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ABSTRACT

Too many ethnic minority students enrolled in urban schools are not achieving to their full potential, and this problem is particularly acute for African-American males. One strategy to enhance achievement has been separate educational settings for African-American males, a relatively new and highly controversial innovation in public education. This research compared perceptions of classroom environment for middle school students enrolled in two classrooms for African-American males at two different schools and similar students enrolled in the general education program at each school. All participants (n=92) completed the Classroom Enrollment Scale (R. Moos and E. Trickett, 1987). Scores were analyzed as a function of school type and classroom type. Ratings were similar for the two African-American male classrooms but differed substantially for the comparison groups. Results are interpreted within a goodness of fit framework. The strong positive relationships among affiliation, teacher support, involvement, classroom order, and task orientation are consistent with previous findings that African-American male classrooms have positive effects on relationships between students and their teacher as well as on students' attitudes toward academic activities and their own academic abilities. This effect seems to be somewhat stronger in the middle school than the K-8 school. (Contains 2 tables, 1 figure, and 11 references.) (SLD)

Urban Minority Adolescents' Perceptions of Classroom Climate

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April 1998

Abstract

Too many ethnic minority students enrolled in urban schools are not achieving to their full potential, and this problem is particularly acute for African-American males. One strategy to enhance achievement has been separate educational settings for African-American males, a relatively new and highly controversial innovation in public education. This research compared perceptions of classroom environment for middle school students enrolled in two classrooms for African-American males at two different schools and similar students enrolled in the general education program at each school. All participants (N=92) completed the Classroom Environment Scale (Moos & Trickett, 1987). Scores were analyzed as a function of school type and classroom type. Ratings were similar for the two African-American male classrooms, but differed substantially for the comparison groups. Results are interpreted within a goodness of fit framework.

Urban Minority Adolescents' Perceptions of Classroom Climate

Introduction

Urban schools face formidable challenges in the face of the social and economic decay and isolation in our inner-cities. Currently, many low income, urban minority children are not achieving at optimal levels, as measured by traditional indices (e.g., standardized test scores, GPA's, college entrance and completion) (Irvine, 1990). Relative to their more advantaged peers, these children consistently lack the opportunity to develop higher level reasoning and complex problem-solving skills so necessary for success in higher education (Mullis, Owen, & Phillips, 1990). The social and economic isolation, student and teacher alienation, and low expectations and achievement so pervasive in our inner-city schools (Waxman, 1992), leave little doubt as to why these students are also especially likely to drop out of high school prior to the attainment of a diploma (Irvine, 1990).

Urban, African-American males in particular experience alarming levels of educational failure. They are more likely than either white males or females of any race to drop out of school before the completion of high school (Reed, 1988). Further, while enrollment in postsecondary education programs during the 1980's was declining 1.1% for African-American females, the decline was greater than 6% for African-American males (Reed, 1988). Far too many young men leave school inappropriately and subsequently are more likely to experience limits on their employment opportunities and heightened criminal activity. In sum, these young men often represent billions of dollars in wasted human potential and social costs.

Academic Settings for Black Males

Educators now seek ways to enhance achievement for urban, ethnic minority adolescents. One reform has been a return to a segregated setting for African-American males, as exemplified by the Detroit and Milwaukee academies (Ascher, 1991). However, race and gender specific programs are relatively new and hotly debated in public education (Hopkins, 1997). Single-sex, single race public schools have been surrounded by controversy, and legal challenges have forced most if not all of them to either undergo substantial alterations or cease operations (Narine, 1992).

Self-contained classrooms for at-risk adolescents, once the preferred educational setting (Swanson & Reinert, 1979), have re-emerged as a viable alternative. Separate classrooms which target curricula and instruction to the African-American male (Hudley, 1995; Narine, 1992) have been instituted on comprehensive campuses in areas as diverse as Baltimore, Miami, and Southern California. These classrooms, though highly diverse in their individual approaches, all share a set of common characteristics: African-American male instructors, a rigorous curriculum that embraces African history and culture, and high expectations (Ascher, 1991). Unlike the immersion academies, these classrooms are legally required to provide services to all at-risk students.

The full effects of these programs are as yet unknown, as data are sparse on both implementation and outcomes. Preliminary research indicates positive outcomes for middle school adolescents in classrooms for African-American males, including increases in perceived

academic competence (Hudley, 1995), intrinsic motivation for academic tasks (Hudley, 1997), and school appropriate behavior (Hudley, 1995).

