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## **No Child Left Behind: Key Issues and Instructional Implications for Teachers of African-American Children**

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*This article presents an overview of five key issues: access to materials; student motivation; teacher preparation; instructional practices; and parent-teacher-student relationships, that must be addressed in effecting change in the academic performance of African-American students. These issues are deemed important if the No Child Left Behind legislation is to impact the teaching and learning of African-American students.*

APPROXIMATELY FORTY-SIX percent of Black and Hispanic children live in poverty compared to 8 percent of Caucasian children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Forty-three percent of African-American families are headed by a single parent as opposed to 18 percent of Caucasian families (McKinnon & Humes, 2000). In single parent families, the poverty rate is 41 percent for African-American children.

In 2001 (NCES, 2001), forty-eight percent of African-American children between the ages of 3-5 were read to every day compared to 64 percent of Caucasian children. Forty-eight percent of children living in single parent homes were read to compared to 61 percent of 3-5 year olds in two parent families. (NCES, 2001)

In spite of the above, African-American communities collectively view literacy as not only important, but as requisite for human existence and "successful survival" (Qualis, 2001). African-American parents living in urban environments have high expectations for their children's success in learning to read. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) conducted case studies on the literacy development of young, urban African-American children living in poverty and found that their subjects had literate home environments with families who supported their literacy development at home and at school. However, the differences between the literacy achievement of African-American students and Caucasian students remain significant according to Au (1998). Au's 1998 assessment was reinforced by the 2000 National Assessment of Education Progress. Reading scores for fourth graders indicated that African-American, Hispanic, and Native American students performed lower than Asian/Pacific Islanders and Caucasian students. Twelve percent of African-American children were reading at or above the proficiency level compared to 40 percent of the Caucasian children. In addition, more advantaged children and children in private schools performed better than less advantaged urban children in public schools (NAEP, 2000). The question is what are some factors associated with low achievement in African-American children and what can be done to help African-American children become successful readers and writers.

This article will focus on some of the important issues that must be considered in understanding the underachievement of African-American

students: access to materials; student motivation; teacher preparation; instructional practices; and parent-teacher-student relationships. The article concludes with implications for change.

### **Access to Materials**

Differential access to literacy has important implications for children's early literacy development. In a study of four neighborhoods with varying incomes, Neuman & Celano (2001) found striking differences between neighborhoods of different incomes. Middle-income children were found to have greater access to a variety of resources (libraries, bookstores, books in the home) compared to lower income children.

Middle class children were more likely to be bombarded with a wide variety of reading material and print in their environment than children from poor neighborhoods. Extensive differences, favoring middle class communities, were found in the number and type of print resources, choice and quality of materials available, and in public spaces for reading (Neuman & Celano, 2001).

Smith, Constantino & Kroshen (1997) in an earlier study on the number of books available in the homes and classrooms of students in two low economic communities and one middle class community, also noted major differences or inequities in the children's access to books. They found that on average middle income children had 99 percent and 99.8 percent more books at home than lower and lowest income students, and 86 percent to 88 percent more books in their classroom libraries than lower and lowest income students respectively.

Neuman & Celano (2001) further found that television sets were more prominent in low-income child care centers than books, and that over 80 percent of the centers did not have book corners, age-appropriate books, and other print materials for young children.

Allington (2001) argues that what was found in school libraries by Smith et al. (1997) and in childcare centers by Neuman & Celano (2001) should not be the case. His reasoning is that "children from lower income

homes especially need rich and extensive collections of books in their school libraries and in their classrooms, if only because these are the children least likely to have a supply of books at home."

In its publication, *Making a Difference* (2000), the International Reading Association asserts that all children have the right to access a wide variety of books and other reading materials in their classrooms, schools, and community libraries. The Association recommends that schools should have sufficient funding to allow them to purchase two new books per student each year for the school library, and that school libraries should contain twenty books per child. It further recommends seven books per child for classroom libraries, with one new book per child added each year.

