

Advocacy and Alternative Settings as Intervention Strategies for Reducing the Achievement Gap

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May 2, 2013

### **Nature of the Problem**

The academic achievement gap between African Americans and their White counterparts has been an issue that has been discussed and dissected for several decades. In 2010, the Schott foundation released a report on Black males in school. It was reported that for the 2007 – 08 school year, there was only a 47% high school graduation rate for Black males and only 9% of Black male 8<sup>th</sup> graders scored at a level of proficiency in reading (Schott, 2010).

Various scholars have speculated on both the causes and the implications of this social problem. Through recent years, scholars have begun to pay more attention to societal and social factors that adversely impact African Americans' achievement. Mickelson (1990) describes an attitude-achievement paradox in which students' personal experiences with education do not align with the overall sentiment of education being a likely path toward success. African American students do not receive the same support from teachers and administrators as their peers. Their teachers are more likely to be less qualified or experienced (Flores, 2007) and the teacher may have low expectations for them and may even go as far as to dissuade the students from attending college or taking advanced classes (Howard, 2003). These students are not even educated in the same way; they are more likely to attend schools that focus less on comprehension and knowledge (Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2007).

The implications of this gap come through in economic attainment, which then leads to disparate health outcomes. Ross and Wu (1995) found that education both directly improves health and indirectly improves health through work and economic conditions, health lifestyle, and social-psychological resources. With its impact on economic, social, and health outcomes, the achievement gap is a social problem that needs to be addressed and reduced.

**Main Position Presented**

The two intervention strategies that I propose for addressing this social problem are the creating alternative settings and advocacy. When alternative settings are being created, it is because the current setting or system is inadequate and changing the system is not a good enough option; therefore, the system or setting is completely abandoned and another is created (Cherniss & Deegan, 2000). Strategies and tactics for creating alternative settings include identifying and involving both insiders and outsiders, learning the prehistory of a new setting, creating a new organization, and transferring ideas into a social situation. Advocacy involves representing group interests in established institutional arenas (Checkoway, 1995). Strategies and tactics for advocacy include outreach to allies, contacting elected officials, and creating a plan that involves a power map of allies and opponents. With each strategy comes both strengths and weaknesses but I believe that they serve as the best options for solving the issue of the achievement gap.

A strength of alternative settings is that there is a sharper focus on the guiding principles of the setting (Cherniss & Deegan, 2000). Having more of a focus on the main goals of the setting allow for those involved to be more successful in implementing the program and promoting positive outcomes. For the achievement gap, this is a positive. Properly educating children should be the focus of any school, but too often this is not the case. In today's climate, there is so much emphasis on raising test scores that students are only learning how to take tests and not actually learning the material. This is especially an issue for already underfunded schools that have had funding rescinded due to No Child Left Behind Act. Creating an alternative education setting would allow for educating students to be at the forefront once again.

Another strength is that the climate tends to be characterized by high energy and goodwill

(Cherniss & Deegan, 2000). The climate plays as big of a role as any other factor in educating students. As stated earlier, African American students face situations with hostile teachers and administrators that hinder both their ability and their willingness to succeed. How can students be expected to succeed when the individuals charged with ensuring that are also the ones telling them that they cannot? Creating alternative settings would likely ensure that students receive the proper support from teachers and administrators that would promote positive academic outcomes.

A strength for creating alternative settings that is specific for addressing the achievement gap is that the students would be more likely to feel as if they belong. Such a setting would establish a sense of community within it. All the parties involved would benefit from being together. The students would be more likely to feel as though they can trust the teachers and other authority figures.

Advocacy also serves as a suitable option for reducing the achievement gap. A strength of advocacy is that it allows the interests of the group to be represented at various institutional levels (Checkoway, 1995). This allows students and parents to have their voices heard by the various bodies such as the school board or the local legislature. Making their voices heard at these levels also allow for them to have an impact on policies. This influences such things as funding and curriculum development. Advocacy could lead to the increase in funding for schools who lack the necessarily resources to properly education their students. As previously stated, African American students are more likely to attend schools that have fewer resources and less qualified teachers (Flores, 2007). With more funding, the schools could provide more resources to students to facilitate their education, as well as hiring more qualified teachers. More appropriate curriculum development could also be a result of advocacy.

Curricula could be developed that both focuses on the necessary material for students to succeed, but also to provide students with diverse skill sets that can prepare them for life after school.