The Current Study

The current study moves from documenting student experiences in single classrooms to comparing features across multiple classrooms. A goodness of fit model predicts that school adjustment should increase as the educational context becomes more compatible with the characteristics of the students in that context. Thus I am now investigating differences in how these programs are implemented at several sites. I am particularly interested in how students perceive the classroom and how these perceptions differ as a function of both school type and classroom type (i.e., race and gender specific vs. general education).

I anticipated that classroom perceptions would be related to students' school adjustment. The data reported here include students' perceptions of their classroom environment at two schools serving adolescents in a single district. Also included are students perceptions of their own level of competence in the school setting, used here to assess one type of school adjustment. These analyses are an intermediate step toward a comparison of implementation effects and adolescents' academic and social-emotional outcomes across multiple classrooms situated at diverse school types.

Method

Participants. Participants (N=92) were African-American male adolescents enrolled in grades 7-8 in one of two schools in Southern California: a middle school serving grades 6-8 and a K-8 school with a departmentalized program for students in grades 7 and 8. The middle

school enrolled approximately 780 students, 61% of whom were eligible for the free lunch program. African-Americans comprised the great majority (84%) of the student population; the balance were Latino. The ethnic balance and economic circumstances were similar for the K-8 school, which enrolled approximately 550 students.

Study participants at each site in the classrooms targeting African-American males received academic instruction (i.e., English, math, social studies, science) each day within a self-contained classroom. Each of these classrooms emphasized African-American history and culture, was taught by two African-American males (a teacher and a teacher's aide), and at the time these data were collected enrolled only African-American male students. At the middle school, students received PE and elective class instruction outside of the self-contained classroom. At each site we compared students in the self-contained classroom (n's=24 and 22 in the middle school and K-8 school respectively) and a comparison group of African-American males enrolled in the general education program (n's=22 and 24 respectively), matched on age, standardized test scores (California Test of Basic Skills), and days of suspension. Mean ages for the groups were 13.5 and13.3 for the African American class students and comparison students in middle school and 13.1, and 13.3 for the African American class students and comparison students in the K-8 school.

Instrument and procedure. Participating students completed the Classroom Environment Scale (CES) (Moos & Trickett, 1987). This instrument has nine subscales of 10 true-false items each. It assesses perceived student-teacher and student-student relationships, as well as perceptions of classroom organization and learning activities. The instrument taps three

underlying dimensions of the classroom experience (Trickett & Quinlan, 1979): perceived relationships, goal orientations, and classroom organization. See Table 1 for sample items. Students rated either their self contained classroom (African-American classroom) or their English class (comparison students), an annual core requirement for all secondary students.

Students also completed the Self-Perception Profile for Learning Disabled Students (Renick & Harter, 1988), an adaptation of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985) . This instrument assesses perceptions of competence with 10 subscales: general intellectual ability, global self-worth, reading competence, spelling competence, writing competence, math competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct. This particular version of the Self-Perception Profile was more useful for this study because it provides multiple measures of perceptions of academic competence by assessing perceptions for specific academic domains.

The sample on which this scale was standardized included normally-achieving children, and the instrument has proven psychometrically sound for use with these children. Using Chronbach's Alpha, subscale reliability estimates for normally achieving children ranged from .80 to .90 (Renick & Harter, 1988). Using factor analysis, the scores of normally achieving children also revealed factor patterns which were consistent with the designated subscales.

Results

Classroom environment. Standardized classroom means on the CES (T-scores with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10) were analyzed in a repeated measures MANOVA, with classroom type and school type as grouping factors and subscale scores as the repeated

factor. A multivariate interaction between class, school, and subscale ($F[8,79]=4.39$, $p<.01$) was explained by univariate differences for the involvement, teacher support, order and organization, and teacher control subscales (see Figure 1).

Overall, African American male classrooms at the middle school and at the K-8 school were rated in a similar fashion, and K-8 comparison ratings tended to follow a similar pattern but to be lower on all subscales. The pattern of middle school comparison ratings were sometimes consistent with the two African-American male classrooms, with the following deviations (as reflected by the significant three way interaction). In the middle school comparison classroom, perceived academic involvement, student affiliation, and teacher support were lowest, perceived teacher control was highest, and perceived order and organization were lower than in the two African-American male classrooms (see Figure 1). Students at the K-8 school rated the African-American male classroom more positively overall than the comparison classroom. At the middle school substantial differences existed in the relationship subscales and in classroom order, again favoring the African-American male classroom.