### **Motivation**

In a survey of 40,000 suburban middle and high school students conducted by the Minority Student Achievement network, a national consortium of 15 school districts considered to be somewhat affluent and racially diverse, race was discounted as a factor in the achievement gap between African-American/Latino and Asian/Caucasian students (Fletcher, 2002). African-American and Latino students were found to be as eager and ambitious about learning as Caucasian and Asian-American students. Although African-American and Latino students were found to have good attitudes toward school, their performance did not equal their Caucasian and Asian-American counterparts. Forty percent of the African-American students and 30 percent of the Latino students reported grade averages of C plus or below compared to 13 and 14 percent of Caucasians and Asians. In contrast 48 and 47 percent of Caucasian and Asian students respectively had grade averages of A minus or higher, compared to 14 percent of African-Americans and 19 percent of Hispanics. The authors suggest that improving the relationship between teachers and students may help to close the achievement gap observed between the African-American and Latino students versus the Caucasian and Asian students.

An ecological approach to the problem of academic underachievement of African-American children in African-American

communities is needed according to Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman & Mason (1996). In a one-year study in which they examined the effects of family (income, parental education, and structure), parenting (maternal support and restrictive control), peer support, and neighborhood risk on the achievement of African-American adolescents, they found that family income, parent education level, and the number of parental figures in the home was not significantly associated with student achievement. Maternal support, on the other hand, was significantly positively associated with adolescents' grades regardless of neighborhood risk. In low-risk conditions, as maternal control became more restrictive, the grades of adolescents decreased. Adolescents in low-risk neighborhoods whose parents gave them greater autonomy had higher grades than those adolescents who had more restrictive parents. However, the reverse was found in high-risk neighborhoods where restrictive control was found to be positively related to grades. The study also found peer support to be positively related to grades for students living in low-risk neighborhoods. Peer support also had no relationship to achievement for those living in high-risk neighborhoods.

The question might be asked, "Are African-American children motivated to achieve?" Literature on the achievement motivation of African-Americans indicate similarities between African-American and Caucasian children in locus of control, sense of competence, expectancies for success, and patterns of attribution for success and failure (Graham & Long, 1986; Graham, 1994). In contrast to Caucasian students, African-Americans have also been found to consistently maintain a high sense of competence after failing. In spite of these findings, the research indicates that there are differences between African-American and Caucasian students in academic achievement. Some researchers attribute these differences to differences in motivation. For example, Spradlin, Welsh, and Hinson (2001) surveyed 185 middle and working class African-American and Caucasian eighth and ninth grade students to determine if student grade point average is affected by student identity characteristics, achievement motivation variables, race, and gender. Identity characteristics included racial identity development and the Ogbu (1998) factor which is based on the premise that involuntary minority students (minorities whose ancestors were brought to the U.S. against their will) are negatively influenced by peers to reject

school and to devalue studying. The variables examined in achievement motivation included academic futility (sense of failure or lack of purpose) academic self-concept, and achievement salience (recognition or prominence). Spradlin et al. (2001) found that the average GPA of both African-American males and females was lower than that of Caucasian males and females. The GPA of African-American males was found to be related to the achievement motivation variables of futility and salience, while the GPA of African-American females was found to be related to racial identity. African-American females were found to have the highest achievement motivation of all of the subjects while African-American males had the lowest achievement motivation. Spradlin et al. (2001) concluded that their findings support Ogbu's (1998) theory of voluntary and involuntary minorities and achievement and Brookover & Schneider's (1975) findings of academic futility and lower levels of academic achievement for minority students. Spradlin et al. (2001) challenge educators and policymakers to acknowledge the importance of the futility effects of tracking, testing, teaching techniques, discipline policies, attitudes of teachers and administrators, institutional and individual racism, etc. on African-American male academic achievement. They also emphasize a strong need for community involvement in helping African-American males to understand how to successfully move through the academic system without feeling that they are being traitors to their race or "selling out."

