

Something Every Teacher and Counselor Needs to Know about African-American Children

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African Americans inherited a “nigger” culture. The literature posits that African-American culture was founded, formed, and shaped in America where European Americans instilled within African Americans the belief, albeit erroneous, that those of African descent were inferior humans, especially, intellectually (see Conrad, 1966; Davis, 2005; Higginbotham, 1996). Is it no wonder that African American children are, academically, the poorest performing children in America?

Corruptive historical influences are deemed as root and primary causes for the persistent and chronic academic achievement gap between Black children and all of their peers. Due to dastardly destructive historical influences, African Americans are now straddled with the dishonorable distinction as the least intelligent “race” in America. This will be further discussed later in this article.

Recently, a most alarming warning was communicated in the literature: a whole generation of African-American males is being lost primarily due to the effects (i.e., drugs, crime, prison, and death) of academic underachievement (see Midgette & Glenn, 1993). Far too many African Americans have been deliberately deceived into believing that they are intellectually inferior to their peers as millions of Black children continue to demonstrate an inability to keep pace, academically, with their peers.

However, this is nothing really avant-garde for educators and educational researchers. Individuals who professionally interact with school children are well aware of the staggering and demoralizing statistics which depict the academic problems of minority children, and African-American children specifically. In

response to this challenge, many educators are focusing on new strategies to teach students and progressive techniques in the preparation of students preparing to become K-12 educators.

Last semester, the dean of the College of Education at my University approached and asked if I was interested in teaching one of these kinds of courses. It was an undergraduate course entitled “*Teaching Diverse Populations*.” Similar to other courses I have taught on diversity, this one was a required course for all students interested in becoming school teachers.

The course being required was predicated on a notion that suggested that students needed to gain an understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures before they became fully employed as educators. Teachers being well-informed about other ethnic and cultural groups is perceived as critical to student education and instrumental to teachers being successful in the classroom with all of their children.

Admittedly, I was a bit apprehensive as this course was the first undergraduate course I had taught in almost ten years. Further, there were 50 students enrolled in the course (quite a large number for a relatively small university); I had gotten comfortable teaching 15 to 20 motivated graduate-level students. Nevertheless, I finally consented to teach the course.

On the first class day, I quickly noticed that the ethnic and gender make-up of my class was typical and reflective of the national trend of American school teachers: young, female, and White. Of the 50 students in the class; seven were male; one (a male) was African American (who also happened to be our only student with a disability). There were no Hispanic/Latino students. The others were all White and female.

Upon attaining a level of safety in the course, students became comfortable stating that they knew very little about diverse cultures, that they were innocently ignorant about the cultures of other people.

They had no idea as to why the foreboding academic achievement gap existed and persisted or what could be done to abate it. Most of them talked openly about how they had come from middle-class families in overwhelmingly White middle class neighborhoods and public schools.

Encouragingly, although they had their prejudices, as we soon found out, they did not seem to exhibit the kind of unforgiving, untenable, and demoralizing racism of past generations. Perhaps what was most conspicuous about this group of students, which is likely true for similar groups of students, was their admitted blatant ignorance about other ethnic groups. They did seem to have a desire to learn, although most of them resented being “forced” to take a course which focused on teaching students who are different.

Week after week, we explored the issues of diversity and, overall, the class was very successful. Student comments on the student evaluations suggested that we had made significant progress in exposing them to the current educational challenges of diverse students and strategies that they might employ to assist struggling students, particularly students of diverse backgrounds, become successful.

UNESCO’s Sustainability of Education

Education, undeniably, is critical to the development and sustainability of any society. Emphasizing the importance of education throughout the world, the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Director General, Koichiro Matsuura, explained that humans could not exercise civil, political, economic, and social rights unless they have received a certain minimum education.

In order to demonstrate the invaluable, precious nature of education, UNESCO’s General Assembly, in resolution 57/254, set aside the years 2005 to 2014 as the

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United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Recently, Director General Matsuura stated, "As an empowerment right, education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty, and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities." UNESCO's sentiments reflected a global declaration for effective education for all humankind.

Commonly, it is believed that effective educators are most successful in the facilitation of the intellectual development of children when they (teachers/educators) understand the specific needs of the children in their classrooms. It would appear, thereby, that American teachers know very little about how to respond to the needs of millions of African-American children, again, as clearly demonstrated by the students my the course discussed earlier.