Another strength of advocacy is that it can empower individuals and groups. Wallerstein (1992) defines empowerment as “a social-action process that promotes participation of people, organizations, and communities towards the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of community life, and social justice. This definition applies because making their complaints known to governing bodies and seeing their efforts come to fruition gives people a sense of control of their lives and the environment around them. Parents will be able to feel as though they are better able to contribute to their children’s success and the students will feel empowered in an environment that is more tailored to their continued academic success.

With strengths, come weaknesses as well and the strategy of creating alternative settings has weaknesses that should be addressed. One issue is that they are typically limited in the number of people they can serve (Cherniss & Deegan, 2000). The best example of this in the education realm is charter schools. To provide a specific example, the KIPP academies in Atlanta have been doing a good job with educating their students and their students tend to have scores that are higher than the national average in several categories. There are six schools in Atlanta and they serve approximately 1600 students. That number may seem large, but when you consider the metropolitan Atlanta area, you realize that this is a small minority of students that are receiving this service. Many other charter schools also admit small numbers of students and when the number of students applying is larger than what they have space for, a lottery is held. Unfortunately, this leaves many students unable to receive this same quality education and this could be due to pure chance.

Another weakness is that the establishment of these kinds of settings may discourage the larger society from assuming responsibility and addressing this social issue (Cherniss & Deegan, 2000). Whether the larger society would even address the social problem, with or without alternative settings is another issue. If parents attempt to hold schools accountable for the poor performances of their children, the response could easily be telling the parents that there are other schools to enroll their children. Yet, as stated before, these alternative schools are limited in the number of students that they can accept. So not only are many students left out, but they are also within systems of the larger society that are less likely to address the issue or assume responsibility for it.

Another issue is the establishment of alternative settings takes away from the resources available that could be used to change the existing systems (Cherniss & Deegan, 2000). This is a complaint that a lot of people have with charter schools. Some feel that charter schools are not guaranteed to be better than the regular public schools and that the funding that charter schools receive takes away from the funding of other schools that could be improved. The alternative setting that is created should be an improvement over the other settings. The strategy of advocacy comes with its own weaknesses as well. One potential issue is the backlash and push back from opponents, which would make the path to enacting policy level change more difficult. Opponents may feel as though the empowerment of other groups threatens their privilege. A prominent example of this is affirmative action. Affirmative action was meant to help increase the representation of minorities various realms such as education. Opponents felt as though White student were being penalized and individuals with lower qualifications were being allowed into schools.

Another weakness is that the individuals or groups that are being advocated for may not be the people who are empowered. Checkoway (1995) states that some advocates empower themselves and not the communities they advocate for. They may impose their personal values on the communities they serve and may even exclude community members from the process. This can lead to issues of dependency because the community will be dependent upon the advocate. With community psychologists being involved, the troublesome part would be to give up their power. The community psychologist would have to share their power with both the students and parents; unfortunately, this is not always the case.

### **Critical Questions**

When considering advocacy and alternative settings as viable intervention strategies, there are several critical questions that must be addressed. Addressing these questions will better illustrate the utility of each of these intervention strategies. For creating alternative settings for reducing the achievement gap, one question that is likely at the core is what constitutes an alternative setting. The most obvious examples are charter schools. Charter schools are relatively free to operate as they wish and they are not subject to the same regulations as regular public schools. Other than charter schools, what other alternative education settings are there? Answering this questions helps in also figuring the various shortcomings such as those highlighted by Cherniss and Deegan (2000). If the alternative setting is a school, an issue that has to be addressed is the addition of new teachers after the initial stages. Teachers who were there from the beginning would have to be responsible for socializing and training new teachers to using different approaches than those they may be used to in traditional settings.

Another question that should be addressed is if the alternative settings are better than the traditional settings that they would replace. One debate, especially with charter schools, is if

they are better than traditional schools. A problem with most alternative settings is that over time, they become more like the traditional settings that they attempt to replace. With all the outside opposition and external forces, any alternative setting would more likely to adapt to survey (Cherniss & Deegan, 2000). Unfortunately, this would mean becoming more traditional, and in this case that would mean not being much better than the previous settings.

