Understanding Social Justice: Improving the Academic Achievement of African American Students[*]

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Abstract

NCLB seeks to level the playing field by narrowing class and racial gaps in school performance by establishing common expectations. No Child Left Behind Act (2001) increases the standards of accountability for states and schools, thus requiring educational leaders to rethink current school strategies. Holding individual schools accountable for the academic achievement of traditionally under-served groups of children, such as low-income students, students with disabilities, and students of major racial and ethnic subgroups is one of the key components of the legislation. As the demands of high-stakes accountability continue to mount on public school administrators, a better understanding of these challenges must be examined. Particularly, schools must now approach the achievement gap between white and African American students with deliberate resolve, setting high expectations and establishing measurable goals to improve individual outcomes.

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[*]Version 1.2: Apr 19, 2011 2:24 pm GMT-5

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1 Sumario en espanol

NCLB procura nivelar la cancha de deportes angostando clase y vacíos raciales en el desempeño de la escuela estableciendo esperanzas comunes. Ningún Niño Dejó atrás de Acto (2001) aumenta los estándares de responsabilidad para estados y escuelas, así requiriendo a líderes educativos a volver a pensar estrategias actuales de escuela. Teniendo a individuo educa responsable para el logro académico de grupos tradicionalmente bajo-servidos de niños, como estudiantes de ingresos bajos, los estudiantes con incapacidades, y con los estudiantes de mayor subgrupos raciales y étnicos son uno de los componentes clave de la legislación. Como las demandas de responsabilidad de alto-estacas continúan montar en administradores públicos de escuela, una mejor comprensión de estos desafíos debe ser revisada. Especialmente, las escuelas ahora deben acercarse el vacío de logro entre blanco y estudiantes norteamericanos africanos con resolución deliberada, poniendo esperanzas altas y estableciendo objetivos mensurables para mejorar resultados individuales.

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2 Introduction

Rawls (1971) states that fundamentally social justice means fairness and it represents a perspective in regard to how "fundamental rights and duties are assigned and on the economic opportunities and social conditions" which are established "in various sectors of society," including but not limited to schools (p. 7).

Even as progress has been documented in math, reading, and science scores, the achievement gaps between affluent and disadvantaged students continues to be present. African American students continue to lag behind their white counterparts in reading, math, and science. According to data released by the Texas Education Agency, African American students are scoring 20 to 30 percentage points behind other students in math and science, with slightly lower variances in language arts and social studies (TEA, 2007).

As African American students continue to lag behind academically, equity must be a goal that is shared corporately; otherwise it becomes an overwhelming task that no group can handle in isolation. With that theme in mind, this article summarizes a research study that examined the means to improve African American performance scores on state-mandated achievement tests in a Title I secondary school. The purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship between the START (**S**afe **T**ransitions **a**nd **R**educed **T**ardies) on Time program; which is establishment of campus culture and academic climate which creates safe transitions, reduces tardies, and increases time on task and the subsequent impact of these management tools on the academic performance of African American students.

For clarity, START on Time is an in-service based program that affords the means for campus personnel to design and implement a unified approach to school wide hallway management that reduces tardies; increases instructional time lost to tardies; increases hallway safety; improves school climate; and increases interaction between staff and students.

This study provided feedback on the effects of the START on Time Program and its impact on the academic performance of African American students. To evaluate student achievement, the researcher used performance scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills Test, comparing the results over multiple test administrations.

3 Theoretical Background

The historical perspectives of school reform begins with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) and its subsequent reforms, followed by A Nation At Risk (1983), Improving America's Schools (1994), No Child Left Behind (2001), and finally the Texas accountability system.

The single largest source of federal support for K-12 education is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Born as part of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty in 1965, this comprehensive reform act provided federal funding to poor schools, communities, and low socioeconomic children. Born of the

understanding that poverty and social ineqality are predictors of the gaps in achievement, the legislation attempted to level the playing field by funding specific initiatives, such as early childhood education, reading intervention, and higher education preparation (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

As progress and setbacks have occurred over the years, ESEA was amended to meet the needs of a diverse nation. Specifically, more than thirty years of research on school reform contributed to the U.S. Department of Education's Elementary and Secondary Education Reform legislation including the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Goals 2000), the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (IASA), and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act. Goals 2000 helps states and communities establish a framework for comprehensive, standards-based education reform for all students. The IASA provided additional support and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act helped to build additional pathways to enable all children to meet challenging state standards.

