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## Shaping the Course of African American Preschool Males in Educational Settings

**ABSTRACT.** The state of African American males in the United States is one of crisis. Educational settings are the ideal settings to address this social dilemma. The issue must be addressed early and often. Research examining how African American males fare in preschool settings is a critical first step in offsetting the adverse situations experienced by this population. Investigation of strategies to engage African American males is warranted to make education equitable for all.

**KEYWORDS:** preschool, males, educational settings

### 1. Background and Purpose

An alarming phenomenon is occurring in the field of early childhood development. Overwhelmingly, more male students of color are suspended or expelled from the classroom setting (Davis, 2003). Early childhood programs are not state mandated for young children so their attendance is up to their families and administration of the school. The impact of these gender practices affect students throughout their lifetime. These tendencies merit investigation and consideration within the educational system. The U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education created a policy statement to address these occurrences. The 2014 report states the expulsion and suspension of young students of color is problematic and occurs with regularity. These drastic racial and gender inequalities play a pivotal role in the future trajectory of male students of color. As a country, we are responsible for starting a dialogue that will culminate in a set of reforms to address this issue. The early years of a child's life are critical to building foundational learning and holistic wellness. When young students of color experience the

negative carnages they may often suffer from a lack of sense of fit in the school environment. By expelling and suspending young males of color we set them on a precarious course that may result in a negative lifestyle. Male students of color are often marginalized and have a record of adverse experiences before entering kindergarten. As this may be a student's first experience away from home, preschool programs are designed to support social-emotional development.

## **2. Review of the Literature**

It is well documented in literature that African American males have a difficult time in school. These difficulties often originate in the primary school years but have far-reaching implications. These students have lower scores in math, reading, vocabulary and other scholastic endeavors (Davis, 2003). What is more intriguing is the cause of this dilemma and what can be done to rectify it. Starting out in school, African American males lag behind their counterparts in the academic setting especially in math and reading. Reading scores are often indicators of future success for African American males. Young African American males score in the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile on standardized tests but are on par with their White counterparts in recognizing letters and counting to 20 (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). The lack of reading skills is attributed to a lack of vocabulary development prior to school attendance (Barbarin, 1993). Preschool is the ideal place in addition to the home for incorporating literacy skills. While by entrance to kindergarten most of these skills are developed, young African American males required extensive exposure to literacy building strategies. African American achievement gaps in middle school and high school are directly correlated to preschool math and reading scores (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). This consistent underachievement contributes to social problems in later life and often-negative outcomes.

## **3. Shaping the Educational Trajectory of Preschool Males of Color**

Across the gender lines, female students often excel in reading competence in the primary years. This literacy acquisition requires prerequisite skills such as letter identification, and sound awareness all of

which appear to be more evident in young females. Educational discrepancies in preschool aptitude are striking in terms of the African American male. African American males are at a one percent proficiency level in addition and subtraction at the start of kindergarten and an eight percent proficiency level at the end of kindergarten (Prager, 2011). White males are at a five percent level in addition and subtraction in kindergarten and a twenty-two percent level by the end of kindergarten (Prager, 2011). When looking at these statistics, researchers must consider both ethnicity and gender, as these deficits are causal factors for later academic problems.

#### **4. Preschool and the Development of Social Emotional Skills**

The preschool setting is the ideal for the development of social skills and the regulation of self. These necessary characteristics are best taught early and often. Preschoolers learn to communicate their needs, follow directions, solve problems, take turns, and wait their turn. Issues such as aggression, disobedience, inattention, and hyperactivity all impede student progress in social development. Low socio-economic status is a determinant of young African American male progress in school settings (Reid & Kagan, 2015). Low socio-economic status influences the quality of life, family dynamics, and later school outcomes (Reid & Kagan, 2015). Problems with behavior and emotional stability often manifest in the early years of life. Social-emotional competence is crucial for school success, and is a predictor of school hardiness. When surveyed, mothers of African American males note their sons often display more symptoms of inattention, restlessness, disruptiveness, and misbehavior than their female siblings. These characteristics habitually lead to more parental and teacher disapproval and punishments. African American males internalize this treatment and it hinders a healthy sense of self and depression. A focused sustained effort must be initiated to support the change necessary for African American males' success in the classroom. Academic and social skills are acquired in a sequential manner and students require support from adults. In California, one-half of African American students live in low-income households. In addition, African American, who students make up six percent of California, account for twenty-two percent in the foster care system (Edelman, 2006). Because of these inequities by age two, students from low-income neigh-

borhoods are six months behind their counterparts (Reid & Kagan, 2015). By age five they are more than two years behind (Reid & Kagan, 2015). One notable finding is that African American students are less likely to be read to than their White peers (Lewis-McCoy, 2012). Limited access to preschool settings is another issue to examine when considering the educational trajectory of African American students (Reid & Kagan, 2015).

## **5. Engaging Preschoolers in the Academic Setting**

When African American students are enrolled in high quality preschool programs, they have multiple opportunities to gain valuable skills to remediate the achievement gap. Research also shows that access to high-quality preschool programs provides the foundation of social, academic, and behavioral proficiency as well as later school achievement, high school graduation, earning ability, and lower rates of arrest (Davis, 2003). Parents of students in preschool programs are more involved in the educational process. The Children's Defense Fund (2015) determined that early childhood programs provide a healthy foundation for young children. These programs add a secure dimension to the lives of young males of color by instilling structure and procedures that build resiliency and stability. In these contexts, young males of color learn personal accountability, autonomy, and self-efficacy.