Also, would the alternative settings maintain their effectiveness while serving larger numbers of students? One of the characteristics of alternative settings is that they tend to serve smaller numbers of individuals than traditional settings (Cherniss & Deegan, 2000). What needs to be examined is whether these settings are more effective because of the limit on the number of individuals they serve or whether the setting is an improvement based on its own merit and not the number of people served. Charter schools such as the KIPP academies and Urban Prep produce students who are academically successful, but they also serve a smaller number of students than other traditional schools. One of the main issues is that urban schools face, especially those that are predominantly Black, is that there is an overabundance of overcrowded classrooms and a lack of teachers who are able to adequately handle such situations. There is a shared opinion that smaller classroom sizes lead to improved outcome students; but what if it is not necessarily small classroom sizes that are better, but the interaction between classroom size and teaching style? Maybe the reason that classroom size is a problem in most inner-city and urban schools is that teachers may not be able to properly adapt their teaching style to suit a larger classroom size. The issue that alternative settings have to address is how to reach a larger number of students, while at the same time, maintaining a high level of effectiveness.

The other question in terms of alternative settings is whether the alternative setting is supposed to serve as an alternative or if it is supposed to be a model of what should be done.



There is no guarantee that if the setting serves as a model it will cause changes in traditional settings. Even if it causes changes in traditional settings, this could be a problem as well.

Traditional school settings may incorporate aspects from the alternative settings into their system, which could lead to the alternative settings being less competitive (Cherniss & Deegan, 2000). This leads to another question of whether these aspects are incorporated into traditional school settings as efficiently as they would be in an alternative settings. If the aspects are incorporated as efficiently, then it would be a positive, but if they are ineffective then it may reflect badly upon the alternative settings. Then there is also the issue if the traditional school setting is willing to amend itself to fit the needs of a given population. If the traditional school setting is not willing to amend itself, then it does not matter if the alternative aspects are implemented because they may be done so in a way that benefits African American students.

The use of advocacy also has questions that should be addressed. One major question that should be answered is: who is the advocate? Is the advocate the community (students and parents), teachers and administrators, or is it an outside person (psychologist, professional)? An issue that was brought up by Chekoway (1995) is that many advocates are not members of the communities that they serve and that they only push more minor modifications rather than fundamental system change. This would relate to an earlier point raised when discussing the weaknesses of the program. Who is being empowered? If the community psychologist is the advocate then there are several areas that have to be addressed.

Community psychologists must make sure that if they become involved in effort to enact policy change, they do not contribute to the status quo or exacerbate the current issue.

Community psychologists should also be knowledgeable about the fact that their research could have wide-reaching implications that can be seriously detrimental if not used properly. With

facing a multifaceted issue such as the achievement gap, community psychology as a field seems to be best equipped to tackle this issue. Psychologists must be aware of the different educational policies that have been enacted in the past. Also important is the political-organizational context. The current political climate is an issue because of the cuts of funding for various educational programs. An example of an educational program that has been hurt by budget cuts is the McNair program. Several programs throughout the country have lost their funding and have been forced to shut down. This relates to the political leaning of the group that the community psychologist is advocating to (Wursten & Sales, 1988). The group could either be one that approaches such an issue by evening the playing field by directing more resources to underfunded schools or they could be in favor of funding only the schools that perform well and leaving the other schools to wither away. Considering these will allow the community psychologist to be a more effective advocate.

If parents or teachers are advocates, then they must be sure that the students have their voices heard as well. There is always the risk that parents and teachers can superimpose their own beliefs onto the advocacy efforts without much input from the students. Then there is also the issue of parents and teachers clashing with one another because of their different points of view. Obviously, this would not be a good thing for the students for whom they are advocating. If the students are advocating for themselves, then there must be someone who will facilitate the students' advocacy and making sure that they learn the proper channels and the best ways to go about advocating for themselves. At the same time, the person or people responsible for making sure students can advocate for themselves should be careful that they do not impose their own beliefs on the students.

Another question that should be addressed in terms of advocacy is determining the appropriate level at which advocacy efforts should be directed. If the change is only desired at the level of the community, then advocating to the local school board may be enough. If more widespread change is desired, then state or even national legislature may be need targeted in these efforts. A very significant and impactful example of this is the case *Brown vs. Board of Education*. The landmark Supreme Court case was the culmination of various protests and demonstration and it led to the desegregation of schools and other public spaces. Determining the level of intervention would likely influence the specific strategies used for advocacy.

