Educating African American children: breaking the silence

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Abstract
It is inappropriate to view all children as the same, even when they may look very similar or share a cultural background. Differences exist in and among all racial and ethnic groups at all social levels. It would be dangerous to read information on diversity and apply it as if all people in that particular group are the same. Cultural information can promote understanding and insight for all. It is necessary to understand the challenges and issues that children of diverse backgrounds are faced with in order to facilitate positive change and resiliency in the counseling process. The author provides an overview of the lack of academic success among African American students, the effects it has on them, as well as implications and interventions for school counselors working with a diverse population.

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EDUCATING AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN: BREAKING THE SILENCE

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Abstract

It is inappropriate to view all children as the same, even when they may look very similar or share a cultural background. Differences exist in and among all racial and ethnic groups at all social levels. It would be dangerous to read information on diversity and apply it as if all people in that particular group are the same. Cultural information can promote understanding and insight for all. It is necessary to understand the challenges and issues that children of diverse backgrounds are faced with in order to facilitate positive change and resiliency in the counseling process. The author provides an overview of the lack of academic success among African American students, the effects it has on them, as well as implications and interventions for school counselors working with a diverse population.
Educating African American Children: Breaking the Silence

In order to successfully and effectively guide young people into healthy, productive adulthood, it is important to understand that children who come from diverse backgrounds learn differently. The United States must ensure that every child has the opportunity to develop and learn to the fullest extent possible that the schools will provide the knowledge and skills that youths need to develop to their full potential. Unfortunately, many African American children do not have the opportunities that this paper will address. This paper contains four sections that address educating African American children. The first part discusses the history and provides statistics about the lack of academic success of African American students. The second part discusses the many effects of how African American children are viewed by educators in the school system. The third part of this paper discusses the different learning styles of African American students. The last part discuss the interventions for school counselors, such as individual counseling interventions, group interventions, and parent/teacher participation, which is necessary for an effective counseling process.

History of African American Students Academic Success

To address the issues of the lack of academic success for African American children, it is important to be aware of the history concerning the education of African American students in the United States. As a group, African American children are not experiencing success in school. While reading test scores for African American children tested in grades four, eight, and twelve have been improving since 1971, the National Assessment of Educational progress report indicates that only 10% to 18% of African American children in these grades scored at the “proficient” or “advanced” level (White
The "proficient" level of reading achievement "represents solid academic performance for each grade assessed" (p.2). In other words, in 1998 more than four out of five African American children read at the basic level, which, according to the NAEP, means they had acquired only "partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade" (White 1999, p.2).

All children are capable of learning, but for some reason in schools all over the United States, African American children are not learning. Misconceptions of teachers often cause minorities to be penalized in the education system. At early ages they are placed into slower learning groups and special education classes, more often than any other group (Children's Defense fund 1989; Knapp & Shields 1998; Executive Committee of Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders 1998). Once placed into special classes or slower learning groups, it is almost impossible for students to get out of this cycle as they progress through the grades (Knapp & Shields, 1990).

**Effects of how African American Students are Viewed by Educators in the School System**

Often educators do not offer instruction that is fitting to the experiences, interests, and abilities of children, especially African American children. What they do is apply the "Deficit Theory" in their teaching practice, this implies that some presuppose that minorities come to school with no strengths but with many weaknesses which must be overcome if they are to become successful learners. Therefore, the level of potential set by these teachers and administrators is low and standards of excellence may be missing. Obviously, these children are competent enough to learn much more than their teachers think they can (Delpit 1999).
African American children come to school with many strengths, such as the ability to communicate with adults and peers, both those who share their background and those who do not. These children are able to switch between language codes, namely, Standard English and the language spoken in their homes and other cultural environments. Schools must take what children already know and can do and then let it serve as scaffolding for new learning. Schools must “stop punishing black, brown and poor children who can learn as well as any other children, if we expect it and provide them fair educational opportunities” (Children’s Defense Fund 1999, p.9). This is echoed by Delpit (1999) in her statement that educators must “believe in the children’s brilliance that they can write, dramatize and that they can read”. She said, “If something isn’t working, don’t blame the children, find some other alternatives” (p. 9).

