Promoting Fair Assessment of African American Students

History

The culture of African Americans has been shaped by their history in the United States as well as by the transmission of African traditions across time and distance. African Americans are not a homogeneous group. Most definitions of African Americans include a descendant of slaves component, or that one ancestor was born in America. The term Black is often used as a generic reference but actually refers to a much broader group of students. The term Black includes students who are immigrants and English Language Learners (ELL), typically from African countries.

Information on ELL programs can be found at:

http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/StuSuc/EngLearn/

Examples of cultural variations within African American populations

(1) Religious beliefs
(2) Geographic location
(3) Educational background
(4) Immigration status
(5) Socioeconomic status as well as other factors

Educators working with families must work to understand the needs of the student and family they are working with, rather than generalize expectations based on limited understanding of a few factors.

Public schools have the essential task of providing students with skills to be successful individuals capable of functional independence, and capable of contributing to society at large. Schools are charged with the task of providing students with a foundation of academic knowledge and are also responsible for helping students develop life skills to socialize with others and manage themselves in a society that contains persons from diverse backgrounds. An expectation for success for all students is essential. From information gathered from the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) standards, students are expected to master “knowledge and skills necessary for college and career readiness” (Parents Know, MDE1).

Parents and caregivers of African American students share the hope of an education for their child that maximizes their child’s potential and which provides skills for success in life. Caregivers hope that the setting where their child is placed provides nurturance and keeps them safe. Other aspects associated with the outcome of education include fostering identity development (including racial) and the attainment of fundamental academic skills.

1 http://www.parentsknow.state.mn.us/parentsknow/gradek_12/topicsAZ/PKDEV_000437
When students experience difficulty with aspects of their education a mechanism of a prevention and intervention should be available to support them. A screening and intervention system is utilized when students show signs of struggling to meet academic demands or when they experience problems with adjustment within the context of school. In most settings this intervention system is conducted in a collaborative fashion involving parents and caregivers.

Specially designed interventions within a Multi-Tiered System of support are applied to assist students who require modifications in teaching strategies or in how information is presented. Preventative services and initial interventions for students fall under the broad domain of Tier 1 services, designed to promote the success for all students within the general education population and curriculum. Modifications in teaching strategies within the traditional classroom are an example of Tier 1 universal strategies.

Despite the application of well-designed research-based interventions, conducted with fidelity, some students may continue to struggle and fall behind their peers with regards to their academic skills, social skills, or ability to manage their behaviors. More intensive strategies may be introduced under the broad domains of Tier 2 services. Tier 3 services may be utilized for those students who require focused and intensive interventions at the individual level.

Some students may continue to struggle despite focused interventions designed to remediate difficulties they have encountered. Based on lack of success with well-designed interventions, or following up on parent request for services, a comprehensive evaluation is utilized to identify the needs and status of students and to determine if special education services under one of the broad disability categories is appropriate for the student.

An individualized evaluation is initialized when a student show signs of difficulty meeting specific expectations associated with academic skills, functional and communication skills, or with social or behavioral adjustment. Although well intended, the mechanism of referral and evaluation for academic, developmental, or social concerns does not provide the intended positive consequences for all students.

The concern of unintended negative consequences associated with the referral or evaluation process is particularly detrimental to many African American students (Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin & Swain-Bradway, 2011). Part of the difficulty stems from the inability of some educators to utilize multiple modes of presenting information, use of inappropriate questioning techniques to support student thinking, or a failure to include the student’s culture as an asset to learning.

---

The referral and evaluation of students who are not from the majority culture is an important and sensitive issue for educational systems. Some systems may not perceive of diversity as a gift to be celebrated, but rather take a perspective of neutrality so as not to be seen as promoting one group over another. Such an approach may diminish the rich heritage and differences among all students in a school.

A White middle class value system, defined as economic security through home ownership and caregiver level of education with a 4 year-college degree (Class Matters3), is sometimes imposed on students who come from diverse backgrounds. While this definition may be consistent with a large number of students in schools in Minnesota, in urban centers and suburban settings the student population may be discrepant from this model. This issue is important because African American students, as a group, experience negative impact of disproportionate representation in special education programs.

**Education Gaps**

Any approach to addressing the needs of African American students must recognize a number of systemic factors that contribute to disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs. The African American Leadership Forum (AALF4) reported that Minnesota is facing a crisis where the education of African American students lags behind that of their White peers. As proposed by the AALF, working with the Education and Life-Long Learning Work group (ELL), the achievement gap and other difficulties encountered by African American students can be attributed to 5 gaps. The areas where there are gaps in development, intervention, treatment, or services for African American students fall within the areas of (1) preparation, (2) belief systems, (3) time for learning, (4) teaching strategies and methods, and (5) leadership issues impacting the focus of services for African American students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The 5 Education Gaps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School preparation involves the presence of basic skills to enter school. Exposure to language and literacy skills, such as amount of reading and vocabulary skill development at home, establish a foundation of skills to meet the initial demands of the school setting. Factors such as poverty or stress within the home setting can interfere with the focus on the development of basic readiness skills. For those African American learners who are in homes stressed by poverty or other factors, their development of baseline skills to enter schools may be altered.