In fact, U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings recently stated, "For far too long we have turned a blind eye to the system-wide failure of the Nation's ability and/or interest to effectively educate and prepare minority children, generally, and African-American children, specifically." At a time when the world leaders affirm the importance of education, African-American children, *as a group*, are the poorest performing children on virtually every standardized academic assessment instrument in virtually every school district in every locale in every state in the United States—one of the most "educated" countries in the world.

The Economic Factor

Relatedly, African Americans, as a group, persist as the most economically and socially marginalized group in America. In study after national study, researchers consistently report the academic disparity between African-American children and all of their peers (Borman, Stringfield, & Rachuba, 2000). The U.S. Census Bureau reports that African Americans are the poorest both academically and economically when compared to any other ethnic group in the country.

However, subsequent to researchers reporting their findings pertaining to the academic under-achievement of African-American children, very few academics/researchers seemed to be able to clearly enunciate or comprehend why African-American students persisted in performing in a manner inferior to all of their peers. This discussion seeks to diminish the paucity of

knowledge pertaining to African-American student academic under-achievement.

I am conscientious of the inherent pitfalls of a discussion positing that it, alone, will be able to explain an all-encompassing, perennial challenge such as the academic challenges of millions of African-American children. Any discussion that attempts to explain similar phenomena is likely fraught with inconsistencies, broad generalizations, and controversy. Every attempt to minimize these potential "pitfalls" will be undertaken. Conscientiously, we proceed. Clearly, the persistent academic under-achievement of millions of African-American children, a problem that often promotes other devastating social ills, demands further explication.

Research and scholarship that investigates the performance of children in academic settings is often intended to inform, educate, and improve the policies and procedures of the practitioners and policy-makers designated to serve these populations. However, as mentioned previously, teachers (and many policy makers) who routinely encounter the poor performance of many African-American children are already well aware of the academic struggles of these children.

Yet, similar to the researchers who study such phenomena, few teachers—those entrusted with the daunting responsibility of the educating millions of African-American children—seem to really comprehend why African-American children seem unable to compete, academically, with their peers. As stated, a premise of this discussion suggests that effective educators are most successful and effective when they understand the specific needs of the children they teach.

A corollary premise of this work suggests that in all of the hemispheres around the globe, as enunciated by UNESCO, educational attainment is deemed critical to successful citizenship. Our American President, George W. Bush, in recognition of the fundamental role of education in the lives of all Americans and the vitality/longevity of the social customs of the U.S., launched the "No Child Left Behind" initiative.

The "No Child Left Behind" legislation seeks to ensure that all of the children in America secure a basic education. Thereby, all Americans would be aptly prepared for academic and economic realities that confront the Nation. However, researchers continue to inform the public that despite decades of similar reform attempts, millions of African-American children are, indeed, being "left behind."

Educational Challenges Confronting African-American Children

In a thorough report published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (2003-2004), entitled, "Status and Trends in the Education of Blacks" in 2001, Black students scored lower than *all other racial groups* and Hispanic subgroups on both the verbal and mathematics section of the SAT. On average, Black students scored 96 points lower than White students on the verbal section in 2001, and 105 points lower than White students on the mathematics section in the same year.

The NCES data depicting this phenomenon appears in Table 1, while additional NCES data in Table 2 describes the rate of poverty by race that parallels the academic achievement of the respective ethnic groups.

In a well-documented study, entitled "Reaching the Top: Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement," Miller (1999) explored the academic problems of African-American, Native-American, and Hispanic-American children. In his discussion, Miller argued that moral, social, and economic imperatives must compel American stakeholders to invest in the educational development of African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans. He stated that "one priority of these public and private investments should be nurturing high achievement." (p. 30).

Despite such urgent appeals and recommendations, recently the U.S. Department of Education (2004) reported that only 12 percent of African-American children scored at or above grade-level in reading (compared with 40 percent of White children) on the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Further, the U.S. Department of Education reported that only 5 percent of African-American children scored at or above proficient levels on the math section of the NAEP. The U.S. Department of Education concluded, "The racial achievement gap is real, and it is not shrinking." How come?

