

UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

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African American Males and Academic Socialization

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the socialization skills, self-esteem, and academic readiness of African American males in a school environment. Discussions with students and the School Perceptions Questionnaire provided data for this investigation. The intended targets for this investigation were African American students; however, there were 21 students: 18 African American males in grades 6 to 8 from a middle school in eastern North Carolina; in addition, one Hispanic American male and two White males were also observed. The African American males tended to enjoy school, yet they lacked the social skills for effective classroom learning.

KEYWORDS: African American males: black males: academics.

“Educate the black man, mentally and industrially, and there will be no doubt of his prosperity.”

Booker T. Washington

African American males need earlier positive experiences within a learning environment that prepare them for ongoing engagement in the academic process. Many African American males do not attend quality preschool programs or participate in early learning opportunities (McCall, 1993). These types of experiences may better prepare African American males for learning. “School is the first public place that many children get the opportunity to demonstrate mastery and competence outside of their early family environment” (Rounds-Bryant, 2008, p. 27). Rounds-Bryant (2008) concluded that early failure in school typically leads to classroom frustration, academic withdrawal, and negative behavior. Head Start or other similar programs may also provide an early educational experience for African American males to cultivate their social skills (McCall, 1993).

Schools across America spend money, invest in programs, sponsor workshops, offer teacher incentives, raise accountability, and even evoke the name of Obama in efforts to raise the achievement of African American males. Incarceration and college retention rates point to a dismal plight for many African American males. Money, policies, reform practices, busing, redistricting, and standards are in place to stop the trajectory of African American males from academic peril. Yet in most instances, the spiral of African American males’ education continues to plummet exponentially. This leads to the conclusion that an important construct for effectively teaching African American males is being neglected: “socialization for learning” for African American males.

Literature Review

The experience of African American males in America is unlike any other experience faced by other immigrants (Douglass, 2007). During slavery, African Americans were dehumanized and treated as inferior based solely on skin color (Douglass, 2007). African American males are often thought of as possessing less than acceptable qualities, such as being lazy and irresponsible (Douglass, 2007). Can it be assumed that African American males are experiencing the residual effects of slavery, and their academic performance is linked inextricably to teacher biases or the cultural dispositions of others?

Historically, African Americans have been the beneficiary of self-hatred and the looming effects of slavery (Douglass, 2007). Many African American males have internalized negative stereotypes about themselves, their looks, and their abilities. As a result, these negatively held beliefs of the dominant culture may have retarded the academic potential of African American males (Douglass, 2007; Bell, 2009). “The treatment that blacks [African Americans] have received from white American society has contributed greatly to the development of their self-hatred” (Douglas, 2007, p.4).

Socializing African American Males

Socializing African American males for educational success is critical in forging academic success and prowess in this often neglected population. Many African American males lack the social skills to effectively compete in today’s classrooms. Simple skills like raising hands, being called on, and following directions are tasks that prevent an alarming number of African American males from engaging in the learning process. Preparing African American males for socialized learning is paramount.

Although past achievements of African Americans are important, the “Raheems” and the “DayQuans” need to observe successful role models they can touch and see. Merely resting on the laurels of Dr. King's accomplishments is not enough. “Blacks [African Americans] frequently have no clear, positive, or realistic adult ambition...“They wish to succeed, but have no clear notion of how or what that will entail for them” (Hare & Hare, 1991, p.10). Invariably, they will have extreme difficulty finding role models (Hare & Hare, 1991). They cannot relate to Malcolm X, Ella Barker, Barbara Jordan, or James Baldwin because these are giants of the past. African American males need positive role models for the present.

Many African American males come to school without adequate social skills to function in a classroom environment. These males are confronted with two “selves”: the “one-self,” which depicts what community and peers expect of them, and the “other-self,” what the school expects of them. When the African American male cannot bring the two selves together, the one-self emerges when it is time to enter the school building. Common courtesy, raising hands, active listening, being self-disciplined, being prepared, and waiting your turn are only a few of the needed social skills that African American males must possess and display in today’s classrooms. As simplistic as these may sound, these traits must be internalized by African American males. When these skills are not developed at home or in the community, it becomes difficult for African American males to transfer those skills into the school environment. Majors and Billson (1992) concluded that African American males’ behavior is often misinterpreted. Misinterpretation can cause educators to conclude that African American males are innately rude and have an aversion towards schooling (Majors and Billson, 1992).