Group counseling and mentoring programs are recommended to achieve this. A mentoring approach developed by Spradlin (1999) involves three to four mentors and four to six students who meet in small group sessions to focus on the questions and needs of the students. Books, one selected by the student and the second by the mentor are used to structure monthly discussions. Important issues related to the books are then discussed in a book-club format.

Achievement goal theory on the motivation of African-American students in predominantly Caucasian school settings suggests that the schools which emphasize task goals promote Black students' academic success and well-being more than those that emphasize ego goals. Task goals are those goals formulated for the purpose of learning and

improving, whereas, ego goals focus on excelling and doing better than others (Ames, 1992b).

To achieve the goal of creating academic tasks that focus on task goals, Ames (1992a) recommends interesting and relevant or meaningful tasks that are new and diverse. These tasks should actively engage students, personally challenge them and allow them to work in a variety of structures to complete the tasks.

According to Ames (1992a), the authority structure of these task-oriented environments should have students participating in decision-making, leadership, and assuming responsibility for their learning. They should also provide equal opportunities to recognize desired behaviors and achievement in both African-American and Caucasian students and provide positive feedback for exhibiting them. While Ames recommends private acknowledgement of desired behaviors, Martin, Linfoot & Stephenson (1999) believe that public recognition might be beneficial. Ames also believes that students should be recognized for extra effort, improvement, creativity, initiative, and achievement based upon normative standards. Consequently, task-oriented environments are considered important to supporting academic and social goals of public education.

### **Teacher Preparation**

Teacher training has been found to enable African-American students to meet reading standards. The National Urban Alliance launched an initiative in 2000 to train 1,300 of the Seattle, Washington school district's 3,000 teachers in an extensive and broad range of techniques for teaching reading and writing skills. Following the training, literacy consultants coached the teachers in their schools. In 1999 the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) was used to compare the literacy performance of African-American students at the fourth and seventh grades with their performance at the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. The WASL showed that students benefited from literacy trained teachers. They passed the 2002 test at twice the rate of students who spent a year or less with these trained teachers. The pass rate was 26 percent for those who spent two years in the classrooms with literacy trained

teachers and 12 percent for African-American children who did not have literacy-trained teachers. Thirty-one percent of the students who did not spend two years with literacy trained teachers passed the writing portion of the WASL compared to 44 percent for those who did (Bach, 2002).

Do teachers feel that they possess the skills to teach African-American students? Research indicates that the majority of the present teaching force is white and female, in contrast to an increasingly diverse student population. Pang and Sablaln (1998) surveyed 100 preservice and 75 inservice teachers enrolled in multicultural courses to determine their feelings about teaching African-American children. They found that preservice teachers were more positive about their ability to teach, assess, redirect and adjust to the needs of African-American children than the inservice teachers. However, sixty-five percent of the inservice teachers felt that even a teacher with good teaching abilities may not be able to reach African-American youth. Inservice teachers also indicated a strong underlying belief that the African-American community is not supportive of education. As a group, the teachers felt that underachievement of African-American children stems from cultural conflict in communication patterns and dialect between home and school.

Given the above, Ladson-Billings (2000) has poignantly stated that there is an urgency for teacher educators to design programs which prepare teachers to attend to the uniqueness of African-American students. Ladson-Billings believes that African-American students are engaged in a "fight for their lives." Likewise, Fremon and Hamilton (1997) feel that schools are failing to educate a significant number of African-American boys. Fourth grade is the beginning of the downward slide in academic achievement for this population of students as evidenced by lower teacher expectations, discrepant disciplinary challenges, and lower academic achievement. Fremon and Hamilton (1997) cite the need for a united effort by caring adults in the community, home, and schools to ensure that students are provided with a sense of hope as opposed to a cycle of failure. They also emphasize the need for ongoing staff training in cultural, economic, gender, and linguistic issues, along with parent involvement, school outreach, male mentors and instructors, community and after-school extracurricular activities, and school reform. If teacher education programs want to

make changes, Ladson-Billings suggests that they reexamine their admission procedures to identify prospective teachers who want to teach in African-American communities. This action has the potential for providing African-American students with a quality education by teachers who feel comfortable working with them, have positive feelings about African-American culture, and who hold high expectations for their achievement.