Comparatively, A Nation At Risk (1983), a report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1981), examined the quality of education in the United States and provided recommendations for comprehensive educational improvement. Specifically, the report assessed the degree to which major social and educational changes affected student achievement, revealing significant gaps in the achievement between ethnic groups and classes. Further, the study assessed the quality of teaching and learning in the nation's educational environments, indicating that American students lacked rigor and motivation for aptitude in the sciences. Finally, the study defined obstacles to overcome in order to successfully pursue the course of excellence in education (A Nation At Risk, 1983).

Of major importance, the study revealed significant gaps in the achievement levels between groups, especially in reading and science. Finding a lack of rigor in content, a lack of accountability for setting high expectations, and the inefficiency with which time is spent in the classroom; the study painted a dismal picture of the American educational system (A Nation At Risk, 1983).

Interestingly, the most disturbing statistics regard time. According to A Nation At Risk (1983), in England and other industrialized countries, it is not unusual for academic high school students to spend 8 hours a day at school, 220 days per year. In the United States, by contrast, the typical school day lasts 6 hours and the school year is 180 days. Moreover, in many American schools, the time spent learning how to cook and drive counts as much toward a high school diploma as the time spent studying mathematics, English, chemistry, U.S. history, or biology. Finally, a study of the school week in the United States found that some schools provided students only 17 hours of academic instruction during the week, and the average school provided about 22 (A Nation At Risk, 1983).

Comparatively, as the cornerstone of reform focused on achievement, the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994 (IASA), enacted on October 20, 1994 (P.L. 103-382), reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), with a focus on changing the methods of delivering education, encouraging comprehensive systemic school reform, upgrading instructional and professional development to align with high standards, strengthening accountability, and promoting the coordination of resources to improve education for all children (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

Significantly, IASA provided a systematic blueprint for local and state education agencies to implement standards-based reform. According to the U.S. Department of Education (1996), their research supported that the following four principles are considered key to comprehensive educational improvement efforts: 1) high standards for all students; 2) teachers better trained to teach to high standards; 3) flexibility to stimulate local initiatives coupled with accountability for results; and 4) promoting partnerships among families, communities and schools. As such, the Department believed that by focusing resources around these key principles for educational improvement, the ESEA substantially contributed to advancing the quality of teaching and learning for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

Similarly, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires all public schools to administer a state-wide standardized test annually to all students. Schools which receive Title I funding must make Adequate Yearly Progress in test scores, with determined emphasis given to students in minority subpopulations (NCLB, 2001). As the latest reauthorization of EASA (1965) the foundation of NCLB (P.L. 107-110) is to compel schools to account for the significant gaps in achievement between minority and white students.

To accomplish its goal of ensuring that all children meet minimun proficiency standards by 2013-2014,

NCLB (2001) focuses on increased accountability, attention to minority populations, the quality and delivery of education, and increased federal funding to schools for intervention programs. As the most comprehensive standards-based reform since 1965 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) NCLB (2001) reminds educational leaders of the importance and value of every child receiving a quality education, acknowledging that a good education may equal better opportunity.

Finally, the Texas accountability system is embedded in reform for student achievement. In 1993, the Texas Legislature enacted statutes that mandated the creation of the Texas public school accountability system to accredit school districts and rate school performance. Since 1993, the Texas Education Agency has worked closely with public school personnel and others to develop an integrated accountability system. The system is based upon a number of guiding principles. These are: student performance, recognition of diversity, statutory compliance, appropriate consequences, and the public's right to know (TEA, 2000).

The accountability system integrates the statewide curriculum with the state criterion-referenced assessment system (TAKS); tracks district and campus ratings; provides district and campus recognition for high performance and significant increases in performance; issues sanctions for poor performance; and governs schools, district, and state-level reports (TEA, 2000).

Further, the accountabilty system focuses on achievement for all students in each core subject area. In fact, the standards were designed to phase in increasingly higher expectations for districts and campuses, especially in traditionally underrepresented ethnic groups. Since 1995, expectations for acceptable performance have been raised every year (TEA, 2000).

