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## Schooling in Rural East Texas: Contextualizing and Responding to the Needs of African American Students

Brandon L. Fox

*Stephen F Austin State University, foxbrand@sfasu.edu*

Patrick S. De Walt

*Stephen F. Austin State University, dewaltps@sfasu.edu*

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## Schooling in Rural East Texas: Contextualizing and Responding to the Needs of African American Students

### Cover Page Footnote

1 The authors use the term persons of African descent instead of African American or Black to acknowledge varied cultural, linguistic, nationalistic identities of people within the U.S. who are often labeled African American yet do not hold the same lived experiences and legacies associated with those of African descent.

## Introduction

In the midst, then, of the larger problem of Negro education sprang up the more practical question of work, the inevitable economic quandary that faces a people in the transition from slavery to freedom, and especially those who make that change amid hate and prejudice, lawlessness, and ruthless competition (Du Bois, 2003, p. 70).

Education in the Southern United States for persons of African descent<sup>1</sup> is marked by the legacy of enslavement, whether that be from the positions of the likes of Booker T. Washington and his Tuskegee machine or the effects of Reconstruction. A people whose access to forms of education were often aligned with much risk and limited rewards, collectively created a population who were, in a sense, devalued as human beings yet valued as inexpensive laborers. Eugene Genovese (1976) discusses the fear and efforts of educating those enslaved within “colonial times [in which] powerful opposition to slave literacy arose among slaveholders in an attempt to prevent the forging of passes but also to head off insurrection or at least to weaken any prospective insurrectionary leadership...” (p. 562). Yet, there were many instances “throughout the South [where] some masters, more mistresses, and even more white children scoffed at the law, which was unenforceable on the plantations anyway, and instructed a favorite or two or some other slave who persisted in the demand” (Genovese, 1976, p. 563).

William Watkins (2001) further illustrates ways in which those enslaved “unintentionally” were educated, “Favored slaves were drawn into the business practices of the plantation, such as record keeping, purchasing provisions, and so on” (p. 13). The agrarian skills retained and/or acquired through perils of bondage often served as the transitional means for commodification within the developing framework of the restructured Union.

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Watkins (2001) furthers his argument with the following, “Booker T. Washington called the plantation an industrial school, suggesting that slaves received a kind of education by virtue of their lives and work” (pp. 12-13). In establishing schools for newly freed persons, many challenges remained through this period of reconstruction. The reconfiguration of social norms as a result of emancipation in the South required much from many different groups such as the Freedmen’s Bureau and often created and/or sustained preexisting barriers (Foner, 2005).

An example of the challenges during reconstruction are visible within the correspondence from William A. Stuart, a Captain in the Freedmen’s Bureau in Arkansas, to a superior officer, Public opinion is evidently becoming more tolerant toward the colored man and the free labor system. The demand for laborers through the country is very great, and that fact coupled with the fear of the Bureau compels many to accept what is in many respects repulsive to their feelings and education. The old slave code is very dear to the people and is relinquished by them with an almost death struggle, so that it requires a constant watch for the present to reconcile the (illegible) to each other, and to the new order of things. (Stuart, 1865, para. 4)

As with the formation of the Common school in the Northeast, education as a socializing agent for the shaping of the society and its norms was necessary. However, in the South, the formation of schools for newly freed Africans was pit against residual social norms and dispositions of the antebellum period. As often asked by W. E. B. Du Bois (2003), “How does it feel to be a problem?” (p. 8). While the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments would offer some political platforms for the uplifting of a people, as during the antebellum period, access to education and educational institutions were often at the behest of philanthropic Whites and/or the social efforts of Black Churches (Williams, 2001). Through such narratives of Washington’s

(1901) “Up From Slavery” or Douglass’s (2005) “My Bondage and My Freedom,” the desire for not only freedom but access to forms of education that offered people of African descent dignity and the ability to shape their own paths became apparent.

Education’s significance within the community, while critical in many ways, still offered for the maintaining of a status quo that was emblematic of current perils that face marginalized communities in which students of color and/or persons living within poverty are situated. These contexts are important to recognize as legacies such as that of U.S. enslavement and the belief systems that both benefited and enforced them still affect the educational opportunities that students in urban settings experience. As Watkins (2001) attests, “The conquering of the South could be mollified with the continuation of racial and social privilege. Accommodationism best described post-Civil War race relations in the South. Blacks must learn their ‘place’ in the new industrial order” (pp. 22-23). Yet, those who are found within rural locations face similar challenges that are distinct to the cultural milieu that binds southern beliefs, religious affiliations, economic factors, and the demands of an ever-changing world and educational policies. In the midst of these converging forces, this study seeks to illuminate the current realities of those who are of African descent while contextualizing the schooling received/offered in rural East Texas.

