying situations. Possibly, the most crucial aspect is whether the research will have positive ramifications for the Black community. In simpler terms, the plethora of past research that only supported stereotypes and for-

warded denigrating data about Blacks will be resisted.

The question concerning whether there is some connection between research resistance and achievement is posed only as a matter of conjecture. The example provided in this article is by no means enough evidence. However, one cannot overlook the fact that achievement is present in this community. Only carefully designed research can answer this question.

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¹³ This control of fate by the parents over their children's success in school could possibly be the phenomenon which Coleman et al. (1966) speak to in *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, and which was found to be a crucial factor in Black student achievement. Perhaps this feeling of self-determination or, as Coleman calls it, sense of control operates in an osmosis-like fashion from the parents to the children which in turn facilitates achievement.

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