---

3 http://www.classmatters.org/working_definations2.php
The **belief gap** relates to establishing and maintaining belief in the capability of African American learners to achieve and learn, and to ultimately defeat the achievement gap and allow African American students to achieve success at the same rates as other learners. Belief in student success and capability is an aspect of school climate, where student and family successes are championed and opportunities for reaching goals are provided.

**Time** - In circumstances where students have fallen behind their peers it is critical to provide strategies that anticipate learning trajectories for students. **Collecting data that assess rate of learning or rate of skill acquisition and comparing those rates to expected outcomes for grade levels helps establish meaningful goals and interventions for students.** This approach is consistent with an evidenced-based approach to making decisions about students. When a student has fallen behind their peers it is not acceptable to ignore questions about where they are within the curriculum or social areas and where they should be within the curriculum and social areas.

**Teaching** - All students deserve educators who care about them and their success. Some school districts are troubled by staff turnover and changes. Programs such as those for students with emotional or behavioral disorders often have staff changes from year to year, yet students in such programs would benefit from strong teachers and stability with staff. Educator - student relationships and educator - caregiver relationships are essential to school success, yet it cannot be assumed that all educators are prepared to work cross-culturally, and in some settings staff changes contribute to the instability some African American students experience in their education.

**Leadership** - School leaders such as principals and special education directors can promote expectations of staff to assess their skills and knowledge to work cross-culturally. Administrators can set the tone of the climate of the school that is welcoming of diversity. Monitoring staff changes within programs, particularly within programs that provide intensive services, is an important task.

**Data, Statistics, and Disproportionality**

The issue of disproportionate representation is important to address because factors that contribute to disproportionality involve issues of race, culture, social-economic status, educator stereotyping about students and their families, and factors associated with the climate of the school. Unfortunately, the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs and discipline policies that remove them from the traditional classroom settings remain a persistent problem (see more extensive data in School Climate Chapter).
As well as concern for over-representation of African American students in specific disability categories, concern exists for under-representation in programs such as those for students identified as gifted or talented. The persistence of these findings requires action to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds receive fair treatment throughout their educational experience.

Multiple factors contribute to disproportionate representation of African American students in special education, or in referrals of students to other services. In some circumstances, failure to understand the cultural dynamics of African American students is found. Other factors associated with the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education services or services other than the traditional classroom, include concerns about bias in referral processes, assessment practices, and placement decisions. These factors combine with inequities in opportunity based on socio-economic factors such as poverty, and with curriculums that are not culturally responsive (Sullivan et al., 2009).

**Particularly distressing for those concerned about disproportionate representation of African – American students in special education programs is research in the area of emotional and behavioral disorders.** Recent findings suggest “many school personnel, regardless of their ethnicity, combined their belief in ED (emotional disorder) as an intrinsic condition with firmly held stereotypes of African American families in poverty (Hart, Cramer, Klingner, & Sturges, 2010, p. 159).”

Some educators or professionals erroneously assume that when an African American learner shows concerns with managing emotions, feelings, or behavior, the problem exists solely within the child. Such quick assumptions by some educators show a lack of empathy for students and

---

5 Sullivan et al., 2009
fail to understand that some of their responses could be attributed to prior negative experiences. External causes or situational factors that might provoke the behavior are not examined. Important environmental, language, cultural, and social factors that contribute to the child or student’s reactions or response to services are excluded in attempts to understand the student’s behavior.

The federal government requires states to monitor disproportionate representation, with emphasis on overuse of special education referral and placement of student. Although not required by the federal government, it is important for educational systems to attend to issues related to underrepresentation. Under-representation for African American students occurs when students are misdirected and served under the primary categories of emotional or behavioral disability/disorder (EBD), Learning Disability (LD), and Cognitive Disabilities (CD), when other categories such as Other Health Impaired (OHD) might serve the student better.

A specific example of underrepresentation would be a student who is categorized by the school as meeting the criteria for an Emotional or Behavioral disability/disorder (EBD), when their concerns and symptoms may be more accurately addressed by practices typically utilized for students with an autism spectrum disorder or possible other health impairment.

**Disproportionate representation of African American students can involve over-representation in some programs and under-representation in others.** Donna Ford stated “concerns over recruiting and retaining minority students in gifted education programs has persisted for several decades (1998, p.4™). It is important for school systems, educators, and caregivers to be vigilant about promoting services for African American students who show promise across a wide range of domains: intellectually, socially, within music and the arts, within the sciences and math, or through creative means, as examples.

Ford (1998) identified several factors that could contribute underrepresentation of diverse students for gifted education.