Humphreys (1988), in a summarization of large-scale academic surveys, found that African-American student academic achievement began to adversely differ from their White counterparts in elementary school, and persisted throughout the process of formal education. Norman (1988) discovered that by the eighth grade, virtually half of the African-American

Table 1
Average Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) Scores (Verbal and Mathematics) for College-Bound Seniors by Race/Ethnicity, 1991 and 2001

Race/Ethnicity	Verbal			Mathematics		
	1991	2001	10-yr. Dif.	1991	2001	10-yr. Dif.
Total ¹	499	506	7	500	514	14
White, non-Hispanic	518	529	11	513	531	18
Black, non-Hispanic	427	433	6	419	426	7
Mexican American	454	451	-3	459	458	-1
Puerto Rican	436	457	21	439	451	12
Other Hispanic/Latino	458	460	2	462	465	3
Asian/Pacific Islander	485	501	16	548	566	18
American Indian/Alaskan Native	470	481	11	468	479	11

¹ Total includes other racial groups that are not presented separately above.

Note: Data for total Hispanics are not aggregated by the College Entrance Examination Board.

Source: College Entrance Examination Board, *News 200-2001*, Table 9, SAT Averages Rose for Almost All Racial/Ethnic Groups between 1991 and 2001.

Table 2
Number and Percentage of Individuals and Children Living Below the Poverty Level, by Race/Ethnicity, 2000

Race/Ethnicity	Individuals		Children	
	# in Poverty (1,000s)	%	# in Poverty (1,000s)	%
Total ¹	31,139	11	11,633	16
White, non-Hispanic	14,572	8	4,222	9
Black	7,901	22	3,526	31
Hispanic	7,155	21	3,330	28

¹ Total includes other racial groups that are not presented separately above.

Note: Black category includes persons who identified themselves as both Black and of Hispanic origin. Hispanic origin includes anyone who identified themselves as Hispanic.

Source: U. S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Poverty in the United States*, 2000, based on March Current Population Survey, 2000.

can student population was performing below grade level, with limited likelihood of ever catching up.

The U.S. Department of Education (2004) reported that the academic gap between Black and White children beginning at age 9 persisted through age 17 (graduation age). Lee (1992) found that the average 12th grade African-American student was reading at the 8th grade level of similar 12th grade White students. This perennial problem has, in many places, attained endemic, critical status. How come?

Why is there an academic achievement gap that is “real and not shrinking” in the United States of America? Where did this “gap” in achievement originate and what is responsible for it? One would think that the time has come when, as a nation of civilized citizens, we genuinely inquire into why or how this occurrence continues. “Why do African-American children persist, academically, in performing in a manner inferior to *all* of their peers?”

Rationale for the Academic Achievement Gap

Researchers, educators, policy-makers, and politicians have pondered the endemic nature of the academic achievement gap for decades. The U.S. has invested millions, perhaps billions, of dollars to address this century-old problem. However, most of these often very expensive programs designed to ameliorate the academic disparities between minority and majority students have proven ineffective.

It seems that most, although well intended, simply do not understand the nature of the problem. Few seem to know “Why?” Some, seemingly exasperated by the recurring academic under-achievement of many African-American children, have attempted to explain this problem by suggesting that African-American children are simply inherently inferior, mentally, to their White European-American, Asian, Latino, and even economically

disadvantaged peers (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994).

However, the argument that one child is inherently intellectually inferior to another child simply due to skin pigmentation at birth has been categorically debunked (CITE). However, if heredity does not explain the persistent academic underachievement of Black children, why don't/can't African-American children compete academically with their peers?

Kober's (2001) discussion of potential factors that contributed to the gap and strategies that could help close the gap might assist in our understanding of the persistent academic disparities between in most respects, very similar children. Her lists follow:

Factors That May Contribute to the Gap

School factors

- ◆ Limited participation of minority students in rigorous courses
- ◆ Watered-down instruction
- ◆ Less-qualified or experienced teachers
- ◆ Teachers with lower expectations
- ◆ Resource disparities between high-minority schools and other schools
- ◆ Concentrations of low-income and minority students in certain schools
- ◆ School climate less conducive to learning
- ◆ Student performance anxiety
- ◆ Negative peer pressure
- ◆ Disparities in access to high-quality pre-school

Societal, community, and home factors

- ◆ Effects of poverty on learning
- ◆ Legacy of discrimination
- ◆ Limited learning supports in homes and communities
- ◆ Access to parenting education

Strategies That Could Help Close the Gap

School strategies

- ◆ Challenging curriculum and instruction
- ◆ Improvements in teacher preparation and professional development
- ◆ High standards and accountability for subgroup performance
- ◆ Equitable distribution of resources
- ◆ Sustained class size reductions in high minority schools
- ◆ Comprehensive school reform
- ◆ Extended after-school and summer learning opportunities
- ◆ Targeted research on promising strategies and unanswered questions
- ◆ Expanded access to high-quality preschool

Societal, community, and home strategies

- ◆ Supportive and motivating culture
- ◆ Extended community learning activities
- ◆ Parent education and involvement
- ◆ Improved social conditions

Interestingly, in her list of possible causes for the gap in achievement, Kober (2001) did not include the previous prevailing rationale for the academic achievement gap between Black and White children: poverty. For decades, poverty was considered the primary cause of the poor school performance of African-American children. It was argued that if/when one controlled for socio-economic status, the academic performance gap between Black and White children would disappear (Battle, 1998).

