Conduct Disorders in African American Adolescent Males: The Perceptions That Lead to Overdiagnosis and Placement in Special Programs

Dr. Eddie Clark, Jr.
Troy University-Montgomery

Abstract

African American adolescent males are significantly more likely than their Caucasian peers to receive a diagnosis of Conduct Disorder. In contrast, their Caucasian peers are more often diagnosed with Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder. Discrepancies in the way diagnosis is made cause more African American adolescent males to be classified as having behavior problems and not offered accommodations as opposed to their Caucasian counterparts. There are definitely similarities in the behavior of students with CD and ADHD, but how the two disorders are diagnosed is a question for concern.

Introduction

In today's classrooms students face many challenges that influence learning. Students, educators, and parents alike must constantly deal with factors that influence how conducive an environment is to learning. A very prevalent concern relates to diagnosing mental illnesses and providing services that affords all students with learning opportunities. Unfortunately, for many African American adolescent males, these opportunities are limited by misconceptions held by educators and counselors. According to Spencer & Oatts (1999), often times African American adolescent males who suffer from a mental illness such as Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are misdiagnosed as having Conduct Disorder (CD) or other behavior problems. Rather than receiving intervention services such as counseling, medication, or study assistance, these students are labeled as troublemakers or maladjusted. When African American adolescent males present problem traits similar to their Caucasian peers, they are still more likely to be diagnosed with Conduct Disorder. It is imperative that counselors and educators recognize biases that lead them to disproportionately diagnose African American adolescent males as CD.

Conduct Disorder is described as a repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others, societal norms, and rules are violated American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Serwatka & Deering (1995) reported that teachers are more likely to attribute classroom inattentiveness and restlessness in African American adolescent males as disruptive and aggressive, behaviors most commonly associated with those individuals identified as CD. They are more likely to be viewed as having inappropriate behaviors (cutting up/acting out) than an indication of greater underlying problems. However, Caucasian adolescent males who exhibit similar characteristics as these males are more likely to be identified and subsequently diagnosed ADHD and generally receive special education services, counseling, and medication (Fabrega, Ulrich, & Mezzich, 1993). Obviously, educators and counselors need to be aware of the multicultural and

socioeconomic perspectives relative to diagnosing African American adolescent males.

The purpose of this survey of the literature is to address the misconceptions associated with African American adolescent males' behavior in the classroom as well as the social and environmental factors that impact motivation. This literature review will also address the multifaceted dimensions of African American adolescent males' behavior in the classroom as well as answer certain questions that contribute to the overdiagnosis of CD and placement in special programs faced by today's school systems. The specific questions center around:

a) how teachers' perception of adolescent behavior differ according to race.
b) whether all children have an equal opportunity to learn in the classroom.
c) how teachers, school counselors, and parenting styles affect motivation.

Because educators and school counselors play such a significant role in the diagnosis of ADHD and CD, there must be uniformity and consistency by providing appropriate training for educators and counselors that incorporate culturally specific strategies for addressing behavioral issues in the classroom. Evidence clearly shows that the public school system has failed to serve at-risk students by low expectation for student performance, inadequate resources, and uneven quality of teaching staff (Blake & Darling, 1994). Only when educators and counselors work to eliminate their own negative images of African American adolescent males can appropriate assessments of their behaviors be made.

The Public School System

Allen-Meares (1990) reported that the school system is failing at making equal educational opportunities for African American adolescent males. The culturally biased assessment tools and prejudice attitudes nurture racial segregation and classroom isolation. The public school practices are no more open and fair than the societal context in which they exist. In fact, they reflect a caste-like system. For example, Blake & Darling (1994) characterized the African American adolescent male as the least understood and studied of all sex/race groups in this country. The primary socializing agent, elementary and secondary education, has negatively affected the achievement and self-concept of these individuals by disproportionately tracking them and not providing positive role models. Neal (2001) concluded that a disproportionate number of African American adolescent males are referred to special programs based on the teacher's perception of aggressive behavior where mainly the conclusions were drawn from the way African American adolescent males walked, classroom posture, and specifically the way they dressed.

