

RUNNING HEAD: Schooling and Achievement

Schooling and Achievement: A Discussion on African American Students from Low  
Socio-Economic Households and their Over-Diagnoses of Learning Disabilities

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### Abstract

The following is a discussion on student level of academic achievement, specifically that of African American learners. The misdiagnosis of Black students having learning disabilities and other disabilities will be examined, and the factors as to why this misdiagnosis occurs so often. Research will be provided as evidence to support this claim, as well as alternate methods of assessing and assisting African American students, especially those who are from poverty-stricken families, as research shows they are most affected by the inaccuracies of the diagnosis of learning impairments.

### Key Terms

1. Learning Disability—“a disorder that impedes academic progress of people who are not mentally retarded, or emotionally disturbed” (Slavin, 2006, p. 399)
2. Exceptional Student Education (ESE)—educational programs mandated by a school district that are designed to effectively instruct students with disabilities
3. Disidentification—“a lack of relationship between academic self esteem, and global self esteem with implication that there has been a relationship in the past” (Osborne, 2007, p. 1)
4. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)—a common learning and behavior disorder that may affect certain areas of the brain that is use to solve problems, plan ahead, understand others’ actions, and control impulses (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2009)
5. Ebonics—a language coined by African American scholars in Oakland, California in 1996 that refers to an African American dialect. “[Ebonics] simply means black (ebony) speech (phonics)” (Rickford, 2007, p. 1)
6. Explicit-Direct Instruction—Focusing on one academic skill that is taught directly, step-by-step, by the teacher
7. Standardized State Assessments—tests mandated by a state’s board of education that determines the academic level of each student

## I. Introduction

Looking back on history, compared to present times, children with learning disabilities and other disabilities have a lot more options at becoming well-respected, functional adults. There are many different programs established to assist them in grasping learning concepts, as well as obtaining the necessary academic skills to succeed in life, including going to college. However, there are a lot of stipulations, as well as discrimination that comes along with having a learning disability, especially if one is a child from a low-income family, or a member of a minority race. As with any assessment of one's learning, the assistance that is received by students with learning disabilities has its ups and downs.

### *What is a Learning Disability?*

One of the most current definitions of a leaning disability is “a disorder that impedes academic progress of people who are not mentally retarded, or emotionally disturbed” (Slavin, 2006, p. 399). This meaning, however, has long since been adapted from other sources including dyslexia, dysgraphia, and other impairments of abilities. However, now that it is confirmed to be some sort of dysfunction of the brain or central nervous system (Slavin, 2006, p.399), clarifications of the requirements have been set by different school systems, as to when a child can be labeled as learning disabled. The following are some of those characteristics:

- Normal intelligence or giftedness
- Difficulty with self-motivated, self-regulated activities
- Attention deficit or high distractibility

- Low academic self-esteem
- Delays in achievement
- Similar self-esteem levels of nondisabled children in areas other than academics

According to these characteristics, race or gender is not a factor as to whether or not a child can or will be labeled as learning disabled. Nevertheless, studies show that, “African Americans...from families in which the head of household has not attended college, tend to be overrepresented in special-education classes” (Slavin, 2006, p. 401). This statement implies that there is a high possibility that several black students in ESE programs are incorrectly placed, taking up a spot in which a student who needs these services should be. Sad to say, one is inclined to believe that some educators are more interested in making their jobs easier by placing African American students that do not “catch on” as quickly as the rest of the class in ESE programs, than adapting their teaching styles to what the student can comprehend without belittling their intelligence. As a result, one asks why are African American students from low socio-economic households are overrepresented in ESE programs, and what is being done to prevent the furthering of these misdiagnoses?

## **II. Research**

### *The Importance of Self-esteem*

Many children that are underachievers, have low academic self-esteem, and have problems speaking, are considered learning disabled (Slavin, 2006). In fact, research suggests that, “50-80% of students that are labeled learning disabled have low academic self-esteem, but show normal to high self-esteem levels in athletic ability”

(www.nichy.org). This statement falls directly within the characteristics of learning disabled children, showing an example of one of the areas they excel and are confident in, other than academics. According to Erickson's psychosocial theory, personality develops through a series of stages and the impact of social experiences through the whole life span. One's ego identity is constantly changing due to new experiences and information acquired through interactions with others. Therefore, as African American students interact with their peers, they inherit many different social experiences, those were they are the underdog (academic) and vice versa, and those were they shine, specifically in athletics. Similar to a roller coaster, these students are built up on one end, only to find themselves being propelled all the way back to the bottom once they get back in the classroom. It also implies that these students are intimidated by the lessons being taught in school, and possibly, compensate for this by being over achievers in sports, such as football, and basketball; anything involving physical intelligence and steers away from academics.

#### *Where the Discrepancies Take Place*

Research on the concept of "disidentification" (Steele, 2007) provides a better understanding of the correlation between African American students and success levels. According to this concept, to become disidentified with academics means that there is "a lack of relationship between academic self esteem, and global self esteem with implication that there has been a relationship in the past" (Osborne, 2007, p.1). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the influence of culture, peers, and adults on the developing child, and that when the student's schemata has been filled the right amount of background information, then they are able to scaffold their own learning via

their zone of proximal development. With this being said, before any child is diagnosed with a learning disability, the lack of a relationship, as stated in Osborne's disidentification theory, as well as their personal experiences with academics should be considered. For example, an African American child from a low-income single parent family, is more likely to not be exposed to proper speech, phonics, and/or reading or writing, prior to entering the school system, simply because his/her mother is the primary source of income of the household, and spends a mass majority of her time at work. When this child enters into kindergarten, he/she is far behind the level of what is expected of kindergarteners that have never been to school, and/or may not catch on to new concepts because he/she has no prior knowledge of what is expected (Slavin, 2006). It is then the educator's responsibility to figure out what is the barricade(s) that is keeping this student from learning, and finding out how to fix it; the easiest way being teaching with relevance to this student by doing the necessary research to find out what he/she can relate to. A situation like this can be easily handled the wrong way, as a student who is disidentified can very well be mistaken as having a learning disability. Another good example, and one of students who have been within the school system for a while, would be high school test anxiety. All students experience this feeling, no matter the race, or ethnic background. However, students who have been disidentified face an added load of stress, worrying about possible failure, and fitting into a stereotype based on their ethnicity. This alone fosters feelings of giving up, and not being good enough, as African American students receive an extra slap in the face when their success levels are not as high as their white peers. They feel as though they only receive academic attention when they are playing into the stereotype, and never when they are achieving according to

ideological standards of teens their age.