Understanding the urgency to improve achievement scores, Sprick (2002) analyzes and reports on those structures to increase the time allotted for instruction. Based on earlier studies regarding the task of using engaged time effectively, Sprick (1999), Kennedy (2004), and Chapman (2003) speak of engagement as an assessment tool for student success; noting that the amount of time on task must be proportionate to the quality of time spent engaging the material. In related research Slavin (2006) and Pete and Fogarty (2007) argue that using engaged time effectively provides more time for a specific population to become better and emotionally connected in the process of understanding; hence, learning is internalized and thus becomes meaningful.

Further, Sprick (2002) acknowledges that distractions during the school day will adversely affect achievement. Noting that these distractions often take students away from the classrom, Sprick (2002) advocates eliminating this form of academic disengagement as a means to improve student achievement scores. Consequently, Sprick (2008) reports that improving student behavior in the hallways will become the impetus for attaining and maintaining a more civil and academic environment throughout the school.

Sprick (2002) contends that creating an environment for learning at the beginning of class will improve achievement scores, especially in minority students. START on Time reduces the frequency of tardiness by up to 90%, increases instructional time lost to tardiness, improves school climate, and increases interactions between staff and students. As part of the Safe and Civil Schools program, START on Time assists the school staff in implementing and developing effective behavior management and motivation practices for halls and passing periods. Piaget's theory of cognition establishes that the adolescent mind must be prepared to encounter learning. Therefore, by establishing a learning climate in the passing period, the student enters the classroom ready to interrelate with the subject content. As Sprick (2002) summarizes, "students who will receive the most benefit from this extension of the classroom are those who are traditionally low-achieving." START on Time reduces tardies, referrals, and any other protocol that disrupts the learning process; and as a result, increases the time students are engaged in learning (Sprick, 2002).

In a follow-up to earlier research (Sprick, 2002) and Sprick and Daniels (2007) examine the impact of tardies on student achievement. Through the "positive sweep" technique, school personnel improved school climate, reduced tardiness, and increased the amount of instructional time students spent in the classroom. As the study reports, by dramatically reducing student referrals, teachers gained additional and valuable time to impact achievement. For example, four years into the combined behavioral and literacy program, 89 percent of the children were reading at grade level, a 74 percent increase.

For clarity, Sprick and Daniels (2007) describe "positive sweep" as the process whereby teachers stand at the doorway of their classrooms, welcoming students entering their rooms and, at the same time, supervising

students in the hallway. If they see any misbehavior, they detain the student until a member of the positive sweep team approaches, at which time; they pass the student to that team. When the final bell rings, teachers close their doors and begin instruction immediately.

Meanwhile, members of the positive sweep team, comprised of teachers who have prep time after the passing period, circulate through their designated zones in hallways, restrooms, and other common areas, greeting students and providing positive supervision.

Their task is to round up misbehaving students and students who have not made it to class on time. They escort these students to a "sweep" room where the students receive predetermined sanctions. Positive sweep team members then escort tardy students to their classrooms, ensuring that the students do not disrupt instruction when they enter. The "positive sweep" process not only supports a positive school climate, it dramatically increases the amount of time students have to engage the academic material (Sprick & Daniels, 2007).

In a similar study, Ciaccio (2000) also discusses the technique of total positive response to student behavior as a method of effective classroom management. Total positive response involves the use of positive strategies to deal with misbehavior in a quick, but caring and loving manner. The study goes on to say that teachers must discover the means to make the classroom a place of meaningful engagement and self-motivation. While the study does not specifically address achievement in minority subpopulations, it does report a significant reduction in office referrals and a significant increase in the amount of time students spend in the classroom engaged with the material.

4 Population

For clarifcation, the population of the study group was 100% of the African American students enrolled in grades 9-11 at "High School A", a Title I secondary institution serving 126 students of color in rural Upshur County, Texas. The campus is comprised of 36% African American 5% Hispanic, and 49% White. (TEA, 2007).

By comparision, the population of the control group was 100% of the African American students enrolled in grades 9-11 at "High School B," a Title I secondary institution serving 144 students of color in rural Upshur County, Texas. The campus is comprised of 36% African American 5% Hispanic, and 49% White. (TEA, 2007).

For discussion purposes, Ary (2006) describes the two groups as statistically equivalent in that the subjects have been randomly assigned to groups and any difference between the groups is a function of chance alone and not a function of experimenter bias, subjects' choices, or any other factor. Additionally, the African American population at both schools is numerically and demographically equivalent, with both schools serving a similar low socio-economic population. The study group administered the START on Time program, while the control group did not use any additional treatment beyond its approved school curricula.