Durodoye & Hildreth (1995) attempted to explain the learning style of African American adolescent male students. What their study found was that these individuals tended to be maligned by an American educational system that has continued to abide by biased assumptions highlighting the differences between African American adolescent males and their Caucasian peers. Furthermore, they found that teachers' perceptions of African American male adolescent students were in direct contrast to the cultural

assumption promoted by Caucasian students whereby culture and learning style of these individuals were ignored. Teachers tended to be consistent with their personal values and expectations in their evaluation of the performance of African American adolescent male students' approach to education and learning styles.

Likewise, when discussing teachers' responses to African American adolescent males' behavior in the classroom, teachers were found to focus on or react to students' movement. Watkins & Kurtz (2001) asserts that African American adolescent male students are disproportionately represented in special programs for complex and multifaceted reasons, including the perception of their movement. Neal (2001) further revealed that teachers based aggressive behavior and achievement in comparison to Caucasians of similar ages in the way they walked. African American adolescent males were considered very aggressive and incapable of achieving targeted goals if they did not walk erect with legs and arms synchronized, steady pace, and head straight.

The African Community:

Hill & Bush (2001) conducted a study on the influence of ethnic differences in parenting that may lead to school problems with children. They found that parenting and family interaction patterns among African Americans were associated with outcomes for ADHD and CD. The African American adolescent males presenting with conduct or inattentive problems reported poorer communication patterns and less parental warmth. However, these boys were mainly from lower income single-parent families where authoritarian or no nonsense parenting

strategies emphasized the use of physical punishment more often than psychological punishment to stress obedience, conformity, and maintaining order.

Similarly, Simon, Kuei-Hsiu, Gordon, Brody, Velma, & Rand (2002) presented various hypotheses regarding parental control and corporal punishment among African American adolescent males. The parental values and parenting practices of African American families often focus on interdependence and security, group effort, perseverance in spite of adversity, and conformity which impact how these students respond to teachers and counselors.

According to Miller-Johnson, Coie, Maumary-Gremaud, Lochman, & Robert (1999), African American adolescent males who experience peer rejection were more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior and that poorly developed social skills and disruptive behavior were common among those individuals who presented for special education programs. The risk factors for antisocial behavior require interventions that address social relations among peers and the need to develop strategies that promote peer ties that support prosocial behavior and discourage affiliations that persuade or maintain problem behavior. The study acknowledged that African American adolescent males reported lower levels of peer pressure or the need for peer approval placing higher levels of importance on involvement in family and school activities rather than misconduct.

Prospective Solution

Rodney, Crafter, Rodney, & Mupier (1999) reported that African American adolescent males score lower than their

Caucasian counterparts on standardized tests and that they are three times more likely to be placed in special education programs for slow learners. They also found that this placement increased the likelihood of problem behavior as well as the African American adolescent males' self-perception of school failure. Likewise Joseph (1996) found that the percentage of African American males who were behind in their expected grade levels is far higher than their Caucasian counterparts. A child who is Black and poor is significantly more likely to be physically disciplined, suspended, placed in alternative programs, expelled, or to repeat a grade than their Caucasian peers. Based on Joseph's (1996) research, an African American adolescent male student is three times more likely to end up in a vocational track than his Caucasian peers.

One of the biggest problems in today's school systems is the attempt to assess African American adolescent males motivation to learn. Colarusso (2001) found that African American adolescent males when compared to their Caucasian peers were more likely to be placed in programs for behavior problems associated with CD.

Likewise, Serwatka & Deering (1995) found that the disproportionate representation of African American adolescent male students in emotionally handicapped classrooms were identified as conduct problems and that the school system recognized that this was a serious issue. Special Education was viewed as a means to remove students with perceived deviant skills. The lack of awareness of African American culture on the part of the public school systems' professionals allowed for myopic perceptions of African American adolescent male students.