The culture of learning in most schools comes with expectations. Many African American males must come to appreciate school for its primary purpose; it is a place to learn.

Good and Brophy (1995) discussed factors that teachers can implement to teach social learning to students, such as addressing realistic perceptions of students while concomitantly enjoying teaching. Teachers must present clear, consistent roles and respond to a crisis in a fair and equitable manner. The following strategies may impact learning for African American males:

- Develop initiatives to appropriately and productively channel potentially self-destructive emotions,
- Focus on sharpening and broadening communication skills (“Obama” style),
- Showcase examples of successful, living African American males,
- Model appropriate social skills,
- Teach the concept of “code switching.”

Comer (1988) concluded that students bring experiences to the classroom which may be contrary to what the school expects. Families are typically agents for socialization, followed by the media, and then the school. African American males must be taught how to survive in today’s classrooms. Raising African American males can be a challenging pursuit in a world that tends to undervalue the culture and achievements of this population (Wilson & Llewellyn, 2009).

Method

In this investigation, students, participated in three discussions and completed five items from the School Perceptions Questionnaire (SPQ). The SPQ is an instrument designed to measure identification with academics (Osborne, 2007). Identification with academics has shown to predict academic outcomes (Osborne, 2007). This study was conducted over a 3-day period in December 2009, for up to 45 minutes per session.

The principal to a setting called students where the study was being conducted. The SPQ was given on the first day of the investigation. The SPQ and discussions were used as a process

to gather information and data for this investigation. In addition, the “Who Am I?” exercise provided data regarding student self-esteem and how students saw themselves. Twenty-one students participated in this inquiry. The intended targets of this investigation were 18 African American males in grades six to eight from a middle school in eastern North Carolina; 1 Hispanic American male and 2 White males were also observed. The researcher hypothesized that African American students would enjoy school. A second hypothesis was that African American students would lack social skills for learning.

Results

Based on interpretive analysis, the participants in this study wanted to succeed academically and attend college. However, the data revealed more preoccupation with “being handsome” than “being self-disciplined.” In general, the researcher found that students wanted to learn and enjoyed coming to school, yet these students were low achievers and aligned themselves with traits that seemed to contradict fostering academic excellence. In addition, it was clear that the lack of social skills prevented a majority of the African American students from learning. A detailed discussion of each measure is discussed below.

The SPQ is an instrument designed to measure identification with academics (Osborne, 2007). Osborne (2007) showed that identification with academics can predict academic outcomes. This investigation used five questions from the SPQ:

- (1) Being a good student is important to me.
- (2) School is very boring to me.
- (3) I plan to go to school.
- (4) Teachers do not care about me.

(5) I do not care whether I get good grades or bad grades.

Most of the students (70%) like being a good student. In addition, most students (60%) plan to attend college. However, for many of these students, their current preparation for college is woefully inadequate. Students cared about getting good grades, yet the majority had poor grades. Students had some ambivalent feelings regarding how teachers felt about them. Out of 20 students who responded to “teachers don’t care about me”, 7 students disagreed strongly, 2 disagreed mildly, 7 neutral, 1 agreed mildly, and 3 agreed strongly. The issue of boredom cannot be dismissed. From the data, it was unclear whether students thought school was boring, only 30% thought school was not boring. A bored student causes classroom disruptions, falls behind academically, and is also suspended often (Bell, 2009).

Focus Discussion

The purpose of the discussions was to create an environment where African American males could openly talk about career and life goals, academic milestones, school concerns, and behavioral issues. These discussions were informative for the investigator. All participants (21) were males; 18 were African American, 1 was Hispanic, and 2 were White.

The focus of the investigation was on African American males. However, the following anecdotal information is worth mentioning. The White students came to the discussion forum with paper and pencil; they were attentive and communicative. Paper and pencils were not required. The sole Hispanic student was highly interactive with the investigator and provided substantive feedback. On the other hand, the African American males were often elusive, vociferous, and playful. They were often off-task and had to be redirected several times.

These focused discussions clearly demonstrated the need for African American males to engage in constructive conversations as a means to develop social skills for classroom learning.