Whereas many opined that poverty was the primary cause of the academic achievement gap, others ardently believed that the difference in academic performance was due to inherent test bias. Clearly, these positions have their portions of merit and accuracy; although neither explanation is sufficient (see Kober, 2001).

The suggestion that poverty is responsible for the poor performance of African-American children in academic settings does not take into consideration results of most academic assessment instruments (i.e., the SAT, ACT, GMAT, GRE, and so forth). It is often overlooked or dismissed that, as a general rule, African-American children perform more poorly, academically, than the group identified as "low income" or those who qualify for "free and/or reduced lunch."

As further evidence, the U.S. Department of Education (1999) refuted the suggestion that poverty was the primary cause when it reported, "The gaps persist even for students (Black and White) from more affluent minority families (National Task Force on Minority High Achievement, 1999). It appears that poverty does not meaningfully explain the academic underachievement of many African-American children. However, it could be effectively argued that poor academic achievement might explain the economic immobility and poverty-stricken predicament of many African Americans in America.

The position that suggests that the assessment tests are inherently biased against African-American children does not explain how Hispanic Americans or Asian-American children, whose Native language is often Spanish or of Asian origin, routinely outperform African-American children on all sections of the test and, specifically, the English intensive sections (i.e., reading & writing) of the assessment instrument. It would appear that the constant refrain of test-bias and "these children are just poor" are insufficient and worn. If school performance of African-American children is not determined by poverty or test bias, then how is it explained?

It appears that in order to respond, meaningfully to the question, "Why do African-American children, as a group, perform more poorly, academically, than their counterparts," one would need to understand the African American, himself/herself. Further, this question presupposes that there was a time in U.S. history that the academic achievement gap did not exist. In fact, there was not a time in U.S. history that there was not a gap in academic performance between White and Black Americans.

Indeed, there should be no wonder that there exists an academic achievement gap between White and Black Americans because the academic achievement gap was fostered, created, and designed by American policy and legislation. A cursory view of historical African-American culture and experience shows it to be distinctly different from Euro-American historical culture and experience, although educators often treat these populations with disregard for these very salient features of their experience.

Understanding African American Culture: What Teachers/Counselors Need To Know

It appears imperative that educators inquire, "What is African-American culture?" Or, "Where did African-American culture originate?" And, "Could African-American cultural mores explain the academic challenges of African-American children?" Once again, the fundamental premise of this discussion suggests that effective educators would need to understand the specific needs of the children to be educated before teachers could be truly successful in attending to those specific educational needs. Perhaps most critical to this discussion is the inquiry that follows.

How can educators properly educate African-American children without a firm grasp of African-American historical cultural heritage and confounding contemporary African-American sentiment that often discourages African-American educational attainment? Few teachers know that African Americans inherited a "nigger" culture, infused with beliefs in their inferiority, deliberately created by Europeans/White Americans.

Currently, African Americans are often punished for poor academic performance in the form of diminished economic mobility, higher education opportunities, and respect. Previously, however, African Americans, during their critical American

socialization, were severely punished for acquiring education or learning how to read and/or write.

Few know this because extremely few educators (more tragically, few African Americans, themselves) have learned much about what it means (and meant) to be an African American in America. Upon making the inflammatory statement: "African Americans inherited a 'nigger' culture," it is likely expected that I should further expound on its meaning.

Most continue to expect African-American children, who are "just as free" as other children, namely, White children, to meaningfully engage in the educational process and perform at a level similar to their peers. When these individuals do not, many begin to wonder, "What's wrong with those children/people?"

However, when so many African-American children continue to demonstrate what appears to be a chronic inability to perform at par with their peers (i.e., 66% performing below grade-level in many states), some intellectuals, intentions unquestioned, resort to the unscientific notion that African Americans must be inherently intellectually inferior to their peers.