1. Recruitment issues
2. Personnel training
3. Retention issues.

Definitions of giftedness vary, which contributes to confusion about identifying factors for gifted students, thus making recruitment efforts inconsistent. Instruments used to identify students often have a White middle class orientation, thus students from diverse backgrounds may not perform in a pattern similar to the standardization group on which the assessment was based.

Educators may lack common training on identifying signs of giftedness for African American students, relying on their own expectations and experience base to guide them. However, given the significant difference in some settings between the backgrounds of educators and those of their students, failure to identify potential gifted students among African American populations may be higher than for other groups. The 2011 U.S. Department of Education Condition of Education Report concluded that the student population within public schools would continue to diversify along racial, ethnic, and linguistic factors, yet the demographics of school educators

---


remain relatively stable at 85% white and 75% female. Differences in attitudes, experiences, beliefs and expectations can occur between professional educators and the diverse student population they are expected to serve.

In some settings, when a student from a diverse background has been identified for services it may be difficult to retain them in a program. If separated from their traditional peer group the student may feel isolated or unsupported, which could negatively impact their response to a modified curriculum.

Learning Characteristics of African American Students

Boykin (1994) and Boykin, Tyler and Miller (2005) proposed several learning characteristics that may be a foundation of learning of African American students. If educators do not understand these factors they could become a source of error in making decisions about services for an African American student. Some educators may misinterpret these factors if their background is significantly different from the student’s. These characteristics likely underscore differences in understanding of disability when an African American student is involved.

### Potential Learning Characteristics of African American Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality (positive outcomes attributed to higher power)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmony (perceptive of connection between people and environment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affect (expressing emotion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communalism (prefer working cooperatively)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement (prefer active learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verve (psychological facet of movement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive individualism (enjoy unique self-expression)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Expression and verbal directness (prefer verbal communication, enjoy debating and bluntness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social time orientation (track events, not time passing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As an example of working to understand the characteristics of a family, the following are several recommendations for education staff suggested Lynch & Hanson (2004).

---

Methods to Foster Relationships with African American Families:

- Capitalize on kinship bonds. Focus on family strengths rather than on weaknesses in developing and implementing interventions. If extended family members are primary caregivers include them in the intervention.
- Utilize informal support networks such as the church, neighbors, or friends whenever possible.
- Address family members formally, using titles and last names, until given permission to be more relaxed.
- Assess resources in the African American community in your area and develop relationships with those resources (extend invitations to join committees).
- Assess the effects of poverty on families and determine which issues are related to culture and which are related to socioeconomic status.
- Avoid generalizing about students from African American families based on the behavior or lifestyles of a few.

African American Caregivers/Guardians Involvement

Within any process where decisions are made about student services, caregiver involvement is essential. Caregiver involvement is a broad term inclusive of several types of participation. Caregiver involvement is important for all families. However, African American caregivers and parents often report more conflict with educators about communication and involvement than other ethnic or cultural groups.

It is important for educators to understand the parent/caregiver’s history with school. Educators can shift the paradigm used to view caregivers through developing mutual respect for their views, getting to know caregivers, and including them in the process rather than blaming caregivers or treating them with little or no respect, as some families report.

Caregivers of African American students can be invited to participate and support their child in many ways.

Examples of caregiver participation

1. Attending school activities
2. Supporting their child with homework
3. Communicating information about the status of the child to school staff
4. Modeling behavior and values associated with development
5. Advocating for schools
6. Participation on school related committees

From a historical perspective, educational services acts such as IDEA and state education guidelines have supported parent and caregiver involvement [http://nichy.org/laws/idea](http://nichy.org/laws/idea). IDEA states that the public agency works to ensure that one or both parents of a child where there are concerns about a potential disability attend IEP meetings. Other aspects of this expectation
include proper notice, scheduling meetings at mutually agreed upon times and places, and providing information so that parents understand the purpose of the meeting.

Multiple means to communicate with parents should also be utilized. Multiple means include use of telephone, electronic-mail, traditional mail, and in person connections and communications. **Parents and caregivers should be contacted when students are progressing adequately or when the student surpasses general expectations.** Waiting to respond only when a student has difficulty contributes to a stressed relationship between educators and caregivers.

The diversity available in many school settings provides an opportunity for broad perspectives and discussion on issues, and prepares students to work in multi-cultural settings. Within such settings caregiver communication and collaboration with educators is an important relationship used to bridge the gap between home culture and the culture in the student’s school or community. Strong relationships between caregivers and educators are an aspect of Tier 1 (Universal) Services, where parents and caregivers have knowledge of their child’s services, and are active contributors to services implemented. Research has shown when parents are involved in their child’s education, children have better attendance rates, earn higher grades, and achieve higher graduation rates than their peers where parent involvement is lacking (Darch, Miao, & Shippen 2004\(^\text{13}\)).

The involvement of caregivers is achieved when parents take initiative to be involved in services for their children, and when educators in the schools support the initiative of parents and caregivers. Unfortunately some school settings are not inviting. It is incumbent upon the school to encourage and secure caregiver involvement, starting with effective communication.

