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Recommendations for Working with African American Parents
of Primary School Children in Low-resourced Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a strength-based discussion of the relationship between parenting values of low-income African Americans and the academic performance of their school-aged children. Using resilience theory as a framework (Secombe, 2002), the authors suggest that African American parents in low-resourced communities have multi-layered obstacles to overcome in order to promote positive academic outcomes for their children (West-Olatunji, 2000). Parents possessing coping skills may educate their children with protective factors against systemic oppression and educational hegemony. The authors provide recommendations for mental health professionals to enhance their effectiveness when working with African American parents and their children.

Recommendations for Working with African American Parents
of Primary School Children in Low-resourced Schools

Previous discussion on African American parenting has been contextualized by decades of misinterpretation, faulty assumptions, and poor conceptualization of African American worldviews (Mandara, 2006). Most recently, scholars have begun to consider that African American parents may be presenting values that are divergent from Eurocentric norms (Schwartz, 2002). As such, previous interpretations of parenting behaviors and assumptions may be erroneous and misleading (Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Steinberg, Dornbusch & Brown, 1992). Moreover, scholarship in this area is fraught with confounding results. The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of the literature of what is known about African American parenting in low-resourced communities and its relationship to academic outcomes for their children. Using resilience theory as a lens through which to view African American parenting skills, the authors provide recommendations for mental health professionals to increase their cultural competence and effectiveness when working with this population.

Review of Literature

Parent Involvement and Educational Achievement

Current literature suggests that when parents create physical environments at home to complete homework assignments, engage in homework tasks and support their child's comprehension of the homework, children are more likely to have positive attitudes, ideas, and beliefs about homework (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Additional parent behaviors that affect children's education include unsolicited visits to volunteer in the child's classroom. Volunteering in the classroom has been linked positively with children's early reading development (Porter DeCusati & Johnson, 2004). Findings suggest that children had better reading skills when their

parents visited and participated in classrooms than children whose parents did not participate in those activities. Although there has been considerable interest and investigation into the relationship between parent involvement and student academic outcomes, the findings are often inconsistent (McNeal, 2001). This is inconsistently evident when investigating culturally diverse families (Mandara, 2006). Resultant parent education programs tend to be generic rather than based upon unique parent characteristics or situations (Schwartz, 2002).

Parent Involvement among Culturally Diverse Parents

Teachers and school administrators often have a set of expectations regarding parent involvement that involve a set of culturally embedded norms. Immigrant parents and other parents from culturally diverse families may have other cultural norms and expectations for teacher interactions. For example, in the Latino culture, exerting one's own power in interactions with representatives of authority, such as teachers or counselors, may be viewed as disrespectful (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, 2001). Unfortunately, traditional responses from teachers who lack an understanding of cultural diversity is to view these parents as disinterested, inept, or unfit parents (Goodnow & Collins, 1990). These attitudes toward families from low-resourced and culturally diverse communities further exacerbate efforts for successful collaboration between home and school. Current research suggests parents from culturally diverse backgrounds seek more involvement with schools (Cassanova, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992).

Another challenge to culturally diverse parent involvement in schools is their expectations for children's behavior and dispositions. Whereas the school culture generally reflects the Eurocentric values and rewards autonomy and creativity, many culturally diverse families emphasize interdependence and conformity to external standards (King, 1997). Teachers are not always aware of the multiple explanations for parents' hesitancy to engage in

communication or to participate in school functions (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Oftentimes, teachers fall prey to misinterpretation of parents' lack of involvement and lack the necessary cross-cultural interaction skills to create bridges between the home and school cultures (Olsen & Fuller, 2003).

Lastly, parents from culturally diverse backgrounds may interpret invitations from teachers differently than parents from the mainstream culture. Low-resource parents often cite feeling intimidated when entering into school structures and are often disinclined to respond positively to invitations from teachers to engage in communication regarding their children's educational experiences (McNeal, 2001). Additionally, parents may not trust school staff because of embedded historical or systemic contexts that are unique to a particular cultural group's socio-cultural context (Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2001). Schools may have a structural climate that is impersonal or bureaucratic that prohibits parents from experiencing a sense of shared space.

It is important to involve parents as key players in academic communities beyond the role of fundraising and outside of objectified disciplinary interactions. Moving toward full participation in curriculum and program planning creates a true teaching-learning environment. Such a model for school communities incorporates an acknowledgement of families' funds of knowledge. School-family partnerships involve an appreciation of diverse forms of knowledge construction. Thus, educators look beyond cognitive, abstract, and linear forms of epistemology to welcome affective, behavioral, and contextual knowledge acquisition informed by parents and other key stakeholders in the child's ecological system (Gordon, 1995; King, 1997; West-Olatunji, 2000).

An African-centered Parenting Style

It has been stated that the lack of shared values and expectations are some of the primary causes of discontinuity between the culture of the school and that of culturally diverse families (reference?). Furthermore, scholars assert that the home culture informs children's diverse patterns of language, behavior, and learning styles (Hale-Benson, 1986; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). Dominant culture families define their family unit as nuclear, emphasize individualism in human interactions and development, and have specific role definitions for family members (Tuttwiler, 2005). This is in contrast with non-dominant cultures, such as African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Latino/Hispanic, and Native American/Indian families. Rather than defining the family unit by immediate family members (i.e., mother, father, and children), culturally diverse families emphasize extended family units that include, not only related family members, but can also consist of unrelated members known as fictive kin. This notion of fictive kinship is especially evident within the African American community in which intergenerational family units provide collective economic, social, and emotional resources that have historically aided them in coping with systemic oppression (Nobles, 1997; Sudarkasa, 1997).

