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Aiding At-Risk Students

Jeremy Baldwin

Western Michigan University, jeremy.baldwin@d300.org

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THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE

CERTIFICATE OF ORAL EXAMINATION

Jeremy Baldwin, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in Fall 2000 successfully presented the Lee Honors College Thesis on April 21, 2004.

The title of the paper is:

"Aiding At-Risk Students"



Mrs. Jane Ryan, Loy Norrix High School



Mrs. Erin Zelikov, Loy Norrix High School



Dr. Angie Moe, Sociology

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: March 26, 2004

To: Angie Moe, Principal Investigator
Jeremy Baldwin, Student Investigator for honors thesis

From: Mary Lagerwey, Chair

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mary Lagerwey".

Re: Approval not needed

This letter will serve as confirmation that your project "The Role of the Loy Norrix Student Resource Center" has been reviewed by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB). Based on that review, the HSIRB has determined that approval is not required for you to conduct this project because you will collect information about the program at the Student Resource Center and not about individual people. Thank you for your concerns about protecting the rights and welfare of human subjects.

A copy of your study questions and a copy of this letter will be maintained in the HSIRB files.

AIDING AT-RISK STUDENTS

BY

JEREMY BALDWIN

THESIS

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the Lee Honors College
and the College of Arts and Sciences of
Western Michigan University, 2004**

Kalamazoo, Michigan

Kalamazoo's Loy Norrix High School was the location of a study in conjunction with the institution's school-wide achievement process to aid at-risk students. Characterized by poor attendance, behavioral problems and/or failing two or more subjects, at-risk students are monitored more closely through school-wide efforts. According to the Michigan Department of Education, the effort to help struggling students implicates the use of supplemental services before or after school to help students in the core subjects: math, science, social studies, and English. Norrix has successfully begun its own efforts to improve the overall academic success of the student body by employing the Academic Achievement Center (AAC) after school on Mondays through Thursdays of each week. In addition to providing tutoring services in the aforementioned subjects, the school also provides access to computers for online research and completion of class assignments.

While recognizing the need for ongoing school improvements, Norrix additionally instituted the Student Responsibility Center (SRC), which serves as a middle ground for students between temporary removal from the classroom due to disruptive behavior and the ultimate consequence of punishment, should it be necessary. Although the SRC does not specifically seek to improve a student's academic achievement, the SRC staff operates on the notion that each student must be treated as a complete individual. Working broadly with a multidisciplinary perspective, behavioral specialist at the school, Jane Ryan, notes how "academic achievement and behavior are clearly intertwined" (2004). As is common with at-risk students and their respective backgrounds, such individuals tend to have much more on their minds than reading, writing and arithmetic. By taking into account and validating the experiences students undergo outside of the

classroom, the SRC personnel work individually with each student on understanding and harnessing daily frustrations. In turn, at-risk students who are able to corral their emotions are more likely to lessen the risk of being dismissed from class in the future. And, if a student can display such control, academic success is attainable.

For the purpose of this study, special interest was focused on the African-American male population of Norrix's at-risk students. Although all races are vulnerable to produce at-risk students, evidence shows that African-American males are disproportionately represented in the at-risk population within many institutions, including Norrix. Historically, African-Americans are known to most commonly come from low-income households, according to Pedro Noguera, a professor in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, as stated in his article "The Trouble with Black Boys" (2002). As Noguera states, "one out of every three Black children is raised in a poor household." The connection between at-risk students and those of low-income families is evident as seen in the lack of resources available to the financially distraught. Additionally, "research on children in poverty shows that impoverished conditions greatly increase the multiplier effect on risk variables (i.e. single parent household, low birth weight, low educational attainment of parents, etc.)," states Noguera. Considering this, a low-income African-American family is susceptible to other pitfalls such as deterred physical and emotional stability. In essence, the majority of the African-American population in our country is raised without adequate opportunities that most other races are privileged to experience.

While Noguera is a dignified scholar, his work carries significant weight in studying the African-American male culture of Norrix because it is his work, specifically,

that Kalamazoo Public Schools' (KPS) administrators are exploring in order to curtail the lacking success of at-risk students. Indeed, a considerable part of Norrix's efforts are geared towards saving at-risk students from "slipping through the cracks" (Ryan 2004).