## **6. Supporting Males of Color in Preschool Settings**

In a national report by the Foundation for Child Development (2010), preschool programs with an 8:1 teacher ratio have less expulsions or suspensions. Also noted are the half day programs are more successful in keeping students engaged in school activities. Teachers reporting a high job stress level often expelled students at a higher rate, 14.9% who identified their jobs as stressful compared to 4.9% with low levels of job stress (Foundation for Child Development, 2010).

## **7. Children's Defense Fund**

Founded over forty years ago, the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) was established as an advocacy organization to support the needs of marginalized children. In collaboration with community partners, the

CDF runs a Freedom Schools program to support preschool students in school readiness activities such as literacy, social emotional readiness, school preparedness, and motivation (CDF, 2015). The Freedom Summer Project began in 1964 during the Civil Rights era (CDF, 2015). It was designed to engage African American and White students in academic advancement. This program was instituted as a model for social justice. The program expanded to other cities and since 1995, over 125,000 preschoolers have attended the CDF Freedom Schools Program (CDF, 2015). College students are trained in the philosophy and teach in the summer program. The greatest program gains, when evaluated were African American boys. The following characteristics included increased reading ability, positive character development, and increased level of parental involvement (Edelman, 2006).

## **8. Harlem Children's Zone**

Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) in New York supports young males of color in preschool settings by providing wrap around services that meet the entire needs of family. These services include family literacy, meal preparation, and exercise and fitness programs (HCZ, 2015). In addition to these and other programs, HCZ hires teachers interested in working with marginalized populations (HCZ, 2015). The administrators have an expectation that teachers will meet the social-emotional challenges with support and understanding as well as the use of effective strategies. Beginning with "The Baby College" HCZ prepares parents for the delivery of their child with prenatal support followed with a 0-3 curriculum that includes a nine-week course of brain development, communication, and nutrition advisement (HCZ, 2015). When families are unable to attend classes a home program is initiated to meet the needs of the community. In addition to HCZs Baby College, an eighteen-month program called the three-year-old journey is offered (HCZ, 2015). This program lays out the developmental needs of young students. Each Saturday morning at the local elementary school, educators and families gather to learn about social skills, literacy, discipline, and age appropriate activities that support academic success (HCZ, 2015). These young students play in learn and play centers with trained staff members (HCZ, 2015). The culminating program for young males of color along with their female counterparts is the Harlem's Gems. These strategies enhance the academic

achievement of young males of color. This six-week summer program prepares students to attend kindergarten by having a 5:1 teacher student ratio and focusing on early literacy skills (HCZ, 2015). Families are required to participate by implementing classroom activities. Of the 2015 Gem students, 99% of tested kindergarten school ready on assessment measures (HCZ, 2015).

## **9. Comer School Development Program**

The Yale Child Study Center opened the School Development Program (SDP) in 1968. The program focused on building relationships that stabilize student ability to learn from teachers. James Comer, Ph.D. (2012) examined the tenets of success for marginalized students and explored the way students learn. The Yale University professor created experiences based on six developmental pathways required for school success: social-interactive, psycho-emotional, ethical, cognitive, linguistic, and physical acquisition (Comer, Giordano & Brown, 2012). Comer constructed the *Curriculum Skills Curriculum for Inner-City Children* (Comer et al., 2012). Comers' research emphasized addressing the needs of the child holistically; mind, and body (Comer et al., 2012). Research and evaluation of the program has shown noted improvement in school readiness skills in African American student as in the United States as well as Trinidad, Tobago, South Africa, England and Ireland (Comer et al., 2012).

## **10. Promoting African American Male Success in School**

R. L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy (2012) reports that young African American males benefit from summer and after school programs. The lazy, fun days of summer often take a toll on young African American males' academic progress especially math and reading scores. Structured summer and after school programs are crucial in building scholastic foundational principles for young African American males. Another strategy is close, clear communication with teachers especially in the beginning of the school year. Because teachers are trained in understanding the developmental markers needed to meet curriculum demands they can provide needed information for parents. Building a strong relationship with educators enhances the educational experience for young African Amer-

ican males. Early researchers, Graham-Bermann, Coupet, Eglar, Mattis & Banyard (1996) state that it is important for educators to support young African American males' self-identity by the use of activities and games that enhance self-worth and confidence. One educator noted the use of hand-held mirrors throughout the day as well as activities that focus on personal characteristics and traits. The use of curiosity about race, skin tones, and language should be openly discussed. The incorporation of developmentally appropriate practices and child-initiated practices is a key component to engaging young African American male learners. When the student has a choice in what activities to participate in and what materials to play with they build autonomy and self-determination. These two resilient characteristics foster strong self-efficacy and self-respect in young African American males. Single gender learning communities show promise for learning in preschool for African American males. Often, when separated from females, African American males experience less pressure in the academic setting (Foundation for Child Development).

In one study, African American boys when interviewed stated that they fared better in separate settings (Gurian, Stevens & King, 2006). The South Carolina office of Public School Choice offers over twenty gender specific program focusing on African American males that highlight three major practices: increased teacher training to determine the gender difference and its impact on education, analyzing data on the impact of gender specific education, input from parents on the gender specific programming (South Carolina Department of Education, 2015).

## 11. Conclusion

African American males' suspension and expulsion rates are a problematic issue in education. When one segment of the population is failing to gain educational prowess, the future generations are impacted. Moreover, when African American males early school trajectory is riddled with problems their self-esteem suffers. The later outcomes for African American males who are not successful in preschool often include a high dropout rate, less engagement in school, high incarceration rates, and an overall decline in positive social capital. A concerted, intentional effort is warranted to offset these adverse conditions. As educators engage in a dialogue, they will discover policies, and efforts required to support this vulnerable societal group.

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