### **Instructional Implications**

Culturally responsive teaching strategies which involve connecting classroom patterns of participation and home values are also fundamental for teaching African-American learners. Au (2001) suggests that if the literacy achievement gap is to be narrowed between minority students and majority students, schools must provide minority students with high quality instruction. Students must understand that reading involves higher-level thinking about text, rather than word calling. Additional recommendations for improving the literacy of minority students include: 1.) establishing ownership of literacy as the overarching goal of the language arts curriculum; 2.) recognizing the importance of students' home languages and promoting bi-literacy; 3.) increasing the use of multicultural literature in classrooms; 4.) promoting cultural responsiveness in classroom management and teachers' interactions with students; 5.) making stronger links to the community; 6.) providing students with authentic literacy activities and instruction in specific skills; and 7.) using forms of assessment that reduce bias and more accurately reflect students' literacy achievement.

Strickland (1994) feels that observational techniques should be used to assess African-American and other at-risk populations because they will allow students to demonstrate what they know. Strickland also offers some additional principles and recommendations that can be used to improve the literacy of African-American and other at-risk populations. They are as follows: 1.) providing literacy programs with an emergent literacy perspective that values children's knowledge and recognizes that, like all children, African-American children come to school eager to learn and to please teachers; 2.) using instructional techniques that allow children to demonstrate what they know; 3.)

starting coordinated school and social service intervention programs to prevent reading failure; 4.) using literacy programs that build upon and expand children's language and culture; 5.) encouraging the use of Standard American English (SAE) through exposure to a variety of oral and written texts and oral language activities; 6.) initiating family literacy programs that allow adults and children to view reading as a cooperative social experience; and 7.) providing incentives to attract and keep the best teachers and provide ongoing professional development to acquaint teachers with a way to increase the literacy levels of low-SES African-American children.

Based upon research conducted to examine reading instruction in effective schools and delivered by accomplished teachers in low-income schools, Taylor, Pearson, Clark & Walpole (1999) found that in all of the effective schools, reading was clearly a priority at both the classroom and school level. School factors identified included:

- strong links to parents;
- systematic assessment of student progress;
- strong communication and collaboration within school buildings; and
- the presence of a collaborative model for reading instruction and early intervention.

Significant teacher factors identified included time spent in small group instruction; time spent in independent reading and high levels of on-task student behavior; and strong home communication.

### **Teacher-Student-Parent Relationships**

Another variable to consider in addressing the achievement gap between majority and African-American children is the relationships between teachers, parents, and children. Vondra (1999) feels that relationships are the basis for learning. Interested, caring, and challenging teachers will teach children not only to expect more of themselves, but also to see and believe in their capacity to achieve.

I believe that teachers and their expectations of African-American children are critical to the success of African-American children. As the noted African-American educator, Marva Collins, said, "high expectations for students, good teaching, and positive teacher-student relations are critical for helping African-American children who are at risk for failure." According to Collins, "We as teachers have a powerful influence on what our students learn. More importantly, we as teachers, have a powerful opportunity to continue learning with our students. Teach our students great ideas, great thoughts, and we grow. Raise the standards for our students and we raise the bar for ourselves. Lower the standard for our students and we lower what we take in as well." (Collins, 1999, p. 6)

