Enhancing Education for African American Children

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Abstract

The United States is in a crisis regarding the ineffectiveness of PreK-12 education for African American children. Principals play a key role in alleviating this crisis through culturally responsive school leadership that includes critical self-reflection, consistently contributing to culturally responsive teaching and curriculum, promoting culturally responsive school environments, and engaging the community in culturally responsive ways. Teachers and significant others (parents/guardians, grandparents, family members, and siblings) in the daily lives of African American children, and community agencies must work collaboratively to enhance the cognitive and social psychological development of African American children.

In the 1966 landmark study, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, James Coleman et al. documented that, in some instances, the achievement gap between White and African American children was approximately five years. Camera (2016) concluded that "after 50 years the achievement gap between White and African American students has barely narrowed" (p.1). Recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment results analyzed by personnel at the Institute for Educational Policy, City University of New York indicated, "Black students on average scored below White students by one standard deviation, which amounts to the difference between the performance of a fourth grader and an eighth grader (Miksic, 2014, p. 1). And as Bartz (2016a) noted, "Today the achievement gap is still the major reference point for the inequalities in achievement results by race and income status of children attending schools in the U.S." (p.1). Further, research pertaining to what is labeled as the "school-to-prison pipeline" reveals that African American children are four times more likely than White students to receive multiple out-of-school suspensions (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017).

The United States has a dismal history relative to success in educating African American children. At times over the past 150 years, it has been illegal for states to formally educate African American children. Even after Brown v. the Board of Education in 1954, many school districts in the United States—especially in the South—continued to run a dual school district, one separately

for White children and another only for African American children within the same district. The quality of education often received by African American children was considerably inferior to that afforded White children (Anderson, 2016). The bottom-line is that a crisis still exists today in the United States pertaining to the ineffectiveness of public schools in educating African American children. The situation must change, and change now!

Some charter schools in the country have African American children who flourish (West, 2016). Magnet schools also exist that effectively educate African American children. There has also been success in educating African American children in places like Dallas through the Learning Centers established by the federal courts (Bartz, 2003). Of course, there are many case studies that show the excellent achievement of African American students at all educational levels in the United States—from preschool through doctorate programs.

What needs to be done to alleviate this crisis of the dismal effectiveness in educating African American children in the United States? The following are several proposals to address this issue.

Definition of Terms

Minoritized refers to children from racially oppressed communities that have been marginalized because of their non-dominant race, ethnicity, religion, language, or citizenship. Minoritized students have been disadvantaged (stereotyped) by historically oppressive political and social structures, and these disadvantages are perpetuated by school personnel and educational institutions in general (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).

Marginalized refers to the process of causing individuals, groups, and communities to be powerless, undervalued, and unimportant because of factors such as race, ethnicity, income, gender, and sexuality are also factors that could lead to marginalization (Khalifa et al., 2016). *Culturally responsive* means making all students, especially minoritized ones, in the whole school feel welcome, included, and accepted (Khalifa at al., 2016).

Principals, district central office staff, and school board members need to understand the difference between equality and equity. *Equality* means all students being treated the same, whereas *equity* means each student is receiving the resources needed to be successful now in school and in the future even if it means that some students get more resources than others (Connelly, 2017).

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL)

Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) at the building level means that principals are knowledgeable and driven by the need to be responsive to the cultures of the various subgroups within their buildings. For most principals, this means that educational reform must take place in order for a truly culturally responsive educational environment to be established. The concept of social justice—doing the right things for children even when they are not required by law or policy—is also an important part of principals' mindsets.

Four strands of a principal's leadership behavior necessary to be an effective culturally responsive school leader are: 1) Critical self-reflection, 2) consistently contributing to culturally responsive teaching and curriculum, 3) promoting culturally responsive school environments, and

4) engaging the community in culturally responsive ways (Khalifa et al., 2016). Critical self-reflection means that principals challenge and reflect upon their own mindsets regarding how they view African American children and meeting the needs of these children, cognitively and for social and psychological development. Specifically, an outward mindset—focusing on the impact a principal can have by stressing inclusion of all stakeholders—is needed (The Arbinger Institute, 2016). This self-reflection must include a review of any *institutional racism* that exists in the building or classrooms. Institutional racism exists when there are practices and policies in place that have a negative impact on African American children, even though the key educators may be unaware of them. Institutional racism may exist even if there is no identifiable person supporting or behaving in a racially biased manner toward African American children. In cases of institutional racism, the biases and prejudices are engrained in the operating procedures of the building and likely the district.

