

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOME ENVIRONMENT AND PARENTAL ENCOURAGEMENT IN THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF AFRICAN- CANADIAN YOUTH

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This article focuses on the educational experiences of African-Canadian youth. Traditionally, researchers have tended to emphasize the poor academic performance of Black students, or issues and problems related to their academic failure, or to stereotype them as loud, lazy, criminal, athletic, deprived, dangerous, and deviant. In contrast, this article looks at Black students in Alberta who have achieved academic success in spite of considerable adversity. The data presented here show that factors such as the home environment and parental encouragement contribute to academic success.

Key words: Black students, school success, family status, Alberta education

Cet article porte sur les expériences scolaires de jeunes Africano-Canadiens. D'habitude, les chercheurs ont tendance à souligner le piètre rendement scolaire des élèves noirs ou les problèmes reliés à leur échec scolaire ou encore à les présenter de façon stéréotypée comme des personnes bruyantes, paresseuses, portées à commettre des crimes, athlétiques, démunies, dangereuses ou ayant un comportement déviant. Cet article décrit plutôt des élèves noirs albertains qui réussissent bien leurs études en dépit de conditions très difficiles. Les données présentées indiquent que les facteurs comme le milieu familial et les encouragements des parents contribuent au succès scolaire.

Mots clés : élèves noirs, succès scolaire, milieu familial, éducation en Alberta

Research on factors affecting school success for Black students is scant. Researchers have tended to emphasize the poor academic performance of Black students or issues and problems related to their academic failure (Irvine, 1990; Lomotey, 1990; Ogbu, 1992), or to stereotype them as “loud, lazy, muscular criminal, athletic, dumb, deprived, dangerous, deviant, and disturbed” (Niemann, O’Connor, & McClorie, 1998, p. 104). Researchers have also observed that “the disproportionate school failure of [Black students] has become one of the most active research issues in education as researchers attempt to understand the underlying causes and to provide policymakers and educators with reliable and useful information” (Ogbu, in Foreword to Solomon, 1992, p. vii). In fact, Belluck (1999) describes the debate and controversy about the academic achievement of Black and White students which continues unabated as “one of the most troublesome and contentious issues in education” (p. A1). No wonder that there are growing efforts in some quarters to look for “some clues to the problem from [Black] students who have achieved in spite of considerable adversity” (p. A1). With the research reported in this article, I advance this goal. I have based this article upon my research with Black youth in Alberta that highlights certain aspects of the Black educational experience not commonly known to the general public (Codjoe, 1997, 1999). Concerning the lack of Black academic achievement, I share Orange’s (1995) point that

concerned educators and administrators must first believe that they can win against the enemies of Black achievement, then be willing to keep trying until they do win. The educational imperative is that paying attention to Black students may garner the attention of significant others who can be helpful but who may not otherwise pay attention. We must know that Black children – all children are more than worthy of our efforts (p. 4).

I am often troubled by the essentialistic thinking that Blacks are incapable of learning because of natural differences in inherited intelligence (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). Indeed, one of the greatest myths promoted about people of African origin is that they lack “the values of scholarship and study” and that they see “academic achievement as forms of ‘acting White’” (D’Souza, 1995, p. 499). This perception of Blacks as academically genetically inferior is reinforced in

the minds of some educators and the public at large because of the achievement levels of Blacks in the school systems and the overemphasis in the literature of school failure and underachievement. As Perry (2003) notes, "the idea of [Black] intellectual inferiority is still taken for granted by many people, despite the illusion of openness toward and acceptance of all races in our society. For no group has there been such a pervasive, persistent, well-articulated, and unabated assumption of mental incompetence" (p. B10).