One of the most controversial aspects of the literature on parenting has been the investigation and identification of an African American parenting style (Mandara, 2006). Early research studies on parenting styles offered a framework for the discussion of effective parenting behaviors and dispositions, stating that there are three basic styles: authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative. The authoritarian style of parenting has been associated with a more punitive, less communicative style of interaction with children that negatively correlates with achievement. Also negatively associated with achievement is the permissive parenting style that establishes

ineffective parent-child interaction boundaries and compromises the parental role. It has been the authoritative parenting style that has positively correlated with achievement. Prior studies on parenting styles have argued that African American parents' predominant use of the authoritarian style of parenting has contributed to the underachievement of African American children (Steinberg et al., 1992).

A Strength-based Perspective

Of value to professionals working with African American families is a strength-based perspective (Amatea, Smith-Adcock & Villares, 2006) that investigates the ways in which these families have persisted despite personal and institutional obstacles. Resilience studies have suggested that an individual's ability to prosper in the face of hardship is partly reliant on the individual but also on the support structures of that individual's own family and community networks (Secombe, 2002). Furthermore, the low-income status of many African American parents often implies that they have less time to be involved in the education of their children, because they work multiple jobs to guarantee the survival of the family. Therefore, they have to develop different strategies to provide support for their children's education. Recent studies suggest that resilience factors for low-income families involve healthy patterns of family communication, access to economic resources, and social networks of support (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei & Williamson, 2004).

Resilience is characterized by a child's ability to reject negative societal messages that promote unhealthy self-images and self-deprecating attitudes and behaviors (Robinson & Ward, 1991). Resilience in the educational realm can be characterized as children's ability to achieve despite risk factors such as poverty, single parent household, multiple siblings, and a young caregiver (Benard, 1991; Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1998). Factors influencing and increasing

resilience include attributional style, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and social competence (Hauser, 1999). However, such factors alone may be insufficient to acquire consistent outcomes for children. Relational factors, such as a supportive home environment and supportive relationships with other competent adults, are equally important. Moreover, internal, family, and community factors appear to influence the success of African American school children. Supportive relationships with adults, self-determination, acceptance of responsibility, participation in community youth programs, academic success, pro-social skills training, faith in their own cognitive abilities, and communication of high expectations to youth are common themes (Chavkin & Gonzalez, 2000; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard & Lintz, 1996).

Recommendations

Most of the literature on African American parenting and student achievement has been deficit-oriented and has frequently misinterpreted cultural mores and assumptions that characterize the African American culture (Mandara, 2006). The results of this literature review suggest that African American parents have coping mechanisms and demonstrate resilience despite systemic and personal stressors such as poverty, oppression, personal or family illness, and developmental obstacles. These coping mechanisms may be rooted in cultural patterns.

New perspectives on parent and family involvement in schools suggest that schools can benefit by moving to a model that is family-centered (Olsen & Fuller, 2003), family-guided (Slentz & Bricker, 1992), family-focused (Bailey et al., 1986), or that emphasizes parent empowerment (Dunst, 1985). Regardless of the term that is used to describe a more family-oriented model of family involvement, all of these terms incorporate an understanding that parents can be equal partners in family-school collaborations. When school counselors and other school personnel collaborate with parents, they demonstrate respect and support the family's

decision-making role in educational processes. This is particularly helpful when working with culturally diverse families (Clark & Amatea, 2004; Olsen & Fuller, 2003).

The authors have constructed four recommendations to aid counselors and foster more effective relationships with parents from culturally diverse backgrounds in order to decrease the gap between home and school and to ultimately impact African American children's educational achievement.

1. ***Assess the needs of the parents.*** Before beginning any endeavor with parents, particularly parents who view the school as disengaging, counselors can better serve the school community by first asking parents about their concerns. This is a useful way to develop rapport and engage with valuable members of the school community in a culturally competent manner. A needs assessment activity might include the use of surveys, observations, informal interviews, and collecting information from group gatherings. Furthermore, sharing the findings of the needs assessment assists in expanding mutual understanding and empathy between parents and schools.
2. ***Serve as a cultural mediator.*** Counselors, teachers, and other school personnel often do not have the skills or knowledge to relate to African American parents, particularly those from low-resourced communities. Such school personnel may not be as welcoming to the parents or may misinterpret behavioral cues. Moreover, they may have different expectations about the home-school partnership. Thus, African American parents may respond by disengaging from school functions. Counselors can become more knowledgeable about African American values and serve and as a cultural mediator for school staff.
3. ***Facilitate the development of parent networks.*** African American parents often cite lack of support from school personnel. When parents do encounter obstacles to their child's educational development, they are reluctant to contact school staff. Counselors can facilitate the development

of parent-to-parent support networks so that parents can share information and resources with each other.

4. ***Empower Parents.*** The community of African American parents may be more connected than is currently believed. African American parents who are active in the school setting may be a bridge to recruiting and understanding the needs of disengaged parents. Counselors can empower the engaged parents to mentor other parents who may need encouragement and empathy from individuals who have shared knowledge about their day-to-day experiences and challenges. One example is to create an ambassador program in which more involved parents serve as emissaries to community members. Their goodwill could lay the foundation for future involvement of other parents who are less engaged in school activities.

In summary, individuals' cultural and social identities are very complex constructs. This paper suggests that, despite obstacles, some African American parents from low-resourced communities are able to demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity. There are several recommendations provided for counselors to increase their level of effectiveness when working with families from culturally diverse backgrounds. Effective counselors can partner with culturally diverse parents in order to learn from them. This can increase the quality of schooling and serve as a bridge between home and school cultures for African American children and other students of color, particularly those in low-resourced schools.

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