Larson (1997) in an attempt to examine the political thinking and the strategies used by school administrators, teachers, and counselors with regard to the unfair treatment of African American adolescent males in the classroom revealed that society was less concerned with the education of these youth as maintaining the orthodox images the administrators faced with the diverse and changing school communities. Williams (2002) reported that if everyone understood the decades of deprivation, the educators and school counselors would recognize the need to structure a more diverse system when dealing with the assessment and placement of African American adolescent males in specialized programs. Administrators and teachers admitted to being uncomfortable with the present situation relative to African American adolescent males but find their hands are tied about what to do when dealing this obvious problem (Larson, 1997).

Vygotsky's View of Overrepresentation

Vygotsky presented several general ideas to remedy the problems associated with African American adolescent males's behavior and misdiagnosis in the classroom. His cultural-historical activity theory (Gindis, 1999) revealed that the irony of special education was based on artificial data and biased principles. Therefore, Vygotsky looked at ways to educate children with special needs and to avoid some of the discrepancies surrounding African American adolescent males placed in special education programs. Vygodskaya (1999) stated that Vygotsky's primary concern centered on the problem developmental strategies to help those individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Vygotsky believed that

understanding the nature of the individual would help in education. The uniqueness of Vygotsky's approach lies in his understanding of the disadvantage of sociocultural development. His major concern was upbringing and discipline.

Carlin (1994) reported that any psychological process regardless of behavior is an undergoing change; therefore, interventions must reflect the evolving clinical course. African American adolescent males are frequently misunderstood and their behavior misdiagnosed. Therefore, it is understandable why they are overrepresented in special programs. According to Patton (1998), African American adolescent males are overrepresented in special education programs thus perpetuating the sociohistorical legacy which allows the general and special education enterprises to continue to create problematic classroom arrangements that jeopardize the potentially positive educational chances for African American adolescent males in this country.

According to Obiakor, Obi, & Algozzine (2001), because of language barriers, African American adolescent males have a difficult time understanding what is expected of them in the classroom. Durodoye & Hildreth (1995) reported that teachers and African American adolescent male students have different communication styles and therefore expectations are often unrealistic. Vygotsky identifies several perspectives that have positive implications for multicultural issues including literacy that revolves around access and engagement with various types of texts. Vygotsky's concern centered on the application of multicultural education as well as the

acknowledgement of psychological tools to transform sociocultural activities at the individual, collective, and historical levels (Troutman, Unger, Ramirez, & Saddler, 2001).

Conclusion

Although there is much research done in the area of misdiagnosis of African American adolescent males and their overrepresentation in special programs, social aggression, labeling, grade retention, test bias, and the lack of awareness among school administrators, teachers, and counselors about cross-cultural competent student-school relationships; it is inconclusive as to how to meet the needs of this population. Clearly some adjustment and rethinking is necessary in dealing with the issues of how students, teachers, counselors, and parents conduct themselves within the school system particularly in the classroom. Obviously, educators and counselors need to have a clearer understanding of the cultural and socioeconomic perception of African American adolescent males relative to diagnosis and placement. Furthermore, the diagnoses of Conduct Disorder and Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder continue to be strongly associated with race. Labeling African American adolescent males as aggressive based on their communicating styles, particularly how they dress and walk, clearly does not meet the criteria for a diagnosis of Conduct Disorder as outlined in the *DSM-IV-TR*. Apparently, the prejudice and bias have contributed greatly to the African American adolescent male's inability to adjust in many classrooms settings.

Recommendations

It is imperative that researchers continue to address teacher and counselor bias and the impact of overrepresentation of African American adolescent males in special programs in an effort to find solutions to this ever growing dilemma. The assessment and diagnostic process needs to be revamped to eliminate racism and test bias. Special emphasis should be placed on recruiting and maintaining diverse administrative and teaching staff. Likewise, special emphasis should be placed on training current teachers and counselors through college courses, continuing education, and workshops in working culturally diverse populations.

School systems should address student issues by:
   a) providing cultural enrichment activities for students
   b) fostering an environment of cooperation between students of differing learning styles and interest.

Similarly, teachers must deal with biases and perceptions as well as how to be effective in an environment of diverse learners.