With this historical reference as the context of this manuscript, the importance of education within rural environments remains an area that requires further study. As current educational policies and programs under the direction of Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, further requires accountability of not only schools and teachers, but the students and communities in which they are situated. In particular, within a speech to the Rural Education National Forum in Columbus, Ohio, Duncan identified three areas regarding rural education that are of significance to this study as well as studies for the future:

1. “[T]he level of innovation and creativity...” demonstrated at rural schools.
2. “[A]n emerging set of collaborations and partnerships...” among stakeholders.
3. “[T]he values and commitment...[demonstrated by] rural communities and rural educators.” (United States Department of Education, 2014)

Each of these points are important to creating successful learning environments for all students, but what do each of these areas look like and who is at the table when they are being developed and implemented? These areas are of as much concern as the curriculum that is implemented and have to have all students’ interests in mind from not only an intellectual perspective, but also culturally and linguistically.

Rural communities have contrasting needs from urban and suburban communities that include access to technologies and other educational resources. Areas of social concern that, in ways, are also shared by inner city schools are the effects of families living in poverty and how those conditions impact students’ attainment of certain cultural and social capital. These circumstances are often at the heart of standardized testing and even common core curriculum and standards. As the U.S. Department of Education and the Texas Education Agency respectively advocate for creating pathways for student success, questions of what those pathways consist of should remain at the forefront. As stated within this speech, Duncan makes it known the “challenges of attracting and retaining great teachers and keeping those teachers in the community for the long haul” (United States Department of Education, 2014).

For the remainder of this section, the authors provide an overview of socialized identity before providing context for the current moment in rural education. The next section is titled *Perspective* and describes the conceptual framework for this critical analysis. *Perspective* is followed by the *Method* section which describes the methodology of the study. The *Method*

section is followed by the *Findings* of the study which contextualizes Region VII. The authors conclude this manuscript with a *Discussion* section which includes *Limitations and Future Research*.

### **Socialized Identity**

When engaging racial and/or cultural identity frameworks, we draw from the conceptualization of William Cross's *Nigrescence*, the process of becoming black (1971, 1978, 1989, 1991, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 2012; Cross & Vandiver 2001; Worrell 2012). This racial identity framework's importance resides in its use as a theoretical bridge for ways in which racial identity can impact other factors of students' academic success. While this framework is geared to persons of college age or older the authors seek to, as Tatum (1997) sought to do with nigrescence, apply it to younger populations. In particular, the notion of mis-education is a major area in which this study focus:

[T]he opponents of freedom and social justice decided to work out a program which would enslave the Negroes' mind inasmuch as the freedom of body had to be conceded. It was well understood that if by the teaching of history the [W]hite [wo]man could be further assured of [her or] his superiority and the Negro could be made to feel that [s]he had always been a failure and that the subjection of [her or] his will to some other race is necessary...If you can control a [wo]man's thinking you do not have to worry about [her or] his actions (Woodson 2006, p. 84; De Walt 2009, p. 6).

Within a social context where elements of race and racism still exist, Woodson's thoughts are still relevant today. The historical references from the antebellum period is still influential in various parts of East Texas as social norms and oppressive sentiments still linger and impact social environments. When connecting this sentiment to the existing curriculum, in particular,

those emphasized within the area of Social Studies, educational stakeholders need to take a closer look at what is taught and not taught as it pertains to what Woodson deemed as “mis-education”. As scholars and school systems promote a rhetoric of “culturally responsive” teaching and/or pedagogy, what the state recognizes as valuable and accessible content may tell a different story.

### **Modern Rural Education**

For the purpose of this study, we define rural in accordance with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) as the area outside of an urbanized space (NCES, 2013). According to the NCES Rural Education in America website, there are 12,413,455 students in public rural schools in the United States with 1,235,964 students being students of African descent (NCES, 2015). Texas has the most students attending schools in rural areas within the United States with 937,886 students and has 401,314 students of color attending schools in rural settings, which is more than any other state (NCES, 2013). Nearly one in five students in rural Texas come from a situation of poverty. The number of students attending rural schools in Texas has been growing by approximately 30,000 per year over the past several years (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2014).