But as Macias (1993) notes, Black academic underachievement is a "complex social phenomena [that] must be explained within a historical, socio-structural view" (p. 411). Consequently, focusing on the theme of Black academic achievement, I have posed this research question: *What can educators learn from the narratives of Black students' academic and personal successes that contribute their educational achievement?* I have used the term Black to mean "all Black peoples of African descent – continental Africans and those of the African Diaspora" (Dei, 1994, p. 4). I also used Black interchangeably to mean African-Canadian and African. I realize some Canadian scholars have challenged the term Black and may find my meaning problematic, an issue discussed elsewhere (Walcott, 2003; Yon, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

To seek answers to the questions posed by my research question, I recorded the experiences of academically successful Black students in Alberta's educational system. I deliberately did not include the perspectives of parents in this study because I believe that minority students' voices have been least highlighted in the discourse on public schooling in Canada. I drew the sample for my study from a population of Black students in Edmonton. It was not a random sample because, unlike Toronto, Halifax, or Montreal, no concentration of Black students in one area occurs. I chose the students from an extensive list of individuals that a Black student group supplied to me. Through pre-screening that involved pre-interviews with students to ask questions about their academic pursuits and interests, I discerned and chose students who showed awareness of the issues concerning Black education and articulated their feelings, experiences, and thoughts about

the Canadian education system. My participants included four students born in Continental Africa, four born in the Caribbean region, and four born in Canada.

The one-shared common characteristic among my student sample was their academic success: a characteristic not true of many of their peers. As Nieto (2004) points out, although there may be disagreements about what it means to be successful, the students in my sample had developed both academic skills and positive attitudes about themselves and about the value of education. They had excellent grades, graduated from high school, and enrolled in Alberta's post-secondary institutions; all but two were enrolled in the University of Alberta. In retrospect, I agree with Nieto's (2004) observation that "it seemed logical that students who are successful in school are more likely to want to talk about their experiences than those who are not" (p. 16). The students' perspectives provide an opportunity to

explore what it was about these specific students' experiences that helped them learn..., concentrating on issues such as home; school; and community resources, attitudes, and activities.... You will see that most of the successful students report similar conditions, albeit within a broad range of environments, that have helped them learn (Nieto, 2004, p. 16).

Using an interview protocol, I conducted both individual and focus group interviews. In the former, each student participated in about an hour-long, semi-structured interview. In the focus groups, I used the interview data to encourage students to build on and react to comments of their peers, creating a dialogue around each question. I used open-ended questions in both the individual and focus group interviews because they are "important when you want to determine the salience or importance of opinions to people, since people tend to mention those matters that are important to them" (Spencer, 1995, p. 17).

THE EDUCATION OF BLACK STUDENTS IN CANADA

My research builds on works of such Black educational theorists as Brathwaite (1989), Calliste (1996), James (1990, 1994), Henry (1993), Solomon (1992), and Dei (1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2005) – highlighting issues that have not been a priority in mainstream Canadian education.

However, most of the research on Black students in Canada is Ontario-based. Little research has been done on Black students elsewhere, except perhaps in Nova Scotia (Black Learners Advisory Committee [BLAC], 1994). There have been only a few studies from Alberta. For example, Thakur (1988) produced a research monograph about sports and academic performance of Black students: *The Impact of Schooling on Visible Minorities: A Case Study of Black Students in Alberta Secondary Schools*. Additionally, a needs assessment study of immigrant youth, age 14 to 19, by the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers included Black youth in Alberta's schools (Seifeddine, 1994). Spencer (1995) completed a thesis titled *Under the Gaze: The Experiences of African Canadian Students in Two Edmonton High Schools*, "research ... [that] examines the experiences of African Canadian school students [and] discusses how these students gain knowledge about themselves, form their identities, and interact with dominant White society's view of African Canadians" (p. ii).

Within the context of contemporary Canadian education, James and Brathwaite (1996) have observed that Black students occupy an unequal position and that their interest is not served to any significant degree by the schools and institutions that regulate their lives and their future in this country. The school is one institution in which Blacks as a group lag. Today, the educational issues and social problems facing the Black community are broad and far-reaching. Canadian Black parents and educators have begun to raise serious concerns about the plight of Black students in Canadian schools. There have been complaints about racism faced by Black students, the low level of teacher expectations of Black students, the high drop-out rate among Black students, and the overrepresentation of Black students in non-academic programs (e.g., Dei, 2005; Raby, 2004). Unfortunately, these issues and others such as differential treatment of Black students by school authorities, lack of teacher support, a hostile school environment, alienation, curriculum bias, and lack of role models are evident in the Canadian educational system (Codjoe, 2005; James & Brathwaite, 1996). Studies of minority youth, other than Black students, have shown similar trends (e.g. Artiles, Harry, Reschly & Chinn, 2002; Gillborn, 1997).