5 Discussion of Findings

Reporting the findings math scores increased by 17% in the study group showing significant increases from 2006-2007 to 2007-2008. Comparatively, in the same period, science scores were up 5% while social studies showed the most significant increases at 16%. With dissimilarity the control group showed measured increases as well from 2006-2008 as well. Math scores showed increases of 9% versus a 13% gain in science. Social studies scores demonstrated the most significant increase at 23%. By comparison English/language arts scores were slightly more significant when compared to the study group.

Considering these findings the researcher draws the following conclusions regarding the relationship between the START on Time program and the academic performance of African Americans as measured by performance on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test. The following conclusions are demarcated according to engaged time, socioeconomic status, and student achievement.

5.1 Engaged Time

The intentionality of narrowing the achievement gap between white students and those from traditionally underrepresented populations begins with an understanding of the need to increase the amount of instruction minority students receive in the four core subject areas (math, English/language arts, science, and social studies).

While the research continues to generate discussion about strategies needed to narrow the achievement gap as it relates to ensuring student academic success, one of the key factors in student achievement is the amount of time spent in the classroom (Kennedy, 2004). These findings support the conclusion that increased allotted time is one means to improve the academic performance of African American students. As such, the researcher references a tenet of the START on Time program, which is to improve academic performance through increased time on task. The study population reduced tardies from an average of 250 daily to just over 12 daily. This intentional restructuring of campus culture afforded the opportunity for students to engage the academic material in a meaningful way for longer periods of time. Using the foundation of START on Time as a guiding principle and using brainteasers to set the academic tone, teacher's reduced academic interruptions by beginning instruction immediately at the beginning of each class.

The results of the study are especially impressive in math and science, two areas where African American students continue to struggle nationwide (NCLB, 2001). In the 2007-2008 school year, students in the study population confirmed measured gains over the previous year. The researcher acknowledges that teachers used the same curriculum and assessment tools in the study and previous years; therefore, the noted increases are statistically related to using the START on Time program. As Sprick (2002) summarizes, "Students who will receive the most benefit from this extension of the classroom are those who are traditionally low-achieving." START on Time reduces tardies, referrals, and any other protocol that disrupts the learning process; and as a result, increases the time students are engaged in learning (Sprick, 2002).

5.2 Socioeconomic and Equity Issues

The disparity between African American and white students is not proven with regards to socioeconomic status. For example, a recent study by Lubienski (2002) identified substantial black-white achievement gaps; however, socioeconomic status failed to account for a large portion of the gap. On the other hand, English (2002), exploring the achievement gaps between minority and white students, found that cultural capital (status and expectancy) is a strong indicator of student achievement. As such, the START on Time program confirms that there is a relationship between improving the campus climate and improved student academic performance. With the intention of reducing or narrowing the achievement gap, START on Time seeks to strengthen and shape campus culture and climate by fostering attitudes and building relationships that directly promote a culture of achievement. For example, the study group ("School A") adopted "Guidelines for Success," those common values that define attitudes toward self, others, and the school community as a whole. Additionally, every facet of the campus community was linked to success, with student achievement becoming the overarching purpose for actions. Most notably, disadvantaged students benefit most from this acclimation of culture. As part of this culture, teachers are challenged to set high expectations for all disadvantaged students, regardless of race. African American students, in particular, begin to view themselves as part of a high-achieving student body, one where failure is not an option and achievement is a common expectation. This is consistent with the findings of Lee (2002) who discusses setbacks in the progress toward racial and ethnic equity. He states,

The conventional measures of socioeconomic and family conditions, youth culture and student behavior, and schooling conditions and practices might account for some of the achievement gap trends for a limited time period or for a particular racial and ethnic group. However, they do not fully capture the variations. (Lee, p. 3)

By contrast, Leroy and Symes (2001), reporting on the effects of poverty on teaching and learning, surmise that children who are from low socioeconomic backgrounds are entering schools with needs from circumstances that schools are not prepared to meet. Essentially, START on Time ignores this premise by disregarding socioeconomic status as a predictor of academic success or failure. START on Time is grounded

in the theory that a good education is often the only means of breaking the cycle of poverty for poor children (Leroy & Symes, 2001). In fact, Sprick (2002) obviously establishes his premise for START on Time on the earlier research of Slavin and Fashola (1998) by supporting that schools can have a powerful impact on the academic achievement and success of minority children by viewing them as at-promise rather than at-risk, thus preparing them to reach their full potential. START on Time became the means for a group of underachieving students to reach that potential.

