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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the myth of socioeconomic dissonance and its effects on the identification, assessment, placement, and instruction of African-American students with special needs. Socioeconomic status is seen to predetermine the academic success and survival of African-American students. The paper looks at the politics of "poverty," the school and the "poverty" construct, and the power of negative expectations. Nontraditional identification, assessment, and instructional strategies are recommended. Educators are urged to deemphasize the family environment and low socioeconomic background of these students and instead provide caring environments, relevant curricula, and disciplinary measures that involve students. (Contains 34 references.) (DB)

The Myth of Socio-Economic Dissonance: Implications for African-American Exceptional Students

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Abstract

African-American exceptional students confront multidimensional problems which range from the prescription that worth of individuals can be derived from a single quantity of intelligence to the lack of cultural acceptance of values, symbols and learning styles. Coupled with these discouraging phenomena is the myth of socio-economic dissonance. This myth has pervaded special education programs for African-American students. Teachers (African-Americans included) have misidentified, misassessed, misplaced, and miseducated African-American students. They have continuously used socio-economic status to predetermine the academic success and survival of African-American students. This paper addresses the myth of socio-economic dissonance and its effects on identification, assessment, placement and instruction of African-American students. In addition, nontraditional strategies for working with these students are discussed.

The Myth of Socio-Economic Dissonance: Implications for African-American Exceptional Students

African-American exceptional students confront a myriad of problems in educational programs. These problems include (a)the theory of biological determinism which subscribes to the principle that "worth can be assigned to individuals and groups by measuring intelligence as a single quantity" (Gould, 1981, p.20); (b)the use of standardized instruments as solutions (rather than as ingredients) for classification, categorization, and placement (Anrig, 1985; Hilliard, 1989); (c)the perceptual assumption that they have "low" or "negative" self-concept because they are experiencing failure in school programs (Obiakor, 1990, 1991, 1992; Obiakor & Alawiye, 1991; Obiakor & Fowler, 1992); (d)the insufficiency of realistic role models (e.g. African-American teachers) who understand their history, symbols, cultural values, and learning styles (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1987; Harvey & Scott-Jones, 1985; Staples, 1984); and (e)the lack of multiethnic education to foster cultural acceptance and diversity (Banks, 1977, 1986; Gay, 1981).

The aforementioned problems are discouraging; however, there is an even greater problem, ie., the issue of socio-economic dissonance. This issue has been presumptuously and mythically addressed in relation to the education of African-American students with behavior and learning problems. Many important questions remain unanswered by special educators and

practitioners working with African-American students. Does "poverty" mean "poor" intelligence? Is "poverty" a stigma that should lead to categorization and placement in special programs? Does "poverty" mean "poor" self-concept and "poor" cultural values? Does "poverty" mean "poor" zest for academic growth?

In working continuously with African-American exceptional students as a researcher and consultant, the author discovered that well-intentioned special educators and practitioners have used socio-economic dissonance mythically and unproductively. This use of socio-economic dissonance in school programs leads many African-American students to internalize and practicalize the negative consequences of the "self-fulfilling prophesy." Is it any wonder that African-Americans and other minorities are over-represented in special education programs? This paper addresses the myth of socio-economic dissonance and its effects on identification, assessment, placement and instruction of African-American exceptional students. In addition, nontraditional strategies for working with these students will be discussed.

The Politics of "Poverty"

Before the Public Law (PL) 94-142 era, there were rampant problems of misidentification, misassessment, misdiagnosis, misplacement and misinstruction of African-American students in educational programs. These problems led to advocacies, litigations and legislations. Unfortunately today, similar situations are prevalent in special education programs. Many at-

risk and economically disadvantaged students who do not fit into any of the existing categories of exceptionalities are not reached, and the social problems that place students in disadvantaged positions are not judiciously tackled (Davis & McCaul, 1990; Obiakor, 1991, 1992; Pallas, Natriello & McDill, 1989). These problems have continued to be excessively politicized in a polarizing fashion, and the society has also continued to blame the "victim." Davis and McCaul presented some alarming data which revealed that:

1. 1 million students drop out of school each year.
2. 1.5 million teenage women become pregnant each year.
3. Between 1/5 and 1/4 of all U.S. children live below the poverty line.
4. On any given night it is estimated there are at least 100,000 homeless children.
5. Every year, more than 5,000 young people take their own lives.
6. More than 2.2 million cases of child abuse and neglect were reported in 1987.
7. Fifteen percent of graduates of urban high schools read at less than the 6th grade level.
8. Almost 10 million children have no regular source of medical care.
9. About 20 million children under age 17 have never seen a dentist.
10. An estimated 3 million children have a serious drinking problem. (p.4)

The data presented above reveals that the progress made in the 1960s has been marked with setbacks in the 1970s and 1980s. Not only has the government failed in its programs to combat "poverty" (Hill, 1989), it has also not challenged practitioners to stop relying heavily on "deficit" assumptions. Apparently, many researchers and educators have been unable to escape the dangers of the myth of socio-economic dissonance. The question, is, Can a poor child of a single parent household, living in the

housing project experience school success? Obiakor (1991, 1992); Ogbu (1978); and Yeakey and Bennett (1991) acknowledged that environmental stimuli impinge upon academic achievement and learning outcomes of African-American students. These stimuli include "poverty," home background, teachers, classrooms and schools. The Center for the Study of Social Policy (1991) noted that there are more African-American children from poor families than white children. Most inner-city schools teach children who are believed to be impoverished. Ironically, teachers in these schools live in different environments and belong to the middle class. In most cases, these teachers have different values, cultures and symbols. A logical extension is that "poverty" and cultural values of African-American students are seen as deficits rather than as strengths. These students are then misidentified, misassessed, misplaced and misinstructed.

The School and the "Poverty" Construct

American schools are very Eurocentric; and public school teachers have divergent cultures, values, and symbols. According to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (1987), Whites represent 71.2% of the children in public schools and 89.6% of the teachers; in contrary, Blacks represent 16.25% of all public school children, but only 6.95% of the teachers. These discouraging figures have several educational implications for the identification and assessment of African-American students in special education programs. These implications are

apparent in four cases that exemplify the predicaments of African-American students in today's public schools.

Case #1.

I visited an inner-city elementary school to see my student teacher. I was fortunate to meet the principal of the school (a White-female) who started telling me that all her students came from "poor" homes; and that they never did well in school because their parents did not have jobs. During our conversation, she told me that she lived in the suburb and that she drove sixty miles every day to and from school.

Case #2

I visited an inner-city high school to observe my student-teacher. In my conversation with the cooperating teacher (a White male), he told me that his students are "poor" and that many of them were drug-dealers who would either not succeed in life or would die before they became adults. When I asked him about solutions to help them, he laughed and indicated that it was difficult to flog a dead horse.

Case #3

I visited my student-teacher in a resource room in one of the inner-city elementary schools. The cooperating teacher was an African-American female with an Educational Specialist (Ed.S) degree in Special Education. During my conversation with her, she proceeded to tell me that many of her students are criminals. She particularly pointed out one of her students -- she told me that the student had broken into cars several times and that the student's mother was a prostitute. When I asked why she was telling me this awful story she noted that everybody knows.

Case #4

I visited an inner-city elementary school to continue my program, Project Self-Responsibility, which I initiated to help retain and graduate African-American students. The principal (an African-American male) was very nonchalent. He explained that the reasons for his skepticism are (a)these students were jail-birds who came from "poor" homes, and (b)these students' parents did not have jobs. In our conversation, he indicated that these students were beyond redemption.

These cases have shown that teachers and administrators (African-Americans included) have given up on many students because they are culturally and socio-economically different.

The U.S. Department of Education (1991) in its book, America 2000: An education strategy had mapped out six national education goals "to jump start a new generation of American schools, transforming a 'Nation at Risk' into a 'Nation of Students'" (p.56). With all its good intentions, "Education 2000" has a fundamental flaw, i.e. excessive reliance on national testing. This reliance ignores environmental factors (such as nutrition, self-concept, motivation, anxiety, examiner race, test sophistication, and language) which have been found to affect academic and test performance (Gould, 1981; Hilliard, 1975, 1989; Obiakor & Alawiye, 1990; Ogbu, 1987, 1988, 1990; Samuda, 1975). Many tests produce reliable or consistent results even when they do not measure what they purport to measure. Like White students, African-Americans differ inter-individually and intra-individually in test-taking skills (Minton & Schneider, 1980). It is counterproductive to test and place African-American students using tests that have been standardized with the ethnocentric, White, middle class sample. Anrig (1985) warned that "excellence must not become the new code word for a retreat from equity, just when the struggles of recent years are beginning to pay dividends" (p.623).