Principals need to consistently contribute to the employment and development of culturally responsive teachers and to aid these teachers in overcoming any biases which they may demonstrate toward African American children either implicitly or explicitly. Implicit biases are unconscious associations based on race, while explicit biases are knowingly and purposefully endorsing racial attitudes and beliefs (Warikoo, Sinclair, Fei, & Jacoby-Senghor, 2016). Training that prompts teachers to self-reflect on their behaviors and beliefs often helps identify needed changes. This staff development should not focus on attacking or accusing teachers about their beliefs, but rather on prompting reflections and discussions among staff members whose behaviors and beliefs do not meet the needs of African American children. Diversity efforts should assist teachers in being able to interact and work effectively with all stakeholders, even if they view them as being different based on race, ethnicity, and values (Bartz & Rice, 2017).

Principals' leadership efforts in the context of being culturally responsive to African American children should utilize the transformational leadership approach. Transformational leadership, as opposed to transactional leadership, is future-oriented and focuses on what needs to be changed and how to make such changes. Transactional leadership, on the other hand, is status quo oriented and stresses efficient management of the present.

To enhance cultural responsiveness, principals should utilize transformational leadership that epitomizes working collaboratively with all the school's stakeholders through vision, empowerment, and the creation of a sense of excitement and inspiration to develop a plan of action for effectively addressing cultural responsiveness. Other attributes of transformational leadership behaviors that principals should use are: 1) challenging the status quo; 2) emphasizing new ideas to *transform* the present culture to a new and improved culture; 3) continuously setting goals to measure improvement targets; 4) establishing agreed upon and worthwhile direction for staff members' efforts; 5) motivating staff to support implementing change; 6) collaborating and team building; 7) stressing collaboration among staff members, administrators, parents, community members, and other stakeholders; 8) affording staff members time and resources for professional growth; and 9) using data to improve future learning for students (Bass, B. M. & Bass, 2008).

Curriculum—the content students are taught—must integrate the rich history of African Americans in the United States and Africa within the subject matter areas across the curriculum. Some teachers will likely need training on how to effectively do this. There is also the issue of *the hidden curriculum*, meaning that teachers infuse their own values into discussions and activities that may be counterproductive to the development of a culturally responsive curriculum. Principals need to be active in visiting classrooms to determine whether teachers who may be putting their own *twist* on the curriculum that is counterproductive to the intent of a culturally rich curriculum.

The curriculum must be cutting edge and challenging with respect to African American children acquiring an academically sound foundation in all subject matter areas. State-of-the-art technology must be coupled with the curriculum and the teachers' approach to implementing it so that individualization can be used as a laser to focus on African American children not falling behind.

A driving force of the culturally responsive school leadership of principals is the establishment of a day-to-day school environment that emulates inclusionary practices for minoritized students who have been marginalized. The goal is to establish a school environment representative of inclusiveness of all groups of children in attendance. Every aspect of the school environment, including extra-curricular activities, must help students to experience positive feelings, be included in all activities, and have a strong positive identity with the school and their culture.

A positive relationship between the teacher and African American children on a daily basis is the foundation for motivating students to higher achievement and reducing discipline issues. A part of this positive relationship is the demonstrated belief by teachers, through high expectations, that all African American children can be successful.

The principal must work diligently to encourage the community in which the school is located to interface the school's environment with activities and groups within the community in a culturally responsive manner. This includes having space within the building which community groups, social agencies, and health agencies can use to serve students and community members. It also includes the principal and school staff going out into the community, on its *turf*, to create positive bridges between community members, groups, and school personnel (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Some schools do not have specifically defined geographical attendance areas. Being able to reach out and connect the school with the multiple communities in which African American students reside is a challenge for principals. Person-to-person contact between school personnel and the adults and communities where African American students reside is still needed, and can be augmented with the use of social media and other technology-based outreach efforts.

Teachers

Teachers serve as role and career models for African American students. There is considerable evidence that students who have teachers of the same race tend to learn more in school (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). With respect to the behavior of children, a recent study of elementary children in North Carolina indicates that African American students are less likely to be removed from their classroom and school for behavioral issues if their teachers are of the same race. For Whites, there is minimal evidence that having White teachers reduced behavioral issues. The point is that African American teachers can significantly impact the educational achievement and enhance the behavior of African American children. This is critical as schools across the country attempt to have an impact on the school-to-prison pipeline issue. This is especially true for African American children because while they represented 16% of the K-12 enrollment in the 2011-2012 school year in the United States, 43% of them had multiple out-of-school suspensions (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017).