### **Perspective**

The authors acknowledge the personal influence of critical race theory (CRT) and embrace CRT as the analytic lens for this study. Applying CRT to educational research has increased tremendously since Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate’s (1995) *Toward a Critical Race Theory in Education*. The foundational themes of CRT include the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination (Crenshaw, 1991), the challenge to dominant ideology (Delgado Bernal, 1998), the centrality of experiential knowledge (Delgado,



1989), the transdisciplinary perspective (Delgado, 1992), and interest convergence (Bell, 1987). Applying CRT to schooling and education has expanded knowledge related to race studies and continues to provide data with the opportunity to transform the field of education. CRT provides researchers with an analytic lens to examine the construction of race as being physically constructed, socially constructed, legally constructed, and historically constructed (Milner & Selfe, 2014). CRT also provides researchers with a lens to analyze the interactions of race in sociocultural contexts (Reynolds, 2014).

Extending CRT scholarship, Yosso (2006) explores cultural capital through a CRT lens to construct a framework of “community cultural wealth to challenge deficit thinking” (p. 77). Yosso’s framework of *Community Cultural Wealth* includes aspirational capital, familial capital, social capital, linguistic capital, resistant capital, and navigational capital. Aspirational capital includes “the ability to maintain hope and resiliency” (p. 78). Linguistic capital “includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” (p. 78). Familial capital includes “those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition” (p. 79). Social capital is described as the “networks of people and community resources” (p. 79). Resistant capital includes “those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (p. 80). The sixth and final form of capital is navigational capital. Navigational capital includes “the skills of maneuvering through social institutions” (p. 80).

This framework as illustrated through the analysis of Yosso allows for the import of theory and concepts that are particular to persons of African descent via the thought of Maluana Karenga’s (2002) acknowledgement of history of African people through “self-construction, social construction and world construction” and thereby linking them to the vast contributions of

the African diaspora (p. 79). Through this intersection, what Woodson highlights as “mis-education” can be offset by including the various forms of capital that Yosso highlights which can be argued ultimately offers learners a heightened consciousness (De Walt 2009, 2012).

### **Method**

This study uses descriptive statistics of the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) data sets to illustrate the context of rural East Texas schools related to the educational experiences of persons of African descent within K-12 settings. Data were collected via organizational sites that include the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Data collected from TEA’s Region VII’s Regional Profile included “96 school districts, [ten] charter schools, and 13,305 square miles in 17 East Texas counties” (Region VII Education Service Center, 2015, para. 1). Through a critical deductive and inductive analysis, various themes emerged. Within themes, an engagement with the theoretic framework of the study was conducted. From these methodological components, the guiding question for this research study: “What is the current state of rural education for students of African descent in Region VII as detailed by the Texas Education Agency (TEA)?” was engaged.

### **Findings**

For the framing of this study, we interrogated the STAAR aggregated data for a particular region of the state of Texas, Region VII. Region VII is particularly important due to the geographical location of the researchers as well as the need for further research in rural settings. Region VII is situated directly south of Region VIII (Northeast Texas) and north of Region V (Southeast Texas). For the purpose of this analysis, we consider Region VII to cover East Texas and to be entirely rural. The counties served by the Region VII Education Service Center are:

Anderson, Angelina, Cherokee, Gregg, Harrison, Henderson, Nacogdoches, Rains, Rusk, Sabine, San Augustine, Shelby, Smith, Panola, Upshur, Van Zandt, and Wood. For the remainder of this section, we provide a series of tables below to provide an image of the current educational moment in rural east Texas. The first table provides demographic data of students across race/ethnicity for Region VII and the state of Texas. Table 2 provides demographic data of teachers across race/ethnicity for Region VII and the state of Texas. Table 3 provides data for the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) phase-in satisfactory standard or above. The fourth table provides discipline data from the Region VII Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) report for 2013-2014. Table 5 provides data associated with attendance, graduation, and push-out/drop-out. The final table in this section provides data for students at postsecondary readiness standard according to STAAR data.

According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2014a), students of African descent make up 12.7% of the student population in Texas and 17.6% of the student population in Region VII (see Table 1). While Latino/Latina/Hispanic American students make up 51.8% of the student population in Texas, they only represent 26.4% of the total student population in Region VII. Although European American students make up only 29.4% of the percent of total student population in Texas, they represent 52.1% of the total student population in Region VII.