Many African American children are taught at home in order to appreciate certain skills that are not always valued in classrooms and do not reflect the school’s norms. These skills include nonverbal communication, dance and rhythmic movements, learning through cooperation and verbal interplay during instruction (Patton, 1995). African American children also may acquire social “survival” strategies, meaning that the duality between the culture of the school and the culture of the family and community can account for much of the discrepancy between the academic and social self-concept. To provide developmentally appropriate instruction the counselor must learn the culture of the children entrusted in their care.

**Different Learning Styles of African American Students**

Culture is “a way of perceiving, believing, evaluating, and behaving. Culture provides the blue print that determines the way individuals think, feel and behave”
In determining the most effective strategies to use when working with African American children, one needs to know the cultural context that are often shared among minority groups and how they can affect the way these children learn. The schools can incorporate into the program those aspects of the culture and life experiences that are similar to those in the home environment. “By doing so, the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that schools consider important and essential can be bridged to what the children already know, the opportunity for their academic success is improved. Cultural characteristics appear to be prevalent within the African-American culture. These cultural characteristics can influence how children learn” (Gollnick & Chinn 1990, p.14).

One portion of learning style is the model of field-independent and field-sensitive learning behaviors. Children who tend to process information using field-independent behaviors are more systematic, use an inductive way of thinking, can see the relationship of the part to the whole, prefer to work alone, make abstractions, are very aggressive, and are strong in mathematics and science. These individuals would tend to see the forest, not individual trees. Characteristically, these field-sensitive learners are group-oriented, humanistic, and outgoing.

Instruction that encourages field-sensitivity includes group projects, close work with the teacher, and material in tune with the ethnic and social backgrounds of students. Field-independent instruction will focus on independent activities, minimal participation of the teacher, curriculum materials, chart and diagrams, and student work that emphasizes individual achievement (Gollnick & Chinn, 1996).
The social orientation of African American children appears to be determined by their culture. According to Shade and Edwards (1997), African American achievers tend to be more extroverted and European-American achievers are more likely to be introverted. African Americans also tend to be more in tune with or attentive to people rather than things. Delpit (1999) explained that African American children might say, “I did your homework, Ms. Smith”, or “I couldn’t be bad in her class” (p.17). The culture appears to give the children the understanding that people, not inanimate objects, are important. Since African American children are more in tune with “feelings, acceptance, and emotional closeness”, the social interaction within the classroom is very important (Shade & Edwards, 1997, p.98). The teaching strategy that appears most successful with these children emphasizes cooperative learning, as opposed to the individualistic, competitive learning that occurs in most classrooms (Delpit, 1999).

Orality is highly valued in the culture of African American’s. According to Gordon and Thomas (1990), “orality” refers to the capacity to receive, generate, and express feelings, signals, descriptors, ideas and concepts through language (p.18). Orality tends to be a strength of the African American culture. In the African American culture, children perform in front of people early in their lives. For example, Delpit (1999, p18.) indicated that little children almost as soon as they can walk, get up on the stage in church programs and say one or two words.

The first choice for the oral mode of communication by African American students should be used as a force to augment the ability in writing and reading as a means of communicating effectively (Gordon & Thomas, 1990). Educators need to be aware that African American children stories may be sporadic, with shifting scenes that
speak about a series of events (Delpit, 1999). Regrettably, many teachers expect a more linear approach to the sharing of events and happenings. In other words, the teacher might be more apt to say, “Now that’s enough, please sit down”, before the class finishes the idea. Be aware this kind of sharing is determined by the culture and that the communicating of ideas should be encouraged and used as a gateway to the expansion of language skills (Delpit 1999; Hale-Benson 1995). “African American culture appears to endorse and keep up a ‘motoric precocity’ and a need of stimulus variation for the children” (p.19). Wade Boykin (1990), characterizes African American children as having a higher psychological and behavioral “verve” resulting from a very active, stimulating home environment (p.19). This research indicates that children should be engaged in activities that are varied in intensity, filled with spontaneity, and delivered with enthusiasm.

African American children might benefit from instructional techniques that focus on active movement. Being active while learning may better meet the learning style of some African American children. Educators might want to include activities that promote active movement as a means of developing academic concepts in African American children. They enjoy pulling, pushing, running, jumping and swinging but seldom do teachers capitalize on the children’s natural inclination to move and use it as a primary tool or teaching strategy for developing or reinforcing academic concepts, such as reading or mathematics.