More African American teachers are needed in our nation's schools. Only seven percent of public school teachers in the United States are African American, with two percent being

African American males (Will, 2016).[1] More African American teachers are needed in our nation's schools. Because of this under-representation, it is imperative that universities effectively train all teachers—and especially those <u>not</u> of color—to be sensitive to the needs and context of African American children and to be culturally responsive to these needs. Principals will not be able to employ as many African American teachers as ideally would be the case, because of supply and demand. Therefore, it is imperative that selection criteria for teacher candidates reveal that they are sensitive, understanding, and committed to being successful in educating African American children. Critical to this is an unwavering belief that African American children can—and will— succeed in school and society. Since many teachers instructing African American children will not be African American, these teachers need effective pre-service training. Once these teachers are employed, ongoing staff development is necessary to help them adjust, when applicable, to effectively educate African American children.

It is critical that teachers can work effectively with significant others (parents/guardians, grandparents, family members, and siblings) of African American children, and they should be actively engaged with community groups in the areas where the children reside. Further, through home visits and the use of social media and other technology based communication vehicles, teachers need to personally "connect" with parents. Teachers also need to create a climate of *welcomeness* for parents to visit their classrooms and create a positive identity with parents in non-classroom school activities.

African American Children's Racial Identity

Prompted in part by the civil rights movement in the 1960's, the curriculum in United States schools was modified to offer experiences for African American children that afforded them exposure and knowledge of their rich heritage. The "Black History Movement" era prompted needed curriculum changes at all grade levels in an attempt to offer African American youth a curriculum that, if properly developed and taught, enhanced their identity, pride, and a sense of "connectedness" to their heritage, culture, and school. Such a curriculum should help to demonstrate to African American children who they are now and how their everyday life experiences are connected to the great accomplishments of present day African American role models and heroes who came before them. These curriculum experiences must demonstrate the unwavering commitment, pride, hard work, and accomplishments of these role models in being successful, despite the oppressive mainstream society they experienced.

A new commitment through curriculum and instruction for African American racial identity is needed today in U.S. schools. Examples of positive outcomes for African American youth to create a meaningful identity are: 1) Greater resilience to overcome barriers they experienced to school success, 2) enhanced coping skills to deal with discrimination, 3) higher academic performance by increased motivation, and 4) increased motivation and commitment to overcome existing obstacles to obtaining an equitable and quality education (Zirkel & Johnson, 2016).

Social and Psychological Factors to Enhance
African American Students' Education

The social and psychological factors presented here are important in and of themselves and also support the mastery of cognitive—academic skills—for African American children. These

five factors are: (1) self-esteem, (2) achievement motivation, (3) social skills, (4) coping skills, and (5) aspirations. Such factors should aid African American children in being successful at school and in future life endeavors.[2]

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem pertains to how African American children feel when comparing their actual behavior and accomplishments to what they think should be the case ideally. Self-esteem sometimes uses what other students accomplish as a comparative point. Examples of practices to stimulate positive self-esteem are:

1. Emphasize reinforcement for good performance and de-emphasize penalties for poor performance.
2. Create situations in which African American children receive positive feedback from students of all racial, ethnic, economic, and social groups in the classroom.
3. Specifically work with African American students new to the building to furnish them with positive reinforcement through the counseling program and teacher teams.
4. Build confidence in African American children via learning activities for which they receive positive feedback.
5. Build bridges with *significant others* (parents/guardians, grandparents, family members, and siblings) to reinforce the students' positive accomplishments at school.
6. Use stories of the successes of African American adults—heroes and models—whose childhood backgrounds are similar to those of the African American students.
7. The teacher and other staff show a sincere caring and feeling for the uniqueness of each student.
8. Reduce comparing students to one another or their siblings with which you have familiarity.
9. Demonstrate to students that each is a special person and has strengths that will help her/him to be successful.

Achievement Motivation

Presently, the concept *Grit* (Duckworth, 2016)—passion, perseverance, and effort to achieve—is popular in some schools. It encompasses many of the key elements of achievement motivation, which is a student's focus, drive, desire, and persistence to accomplish a task.

Among the practices to empathize achievement motivation are the following:

1. Help develop time-management skills.
2. Integrate students' backgrounds and experiences into classroom activities.
3. Discuss and show students how their efforts cause success for specific accomplishments (attribution theory).
4. Structure activities so that every student's achievement is recognized.
5. Create challenges that build on students' existing strengths.
6. Create ways for students to assess and discuss their progress.
7. Offer "personal best" awards and other incentives for attendance, grades, and/or achievement.

8. Structure classroom experiences so that students feel responsible for their actions.
9. Structure lessons to prompt active participation from all students.

Social Skills

Social skills pertain to African American children interacting productively with others in meaningful ways. Such skills include avoiding negative and violent behaviors and establishing positive interpersonal relationships with others even though they may be viewed as "different" for a host of reasons.