Table 1

*Region VII Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Students for Academic Year 2013-2014 (TEA, 2014a)*

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Students in Texas	% of Total Student Population in Texas	Number of Students in Region VII	% of Total Student Population in Region VII
African American/Black	650,919	12.7%	30,059	17.6%
Latino/Latina/Hispanic American	2,660,463	51.8%	44,973	26.4%
European American/White	1,511,700	29.4%	88,879	52.1%
Native American	20,142	0.4%	739	0.4%
Asian American	189,483	3.7%	1,637	1.0%
Pacific Islander	6,778	0.1%	129	0.1%
Multi-Racial/ Multi-Ethnic	95,365	1.9%	4,248	2.5%

The demographics of teachers continue to represent disproportionality across race/ethnicity. During the 2013-2014 academic year, teachers of African descent made up 9.6% of the teaching workforce in Texas, but only 8.6% of the teaching workforce in Region VII (see Table 2). While Latino/Latina/Hispanic American teachers make up 25.2% of the teaching workforce in Texas, they are only 4.9% of the teaching workforce in Region VII. European American teachers are 62.3% of the teaching workforce in Texas, but are an alarming 85% of the teaching workforce in Region VII.

Table 2

*Region VII Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Teachers for Academic Year 2013-2014 (TEA, 2014a)*

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Teachers in Texas	% of Total Teacher Population in Texas	Number of Teachers in Region VII	% of Total Teacher Population in Region VII
African American/Black	32,073.5	9.6%	1,068.1	8.6%
Latino/Latina/Hispanic American	84,412.9	25.2%	608.4	4.9%
European American/White	208,434.7	62.3%	10,567.9	85.0%
Native American	1,219.3	0.4%	46.8	0.4%
Asian American	4,552.5	1.4%	28.7	0.2%
Pacific Islander	284.6	0.1%	6.0	0.0%
Multi-Racial/ Multi-Ethnic	3,553.1	1.1%	104.0	0.8%

Table 3 provides an overview of the mean student performance by race/ethnicity on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exam across all subjects and within reading, mathematics, writing, science, and social studies. According to the data, students of African descent and Latino/Latina/Hispanic students are scoring below all other racial/ethnic groups (see Table 3). Sixty-three percent of students of African descent are meeting satisfactory standard in Reading while the mean in Region VII is 76%. European American students and Asian American students have the highest percent meeting standard at 84% and 85%. There is a 14 point differential between the percent of students of African descent meeting standard in mathematics, writing, and science than the Region VII mean. In social studies, there is an 11 point differential.

Table 3

*STAAR Percent at Phase-in Satisfactory Standard or Above for 2014, All Grades, Across Race/Ethnicity and Subject Area (TEA, 2014a)*

	All Subjects	Reading	Mathematics	Writing	Science	Social Studies
Region VII Mean	76%	76%	77%	71%	77%	73%
African American/Black	62%	63%	63%	57%	63%	62%
Latino/Latina/Hispanic American	70%	69%	74%	64%	70%	65%
European American/White	83%	84%	83%	78%	85%	80%
Native American	78%	78%	81%	67%	79%	72%
Asian American	87%	85%	90%	90%	87%	83%
Pacific Islander	77%	74%	81%	71%	79%	82%
Multi-Racial/Multi-Ethnic	78%	81%	76%	74%	79%	71%

There are nearly three times as many European American students as there are students of African descent in Region VII. Data across expulsions, placements in alternative educational settings (DAEP), and in-school suspension (ISS) are similar in quantity across students of African descent and European American students (see Table 4). However, students of African descent were placed in out-of-school suspension (OSS) 8,257 times while European American students were placed in OSS 4,374 times and Latino/Latina/Hispanic American students were placed in OSS 4,260 times.

Table 4

*Region VII PEIMS Discipline Data for Academic Year 2013-2014 (TEA, 2014a)*

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Students in Region VII	Expulsion Actions	DAEP Placements	Out of School Suspensions	In School Suspensions
African American/Black	30,059	26	1,177	8,257	21,436
Latino/Latina/Hispanic American	44,973	Data Not Provided	706	4,260	13,589
European American/White	88,879	23	1,244	4,374	21,924
Native American	739	Data Not Provided	16	59	253
Asian American	1,637	Data Not Provided	Data Not Provided	29	124
Pacific Islander	129	Data Not Provided	Data Not Provided	8	34
Multi-Racial/Multi-Ethnic	4,248	Data Not Provided	102	493	1,726

The attendance rate for the 2012-2013 academic year shows that students of African descent, Latino/Latina/Hispanic students, and Asian American students are attending school at a higher percentage rate than the Region VII mean (see Table 5). Asian American students had the highest attendance rate at 97.4% (+1.5%). Students of African descent attended school at a 96.1% (+0.2%) while European American students attended school at a rate of 95.6% (-0.3). Latino/Latina/Hispanic American students attended school at a rate of 96.2% (+0.3%).