---

Educators and administrators as well can work to make the school setting inviting and inclusive of parents and caregivers, and work to proactively engage and involve parents and caregivers. Often school staff controls access the educational environment. Caregivers hope to feel included and supported, and seek guidance from school personnel about ways they can be involved. Parents and caregivers are the expert on their child, and can be expected to contribute knowledge of family history, developmental history, social history, and medical history of their child.

Students benefit from the support they receive from their caregivers both in and outside of the home environment. Research supports that parents also benefit from being more involved in their child’s education. Domina discussed the benefits experienced by parents of diverse children (200514). Parents involved in schools become more familiar with the educators who work with their child. If the environment is inclusive and inviting, parents and caregivers develop knowledge of the school’s climate and culture. Once parents become familiar with teachers, specialists, and administrators in the setting they can build relationships with them. A strong relationship contributes to caregivers feeling at ease with raising questions about the progress of their child, which will help parents and caregivers advocate for appropriate supports for their child (Turney & Kao, 200915). They also are better able to understand the range of services offered by schools, and the reasons for such services.

Schools have a climate, culture, and language, both within the general and special education setting. It is important for educators to assist caregivers in understanding the dynamics of the school, particularly in terms of the language used in schools to communicate about students and their development (Epstein, 200116). Many educators (classroom teachers, school counselors, specialists in disability areas, school psychologists, social workers, communicative disorders specialists) complete professional training programs where they develop professional language. The language of the profession, often referred to as jargon, can create a barrier between effective communication between educators and staff if adjustments are not made to communicate in a manner that does not rely on professional training to understand.

Schools must actively engage in outreach to parents and caregivers to bridge the communication gap. Proactive methods to communicate through letters, Friday folders and notebooks with information about their child's progress, or an occasional telephone call to the home are examples of methods to communicate with families.

The availability of electronic means to communicate, such as e-mail between home and school, or the use of the Internet and other forms of electronic communication, must be weighed carefully considering issues related to the high percentage of African American students who live in poverty. It is important to be mindful of a potential for a digital divide where some caregivers may not have easy access to the internet, or access to computers in the home.

16 Epstein, 2001
If educational or professional language (jargon) is used and is combined with a reliance on technology as the primary means of communication, some families will suffer. A communication barrier can still exist (Lazar and Slostad, 1999\(^{17}\)). **It is not just the availability of multiple means of communication; it is that the message is received and is clear to the caregiver.** Other barriers that might interfere between communications from school to home with African American families.

(1) Active resistance to communication with parents and caregiver must be addressed and identified. Some educators may resist communication with parents and caregivers as a means to avoid conflict.

(2) Fear a loss of control over their classroom environment or educational setting (Lazar and Slostad, 1999\(^{18}\)).

(3) Resistance due to concerns about lack of time in their daily schedule for communication with parents and caregivers.

Educator and administrator preparation programs can provide training to new generations of professionals on methods to support parent and caregiver involvement from a cross-cultural perspective. Some new educators may not feel completely confident in communicating with parents, and may need support from mentors and supervisors to ensure that they develop their skills and expertise with communicating with caregivers, particularly when cross-cultural communication is required. **Educator preparation programs can help candidates develop cultural competence through course work that is intentional and which addresses cultural competence and culturally responsive education.**

In addition to concerns regarding communication between parents and the school, differences in beliefs and differences in expectations about service delivery and responsibility for problem solving are often involved with conflict between home and school. Some African American caregivers may have different belief systems from school personnel about how concerns about their child should be resolved, and also differ in their beliefs about who has responsibility for resolving difficulties.

Some caregivers focus on resolving emotional or behavioral difficulties experienced by their child with religious leaders through their church, or with respected elders within their family (Katz and Pinkerton 2003\(^{19}\)). Conversely, many educational institutions may suggest professional resources such as mental health services as an option for resolving emotional or behavioral difficulties. As a group, African American families under-utilize mental health services. This may be due to historically utilizing other resources such as family members or religious leaders for support in resolving problems. Finally, financial barriers may also impact the ability to seek out mental health services, which may require insurance and financial costs that exceed the family’s ability to pay.

---


For many parents of African American students referred for concerns about educational progress, there may be a stigma about the meaning of special education. Some caregivers of African American students may not understand the language associated with interventions and assessment. **Because of historical factors associated with concern about the meaningfulness of intelligence testing diverse populations, parents of African American students may be suspicious and guarded about the use of such measures with their children** (Larry P. vs Riles\(^{20}\)). If communication is not clear and understandable, suspicion about the meaningfulness of interventions is crystallized and resistance develops. This resistance is a combination of rejection of poor information, unclear information about the purposes and use of test scores, and families working to protect the esteem of themselves and their children.