To confirm the overall effects of educating African American children, counselors and teachers should be aware that research shows that all healthy children seem to require more activity than others do. African American children may need to get on the floor and
roll around three times, rather than having to count three items on a worksheet while sitting at a table. Active movement can provide concrete personalized means for learning. Teachers would be well advised to include activities that promote active movement as a means of developing academic concepts in African-American children (Brown, 1976; Cratty, 1972, 1973, 1985; Humphrey, 1966, 1987; Humphrey & Sullivan, 1970).

_Individual Counseling Interventions_

In developing a counseling relationship in the school environment and before interventions can be considered or implemented, an assessment must be performed. Assessment procedures for the initial session should include an overall view of the child’s unique responses to, and experiences with, academic success and failures, the support system at school and home and how the child understands the meaning of academic success (Hale-Benson, 1995).

In formulating school-based interventions for African American children, other considerations need to be addressed. One consideration is the possibility of chronic and nightly stressful series of events lasting in some cases for the entire school year. Another consideration is that African American children may be experiencing a set of indirectly related transitions, such as loss of home, loss of a parent, change in neighborhood or school, and others increasing the stress of not being able to focus in school. Some African American children may simultaneously lose the support of extrafamilial figures and be particularly needy of nurturance from empathetic adults with whom he or she spend time. Finally, another consideration in the assessment process of the initial
counseling session is the child’s capacity to cope with stress understanding that it is dependent on age, developmental temperament, and problem solving skills.

Effective individual counseling interventions include working with self-esteem, home-based behaviors, school-based behaviors, cultural beliefs and relationships with family members and peers. Supportive psychoeducation, problem-solving skills training, social skills training and stress management training should be a part of most interventions with African American children (Ladson-Billings, 1992). The supportive psychoeducation component should both provide African American children with a safe forum within which to express their feelings related to failure and desire to be successful and also a reliable source of information about the experience of coming to terms with family issues. The skills training components should equip African American students with the requirements to manage the psychological and social challenges they face as a result of their parent separation. According to research, many African Americans face this problem daily. The effectiveness of such child focused program may be enhanced by including parallel parent training (Ladson-Billings, 1992). That focuses specifically on training parents in listening and discipline skills to enhance the quality of the parent-child relationship and help the parent help the child transfer skills learned in counseling sessions into their day-to-day skills (Ladson-Billings, 1992).

**Group Interventions**

According to Ladson-Billings (1992), research in theory and its application has shown that individuals who receive cognitive guidance and emotional support for coping with difficult situations have reduced risk for developing mental and physical illness. Group content can focus on individual’s confusion concerning the reasons for failure or
not believing in themselves, problems within family, peers and getting alone with teachers. Group intervention teaches needed coping skills, which can be taught through role playing and discussion emphasizes defining problems, thinking ways to solve problems or recognizing that a problem cannot be solved by the adolescent alone, and recognizing consequences and behavior. Coping skills allow adolescents to feel less out of control and the tendency to act out is decreased as the mastery increases. The main goals of group counseling interventions are to provide a supportive group environment, helping African American children to identify and express feelings and promote understanding to other children who are like them and possibly educate others who are not from the same culture.

**Parent and Teacher Participation**

Interventions are more like to be successful when parents and teachers are involved in the counseling process. Developing strong support systems include parents being involved by participating in surveys or questionnaires, parent meetings and parent-child interaction to enhance child-parent communication (Coleman, 1997). Parent involvement and behavior has a tremendous effect on the overall outcome of an African American child’s progress in school. Parents are the essential part for attaining and forming a successful student. Consistent involvement of teachers is also an important piece of creating successful prevention models for the school system. The teacher has the greatest cumulative effect on the largest number of students, therefore, they must be a central collaborator in the counseling process. Teachers are able to help in the counseling process by being involved in the assessment process, consultation, and carrying out goals as needed (Coleman, 1997).
Conclusion

Given the history and prevalence of educating African American children and their academic success, there are clearly issues that must be addressed and worked through by school personnel, particularly counselors and teachers, who must be prepared to engage in strategies that are developed specifically for working with African American children. Evidence has shown that schools across the United States are not meeting the needs of African American children. This places the school counselor in a unique position to advocate for these students in order to change the current statistics by educating parents and teachers on the importance of working together, providing an organized support system for African American children to focus on their true ability, and instilling coping skills, stress management and other necessary skills.
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