School systems should:
   a) base referrals on more than teacher observation
   b) involve parents in the assessment process
   c) implement a review committee to monitor system-wide compliance
   d) offer a mentoring program to help teachers adapt to new challenges and special issues

By providing these services to students and teachers, those students who need assistance will not be overlooked and others will not be placed for services based on teacher and counselor bias.◆

AUTHOR NOTE

Correspondence regarding this manuscript should be directed to: Dr. Eddie Clark, Jr.,Troy University-Montgomery, P.O. Drawer 4419, Montgomery, Alabama 36103-4419.
Email: clarked@troy.edu.

REFERENCES

Allen-Meares, P. (1990). Educating Black youth.The unfulfilled promise of equality. *National Association of Social Workers, 37,* 283-286.

American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (Text Revision).* Washington, DC: Author.

Blake, W. & Darling, C. (1994). The dilemma of the African American male. *Journal of Black Studies, 24,* 402-414.

Carlin, M. (1994). The psychodynamic treatment of a disturbed adolescent: A Vygotskian perspective. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic, 58,* 355-375.

Colarusso, R. (2001). A comparison of eligibility criteria and their impact on minority representation in LD programs. *Learning Disability Research & Practice, 16,* 7-13.

Durodoye, B. & Hildreth, B. (1995). Learning styles and the African American student. *Education, 116,* 241-248.

Fabrega, H., Ulrich, R., & Mezzich, J. (1993). Do Caucasian and Black adolescents differ at psychiatric intakes. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric, 32*, 407-414.

Gindis, B. (1999). Vygotsky's vision: Reshaping the practice of special education for the 21st century. *Remedial & Special Education, 20*, 333-342.

Hill, N. & Bush, K. (2001). Relationships between parenting environment and children's mental health among African American and European American mothers and children. *Journal of Marriage & Family Therapy, 63*, 954-968.

Joseph, J. (1996). School factors and delinquency. *Journal of Black Studies, 26*, 340-356.

Larson, C. (1997). Is the land of oz an alien nation? A sociopolitical study of school conflict. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 33*, 312-338.

Miller-Johnson, S., Coie, J., Maumary-Gremaud, A., Lochman, J., & Robert, T. (1999). Relationship between childhood peer rejection and aggression and adolescent delinquency severity and type among African American youth. *Journal of Emotional & Behavioral Disorders, 7*, 137-149.

Neal, L. (2001). Teachers' reactions to African American students' movement styles. *Intervention in School & Clinic, 36,* 168-174.

Obiakor, F., Obi, S., & Algozzine, B. (2001). Shifting assessment and intervention paradigms for urban learners. *The Western Journal of Black Studies, 25,* 61-77.

Patton, J. (1998). The disproportionate representation of African American in special education: Looking behind the curtain for understanding and solutions. *Journal of Special Education, 32,* 25-32.

Rodney, L., Crafter, B., Rodney, E., & Mupier, R. (1999). Variables contributing to grade retention among African American adolescent males. *Journal of Educational Research, 92*, 185-193.

Serwatka, T., & Deering, S. (1995). Disproportionate representation of African Americans in emotionally handicapped classes. *Journal of Black Studies, 25*, 492-507.

Simon, R., Kuei-Hsiu, L., Gordon, L., Brody, G., Velma, C., & Rand, D. (2002). Community differences in the association between parenting practices and child conduct problems. *Journal of Marriage & Family, 64*, 331-346.

Spencer, D., & Oatts, J. (1999). Attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder vs. conduct disorder and overrepresentation of African-American males. *Education, 16,* 18-30.

Troutman, P., Unger, J., Ramirez, M., & Saddler, S. (2001). Looking for artifacts and agency: a basic approach to diversity for preservice and inservice teachers. *Intercultural Education, 12*, 209-221.

Vygodskaya, G. (1999). Vygotsky and the problems of special education. *Remedial & Special Education, 20,* 330-335.

Watkins, A. & Kurtz, D. (2001). Using solution-focused intervention to address African American adolescent male overrepresentation in special education: A case study. *Children & Schools, 23*, 223-233.

Williams, P. (2002). Diary of a mad law professor: Racial prescriptions. *Nation, 274,* 9-11.