Finally, a question that should be considered due to its relevance for both intervention strategies is whether the community is ready for the change. There would not much point of implementing a strategy if the community is not behind it. This is especially difficult when the strategy may be implemented by individuals outside of the community. Jordan and colleagues (2001) discuss issues that Black psychologists face in their own communities due to the mistrust that Black communities have toward researchers and help professionals. With such a history of abuse at the hands of scientist, this issue has even more importance.

### **Limitations**

While these questions are important to consider, there are limitations in the existing literature that have be addressed to adequately answer these questions. In terms of what constitutes an alternative setting, there seems to be a lack of consensus on both the nature of the construct and its definition. While Cherniss and Deegan (2000) describe settings as existing on a continuum between the extremes of traditional and alternative, they do not go into enough specifics as to where an “alternative setting” falls on the continuum if it is embedded within a more traditional system. It also says that alternative settings could also be alternative in different

areas. I believe that this could cause a great deal of confusion because with these stipulations in mind, many programs or settings could be considered alternative even if in practice they are not much different than settings that would be considered traditional. There was also a description of several characteristics of alternative settings, but they were rather broad and seemed to only refer to surface characteristics that may not necessarily portray what makes them alternative. With an area like education, it can be difficult to properly define an alternative setting. Apart from charter schools, the criteria could be less clear in terms of defining what an alternative educational setting is.

Whether alternative settings can remain effective while serving a larger number of individuals is another area that has gaps. While there have been studies that have examined how alternative settings have worked when applied to different places or population, there does not seem to be much that looks at the effectiveness of the settings while services more members of the same population. This is an issue because the assumption that alternative settings are effective because of their smaller scope, while a valid assumption, needs to be validated by research. Studies need to be conducted to make sure that there are no other variables at play besides the number of people served that impact the effectiveness.

Also, there is little mention of evidence showing that alternative settings are significantly better than the traditional settings. A reason for could be the issue of defining and operationalizing alternative settings. While the idea of creating alternative settings seems very attractive, there has to be evidence that there is an improvement of outcomes. In terms of charter schools, there have been mixed results in terms of judging their effectiveness as compared to regular public schools. There also seems to be little research differentiating between programs that are intended to serve as alternatives and programs that are meant to serve as models for what

is supposed to be done. This differentiation is important because knowing what purpose the setting serves also influences how the setting is deemed a success or failure.

Other limitations arise when attempting to answer the question of who is the advocate. While studies have identified the different kinds of individuals who could be advocates (community members, professionals, etc.) there has not been any research that identifies which of these individual is the best advocate or which advocate is most likely to attain positive outcomes for the group they represent. While there is a bit on the pitfalls of outside individual advocates who advocate on the behalf of communities, there does not seem to be much that identifies whether these outside advocates are as good as people from the communities in question. The final issue that should be addressed is at what level should there be advocacy. While advocacy could happen at various levels, but there is not much that identifies an appropriate level to intervene at or whether there is one appropriate level. Phillips (2000) described how problems are defined differently and responded to differently based on the level of analysis, but there do not seem to be specific advocacy strategies for each level of analysis. It should be expected that strategies that work at the microsystem or mesosystem levels are at least somewhat different than those that work at the macrosystem level, but those specific strategies should be identified.

### **Recommendations**

The issues that were raised in the preceding section must be addressed to ensure the successful implementation of these prevention strategies. Conyne (2010) outlines ten steps for establishing a prevention program and evaluating it. Some of these steps will be useful in terms of addressing specific concerns that were raised. The first step is to establish and maintain a team. In this case, this would include recruiting teachers, administrators, and other academics to

help plan the program. As stated in Cherniss and Deegan's (2000) chapter, there must be a socializing and training process that facilitates the staff learning techniques that are suitable for an alternative setting. In terms of advocacy, there should be representatives from all interested parties included. This addresses the issues of who are the advocates in that it allows collaboration between students, parents, teachers, and administrators.

Step 2 is identifying a potential community issue. While the social problem is the achievement gap, there are several different aspects of the gap that can be considered (testing scores, GPA, dropout rates, graduation rates, etc.). However, the problem is operationalized impacts the strategy that will be used to reduce the problem. In terms of alternative settings, this would influence what kind of alternative setting would be used. The options could be a charter school or alternative school being created or established. For advocacy, the definition of the problem could influence decision of what is the appropriate to intervene at. Is this an issue that can be handled at the level of the local school or does it require policy change at the state or national level?