Should special eduators ignore historical backgrounds, language and symbols, cultural beliefs, behavioral patterns of

African-American students because they are "poor?" Should the complex web of informal rules and processes be instituted to decrease academic opportunities, choices and achievements of African-American students because they are economically disadvantaged? These questions call for nontraditional strategies to help African-American exceptional students to maximize their potential in school and in life.

Responding to Nontraditional Strategies

It is apparent that African-American students, especially those in the low socio-economic bracket, are at-risk. Clark (1988) remarked that "the bulk of young people who are at risk are subjected to psychological genocide" and "robbed of self-esteem and the capacity to achieve" (p.iii). In fact, most at-risk students "fall into the mode of learned helplessness" (Lovitt, 1991, p.387) when programs are inappropriately designed to address their special needs. Baer (1991) reiterated:

> We need to understand who these kids are. They have potential; however, they don't know it. They need what we all have to offer, but they won't believe it. In a way, they may want to fail because there is a kind of comfort in that. After all, it's what they know best. Failure is a restful place to be. Nobody bothers them much because they can't be expected to give or participate --- The crucial point to remember is that in spite of all these obstacles, these kids have all the potential that other kids have. (p.25)

Baer's comment demonstrates that at-risk African-American students are not well-understood by professionals who work with them. It has two implications. First, nontraditional

identification, assessment and instructional strategies are needed to ameliorate their multidimensional problems. Second unwarranted suppcsitions about at-risk African-American students by professionals do not assist these students in becoming productive members of the society.

The myth of socio-economic dissonance is just a myth. Children from "poor" homes can succeed in school. Knapp and Shield (1991) explained that the attention on the poor preparation of economically disadvantaged students frequently removes attention on how poorly prepared educational programs are. Schools should respond to their needs by designing programs that meet the unique individualities in least restrictive envoronments. Special educators should provide caring environments, relevant curricula, and disciplinary measures that involve students. Frantic efforts should be made to de-emphasize the family environment and the low socio-economic background of the student (Calabrese, 1991). Special educators and service providers should motivate these students to maximize their potential by (a)not subscribing to the archaic theory of biological determinism which prescribes that the worth of an individual can be known through single intellectual quantities, (b)not using instruments that lack validity and reliability for classification and placement, (c)not assuming that "poverty" means "poor" self-knowledge, self-esteem or self-ideal, (d)not ignoring the cultural values and learning styles that students bring to school programs, and (e)not ignoring students because of

their socio-economic status. Hilliard (1992) contended that new special education imperatives are necessary if African-American students are to succeed in school programs. He reaffirmed:

1. We must assume that children's thinking can be changed significantly. We do not know their upper limits.
2. We are interested in the process of thinking and how they can be changed, rather than in the product for comparative purposes (ranking and classification).
3. We must require that any system that is employed be able to produce significant and meaningful change in students' cognitive and academic functioning.
4. We should, given the existence of a successful system, have a theoretical explanation of it. (p.170)

Perspective

The pervasive myth in educational programs is that "poor" children cannot learn. Today, many "poor" African-Americans are ignored in school programs. They are misidentified, misassessed, misplaced and misinstructed. The wrong assumption is that they are doomed to fail. Many White teachers do not understand the values, symbols and cultures that African-American students bring to school programs. Ironically, many African-American teachers (who might themselves have been from poor backgrounds) are insensitive to the plight of African-American "special" students. Prater (1990) reported that pregnant or parenting African-American teenagers experienced gross insensitivity from their African-American famale teachers. The educational system cannot afford to treat the African-American student as a nonentity. Teacher training institutions should prepare their students (African-Americans included) for society's realities -- institutions cannot <u>prepare</u> and <u>destroy</u> students at the same

time. More befitting to this present challenge is Woodson's (1933) statement about 60 years ago. He wrote:

> The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worth while, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. The Negro thus educated is a hopeless liability of the race. (p.xiii)

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