African American males must be taught the skills for effective communication. The marginalization of the educational process by many African American males presupposes the notion that they do not value the learning process. However, the investigator observed their behavior to be a lack of social skills for learning rather than a dislike for the educational process. These students did not come to the session with a thrust for learning; they had to be redirected several times, often off task, talking without permission, constant laughing, and exemplifying a battery of anti-social behaviors that were not conducive to a traditional learning environment.

Academic Achievement and Self-Esteem

The literature is not definitive regarding the link between academic performance and self-esteem (Bell, 2009). Bell (2009) concluded that academic performance may not be related to self-esteem. Osborne and Walker (2006) posited that “when there are negative stereotypes about the intellectual capacity of certain groups, members of that group suffer aversive consequences; group members who are most strongly identified with the stigmatized domain are those most likely to suffer the effects of the stereotype threat” (p. 563). Steele (1992) concluded that African American students tend to underachieve when presented with similar resources and experiences.

The African American students in this inquiry participated in a “Who Am I?” exercise. They were given a list of the 50 most frequently used words for the identification of self or how a person is viewed such as being caring, handsome, focused, happy, and friendly. The results support the belief that being handsome is more important to this group than being self-disciplined. A self-disciplined student tends to be more focused academically (Bell, 2009). Lack of self-discipline is a primary reason that African American males are suspended and incarcerated more than any other population (Bell, 2009). In particular, this group placed more emphasis on being handsome (60%) than on being self-disciplined (10%).

The majority of the students were below grade-level proficiency; however, 80% of these students saw themselves as successful. Success for these students may not be linked to academic achievement. Their definition of success may not be linked to how the majority culture defines the term. For many African American males, simply making it to the school may be an act of success. Being happy (20%) was not a valuable trait for these students. However, being happy has some implications for one's self-esteem and the psychological framework for learning and achieving.

Discussion

African American males continue to face a myriad of academic, social, and cultural factors that can hamper their learning potential. This population has a history marred by underachievement and low expectations, coupled with practices and measures that systematically place African American males at risk academically. African American males are not reaping their fair share of academic success. The academic achievement gap between African American students and their contemporaries continues to be a national educational concern (White, 2009).

African American males do have a responsibility for their own learning. African American males must develop the social skills that will allow them to learn. They must be attentive, on-task, engaged, polite, and free from disruptive behaviors that place them at risk academically. In addition, African American males must develop effective communication and meaningful vocabulary development. Behaviors such as excessive laughter, anger, rudeness, disrespect, "clowning," and joking thwart the instructional process. Teachers and educators often lack the cultural disposition to understand these behaviors. As a result, African American male students will continue to fall prey to suspensions, low test scores, and academic failure. Tasks like removing students from class, quieting them down, rebuking negative behavior,

stopping fights, eradicating “momma” jokes, and eliminating loud verbal exchanges inhibit classroom teachers from doing their primary job of teaching.

This investigation supports the assumption that social skills may aid African American males in developing the resolve to become better learners. Being happy, self-disciplined, friendly, caring, and honest were not salient responses of this population. Instilling appropriate social and academic values into the learning repertoire of African American males may positively impact their academic achievement. African American males also need to observe the positive social skills of successful black male adults. The researcher hypothesized that African American students would enjoy school. The first hypothesis was met; students did enjoy coming to school and seem to like their teachers. In addition, the students lacked the social skills for learning. The second hypothesis was also met. Many displayed socially unacceptable behaviors that prevented a continuous delivery of the instructional process

Conclusion

African American males need to be taught social development. The social learning theory is built on modeling attitudes, dispositions, and reflections of others (Bandura, 1977). Many African American males receive positive feedback for negative social behavior, and the negative feedback is received as appropriate. As a result, the social development of a negative culture is developing (Vygotsky, 1978). The constructivism theory postulates that learning is constructed from reflecting on prior experiences and extrapolating old information with new knowledge (Bruner, 1960). The social cost of inadequate and ill-conceived education for African American males is enormous (Levin, 2005). Not educating African American males has serious implications not only for this population, but also for the nation (Levin, 2005). Washington (1884) concluded that the “proper education of all the whites will benefit the Negro

[African American] as much as the education of the Negro [African American] will benefit the whites.” W. E. B. Dubois (1903) concluded that “the Negro [African American] race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional [African American] men.” We must save African American males. Are they worth saving?

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