Step 3 would be to explore the professional literature. This would include looking for literature in support of the effectiveness of alternative settings in area of education. It would also help to search the literature for different definitions and operationalizations of alternative settings; doing so will allow the team to hopefully understand how to best operationalize alternative settings or creating a definition that best combines all the others. This may also help to find evidence for what makes alternative settings work and whether these factors are related to the number of people served or other unidentified variables. For advocacy, conducting a literature search will also help to provide more evidence to present to the policy makers. Step 4

would be developing a germinal, motivating idea. This can be done by informal discussion, using idea-creating devices, or a combination of the two.

The next step would be to engage a stakeholder planning council. The goal of this would be to expand the team to community stakeholders that can take part in planning a program or in this case, developing the alternative setting. Because members may come from different segments of the community there are issues of power and privilege that should be addressed. Care must be taken to make sure that researchers, teachers, and administrators share their power with parents and students. Specifically, for students, many people in the group would believe they know what is best for students, but the students should have the freedom and space state their concerns and ideas for change. This will help to ensure that the students are empowered in this process.

Step 6 is creating a shared vision and mission. At the minimum, the vision and mission should be related to ensuring the academic success of African American students. The vision would answer the question of what planning council wants to and the mission would answer the question of why it exists. Step 7 is stimulating community readiness. This would address the question stated earlier of whether the community would be ready or receptive to change. Wolff (2001) discusses dimensions that are important for the success of building coalitions. Community readiness was one of those dimensions and while it was referring to building coalitions, the concept applies due to individuals from different sectors coming together. The education system has long been an instrument of oppression against African Americans. Because of this, it could be much more difficult to bring individuals together for the same goal. The Black community must be willing to trust that representative from the school system will work alongside for the best interest of their students. On the other hand, teachers and

administrators must be willing to admit that there is something that they can do different and identify other factors that influence the success of students.

Step 8 is assessment: a local ecological and literature review assessment. The literature review assessment is more rigorous than the literature review in the beginning steps. An ecological assessment is particularly important when there are issues poverty, race, and class that are involved. The information that could be gathered from the assessment could include graduation rates, dropout rates, and educational attainment of parents. Other information that could be acquired would be the resources present within the schools and the funding that the schools receive and how the money is spent. Whatever the information reveals will inform the intervention strategy that will be used.

Steps 9 and 10 involved the implementation and evaluation of the intervention. These two steps would likely be more appropriate for creating alternative settings but they apply to advocacy as well. Step 9 is designing the program plan. The problem that would be addressed is the achievement gap. Possible objectives for reducing the gap would be to increase graduation rates, increase standardized test scores, or increasing the resources provided to African American students. An activity within the strategy for creating the alternative setting would be the hiring of qualified teachers who have experience in working successfully with minority populations; an activity for advocacy would be preparation of policy briefs that could be disseminated to various policy makers.

The final step, Step 10, is the evaluation of the program. A process evaluation would be done order to monitor program implementation and to make sure that the program runs effectively. Information that could gather would be whether the curriculum within the school is culturally relevant or fit the students receiving the instruction. Does the alternative



setting/program take into consideration the context that the students are coming from? That is another question that would be answered in a process evaluation. An outcome evaluation would determine whether the program worked and if certain criteria were met. Academic outcomes should be gathered from the alternative setting and then compared with outcomes from regular public schools to determine if the setting is an improvement over traditional settings. The outcomes should also be compared to national averages to determine if there is a reduction in the achievement gap. There should also information as to whether the students received the proper resources that facilitate academic success. Another question would have to be answered in the evaluation is whether the program is transferable. This would require the program to be implemented in multiple areas. If the program is shown to be effective and transferable, then that would possibly be good enough evidence to warrant the program/setting spreading. The spreading of alternative educational settings would facilitate in ensuring that a larger number of students receive this service.

These ten steps addressed several critical questions that impact the feasibility of these two intervention strategies. Whatever strategy is used, either strategy would be a step in the right direction in terms of reducing the achievement gap for African American students. It is likely that because the achievement gap is such a complex issue, both strategies may be needed. Alternative settings must be created to provide settings that would be more supportive for African American students and advocacy may need to be used to influence policy makers to make changes to the current education system to ensure that ALL students have an equal chance at academic success.

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