Related to START on Time, the program yields measurable results for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In this case, the study rejects the hypothesis of Leroy and Symes (2001) by ignoring the reference points (poverty, educational level of parents) of children entering "School A." More specifically, START on Time levels the playing field by ensuring that all students are educated with equity. High expectations for all are the cornerstone, as every student in every class and grade are exposed to rigorous bell-to-bell instruction.

Interestingly, START on Time findings also contradicts the research of Goodwin (2000) who reports that instructional and classroom management techniques that work well with some students don't necessarily work well with poor children. START on Time is less interested in the baggage that children bring to school and more concerned with exposing them to a structure that impacts student achievement. Being on time for class and ready to engage the material is less about social capital (English 2002) and more about establishing positive daily routines.

START on Time is a partnership between teachers, students and their school. African American student performance was influenced by the reinvention of a culture that achieves equity through a rejection of socioeconomic status. Therefore, the premise or assumption that START on Time transcends socioeconomic and equity issues are supported by the findings in this study.

5.3 Academic Achievement

Evidence of academic disparity continues to be revealed in the achievement scores and state assessment instruments of African American students. When compared to their white counterparts, as well as other ethnic groups, the achievement level of African American students lags far behind, especially in math and science (NCLB, 2001).

Understanding that the intended purpose of the study was to evaluate the relationship between the START on Time program and the academic performance of African American students, the START on Time program yielded measurable results. In the population of interest (study group), African American TAKS scores increased an aggregate of 39% in the four core subject areas of English/language arts, math, science, and social studies. While improvement in all areas is acknowledged, measured improvement in traditional areas of poor performance (math and science) yielded impressive results. These findings are consistent with the research of House (2005) who examined the causes and cures for low minority achievement. According to that study, student achievement is linked to academic rigor; summarizing that academically rigorous schools produce student success. While the START on Time program is not part of the "school within a school" concept, the program does reinforce academic rigor by placing academics at the forefront of the daily campus climate. Essentially, to focus on bell-to bell instruction, a byproduct of START on Time, students are immersed in a culture of learning, focused on measured outcomes. The connection here is that student success begins with the instructional environment of the classroom. Using a similar experiment, Tomlinson and Doubet (2005) found that in classrooms with rigorous curricula and high expectations, students also mastered content through relevant activities and extended writing assignments. As the achievement of the study group is invariably linked to the connections between the instructional climate and assessment, meaningful learning became relevant for African American students.

Moreover, START on Time affirms the role of the principal in closing the achievement gap. DuFour (2002) summarizes that the principal must serve as the instructional leader of the school by focusing on learning; not only as the way that teachers work together, but also in the way they relate to and work with each student.

In the study group, the principal delineates the impact of START on Time by keeping the faculty and

student body focused on student achievement. In this manner, the principal focuses on advancing student learning by promoting START on Time as a system of intervention (DuFour, 2002), thus improving African American achievement scores in just one year.

6 Concluding Remarks

This study was designed to evaluate the relationship between the START on Time program and the academic achievement of African American students. While the control group showed measured increases in each core subject area, there was significant improvement in the aggregate TAKS scores (34%) in the study group. As such, the research found that measurable differences exist between the means of the study group versus the control group, inferring a positive relationship between the treatment and the academic performance of African American students.

Using a series of survey instruments and focus groups to evaluate buy-in from the faculty, START on Time singularly changed an approach to education. Students became more intentional and focused on academics, affording for the subsequent success of the program. Although not necessarily innovative, START on Time is rather practical. Quite simply, moving quickly between classes, getting to class on time, and observing good manners are not new to education; however, in the context of a failing school, it is this intentionality that proved to initiate measures of success for a disadvantaged population.

Essentially, START on Time was a product of collaboration between teachers and campus administrators. Revisiting the challenges of NCLB (2001), START on Time is a means to impact student achievement by requiring stakeholders to assume mutual accountability roles in the development and sustainability of reforms that produce measurable academic improvement for African American students. Perhaps the price of failure has become too high. If so, START on Time may be a starting place for future conversations, a challenge to be accepted and a hope that must not fail.

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