In addition to differing perspectives of resources that may hinder the effectiveness of parent/caregiver involvement in the child’s school development, scheduling conflicts are another common factor that contributes to stress between expectations of home and school. Several factors contribute to difficulties with scheduling, including caregiver work schedules that may not allow access to meetings during the workday, availability of transportation for the caregiver, cost of transportation, or financial cost of missing work and the need for daycare or supervision for other children in the home (Minke, 2006\(^{21}\)).

**Suggestions to Support Involvement of African American Caregivers**

The National Parent Teacher Association suggested several ways to support parent involvement\(^{22}\).

1. One aspect of parent involvement is to make sure collaborations are ongoing and two-way. Methods to support ongoing communication include offering periodic workshops to parents on topics on various ways to support children, or workshops about types of services offered within the schools.
2. Other means to support ongoing communication include documentation and review of efforts for outreach through parent-teacher communication logs.
3. Identifying cultural liaisons and supporting their work in communicating with families can also be an avenue to build bridges between school and home.
4. Calling or sending notes home when students do something well or have good days, or completed an achievement, builds bridges.

It is important for educators to identify to African American parents and caregivers ways outside of the classroom that they may be involved in supporting their child's education. Examples of such involvement include reading to their children at home, leading family conversations about school, providing support for homework, and monitoring the child’s progress. Definitions of parent involvement that are restricted to the caregiver being present in the school, or in the child's classroom, are limited.

---

\(^{20}\) Larry P. vs Riles  
\(^{21}\) Minke, 2006  
\(^{22}\) http://www.pta.org/
A key aspect in developing proactive caregiver involvement is the cultural competence of the educator (NEA Policy Brief23). Educators who work to understand the culture and climate of their school, their own cultural background, and who work to develop an understanding of the different cultural backgrounds of the students within their system are role models for other educators.

Caregiver involvement in education is important because parents are not only considered the primary educators of their child, but they can also serve as decision-makers and advocates for their child’s education. Caregiver involvement and empowerment positively impact outcomes in urban schools. When parents are involved, there is a positive impact on academic achievement and cognitive development, as well as behavior (National Parent Teacher Association24). This positive impact on behavior is particularly important because African American students are more likely than any other ethnic group to be suspended, expelled, or placed in serious emotional disturbances (SED) special education classrooms.

Legislation exists that legally mandates that educators partner with parents. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act emphasized parent-school-community partnerships and promoted parent involvement in education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 200425) also stressed collaboration between parents and educators, specifically in regards to educational goals and objectives for students with disabilities.

Many factors affect low urban parental involvement, including socioeconomic status/family structure, caregiver schedules, caregivers’ educational level, and administrator and teacher expectations. The majority of low-income urban children come from single parent, female-headed households. Some educators may have the perception that parents and caregivers from low-incomes homes do not value education.

At times when caregivers are not able to make meetings or activities, some educators may conclude that the caregiver does not care about the child’s education. Outreach to such caregivers may be limited and urban parents become alienated from schools and do not see any opportunity to be involved. Caregivers may also feel that they do not have adequate skills or knowledge to partner with educators. Scheduling of opportunities to be involved with the school may become an additional barrier for parents who have employment with no flexibility to leave for day-based functions, or caregivers who have younger children at home with no childcare support, or for those who believe that teaching is the job of the teacher.

Unfortunately, some educators make assumptions about caregiver’s level of education. Parents who lack a four-year degree may be treated in subtle ways that reinforce separation between home and school. These same parents may have had past negative educational experiences. For these reasons, it can be difficult to build a collaborative partnership.

23 http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB13_CulturalCompetence08.pdf
24 http://www.pta.org/
25 www.idea.gov.com
When educators have low expectations of caregiver and family involvement, the potential for a self-fulfilling prophecy exists. These low expectations, which are based on reactions to race, socioeconomic status, or gender, are also sometimes applied to the student. When parents are involved, they can help educators understand and appreciate their family’s values and culture, keep expectations for their child high, and ensure the child’s educational needs are met effectively.

There are various ways to increase caregiver involvement. Trotman offered several recommendations (2001):

1. Remind caregivers that they are their child’s primary educator and encourage them to become active in their child’s education or remain active if they already are.
2. Work as a team (administrators, teachers, and caregivers) to ensure that students receive a quality education and that the child understands the importance and value of education.
3. Identify factors that hinder caregiver involvement by conducting a case history of the family and develop a strategy to address barriers identified.
4. Establish positive rapport with parents through positive communications (communicate successes!)
5. Empower caregivers and respect their decision-making authority as part of a team-oriented approach. Empowerment is shown by supporting decisions made by caregivers when service options have been explained to them.
6. Develop a network of parents supporting parents.
7. Maintain high expectations of caregivers and parents and avoid a judgmental perspective about caregivers.

It is the responsibility of educators to aggressively seek, support, and maintain parental involvement. Caregivers reciprocate with maintaining open communication. Urban African American caregiver involvement is essential to the improvement of the academic performance of low-income urban African American children. When systems fail to involve caregivers and parents, outcomes are less likely to be positive. Caregivers experience alienation when they perceive negative attitudes among educators, or when they feel their opportunities to participate are restricted.