Four year longitudinal data provided by TEA shows that over 90% of all students in Texas are either graduating with a diploma, earning their GED, or are continuing high school (see Table 5). The mean push-out/drop-out rate for Region VII was 4.7%, while the push-out/drop-out rate for students of African descent was 6.8% (+2.2%). The push-out/drop-out rate

for Latino/Latina/Hispanic American students was 6.6% (+1.9%). The push-out/drop-out rate for European American students was 3.3%, 1.4% below the Region VII mean.

Table 5

*Attendance Rate and Graduation Rate Data Across Race/Ethnicity (TEA, 2014a)*

	Attendance Rate for 2012-2013 Academic Year	4-year Longitudinal Rate for Class 2013: Graduated, Received GED, or Continued High School	4-year Longitudinal Rate for Class 2013: Pushed Out/Dropped Out
Region VII Mean	95.9%	95.3%	4.7%
African American/Black	96.1%	93.2%	6.8%
Latino/Latina/Hispanic American	96.2%	93.4%	6.6%
European American/White	95.6%	96.7%	3.3%
Native American	95.3%	90.0%	10.0%
Asian American	97.4%	96.2%	3.8%
Pacific Islander	95.0%	100%	0.0%
Multi-Racial/Multi-Ethnic	95.5%	96.3%	3.7%

The following table provides an overview of STAAR percent at postsecondary readiness standard for Region VII in 2014 across all grades. The highest percent of students at postsecondary readiness standard across all subjects were Asian American students (see Table 6). Thirty-seven percent of students in Region VII were at standard in two or more subjects, 43% in reading, 36% in mathematics, 32% in writing, 39% in science, and 33% in social studies in 2014. The percent of students of African descent at standard in 2014 was well below the Region VII mean. Twenty percent (-17%) of students of African descent were at standard in two or more subjects, 25% (-18%) in reading, 20% (16%) in mathematics, 19% (-13%) in writing, 21% (-18%) in science, and 20% (-13%) in social studies in 2014.



Table 6

*STAAR Percent at Postsecondary Readiness Standard for 2014, All Grades, Across*

*Race/Ethnicity and Subject Area (TEA, 2014a)*

	Two or More Subjects	Reading	Mathematics	Writing	Science	Social Studies
Region VII Mean	37%	43%	36%	32%	39%	33%
African American/ Black	20%	25%	20%	19%	21%	20%
Latino/Latina/ Hispanic American	28%	32%	32%	24%	29%	24%
European American/ White	46%	53%	43%	39%	49%	40%
Native American	39%	44%	39%	29%	48%	37%
Asian American	66%	68%	70%	62%	66%	61%
Pacific Islander	40%	45%	47%	46%	57%	70%
Multi-Racial/ Multi-Ethnic	37%	45%	35%	33%	39%	32%

### Discussion

This study was guided by the question: What is the current state of rural education for students of African descent in Region VII as detailed by the Texas Education Agency (TEA)? After a critical deductive and inductive analysis, the findings of this study contextualize the current state of rural education for students of African descent in Region VII (see Table 7). The summary of key findings provided in the table below provides context of the current state of

education for students of African descent in rural east Texas. The table is followed with a discussion in which the authors respond to the data.

Table 7

*Contextualizing Region VII of Rural East Texas*

<b>Area of Analysis</b>	<b>Key Findings</b>
Student Demographics (2013-2014)	Students of African descent make up 12.7% of the student population in Texas and 17.6% of the student population in Region VII (see Table 1);
Teacher Demographics (2013-2014)	Teachers of African descent make up 9.6% of the teaching workforce in Texas, but only 8.6% of the teaching workforce in Region VII. The ratio of students to teachers within race/ethnicity are disproportionate (see Table 2);
Student Performance on STAAR (Met Satisfactory Standard in 2014)	The percentage of students of African descent meeting standard is below all other racial/ethnic groups: 63% of students of African descent are meeting satisfactory standard in Reading while the mean in Region VII is 76%. There is a 14 point differential between the percent of students of African descent meeting standard in mathematics, writing, and science than the Region VII mean. In social studies, there is an 11 point differential (see Table 3);
PEIMS Discipline Data (2013-2014)	There are nearly three times as many European American students as there are students of African descent in Region VII. However, students of African descent were placed in out-of-school suspension (OSS) 8,257 times while European American students were placed in OSS 4,374 times (see Table 4);
Attendance Rate (2012-2013)	The attendance rate for the 2012-2013 academic year shows that students of African descent are attending school at a higher percentage rate than the Region VII mean (see Table 5);
Graduation/GED/ Continuing Education Rate (4-year Longitudinal for the class of 2014)	Students of African descent have the second lowest graduation/GED/continuing education rate among all racial groups at 93.2 %. Students of African descent have the second highest push-out/drop-out rate in Region VII. The mean push-out/drop-out rate for Region VII was 4.7%, while the push-out/drop-out rate for students of African descent was 6.8% (+2.2%) (see Table 5);
Postsecondary Readiness (2014)	The percent of students of African descent at postsecondary readiness standard in 2014 was well below all Region VII means. Twenty percent (-17%) of students of African descent were at standard in two or more subjects, 25% (-18%) in reading, 20% (16%) in mathematics, 19% (-13%) in writing, 21% (-18%) in science, and 20% (-13%) in social studies in 2014 (see Table 6).