This is where discrepancies come into play for misdiagnosing African American children with learning abilities. A lot of educators have been brainwashed, and firmly believe in the majority of academic stereotypes about African American children, especially those of low socioeconomic status (Arlington, 2008). They may have a Black child in their class that started off doing as well as the other children in the class, then, after some type of manipulation has come into play, this child begins to fail. Instead of investigating the situation, the teacher will easily use a learning disability as a cop-out. A study performed by Dr. Joshua Aronson, and Dr. Claude Steele (2008) proved that manipulation is a huge factor in the test performance of African Americans. The two performed a series of tests, each with a different level of stereotypical manipulation. In the first test, the one with a heavy amount of stereotypical manipulation, what was proven was that African Americans did worse on an academic diagnostic test than Whites, but once the same test was administered again, and the manipulation was removed, these African Americans proved to only have a small marginal difference in scoring than the White students. After five tests of different kinds were given to the students, the effects of stereotypes on African American students were obvious. What was discovered was that “the nature of the test impairs the rate as well as the accuracy of Black’s performance...”, “reporting racial identifiers depresses performance on a difficult test even when it was not presented as a diagnostic of intellectual ability...”, and “that if stereotypes are primed for the test-takers, the students will perform worse on the test.” (Steele and Aronson, 2008, p.69). This proves the premise behind social learning theory—that learning occurs in a social context, and that people learn from each other in



various ways, including observational learning, imitation, and modeling. The racial identifiers made the students feel inferior, affecting their self-esteem and causing them to score poorly through manipulation in the social context. This is a common occurrence as well as a factor in misdiagnoses of African Americans in ESE programs (Arlington, 2008).

#### *A Brief Look on Other Areas of Misdiagnosis*

Unfortunately, learning disorders are not the only type of disorders African American children are misdiagnosed with. Another popular disorder is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or more commonly known as ADHD. In 2008 alone, a whopping 65% of non-White children were diagnosed with ADHD (Cuffe et. Al). What is even more shocking about this number is that these children are also diagnosed with higher levels of psychiatric disorders such as disruptive orders, anxiety disorders, and mood disorders, just to name a few, and only a small percentage of these children are being properly treated. Low-income parents do not have the funds needed to get their children the necessary help, and therefore these children go untreated. They end up getting worse and worse, and eventually are too far-gone if and when they are able to get treated.

#### *Researching Possible Solutions*

Although one does not completely stand behind the teaching of Ebonics, as this “language” in itself further separates the African American race from the majority race, it does have good intentions, and has proven to be successful academically in the state of California. Ebonics is coined to be “the African American vernacular English”; however, the writer is only aware of one and speaks one form of English. At any rate, those

African American children that are familiar with this dialect (as Ebonics is exactly that and not a language) and cannot apply nor fully understand proper English, excel when taught in Ebonics. A study done in California (1996) produced surprising results for students who were tested in standard English, and Ebonics. Both tests were exactly the same, only one was prepared in a manner that the students were more comfortable understanding (Ebonics). The results showed that those students who scored very poorly on the English test excelled when the test was provided in Ebonics. The state of California even went as far as requiring its teachers to treat the dialect as a foreign language, learn it, and teach in Ebonics to its students, causing a tremendous amount of controversy for California's Department of Education.

The writer commends the California Department of Education for investigating the problem, and discovering other methods as a solution other than labeling these African American students as learning disabled. What other state departments of education, as well as parents, citizens, and African Americans should have taken out of this situation was not only the insult that it provided, but that an awareness of a crisis is at hand, and more methods of finding solutions need to be strategized. The teaching of Ebonics is insulting to the African American race mostly because it teaches children that improper English is okay, and that because this "language" is "genetically based [in African Americans]" (Fields, 1997, p.31) that it cannot be helped, acting as a crutch for these youngsters. It also provides false hopes for these students, as they will never be able to get into a college, be able to have a successful college career, or obtain and maintain employment of any kind. Although an attempt at a solution, it acts more so as a quick get-away, resulting from prior frustration of figuring out how to solve a never-

ending problem. Yet, at the same time, it proves that these children are not learning disabled; they just have no academic relationship with the information provided (disidentification). They are very much capable of completing the academic work, but if they lack resources, then the wrong interpretation will follow. One must treat each student as an individual, incorporate all factors that affect that student academically, and act accordingly. That is the ultimate responsibility for the educator.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion on the misrepresentation of African American children with learning disorders is meant by no means to be interpreted as all African American children that have been diagnosed do not indeed have learning disorders. There are many that benefit from being diagnosed, as their diagnosis is accurate; they fall completely within the guidelines of being deemed having a learning disorder, and, if recognized early on, will be able to benefit from this assistance the most. What is being said within this discussion, is based on stereotypes of academic performance of African American students, especially those that are from a poor family; they are expected to do badly in school, and that these wrong ideas are openly displayed to the students, both covertly, and overtly, and affect some more than others, especially those that are part of a poor family.

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