Dissatisfaction with mainstream educational practices has led Black parents to mobilize and define their own educational agenda, and

to seek alternative models and approaches for educating their children. Consequently, a number of approaches to reverse the pattern of school failure among Black students have been suggested, developed, and implemented. One example has been the renewed calls for experimental Black-focused schools (Brennan & Brown, 2005; see also Calliste, 1996; Dei, 1995).

FINDINGS

My study adds a missing perspective to the general literature on the experiences of Black students in Canada's school systems and moves beyond the study of Black underachievement that is pervasive in the literature to incorporate the study of Black school achievers themselves and their lived experiences. The students identified several factors¹ that contributed to their success in school. In this article, I address one of the factors identified by the students as contributing to their educational success: parental encouragement and a supportive home environment. All the students stated that they persevered because of their parents' involvement, encouragement, and home support².

'You Can Make It' – Placing a High Value on Education

From day one in the lives of the students in my study, their parents have been very supportive, helping them to develop their self-confidence and self-esteem. Because the parents' knew from their own experiences in Canadian society what was waiting their Black children in the "real world," they stressed early in their children's lives the importance of education. Ama,³ one of the students, said, they "always made sure we were doing what we had to do in school." Kwadjo recalled that, as a motivating factor, his parents kept telling him to "remember [that] Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois and Sojourner Truth had to go through far worse than this." Thanks to his parents, this student was aware of the histories of Robeson, DuBois, and Truth. This quotation shows the importance some Black parents place on Black history in the academic achievement of their children (Codjoe, 2006).

Abena recalls the atmosphere in her house:

I think my experience is a little bit different being that I was the youngest of six kids.... All I've ever known is that you were going to go to university because

when I was going into grade one, my oldest sister was going into first year of university, so I've always seen that pattern in front of me. As well, all of my aunts and uncles went to university. My whole family environment has been that of education and I've just always seen it.

Ama also remembers her dad as "very pro-education when we were young." She recalls that her dad would let her play,

... but usually he would have a rule that every week [I'd] have to summarize a little story [I] read for [him]. I hated it then, 'cause I couldn't go outside and play. At least that instilled that love for reading, for education. Going to school was a good thing, it was a fun thing. I hated being sick, every time I was sick, I would pretend I wasn't sick so that I would go [to school], just so I wouldn't miss anything.

Looking back, Kofi did not like what he had to put up from his parents, but now appreciates it. He recalls:

When we were younger our mother did sit us down a lot of times and taught us simple math, how to write. We all knew how to write before we were able to formally enter school. Our mother took the time to teach us. It came to a time when we were sort of fooling around in school, and I recall an incident where my father took away our TV privileges and he would lock us in our room every night to study. We got the understanding that we had to take certain things very seriously.

For Kwabena, too, his

parents, right from the start, always said, "Education first, everything else can wait." They've always told me to set my priorities straight. I remember even as a kid my parents used to tutor me in the areas where I had problems. They always encouraged me to do well in school and all else will follow. Once you get your education, nothing else can stop you from attaining what you want to get. I think that played a big role [in my being successful at school].

And with Kwaku, he was "motivated from back home [the Caribbean] to go to university ever since I was young":

My family [was] middle class. My father wanted me to be a doctor. At nine I was giving insulin injections to my grandmother every morning. He was trying to

break me in already. That environment sort of prepped me and when he died, I thought to carry it through.... That kind of motivated me to want to achieve something because the cushion of having my father there was no longer. I knew I had to have an education here to survive. If you got a good solid foundation at home, then you're going to do well in [school].