---

**Recommendations for School Systems to Support African American Caregivers**

School systems have the capacity to provide support and training for educators, administrators, and other school staff to work effectively with African American caregivers. Training should be directed at methods to increase cultural competence for working with diverse populations. Cultural competence involves understanding the dynamics of groups that have a different experience and history than one’s own (see discussion of Worldview under Introduction to the Reducing Bias Manual), as well as understanding one’s own history and perception about others. Cultural competence means understanding one’s own identity and cultural heritage and how it interacts with others.

**Recommendations:**

1. Create a caregiver involvement policy and assess it for cultural sensitivity (TIER 1 Service).
2. Create a Caregiver Involvement Committee involving educators, administrators, caregivers and liaisons.
3. Insure that any caregiver involvement policy has multiple means of ways parents and caregivers can be involved.
4. Monitor caregiver involvement, collect data about percentage of caregivers/families that regularly participate, identify those parents who are regularly absent and develop strategies for outreach to those families.
5. Survey families on needs (childcare, meeting times) and engage in discussions about barriers they may identify.

Inclusion of caregivers through all levels of tiers of educational services insures that collaboration and communication occur between home and school and that caretakers have the information they need to support their children. Moreover, with good communication and cooperation with school staff, caregivers are in a better position to make decisions about their children when they feel that their questions have been heard, and when they feel they have clear answers to their questions.

Through the establishment of good communication and an atmosphere of collaboration, caregivers feel included. Moreover, through communication between home and school, and intentional efforts by staff to understand the family, parents and caregivers feel empowered in their ability to maintain their role as their child's advocate. Through open communication, respect for differences among families, and trust, barriers of suspicion and mistrust are reduced between caregivers and educators, and the focus of achieving success for the child is retained.
Language Issues and Communication Styles

Some, but by no means all, African Americans speak a variation of Standard English that is referred to in the literature by several names such as Black English, Ebonics, African American English and African American Vernacular English (AAVE). African American English reflects the complex racial and economic history of African Americans, including their origins in western Africa as well as more recent migrations from the rural south to the urban north. The term African American English, or AAE, will be used in these guidelines.

AAE evolved over time from contact and convergence among various languages. AAE and Standard English have influenced each other over time. Some words used in Standard American English are derived from western African languages, such as “OK” which is derived from “wa kay.” In Minnesota, youth can be observed using vocabulary and expressions from African American English in communications with others. An important aspect of the language use is the connection to a sense of cultural identity.

A review of recent literature on the topic of Ebonics in schools revealed that many educational barriers remain for African American students who use Ebonics or African American English. AAE continues to be overlooked and misunderstood by educators, which negatively impacts student identity and school engagement. Failure to recognize the use of AAE by students contributes to inadequate instruction, particularly in regards to literacy. Other problematic outcomes when AAE is not recognized include inappropriate referral, assessment, and placement in special education for African American students. Furthermore, the achievement gap between Caucasian and African American students continues (Grant, Oka, & Baker, 200927).

AAE shares many similarities with General American English (GAE, also called Standard American English [SAE]), there are important differences between the two that have serious implications for educating AAE-speaking students. The linguistic differences between AAE and GAE, such as tense morphology, “can give rise to subtle misinterpretations that may go unnoticed by speakers of either AAE or SAE and therefore result in only partial understanding, a phenomenon referred to as pseudo-comprehension” (Stewart, unpublished remarks, cited in Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012, p. 36628).

Often classroom context, familiar routines, and non-linguistic cues provide the AAE-speaking student with additional information to guide responses and behavior and may mask the fact that the student may not be interpreting speech correctly (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 201229). Since teachers often interact and observe students in the classroom, an environment abundant with non-linguistic cues, they may not identify the student’s dialect as a factor impacting learning. “Thus appropriate language-based interventions may not be offered to students who are otherwise quite capable of learning. This lack of appropriate language-based intervention for students who speak

---

non-mainstream varieties of English, therefore, may unnecessarily impede academic success.” (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012, p. 378).

In addition to questions about the learner’s ability to interpret context clues, it is important to consider the student’s use of **Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)**. BICS involves social language necessary to communicate with others within specific settings. The social language used and required in the school setting can be different than the social language used at home.

Some African American students may feel rejection or may question their ability when they perceive that their social language is not accepted within the school setting. **The important factor is helping students understand that they are capable of using both AAE and Standard English.** Where African American students need support is in understanding when to transition from one form of speech (AAE) to another form of speech (SAE).

As well as considering the student’s level of social language, it is also important to determine the level of language skills needed for success on academic tasks, referred to as **Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)**. Cues for language skills are typically not present in formal tests and assessments when stakes might be high (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012).