Among the practices to enhance social skills of African American students are the following:

1. Develop a curriculum component that specifically teaches effective interpersonal skills.
2. Utilize the expertise of support staff (e.g., school psychologist, social worker, and counselor) to work with African American children who have deficits in interpersonal skills.
3. Use the cooperative learning model, with emphasis on positive interdependency and the value of working with others to accomplish tasks and solve problems.
4. Structure the classroom so that aggression and hostility are reduced among African American students and between the teacher and students, with a special emphasis on reducing aggression and hostility based on factors such as socio-economic status and race.
5. Assign informal small-group learning activities so that African American students learn to cooperate in developing peer-help programs.
6. Eliminate social subgroups that ostracize others.
7. Emphasize the need to be sensitive to the feelings of other people.
8. Reduce competition when it can lead to negative relationships.
9. Teach diversity in the context of showing how differences among people are strengths, especially for problem solving.

Coping Skills

Consistent failure and difficult obstacles in personal life can cause African American students to fall into a cycle of learned helplessness—a feeling that they have little control over outcomes important to them. Dweck's (2006) growth mindset that you can change the situation through how you view and react to adversity represents a major attribute of the new positive psychology movement which is important to African American students' coping skills.

Examples of activities to address coping skills for African American students are:

1. Provide activities to help African American students cope with typical real-world situations.
2. Teach African American students to handle conflicts and rule violations through negotiations and peer mediation.
3. Integrate stress reduction techniques into daily or weekly activities.
4. Train parents to initiate positive parent-child interactions, especially where there is potential conflict.

5. Have discussions with African American students about what it means to be successful and what it means to fail and how failures can be addressed to prevent them in the future.
6. Incorporate activities that encourage African American students to talk about their emotions, listen to their classmates express their feelings, and reflect on what motivates people.
7. Encourage nonjudgmental and non-disruptive venting of emotions rather than negative verbal and physical aggression.
8. Teach African American students various methods of relaxation, such as deep muscle relaxation and deep breathing, for times when they need strategies to reduce anxiety.
9. Foster a sense of belonging for the African American students in the classroom so they feel a connection to the school.
10. Reduce the emphasis on negative aspects of failure and emphasize the positive attributes of success.
    a. Systematically teach the growth mindset content to African American students—the "hand a person is dealt" is just a starting point and is not fixed.
    b. Everyone can change and grow through application and experience.
    c. An individual's true potential is unknown and unlimited.
    d. Passion, hard work, and training greatly impact what can be accomplished.
    e. Do not hide deficiencies, but overcome them.
    f. Even when feeling distressed, be ready to take risks, confront challenges, and keep working at being better. (Dweck, 2006).

Aspirations

Preparing African American students for college and careers, a current national movement in the United States, is a focal point for inclusion in the concept of aspirations for African American students. Aspirations pertain to the knowledge and drive to realistically prepare for college, careers, or both and the motivation and drive to do so.

Examples of practices to effectively address aspirations of African American students are:

1. Stress the acquisition of skills needed to master prerequisites for specific vocations, careers, and colleges.
2. Stress the development of transition skills for African American students so that when they leave PK-12 education, there will be a smooth change to college, careers, the military, work, or whatever they pursue at the post-high school level.
3. Help African American students identify heroes and role models through lesson plans and activities so that they have examples of people they want to emulate for careers.
4. Make real-world connections during lessons so that African American students can see how the information they are learning can help them later in life with college, careers, and jobs.
5. Nurture the curiosity of African American students to prompt them to consider various career opportunities and pursue additional career information through technological resources.
6. Talk to African American students about their interests and relate those interests to possible vocations, careers, and college programs.

7. Assure African American students that everyone has positive attributes and that those, coupled with training and aspirations, can lead to successful and rewarding careers.
8. Explain to African American students what "career and college readiness" means by using activities designed to promote their aspirations.

Concluding Thoughts

Success of African American students in our PreK-12 schools is critical to the personal fulfillment of their childhood, as well as their enjoyment and economic status as adults. If principals create cultural responsive school environments for African American children, their personal fulfillment can be realized. High expectations by all adults—especially teachers and other school personnel—is essential for each African American child's cognitive achievement, social and psychological development, and success in daily life.

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Footnotes

Footnote 1: For more information pertaining to race of teachers and related issues, see the following studies listed under references: "The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) and "Through Our Eyes: Perspectives and Reflections from Black Teachers" (Griffin & Tackie, 2016),

Footnote 2: For more details regarding these factors, see "Remediating Social and Psychological Harm Resulting from Segregative Acts" (Bartz, 1984) and "Enhancing the Social and Psychological Development of Young Adolescents" (Bartz, 2016b) presented in the references.