However, this terribly unfortunate and irrational position is the primary cause of the current problem. Calling into the question the humanity and intellectual wherewithal of the Black race is what has created this quagmire of academic underachievement of millions of unsuspecting African-American children that we are now attempting to ameliorate.

Here, we begin to inform teachers of what they *need* to know prior to any one of them embarking on the process of educating any African-American children. However, it appears that few teacher teachers (i.e., professors), themselves, understand the African-American child that they are preparing student-teachers to teach. Instead, there appears to be a quiet resignation that this group of children will continue to demonstrate an inability to really academically compete with their peers, despite the reality that due to poor educational attainment, a hugely disproportionate number of African Americans are unemployed and an even greater disproportionate group of African Americans are either incarcerated or manacled in the American criminal justice system (i.e., on probation, parole, deferred adjudication etc) to the point that some suggest that a whole generation of African-American males is being lost (i.e., Midgette & Glenn, 1993).

African Americans, as it pertains to

education, inherited a “nigger” culture, steeped in inferiority. Teachers must know that. Teachers must know—someone somewhere must tell them. Teachers must know that culture is perhaps the most powerful construct that governs human behavior (Hollins, 1995). Teachers must know this. Therefore, in order to understand group behavior, educators, policy-makers, and others, must seek, diligently, to understand the culture of the individuals in question, namely, African Americans.

Perhaps now sufficient enough “ground work” has been completed that would allow the exploration into the culture of the African American. First, the nomenclature “African Americans” seems erroneous and misleading. Although “Blacks” originally, hailed from the Dark Continent of Africa, (as did all of mankind, anthropologists and researchers conclude), there appears to be very little Africa in the African-American Black person. In 1951, Psychiatrists Kardiner and Ovesey in their book, *The Mark of Oppression*, insightfully determined, “The most conspicuous feature of the Negro in America is that his aboriginal [African] culture was smashed, be it by design or accident” (p. 39).

Thereby, it would behoove educators to rethink the notion of what is an African American. African Americans acquired their culture, and, specifically, their culture that pertains to education, directly from American soil. The African American (forgive the misnomer) is an American creation. Anyone courageous enough to sit through the many hours of the historic and edifying “Roots” television series would recognize this truth.

Many African Americans seem to want to deny or disavow these realities. However, in so doing, we unwittingly perpetuate the miss-education of our children. Murphy and Hampton (1988) insisted that, for the most part, we are all products of the system of socialization of which we were raised.

To a great, inescapable extent, African Americans today are products of the system of socialization of their ancestors. During the process of socialization of the Africans during the inception of the Africans in America—that which contemporary African Americans are products of—intentionally inculcated into the acculturation/socialization of these individuals a “nigger,” culture, steeped in European ideology that suggested that Blacks were/are intellectually inferior to Whites.

Tragically, yet instructively, despite the inflammatory nature of this very term, “nigger,” it is yet tenaciously attached to

the identification of the African American, and ironically, used by many if not most African Americans themselves.

Interestingly, most African Americans (I include myself) could not identify or have knowledge of even one African word (other than “Kuwanza,” perhaps). However, language is one of the most rudimentary, fundamental, and basic components of a specific culture. Therefore, would this not further suggest that African-American culture is not African? If African-American culture is not African, what is African-American culture? The clarification of this matter is critical to teachers’ abilities to do their jobs, that is, to properly educate all of the children in their respective classrooms.

Teachers must know that African-American culture was founded, shaped, and promulgated during the American enslavement of the African. Few want to talk about this fact, it seems. Many recoil at the very mention of our collective pasts. However, truly interested individuals must determine to move beyond the initial discomfort associated with the accuracy of these realities and persist in facilitating the education of America’s children in a manner that is truly equitable.

Conclusion

African-American student academic performance, as a group, in most educational settings causes alarm to educators, policymakers, and laypeople, alike. Some suggest that the problems associated with the academic under-achievement of many African-American students is perhaps the most pressing issue facing both educators and researchers.

Much research has ensued designed to understand and intervene in the academic challenges of many African-American children. However, despite decades of discussion and governmental intervention, the academic achievement gap persists.

It appears that most educators are far too ignorant as it pertains to the nature of the problem and how to meaningfully intervene therein. What teachers need to know is that the African-American historical culture—the culture that continues to influence African-American thought and behavior—has characteristics that encourage African Americans to resist the American educational process.

Further yet, the African-American culture that was founded during the American slavery of the African caused the African American to believe in his/her inherent

intellectual inferiority—which exacerbates and perpetuates the obstinate, unforgiving, academic achievement gap.

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