*Responding to Demographics and Teacher Preparation*

Student demographic data suggests that students of African descent represent a larger percent of the student population in Region VII than the percentage of students of African descent in the state of Texas. While students of African descent make up nearly 17.6% of the student population, teachers of African descent only make up 8.6% of the teacher population. It is imperative to increase the number of teachers of African descent in Region VII. Furthermore, the representations of culturally diverse faculty for the diverse populations within the schools is of concern as it pertains to student social and cultural connections.

Self-esteem and self-efficacy are important aspects of a learner's identity and well-being. Taking this into consideration, the importance of students seeing faces that remind them of their respective communities must not be overlooked. Often these needs broach the realm of racial and cultural identity within their respective frameworks. Within rural contexts, racial identity is still a very important factor where racial undertones and overtones are clearly at work. Social stratification based on economics are still looming within many rural environments, yet racial stratifications are often situated within class debates to avoid acknowledging institutional and structural racism that may still exist within the ideologies and practices of community members. As a result of these concerns and the desire to offer both teachers and their students with meaningful learning experiences and environments, the task of this study is to bring attention to the often overlooked nuances that both race and social capital play in the education of students of African descent and the teachers who teach them.

While there is an obvious desire to enhance the quantity of teachers of African descent in Region VII, it must be acknowledged by stakeholders that there will continue to be a large percentage of teachers who are not of African descent. Teacher preparation programs must do

more to ensure that their graduates are better prepared to work with students of African descent. Milner and Selfe (2014) remind us that it is inaccurate to assume that all teachers, teacher educators, and members of society are committed to understanding the nuances of a racialized society. They further suggest that “the racial backgrounds, knowledge, experiences, and mindsets of teacher educators should be continuously in studies and theory related to race in teacher education” (p. 8). Programs that embrace a culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse faculty that has a strong foundation in race/ethnic studies could increase the chances of a more race-literate teaching workforce.

Research in teacher education has reported that curriculum and instruction is mirrored across P-16 suggesting that it is Eurocentric and furthers dominant ideology (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Milner & Selfe, 2014). Modifying teacher education curriculum to include a more nuanced exploration of research related to race and education is encouraged. Programs that include a rich exploration of Black history, including the history of education as it relates to people of African descent, could positively influence racial attitudes (Banks, 2003). Furthermore, programs that embrace frameworks to assist in forming a culturally responsive teacher identity are desirable (Gay, 2010).

#### *Responding to Student Academic Performance and Postsecondary Readiness*

Data from this study provides further evidence that students of African descent continue to face more limited life chances and life choices than White students due to performance on standardized assessments (Howard, 2010). With the transition from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) to the STAAR, the educational attainment of students of African descent within rural settings are situated in such a manner that deficit-thinking ideologies can permeate almost any form of analysis. When considering the historical legacies that have

generational impacts on minoritized populations, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders must adjust their lenses when viewing learners through a perspective of “glass half empty”. Curriculum and instruction that embraces the *community cultural wealth* of students and families of African descent will move beyond more typical and traditional deficit approaches to curriculum and instruction (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997; Yosso, 2006). One area of tremendous concern is the percentage of students of African descent meeting satisfactory standard in writing as well as meeting the standard for postsecondary readiness.

Enhancing literacy and writing skills has been a central focus of education for students of African descent throughout Black history (Woodson, 2006). One culturally responsive, critical race approach to enhancing the literacy and writing skills of students of African descent has been developed by Christopher Knaus (2011). While working at East Bay High School in Oakland, Knaus embraced *voice* of his students and worked tirelessly to create space for students to write the world they live. In turn, engaged students reading and writing the world they live are able to express *community cultural wealth* through experiential knowledge (Delgado, 1989; Yosso, 2006). Applying an approach to literacy and writing similar to Knaus in rural east Texas may enhance the performance of students of African descent across subject areas and increase the percentage of students meeting postsecondary readiness.