The student narratives present clear evidence that parental encouragement and support affected their children's achievements, attitudes, and aspirations. Contrary to perceptions, Black parents can indeed support and encourage their children to succeed in school. As Henry (1994) has shown with respect to West Indian immigrants, education may be the most important, if not the only mobility channel for success in Canadian society. But as pointed out by James and Brathwaite (1996), "the social construction of Black students as academically incompetent operated as a barrier to the realization of their educational goals" (p. 16). For Black students in a racialized society like Canada, parental encouragement, support, and expectations are particularly critical because, as Reynolds (1993) points out, in the absence of a supporting school climate, "[Black] parents must fill the void and counteract the schools' potentially negative influence" (p. 15). Research by Taylor (1991) has also shown that, for Black students, despite highly unfavourable life circumstances, "parental expectations ... are found to be positively related to ... children's self-expectations and school achievement" and "parental involvement was found to have consistent and directive positive effects on the children's reading and mathematics achievement and social maturity" (p. 20).

Imparting Knowledge and Valuing One's Own Culture

In my study, I found that, in addition to the high value placed on education, imparting and valuing one's own culture was also instrumental and played a significant role in parents' fostering the love for learning in their children, as this account by Kwadjo indicates:

My parents were born in the Caribbean. My mother...is a teacher. She would educate us on various Black figures. From the time I was five we'd know about people like Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Dubois. She knew that since we were living in this country we may as well know something about the Black people who

pioneered something here. Like Mary Ann Shadd, who had the first Black newspaper here, the first Black editor, and others like John Ware My mother and father would sort of cultivate my mind with all this information from the time I was really small.

This aspect of parental influence suggests that many of the parents saw education, especially for Black children, as more than acquiring the basics. This is best illustrated by this narrative from Kwame:

Both my parents are parents to the nth degree. Playing with you or teaching you things while they were playing with you and you didn't even realize it. We'd go and see important Black artistic figures; I saw Dizzy Gillespie when I was 10 and I saw Miles Davis when I was 7. That's an aspect of education too, so that when you go out into the world you say, "Well, my culture has meaning, too." My mother would tell me stories about when she was growing up and about my grandmother; that too teaches you about respect for the elder generation which a lot of Black kids I see, don't have.

Kwame said when he decided to go to university, his mother told him to remember that "university is not [for] job [seeking], not for money [but] for learning." It is important to mention here that the parents' educational and professional backgrounds helped the students in many ways toward imparting knowledge, such as assisting with homework. For example, Ekua recalls that:

whenever we had any school problems, we'd take it to her [mother] and she'd help us because she worked with kids, she knows what to do. My dad too, when I was taking calculus, a very hard topic, he helped, tried to explain what it was all about. They're helping, they're trying, just pushing us basically. This is where you should go, this is where it's at, you hate it but once you look back and you realize, okay, that was good.

Adwoa also recalls this about her father:

When I was young, we'd come home from school with schoolwork and he'd always come and start tutoring us, helping us with what we needed to do and it helped. I actually skipped a grade. I went from 6 straight to 8 and I think [it was] the fact that I got my parents' help.

As these narratives suggest, the importance of values, culture, knowledge acquisition, and the expectations parents have for their children is important in fostering academic achievement. It became obvious from knowing the background of some of these students that social class was an important factor. Most of the students came from homes where their parents were well educated and were successfully employed in professional, managerial, or technical occupations. Consequently, these parents held higher educational and occupational expectations for their children. Afua, whose father is a dentist, said:

people would say, "Oh, you're Dr. [name deleted]'s daughter," and they already had set expectations that I was going to be an overachiever. So because they expected it of me, I wasn't going to let them down. I wasn't going to let myself down.

The parents of these students have invested enough financial resources in their children's schooling and their socio-economic status permitted their children to spend a lot of time engaged in their school work rather than employment as would be the case for students with parents who have limited financial resources.

Educational Resources and Materials

The students' families' social class backgrounds showed up again in the study concerning access to resources and opportunities in the home – another important factor in what Akosua described as "the presence of materials that shows a love of learning and of knowledge." Adequate financial resources meant that for a significant number of the students, their parents were able to buy large amounts of educational materials and resources for their homes. As she related:

[Our] house was always filled with books and magazines and, for instance, developing auxiliary academic things such as drawing. At the house we always had lots of blank paper and pencils. So if those things are around, it's natural because we're born curious, curiosity has to be destroyed in us, it has to be beaten out of us If there are books around, kids will want to read. If parents model reading ... and read to their kids, kids will want to read.