In correlation with aiding at-risk students, the school has also adopted the seven characteristics of effective schools as composed by Lawrence Lezotte, a representative of the Michigan Institute for Educational Management (*Excelsior* 1999). While each of the seven goals remains equally important to a school's success, the AAC and SRC respectively depict specific goals put into action. The aim to supply "frequent monitoring of student progress" is the intent of the AAC, for example, while the SRC does its part to provide "a safe, orderly environment" along with promoting "a climate of high expectations for success for all students" (*Excelsior* 1999). By referring a student to the SRC the teacher is able to uphold the integrity of the classroom, which demands a safe and orderly environment in order for learning to occur. And, by interacting with the SRC staff the student is taught to justly take responsibility for their actions while advocating high personal expectations for appropriate behavior. Because, despite outside influences of at-risk students, only the individual can ultimately control how they react to their environment.

Relating to the at-risk African-American male population, Noguera additionally provides explanations for the disproportionate success of African-American males compared to the overall student population. By identifying the "ominous array of social and economic hardships" that plague African-Americans, Noguera further explains how it is "hardly surprising that the experience of Black males in education, with respect to attainment and most indicators of academic performance, also show signs of trouble and

distress” (2002). While noting the apparent connection between the educational performance of African-American males and the hardships they endure within the larger society, Noguera admits that it is hardly understood exactly *how* the African-American culture impacts its males on their perceptions of school and how those perceptions influence their behavior and performance in school (2002). Nonetheless, Noguera asserts that “human beings have the capacity to resist submission to cultural patterns, demographic trends [and] environmental pressures and constraints,” which in turn presents the possibility that schools can take action to support the academic achievement of African-American males (2002). Indeed, Noguera’s observations are “rooted in the notion that it is possible to educate all children” (2002). Likewise, Norrix’s school-wide achievement team operates on exactly this same principle, seeking to provide an effective education “for *all* students,” as specifically emphasized by Ryan (2004).

Most notably, Noguera explicitly insists “Black males often adopt behaviors that make them complicit in their own failure” (2002). Continuing in his research, Noguera recognizes how “Black males are not merely passive victims, but may also be active agents in their own failure” (2002). As a solution, policies must be altered, argues Noguera, to “actively engage Black males [...] in taking responsibility to improve their circumstances” (2002). In addition to this, Noguera states that innovative strategies must also “involve efforts to counter and transform cultural patterns [...] adopted by Black males that undermine the importance they attach to education” (2002). Norrix’s SRC is specifically designed to accomplish such a task, as it aptly incorporates the word “responsibility” into its title. By doing so, the SRC demonstrates that responsibility lies upon the student to proactively control their fate within the classroom.

Ideally, the SRC appears to be a great innovation to aid the overall population of at-risk students, as Noguera would agree. However, various conflicts are evident that deter the SRC from fully reversing the cultural influences that plague African-American males, especially.

While the SRC is designed to temporarily remove an individual in order to preserve an academically focused atmosphere for the body of students willing to learn, teachers sometimes abused their authority and continuously dismissed the same student(s) for seemingly minor offenses. Whereas the SRC is constructed to be a place of intervention for at-risk students, too often the SRC appeared more as a detention facility where teachers would send and dispose of uncooperative students. Objectively, however, the SRC staff understands that a teacher has an immeasurable amount of responsibility to each and *every* student in the classroom, and the flow of the class simply cannot be jeopardized to adequately address *one* student's concerns.

Comparably, concerns repeatedly surfaced, especially among the African-American males who seemed to be regularly sent to the SRC, that the conflicting teacher was racist. Of course, it is important to understand that natural adolescent tendencies of irresponsibility and narrow-minded perspectives are at play within the minds of high school-aged students. In fact, certain students incurred in detrimental behavioral in only one specific class. While that teacher alone may very well be the object of a particular student's disdain, a more agreeable explanation is found in the student's preference for certain subjects in spite of others. For example, a student might have a distasteful opinion of his science teacher solely because that teacher has the responsibility to teach science, a particular subject that may be difficult and altogether unappealing to that

specific student. Yet, whatever the circumstances for a particular student, the process of repeatedly being sent out of class does not help to change a student's attitude towards a specific class.

Despite the naïve and immature tendencies of the adolescent-aged students, it is critical not to undermine the intelligence and perspective of Norrix's at-risk students. Especially among the African-American males, who were indoctrinated to the world of street savvy-ness, stemming from working class families that often demanded a child fend for itself, students exhibited authentic intelligence and manipulative capabilities. Because a student was failing his classes did not mean that student was incapable of learning. Relating to the cultural demands of the low-income, underprivileged society that most of Norrix's African-American males belong to, students refused to cooperate with certain teachers in fear of losing respect. Assuming a certain teacher did, in fact, treat a student inappropriately, upper-class citizens may universally believe that two wrongs do not make a right. However, certain students of Norrix intentionally overlooked this principle to reserve their self-respect, as culturally induced norms of African-American society inflicted their views of education. According to Erin Zelikov, who is the head faculty member of the SRC, many of the at-risk students at Norrix place such a high regard on self-respect because in many cases that is all they have; and, in the African-American culture, self-respect is valued – and needed – much more importantly than any other quality (2004). This is not to say that attaining academic success does not qualify as a self-respecting behavior; merely, the intense demand to illustrate self-respect often contradicts with the structural atmosphere of a classroom that deems the teacher as the sole authority figure.