Minority and low-income children are less likely when compared to middle-class and majority students to have positive relationships with their middle-class teachers (Vondra, Shaw, Swearingen, Cohen & Owens, 1999; Pianta & Nimetz, 1991). The use of prejudicial classroom management techniques with minority students, particularly African-American and Hispanics is well-documented (Sheets & Gay, 1998; Brown, Payne, Lankewich, & Cornell, 1970; Banks & Banks, 1993). The behavior of African-American males is often viewed as more aggressive and severe than their counterparts and similar behaviors to their majority counterparts are more likely to result in more severe punishment (Grant, 1985; Sheets & Gay, 1998) such as suspensions and expulsions (Townsend, 2000; Costenbader & Markson, 1994). Disparate differences in the severity of disciplinary practices for African-American students when compared to majority students have been found to be related to non-achievement, exclusion from courses, feelings of alienation, increase misbehavior, dropping out of school (Irvine, 1990), lower expectations (Garibaldi, 1992), and grade retention (Rodney, Crafter, Rodney & Mupier, 1999).

Rodney et al. (1999) call for a change in the nature of suspension and the school environment of African-American males because suspension has been linked to the poor academic performance of African-American 13-17 year olds. However, grade retention has been investigated as an alternative to suspension and expulsion in order to reduce in-school rebellious behavior and to increase the feelings of

attachment of African-American seventh and eighth grade males to school, but it has not been found to be effective (Gottfredson, Fink, & Graham, 1994).

As previously indicated, socioeconomic differences have also been found to influence disciplinary practices. Frequently, teachers perceive low-income students as having the most behavioral problems (Malone, Bonitz, & Rickett, 1998). As a result, students from working-class or low-income homes, regardless of ethnicity, experience more discipline and control encounters from teachers when compared to middle-class Euro-American students (Appleford, Fralick, & Ryan, 1976; Woolridge & Richman, 1985; and Rist, 1970). These findings correlate with findings that teachers of lower socioeconomic children more frequently use or support the use of corporal punishment, verbal punishment, or suspension when compared to teachers of middle-class students (Lezotte, 1998-1999).

Lezotte (1998-1999) argues that the behaviors that teachers of minorities and lower socioeconomic students see as annoying and/or problematic are often behaviors needed to cope in their world or environment outside of school. Any program which hopes to be effective with these learners must teach students school behaviors as separate from outside behaviors and, more importantly, must be grounded in both structure and choice. The element of choice is important because it moves students from being dependent upon others for controlling their behaviors. Appropriate school behaviors must be clearly identified and probable consequences for not choosing those behaviors clearly stated (Lezotte, 1998-1999).

McMillon and Edwards (2000) investigated the incongruence between the church and the school environment of an African-American child named Joshua. They found that Joshua was exceptionally literate in his Sunday school classroom. He was encouraged to work cooperatively with his peers and allowed to share his knowledge with them to broaden their understanding of issues. In preschool, Joshua's preschool teacher perceived him as socially illiterate. When he attempted to elaborate his peer's responses, his actions were seen as disruptive and he was disciplined accordingly. The cooperative learning environment

of the church classroom and the disciplinary practices of the church school were in stark contrast to that of the preschool. While discipline in the Sunday school class focused on learning together and changing inappropriate behavior which interfered with student learning rather than punishing the individual displaying it, the focus in the preschool was on the individual student's responsibility for learning and inappropriate behavior. Time out or removal from the preschool class was used to reduce the likelihood of reoccurrence of a behavior. When Joshua's mother intervened and taught Joshua how to navigate the boundaries of school, his relationship with his teacher and his peers improved. The researchers concluded that the learning environment of the African-American church is of value to teachers who want to be effective in working with African-American children. They also believe that Sunday school teachers have a responsibility to teach African-American children how to negotiate their school environments.

Other theorists believe that humanistic principles such as respecting students, acknowledging their creativity, and recognizing their skills are necessary for successful management of urban classrooms. It is critical that teachers follow these principles, especially in high-poverty urban schools where teacher-child relations have been identified as the most important aspect of school climate (Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1996).