*Responding to aspects of curriculum and instruction: Highly qualified teachers*

In analyzing STAAR data, the content from which these assessments are based must also be examined. Aspects of the curriculum as well as instruction within Region VII and the state overall lay an important foundation to how students will perform while taking into consideration factors such as socioeconomic status and other forms of access to social and cultural capital. As accountability efforts increase in pursuit of increased student performance, an emphasis has been

placed on having “highly qualified teachers” in every classroom (Region VII, 2015). TEA identifies highly qualified teachers according to “Section 1119 of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)...the act requires all teachers teaching core subject academic areas to meet specific competency and educational requirements” (TEA, 2015, para. 1). TEA explicitly identifies criteria as “...teachers who provide direct instruction to students in any core academic subject area, including English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages [languages other than English], civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography” (TEA, 2015, para. 2). Highly qualified teachers for these subject areas must

1. Hold at least a bachelor’s degree;
2. Be fully certified to teach in Texas; and
3. Demonstrate competency in their core academic subject areas. (TEA, 2015, para. 3)

In rural schools, due to such factors as teacher retention and recruitment, there are challenges to maintaining this standard. This goal becomes even more difficult when there is an intent to offer learning opportunities from a diverse highly qualified teaching pool. Within TEA’s Region VII during the 2013-2014 school year, there were 9,431 highly qualified teachers in “Regular” and 831 highly qualified teachers in “Special Education” classrooms (TEA, 2014b). From these totals, the data illustrates in the elementary grades (PK-6) 99.46% of 6,112 “Regular” classrooms were taught by highly qualified teachers while in the secondary grades (7-12) 98.93% of 21,993 “Regular” classrooms were taught by highly qualified teachers. In “Special Education” classrooms, the data illustrates in the elementary grades (PK-6) 99.47% of 569 classrooms were taught by highly qualified teachers while in the secondary grades (7-12) 98.04% of 2,096 classrooms were taught by highly qualified teachers (TEA 2014b).

When linking student performance on STAAR with the high percentages of highly qualified teachers within the region, there are significant concerns that still need to be addressed. Questions arise through this analysis that suggest that while teachers are not the only factor in students' success, what TEA uses as criteria may need modification. For students of African descent, as with other students, connections between their constructed worlds and the course curriculum is essential. Mastery of course content by teachers alone does not ensure that course content will effectively be conveyed to and learned by students. When reviewing the STAAR data for percent of students at postsecondary readiness (see Table 6), the success rates of students across race and ethnicities do not align with what would be expected by being taught by highly qualified teachers. Students of African descent are placed in contexts with many obstacles in front of them within rural schools and school districts that extend beyond how they are taught but also to how they are tracked due to the social class and ideas regarding knowledge in ways highlighted in the work of Jean Anyon (1981). While Anyon's work centered on urbanized settings, much of what is discussed has implications for rural settings as well. As the subsequent section illustrates, concerns regarding discipline and student graduation are not limited urban contexts.

*Responding to PEIMS Data (Attendance, Discipline, and Graduation)*

While students of African descent are well above the Region VII mean for attendance, they are well below the mean for the rate of Graduation/GED/Continuing Education. Conversely, students of African descent are well above the mean for the percentage of students being pushed-out/dropped out. Furthermore, students of African descent are twice as likely to be placed in out-of-school suspension. While students of African descent were placed in out-of-school suspension 8,257 instances during the 2013-2014 academic year, they were also placed in in-school-

suspension 21,436 times. Each disciplinary incident negatively impacts the educational opportunities of the punished student (Fuentes, 2014). Fuentes further states:

The report *Breaking Schools' Rules* (Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks III, & Booth, 2011) found that 10% of students who had been disciplined eventually dropped out. Worse, it identified the connection between zero tolerance discipline and the school to prison pipeline: Students suspended for a discretionary code violation were three times more likely than students who were not disciplined to become involved with the juvenile justice system in the following year. (p. 45)