In addition, I analyzed correlations among subscale scores separately by subscale type and school type (Table 2). In the African American male classroom at the middle school, involvement and teacher support were strongly related, and both related to task orientation and classroom order. Affiliation also related to involvement, task orientation, and classroom order but not to teacher support. Task orientation, rule clarity, and classroom order were also strongly

related. At the K-8 school, teacher support and student affiliation were related, as were task orientation and rule clarity.

For the middle school comparison students, involvement was strongly related to teacher support and rule clarity. Affiliation was also related to rule clarity. In the K-8 comparison, task orientation related to involvement, classroom order, and teacher control, while teacher support related to affiliation and rule clarity.

Perceived competence. Ratings for the Self-Perception Profile were also analyzed in a multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA). Mean differences between groups were not significant. Overall for the sample, scores clustered around the mid-range. However, relatively small cell sizes substantially reduced the power of this complex analysis. Thus, to further investigate differential patterns among the four classrooms, I analyzed correlations between subscale scores on the Self-Perception Profile and the CES, separately by school type and classroom type.

In the African American male classroom at the middle school, perceived general intellectual ability was positively related to teacher support (r=.53, p<.05). In the similar classroom type at the K-8 school, perceived general intellectual ability was positively related to both teacher support (r=.48, p=.05) and classroom order and organization (r=.46, p=.05), and negatively related to teacher control (r=.-49, p<.05).

In the middle school comparison group, perceived general intellectual ability was positively related to both teacher support (r=.59, p<.05) and student involvement (r=.67, p<.05), and negatively related to teacher control (r=.-57, p<.05). Only the K-8 comparison classroom

demonstrated relationships between variables which differed somewhat from the patterns evident in the other three classroom types. Perceived general intellectual ability was negatively related to both student affiliations (r=.-64, p<.05) and task orientation (r=.-58 p<.05).

Discussion

The relationships among variables that exist in these classrooms may affect students' intrinsic motivation for academic tasks. Features such as teacher support and control, as well as classroom order and rules have been found to have a substantial effect on measures of students' intrinsic motivation (Hudley, 1997) among this population. The strong positive relationships among affiliation, teacher support, involvement, classroom order, and task orientation are consistent with previous findings that African-American male classrooms have a positive effect on relationships between students and their teacher, as well as on students' attitudes toward academic activities and their own academic abilities. This effect appears to be somewhat stronger in the middle school than the K-8 school. However, environment variables were more consistently related to perceived academic competence at the K-8 school, suggesting that the African-American classroom environment may have a stronger effect on student cognitions when learning is not departmentalized, and students see only a single teacher all day. In the middle school, students in the special program interacted regularly with an elective teacher and a PE teacher, as well as a counselor. A somewhat divergent pattern in the K-8 control classroom suggested that peers were negatively influencing students' academic adjustment.

Overall, these data are evidence that the effects of race and gender specific programs will be moderated by specific features of both schools and classrooms. Understanding how these programs differentially relate to student outcomes must await further analyses of our data. These data are also quite limited in that they compare a single, self-contained classroom with multiple, departmentalized classrooms at each school type. Thus, additional investigations that can separate multiple effects of classroom type and school type more fully seem warranted.