As early as third grade, Baker (1999) found that for African-American students in an urban setting, the social context of the classroom influenced their assessment of the school environment. Students' perceptions of a caring, supportive relationship with a teacher and a positive classroom environment were related to their overall school satisfaction (Baker, 1999). All children, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status or intellect need access to learning environments that provide them with confidence in their ability to learn. Students also need teachers whose actions support a belief in their students' abilities to learn (Strickland, 1998). Strickland's comments have immense implications for teachers working with at-risk African-American students in urban classroom settings. Marva Collins believes that there are an infinite number of possibilities that can emanate from a positive classroom/school environment and that teachers who display high

expectations and who recognize that teaching itself is discipline will be successful (Collins, 1999).

In contrast to disciplinary plans or proposals which emphasize teacher expectations for behavior (Canter, 1976; Lezotte, 1998-1999), the Marva Collins' plan requires students to establish individual expectations for behaviors. Students are challenged to change inappropriate behavior by rejecting negative expectations or situations and supporting teachers in their attempts to control their behaviors. Rather than noting students' infractions with a penalty system, teachers are encouraged to promote student self-reflection (Collins, 1999).

Marva Collins tells children that she expects behavior from them that contributes to the learning process and that benefits other children. She believes that discipline must be done in a caring manner (Collins & Tamarkin, 1982). Teachers are encouraged to express concern and praise, but to also demonstrate tough love and high expectations for student achievement and behavior. Teachers are expected to be frank with students about the negative consequences of inappropriate behavior and to teach them that self-discipline and self-determination are necessary for success (Collins & Tamarkin, 1982).

Teachers who pity or hold lower expectations for low-income African-American children are not helping them. These students should be expected to strive for self-control; and encouraged to analyze and reflect about their behaviors. Writing can be integrated into the reflective process as students are implored to record reasons why they are too intelligent to engage in disruptive behavior. Links can also be made between oral and written discussion, and proverbs can be used to reflect about misbehavior. Appropriate proverbs can be taught, written, and recited as a means of indirectly teaching students to change a disruptive behavior (Collins, 1999). Collins often uses literary classics (i.e. Macbeth) to make real world connections or to help students to understand the consequences of present or future behaviors (Collins & Tamarkin, 1982).

According to Compton-Lily (2000), African-American parents in the urban school where she taught expected teachers to hold high

behavior expectations for their children and to develop caring relationships with their children. These parents felt that a caring and demanding relationship was critical in helping their children to achieve. They expected teachers to teach their children by “staying on their children and not allowing them to play around (waste time).” Staying on children requires the teacher to know the child and to see him or her as capable of achieving.

As parents have expectations of teachers, so too do the children have expectations of their teachers. Compton-Lily (2002) found that the students expect teachers to actively teach them to learn. They also expect teachers to demonstrate that they care. Nieto’s (1966) call for good teaching practices and the existence of positive relationships between students, parents, and teachers in order to overcome the academic difficulties faced by urban children has merit.

### **Implications**

Culturally responsive and genuinely caring teachers are needed to ensure that no more African-American children are left behind. (Gay, 1993; Thayer-Bacon 1993; Sanacore, 2004). African-American children need teachers who can combine cultural styles of teaching and learning to create culturally compatible classrooms that provide genuine invitations and opportunities for all students to engage maximally in academic pursuits without any one group being unduly advantaged or penalized (Gay, 1993). Among the genuinely caring teaching literacy practices for African-American children that Sanacore (2004) recommends are that teachers:

- engage them in lively discussions or opportunities for meaningful language interactions and critical thinking
- immerse students in drama to make an emotional response to literature
- instill a lifelong love of literacy
- build resilience or the ability to achieve by helping students to recognize the link between sustained effort and personal and academic success
- support improved home-school connections

The achievement gap between African-American and Caucasian students is a reality. The need to change the situation has to move beyond a dream of equity to the implementation of practices. To do this, we desperately need informed and caring teachers and school administrators who are truly committed to leaving no more African-American children behind.

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