Without quick intervention, many students of African descent will remain on the school-to-prison pipeline in Region VII. Parents, guardians, teachers, students, and community stakeholders must come together to disrupt the systematic policing of modern schools in Region VII. Re-situating public schools as community centers could be a start to the process of developing a force of community collaboration (Lacquees-Zapien & Mendoza, 2014). Schools could be open year-round and extended hours to serve as a central hub for enrichment activities for parents/guardians and students, job placement for community members, and mental and physical health care services (Lacquees-Zapien & Mendoza, 2014). Furthermore, creating schools as community and cultural centers could create a public space for open negotiation between the school and community members for the development of school policies that embrace and respond to the cultural wealth of the community (Yosso, 2006). Being active in school policy at the local and state level is critical in disrupting this problematic cycle of disproportionate punishment. Community stakeholders should stand-up in protest against any increased efforts to expand police and military in our schools (Lacquees-Zapien & Mendoza, 2014). It is encouraged that community stakeholders submit a call to eradicate current policing of



schools and instead schools should employ more school counselors, social workers, peace-builders, and community interventionists (Lacquees-Zapien & Mendoza, 2014).

Schools and district administrators must also foster meaningful opportunities for community empowerment through authentic engagement and educational experiences that value the social and cultural capital found within them. Schools should consider working more closely with community partners to engage in activities to enhance the community infrastructure. Some historical approaches to enhancing the community infrastructure include community arts projects and community garden projects. Through the development of positive community that responds to the community cultural wealth, schools would become a safe and positive academic environment for youth. A safe and positive academic environment should directly impact student attendance and academic success. With high attendance rates and experiencing academic success, graduation rates will rise (Lacques-Zapien, & Mendoza 2014). However, without experiencing academic success and a continuance of disproportionate punishment, the life choices and life chances of students of African descent will be negatively impacted.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This critical analysis was limited primarily to the data within Region VII as dictated by the Texas Education Agency. Also, data limitations included only data readily accessible via the website for the Texas Education Association. While this study provided context of the current moment in education for students of African descent in Region VII, many questions loom. Future research is needed to explore the following questions: Assuming that rural education is really an area of concern as stated by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, how are the ideas or policies of the department of education making it to the students and teachers in Region VII? What are the admission policies for teacher education programs that primarily serve Region VII and how

do those policies impact students and potential teachers of African descent? What are the policies and processes for hiring teachers of African descent in Region VII and what impact are these policies and processes having on potential teachers of African descent? What additional criteria could enhance what is defined as a highly qualified teacher for culturally and linguistically diverse rural settings? PEIMS data should cause critical race researchers pause. In what ways are race as a physical, social, legal, and historical construction intersecting with the schooling experiences of students of African descent to impact their schooling experiences in rural contexts?

In order to gain a clearer perspective on the educational experiences of students of African descent, stakeholders must engage the curriculum, learning/home environments, teacher influences, and student connectedness. These factors are complex in scope and nature but require that the intersectionality between these facets be analyzed. This need becomes even more important and essential as students, teachers, school administrators, families, and surrounding communities are often negatively implicated when state-identified benchmarks are not met. Schools' ratings impact future student attendance, teacher retention, and the manner in which resource allocations will occur (Abendroth & Profilio, 2015).

These occurrences have significant implications to rural schools, which as discussed previously within this article, face their own sets of circumstances and obstacles that the current educational climate stipulates. The researchers believe passionately that students of African descent must be provided with time and space to express authentically their various forms of intelligences and cultural frameworks. Cultural and social norms that are distinct to rural areas also must be further explored as it relates to student identity and student advocacy which may also include parental involvement. Within rural east Texas school districts, what avenues do

students of African descent and their parents/guardians have for advocacy in light of the frustrating PEIMS data?

While there appears to be agreement among stakeholders that rural schools and districts are important institutions for community success, there appears to be varied perspectives on how to achieve this success. Critical masses of diverse populations, in terms of students, parents, faculty, staff, and administration are needed beyond what is traditionally accepted based on race and/or ethnicity. Yet, this may be one of the greatest challenges based on the current landscape and opportunities within East Texas communities. Diverse social, political, religious, and/or economic perspectives are also needed as learners within rural communities are expected to compete with their counterparts who reside in urban and suburban contexts as the nation shifts its focus to global competitiveness.

Each of these identified concerns are significant for all learners within this context. This research seeks to centralize the researchers focus to how the aforementioned concerns directly and indirectly impact the educational opportunities of students of African descent and the communities in which they are members. As with racial identity frameworks, we must also recognize persons of African descent who are of mixed race/ethnicity and those who are first or second generation immigrants from African countries who are often labeled as African American. In acknowledging these within the context of rural East Texas, further research that explores the lived experiences of students of African descent may be most informative.

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