In combination with the unmeasured intelligence, manipulative characteristics of the African-American male population at Norrix furthermore created a conflict in SRC's intentions to reverse cultural influences. While working with students individually, discussing a student's disruptive behavior and what course of action could be taken in the future to avoid such consequences, students were often quick to supply the most viable option. Indeed, obeying a teacher's command would certainly prevent any conflict from arising between a teacher and a student, and students who commonly visited the SRC knew this. Students complied with the SRC staff for the purpose of completing a task *demand*ed of them. Unlike a teacher, who has no option but to avoid confrontation in order to serve the majority of the class, the SRC staff is able to dedicate much more time and effort in gaining cooperation from students. Ironically, even the most stubborn of students showed the capacity to cooperate if sensitively yet firmly instructed, even if the cooperation is merely a façade.

Regardless of the insincere solution posed by students of the SRC, the individuals nonetheless exemplified the ability to submit to authority, at least to some degree. Although a student may remain quiet in his chair vehemently disagreeing with a teacher, that student is, in fact, still in the class and not disrupting the teacher's lesson. Although Norrix's mission statement is to ultimately ensure each and every student gains a "stimulating" education, Zelikov notes that each compliant step, however minute, remains a stride in the right direction. For example, a student's second visit to the SRC for disruptive behavior in the same classroom may initially seem like cooperation is far from sight, yet Zelikov believes differently. Whereas a student disturbs a class and verbally assaults the teacher upon being asked to leave, Zelikov notes that progress is

evident if the same student leaves the classroom the next time without verbally accosting the teacher. While the student still needs to correct the initial action that has caused him or her to be sent out of class, the student has shown some form of control by improving his or her demeanor and refraining from verbally attacking the teacher (2004).

Despite the traces of promise within the at-risk population of Norrix, the SRC continues to struggle against factors that deter the center's success. Perhaps the most disadvantageous aspect in the quest to aid at-risk students lies in the very staff of the SRC. To date, there are no African-American staff members (male or female) directly involved with the SRC. While Zelikov is well liked and very popular among the staff and students of Norrix, her connection to the severely at-risk – that being the African-American male population – is limited. Zelikov is a Caucasian female. Despite her best attempts, Zelikov can never epitomize the example of how a dignified African-American male should conduct himself.

In observation of Norrix's at-risk African-American population, African-American faculty seemed to hold a valuable place in the school's racially diverse composition. Although the implication of race did not directly influence how effectual a certain staff member was in comparison to another staff member, the common ground shared by African-American male students and African-American staff created a more comfortable atmosphere when interacting in a disciplinary manner. The natural association of race served to more closely bond African-American students with African-American faculty. Perhaps because the race card was visibly disregarded, students felt more apt to receive a staff member's instruction with sincerity, instead of rejecting the authority figure's commands and opinions as racial prejudice.

Despite the lack of African-American staff in the SRC, Zelikov remains able to adequately connect to the at-risk students of Norrix, including the African-American male population. Indeed, being able to associate one's race with a specific individual is helpful in successfully relating to that individual. However, the commonality of race is not required. More importantly than race, one must be able to compassionately identify with those of different cultures. Although Zelikov was raised in a secure, suburban area, she understands how the inner-city African-American culture forces children to mature much quicker than children of more privileged backgrounds. As an educator, however, Zelikov also grasps the need to fully understand students in order to help them. Additionally, Zelikov notes that although the at-risk population of African-American males is "wiser than their years," they nonetheless make "irrational decisions due to the fact that they're still kids" (2004).

By noting such, Zelikov effectively validates the experiences of the students she encounters. And, as Noguera concludes, "when educators are aware of the social and cultural pressures exerted on students, the need to choose between one's identity and academic success can be eliminated," therefore calming the cultural influences inside the minds of struggling African-American students (2002). In turn, educators need not prescribe any specific solution to improve the academic achievement of troubled students; awareness of the outside world and how it affects the underprivileged combined with the ability to sympathize is in itself the ultimate key to aiding at-risk students.

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