Abena also remembers her home to be

always filled with lots of educational things. My parents have lots of books. Whenever we would play games, they'd always tend to [choose] kind of mind-stimulating things. It's just a family thing we do, we play Trivial Pursuit. My mother started all of us reading very early.

For Ama, too,

there were tons of books at our house, and I was always reading, I loved stories so I loved to read. I was reading *Animal Farm* at grade 4 and I didn't have any clue what it actually meant, it was just a story to me. I was reading it 'cause it was there and I wanted to read.

These students were "always encouraged to go to the library and just read even if it was just for fun." But for some like Akosua, the home atmosphere was more than just the love of books; it was also a home where "we ate dinner together at the table, we didn't sit in front of TV to eat I remembered that we talked a lot, we got along and the kids did things together." In thinking of the factors at home that contributed to his school success, Kwesi also recalls the role his mother played in making him learn to speak up, something he finds many Black children not able to do:

Many parents live by the rule [that] children should be seen and not heard and yet then they expect their kids to be successful and to be proud and to speak up. If they've never had any practice at home then how are they going to apply those skills I think that relates to the household because if your parents are discussing the news with you or politics or culture or religion or art, even if it's just a matter of talking about school work, [you'll] learn how to talk like adults, and they're going to learn that hopefully, not just by seeing it from afar, but by talking with [parents at home]. I think this is crucial.

A critical aspect for these students that influenced their school success was their acquired love for reading early in their lives. They all said books and other reading materials in their homes were what made it for them. Throughout their public school years, "reading gave [them]

the desire for knowledge and made school very easy.” Kwaku recalls that:

My mother forced me into reading when I was young. When I say forced, I mean forced to the point where if I watched an hour of TV, I had to read two hours. I didn’t get cable until I was 15, so I spent a lot of time reading books. Then even for awhile she cut the cord of the TV and I didn’t have any TV because I wasn’t doing my reading.

Kwesi added:

I was an avid reader. I read a lot. I was reading novels from the time I was in grade 2, not only juvenile novels, but I was reading adult novels by about grade 3 or 4. Then I got into reading comic books and that was very helpful even though people say someone that reads comic books isn’t literate. They forget that the work is reading and the *Super Hero* comic books involve a lot of dialogue. Comic book readers ironically tend to develop larger vocabularies than their peers because all these arcane words are coming in. Plus comic books say a lot about literature and science. They’re always taking major ideas, so I learned all kinds of stuff about science from reading comic books that my peers didn’t know. So all that stuff helped me, which gave me an edge.

These student narratives again confirm that access to educational resources is a critical factor in determining higher educational achievement and expectations. A family’s educational resources, particularly those related to items like magazines, newspapers, and books are significant in student achievement.

Standing Up and Responding to Negative Influences

Because Black parents must fight a second battle in the educational arena to “overcome the influence of general patterns of societal discrimination” (Dornbusch, Ritter, & Steinberg, 1991, p. 565), the parents of the students in my study equipped their children with coping strategies as they relate to standing up and reacting to negative influences or comments. For example, Kwadjo particularly remembers her mother helping her when she was in elementary school to cope and deal with a lot of name-calling:

“nigger,” “Blacks are coming,” “what did your mom do? – did she stick you in an oven, cooked you too long” and all that kind of stuff. I’d come home crying

and she'd be the one to say, "Oh don't listen to them. You're way better than any of them could possibly be. Just keep your head up."