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Table 1

Sample Items from the CES

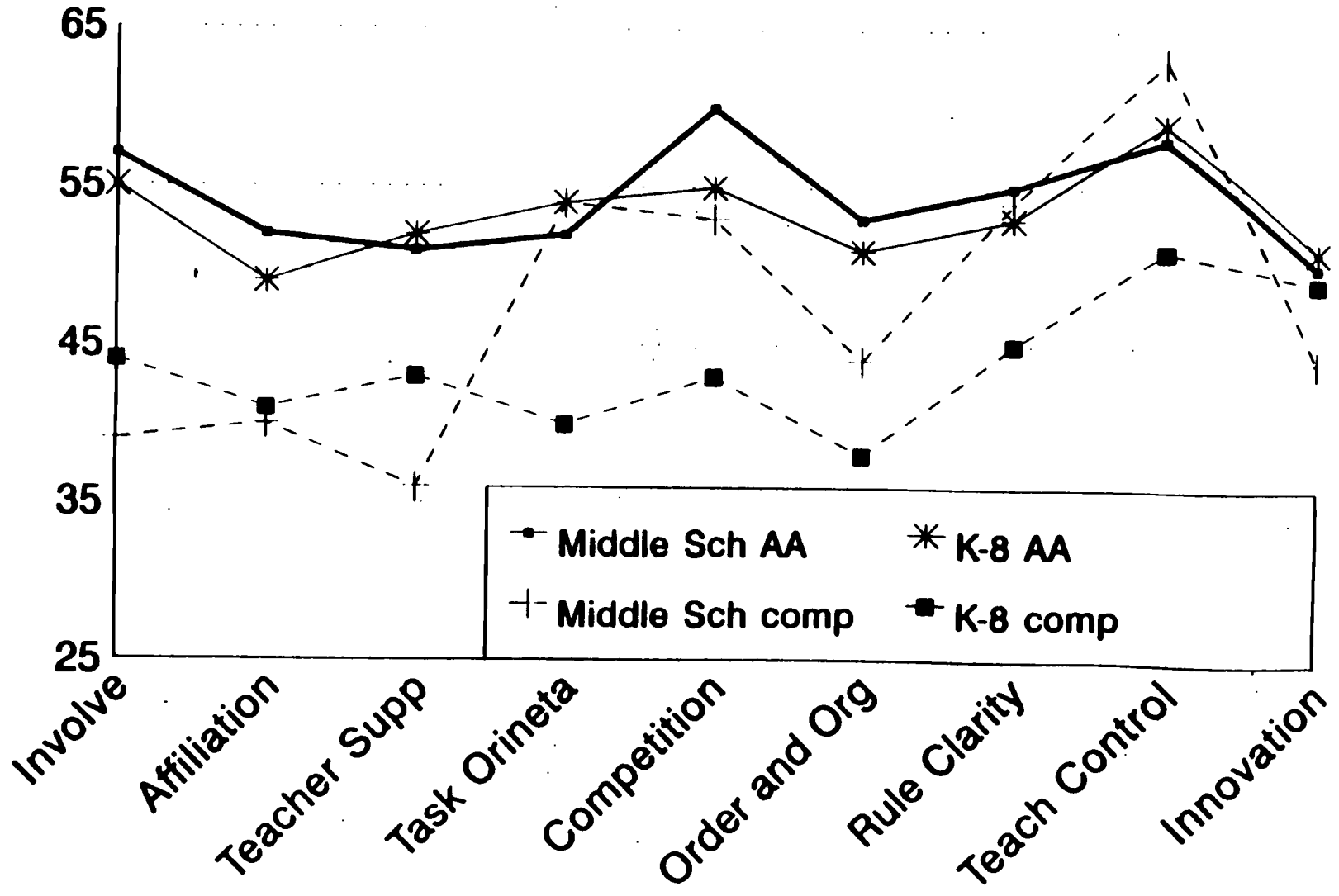
Relationship Dimensions
Involvement: Students put a lot of energy into what they do here.
Affiliation: A lot of friendships have been made in this class.
Teacher support: The teacher takes a personal interest in students.
Goal Orientation Dimensions
Task Orientation: Students are expected to stick to classwork.
Competition: Sometimes the class breaks up into groups that compete with each other.
Classroom Organization
Order and Organization: Students fool around a lot in this class.
Rule clarity: The teacher explains what the rules are.
Teacher control: The teacher will kick a student out if he acts up.
Innovation: The teacher likes students to try unusual projects.

Table 2 Selected Subscale Correlations

Variable	Af-Am Middle school	Af Am K-8 school	Comp. Mid. School	Comp. K-8 school
involvement/ teacher support	.78	n.s.	.81	n.s.
teacher support/ affiliation	n.s.	.42	n.s.	.62
involvement/ affiliation	.60	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
task orientation/ affiliation	.68	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
task orientation / teacher support	.66	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
task orientation / involvement	.67	n.s.	n.s.	.50
task orientation / teacher control	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.54
task orientation / classroom order	.83	n.s.	n.s.	.63
classroom order/ involvement	.77	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
classroom order/ affiliation	.60	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
classroom order/ teacher support	.69	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
rule clarity/ affiliation	n.s.	n.s.	.59	n.s.
rule clarity/ involvement	n.s.	n.s.	.60	n.s.
rule clarity / task orientation	.66	.47	n.s.	n.s.
rule clarity/ classroom order	.62	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
rule clarity/ teacher support	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	.53

NOTE. All p's <.05

Classroom Environment Ratings



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