Within the broader educational setting the student has access to cues and other models for communicating information, particularly verbal. Those cues may be the language used by their peers. **Within a formal standardized assessment situation, broader supports are limited or non-existent, as there are no peers in an individualized testing context, and examiners are often restricted in providing cues to the student.**

Beyer and Hudson Kam (2012) conducted a study on 1st and 2nd grade AAE- and GAE-speakers that “found that while all children correctly interpreted shared forms, only the SAE-speakers, but not the AAE-speakers, successfully interpreted SAE tense morphology” (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012, p. 365). Their findings suggest, “mere exposure to SAE is insufficient to support the complete learning of these specific SAE morphemes” (Beyer & Hudson Kam, 2012, p. 377). In other words, **African American students benefited from specific instruction on tenses.** Simply hearing tenses used by other speakers was not sufficient to benefit their understanding.

---


Overlooking the differences between AAE and GAE causes AAE-speaking students to spend a substantial amount of time with dual processing of morphemes, which can create a disadvantage during crucial educational stages.

African American English is sometimes misperceived. “When a dialect is associated with a traditionally stigmatized and marginalized group, the dialect tends to be viewed negatively” (Cheatham, Armstrong, & Milagros Santos, 2009, p. 33). Furthermore, “individuals’ perceptions of nonstandard dialects have deep historical and social roots and can be difficult to change” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 34).

Dialects have strong connections to culture and play an important role in the formation of children’s identities. AAE cannot be understood without considering African Americans’ history of enslavement, oppression, and past and present discrimination (Hilliard, 2002, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009).

It is important to consider in the context of a classroom, where students have a dual audience of teachers and peers. Students may choose to use AAE to establish group affiliation and create meaning. Language becomes a method to crystalize identity and culture. When educators adopt the approach of correcting the dialect of an AAE-speaking student and forcing students to use GAE, they are devaluing and rejecting not only that student’s speech, but also their identity as an African American. “Consequently, these children may silence themselves or resist or withdraw from school (Corson, 2001, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 436).”

Some lessons from bilingualism can be applied to bidialectals. Similar to bilingual students, bidialectical students can experience a negative socioemotional impact when they perceive their first language spoken in the home is replaced a second language. As well, it may be more confusing for students when their first language is taken from them at a time in development when language fluency is crucial for learning and critical thinking skills (Lambert, 1977, and Han, 2010, cited in Pearson, Conner, & Jackson, 2013).

Overlooking and misunderstanding AAE in education results in the inadequate instruction of AAE-speakers. Of particular concern is the potential negative impact on literacy. Students who speak a non-standard dialect such as AAE may have additional challenges when it comes to literacy, such as making sound-symbol associations, because the representation of sounds is different from their dialect (Cheatham et al., 2009).

“Although there are numerous studies that legitimize AAVE as a linguistic system, many practitioners continue to struggle with the successful implementation of instructional strategies that support the literacy learning of AAVE-speaking students in their classrooms” (Cooks & Ball, 2009, p. 140).

Assessment of African American students is impacted by dialect. According to Wheeler, Cartwright, and Swords (2012), “assessment manuals do not explain what counts as dialect features or how dialect can affect decoding. Without specific guidelines and specific knowledge of their students’ dialect patterns …teachers will be unable to factor dialect into reading assessment” (p. 418).

Assessors are left to their own judgment as to what is a dialect. This subjective component increases errors in assessment. If educators cannot separate dialect influence from a decoding error in GAE, students are not assessed accurately, and opportunities to determine instructional strategies or interventions that will help them be successful are missed (Wheeler, Cartwright, & Swords, 2012). “This distinction—dialect influence versus reading error—carries profound implications not only for the child’s current reading placement, but for her or his or longer trajectory in school, and even for her or his later adult life… Simply put: Considering dialect can transform reading assessment and intervention” (Wheeler et al., p. 424).

Considering the dialect of a student would also likely transform the referral, assessment, and identification of AAE-speaking students for special education services. Children who speak nonstandard dialects are often misdiagnosed as having a disability” (Rickford, Sweetland, & Rickford, 2004, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 3).

When it comes to fair and accurate assessment, one challenge facing educators is that traditional assessment strategies do not distinguish between typical AAE and disordered GAE and AAE (Pearson et al., 2013). Moreover, many, if not all, standardized assessments do not accept AAE responses and have not been normed on AAE-speaking students (Gopaul-McNicol, Reid, & Wisdom, 1998, cited in Grant et al., 2009).

For ethical and legal reasons, “assessors should not use an assessment on a population for which it is not normed” (Grant et al., 2009, p. 120). Overrepresentation is a complicated issue with no single solution, but it is clear that traditional assessment approaches often fail some AAE-speaking students. Evaluators and those making placement decisions about African American students need to understand how their performance on standardized tests is influenced by language spoken at home and cultural orientation of the student.

---

42 Grant et al., 2009, p. 120
Addressing the issue of over-representation, as well as the achievement gap between African American and White students will require changes in approach and practice within educational systems. Recent literature provides recommendations for staff development, school climate change, instruction, and assessment in relation to AAE. It is crucial for educators to develop linguistic and cultural sensitivity.