This account is noteworthy and goes to show that, for Black parents, seeing their children through the education system is more than helping them to learn to read, write, and compute. It means countering negative influences and derogatory comments their children suffer because of their race, and being vigilant and assertive to make sure their children are treated properly and respectfully and not become a victim of stereotypical perceptions about African Canadian students. This last point brings to mind this account by Ekua whose parent stood up and fought for her daughter's rights:

When my parents first moved to [Alberta], they moved with another family and my oldest sister and the other family's oldest son were both going into grade 1 and they were automatically put into the slower class. My mother was not going to stand for this. She said, "Why is my child in this class?" They said, "She's not performing, this is where she should be." So my mother got my sister tested and it showed she was above average intelligence and she caused a stink. She said I want my daughter in the appropriate class, so they did that. So from the word go, my parents weren't going to give in either, even if the school system was against them; it didn't matter because they knew what they had.

Kwadjo related how his mother had sent an "extremely polite" but "really nice" letter to his teacher cautioning the teacher not to cast her son as the slave in the school's "slavery days" ceremonies which, according to the student, "actually did exist at my school." It was "complete with an auction and everything My mother's letter sort of made them think that maybe we should find something else to do." In any event, she requested that, should the school's "slavery days" ceremonies take place, they better find someone else other than her son to be the slave to be auctioned.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the study show that contrary to popular opinion and research, not all Black students make poor choices about education. Black students also develop successful academic skills. Although the

students talked about other factors that contributed to their academic success, this article has focused on parental support and encouragement in the home environment and uncovered some factors that contribute to Black students' academic success. Research confirms that students have an advantage in school when their parents encourage and support their school activities, and they lay the groundwork for their students' success in school by building their children's self-confidence, self-concept, and self-reliance (Cummins, 1986; Epstein, 1987; Levin, 1995; Mah, 1995; Perry, 1993; Slaughter & Epps, 1987). This research suggests, in my opinion, that schools must give more emphasis to finding transformative ways to increase the involvement of Black parents in the education of their children and of developing closer ties between schools and the communities they serve. Instead of falling back on deficit theories and continuing the practice of blaming Black students, their families, and their communities for educational failure, schools must develop a model of parent and community education and advocacy that works with parents, communities, and students to advance the education of students. Furthermore, schools need to focus on areas where they can make a difference through fundamental changes in their policies and programs. For example, schools should be restructured to become open places where parents and others can feel that they are welcomed and valued. Black parents, like White parents, have a right to be treated with respect by school staff. To address this, I believe ethnic/racial sensitivity must be incorporated into school policies, programs, and practices because some teachers' expectations of poor academic work from Black students stem from how these teachers view their relationships with Black parents. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that if so many teachers are inadequately prepared to interact with a culturally diverse student body, they would be less prepared to negotiate with students' parents. As Boateng (n.d.) points out,

there are many teachers who are hesitant about communicating students' progress to parents for fear that parents would turn a deaf ear to the reports. This expectation is contrary to all reports which suggest that the Black family is the motivating force that inspires children to value education, even in the face of all the negative stereotypes perpetuated by White teachers. It is critical that teachers understand and capitalize on the significance of the Black family and

eliminate the myth that this powerful unit is capable only of transmitting a 'culture of poverty.' It is the Black parent who helps the child to understand that excellence in education is the foundation for success in society. (p. 6)

In closing, I believe my Alberta research makes an important contribution in several respects: first, it contributes to the literature on Black education in less concentrated urban areas of Canada other than Ontario. Second, it adds to the growing literature on the academic achievement/underachievement of Black students in multicultural societies like the United Kingdom where a substantial number of first, second, and third generation Blacks reside and share similar backgrounds with Black students in Canada (Majors, 2001; Rhamie & Hallam, 2002). And, its focus on academic achievement complements the educational research on "the new and more hopeful perspectives, on the success stories [of minority youth] and the learned lessons that can help us face the educational challenge of the 21st century" (Trueba, 1994, p. 376). In this manner, educators are able to identify promising intervention strategies for enhancing Black and minority children's school success.

NOTES

¹ The main factors identified were strong home support and encouragement by parents; positive role modeling; pride and affirmation in Black cultural/racial identity; personal initiative and responsibility; extracurricular and community activities; 'sympathetic' and 'culturally relevant' teachers; positive peer relationships.

² Space does not permit me to discuss other issues here, for example, generation, parent/family composition, or gender and other mediating factors that operated for each respondent in the study.

³ Names are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

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