Negative perceptions can be deeply rooted and not easily changed. “The widespread stigma means that a large number of people are not predisposed to see advantages in AAE. Most people learning about AAE are not just learning something new: They are being asked to accept something new” (Pearson et al., 2013, p. 36). To serve AAE-speaking students, educators must not only understand language diversity, but they must also develop linguistic awareness of their own attitudes about language (Pearson et al., 2013).

Many educators will need to be informed of the value of accommodating more than one language variety in the classroom (Pearson et al., 2013). Linguistic awareness must also be increased, or underlying attitudes will continue to impede success. “Since expectations and language patterns are so strongly implicated in practices by which teachers can unwittingly undermine their own educational goals, it will be important for culturally responsive teaching to begin by cultivating positive attitudes about language diversity as a cultural asset, not a deficit” (Hoover, 1990, cited in Pearson et al., 2013, p. 38).

Staff may need direction and guidance “in discussing the social and political motivations for misunderstandings” about different dialects (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 1043). Training may also be necessary to specifically address “the negative consequences of stereotyping on the basis of faulty definitions of ‘correct’ speech” (Corson, 2001, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 1044).

To create a school climate that is accepting of linguistic diversity, it is important to address language diversity with students, staff, and parents. “Schools and programs can work with staff and parents to develop a policy on language diversity that responds to local concerns and local norms” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 1045). Since some people may not recognize the value of linguistic diversity, it is important to identify the positive outcomes associated with linguistically diverse students who can use GAE in school, community, and eventually work (Cheatham et al., 2009). Educators must be careful not to make assumptions about students or families and instead take steps to learn about students, families, and communities “to determine the extent to which they adhere to particular dialect characteristics” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p 946).

---

Instructional recommendations include direct instruction and intervention with AAE-speaking students, dialect-sensitive literacy instruction, creating innovative learning environments, helping children expand their sociolinguistic and language use awareness, and communicating classroom spoken language expectations clearly. The results of a study by Beyer and Hudson Kam (2012) “support the notion that like English language learners, young AAE-speaking children could benefit from direct instruction” (p. 378\textsuperscript{47}). Beyer and Hudson Kam go on to state, “since performance in school is highly dependent on competence in SAE, any student whose home language background is different should receive language-based intervention” (p. 378\textsuperscript{48}). A useful tool that can be developed and implemented by schools is a home language survey.

**Instructional recommendations to support AAE-speaking students**

- Dialect-sensitive literacy instruction
- Direct instruction on tenses and morphemes
- Direct instruction on understanding environmental cues for language
- Creation of innovative learning environments that allow for use of AAE
- Help children expand their sociolinguistic and language use awareness
- Communicate classroom spoken language expectations clearly.

Elements of a **home language survey** used with caregivers include questions such as:

What language do you use with your child?
When did the child first acquire language?
What language does the child use with siblings? Peers?

Pearson, Conner, and Jackson (2013\textsuperscript{49}) advocate for dialect-sensitive literacy instruction that includes dialect-sensitive reading curricula. Creating innovative learning environments may also help AAE-speaking students succeed.

Educators can also help children develop their own sociolinguistic and language use awareness. Cheatham, Armstrong, and Milagros Santos (2009) provide some examples for teachers, including developing “thematic units based on aspects of language diversity and include the use of books that contain dialects” (p. 8\textsuperscript{50}). Teachers can also conduct age-appropriate discussion on the use of different dialects in different settings and for different audiences (Cheatham et al., 2009). “Children should be provided with opportunities to take control of their language choices as they interact in different social situations with others who speak in diverse dialects” (Dyson & Smitherman, 2009, cited in Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 9\textsuperscript{51}).

\textsuperscript{49} Pearson, B.Z., Conner, T., & Jackson, J.E. (2013). Removing Obstacles for African American English-Speaking Children Through Greater Understanding of Language Difference. Developmental Psychology, 49 (1), 31-44. DOI: 10.1037/a0028248
It is important to address code switching with AAE-speaking students. Code-switching refers to the ability to change linguistic codes, or manner of speaking, based upon the situation and speaking partners. Some African American students may use AAE while among group members but use standard language with members of other racial groups.

Educators can incorporate techniques to address code switching in the classroom. For example, they can facilitate “children’s creation of a standard and nonstandard dialect dictionary, allow all children to try out SAE in puppet shows, and read books to children that contain nonstandard dialects” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 9).  

**Code-switching is a skill that requires development.** According to a study of AAE-speaking student perspectives by Godley and Escher (2012), students believe that classrooms should be a safe place to practice code-switching and GAE without fear of judgment. Godley and Escher (2012) found that teachers’ and students’ perspectives on the use of language in the classroom are different, and they advocated transparency in classroom language expectations. “It is unfair to hold students to expectations for spoken language that are never explicitly shared in the classroom” (Godley & Escher, 2012, p. 712).

Educators must change their approach in relation to AAE-speaking students. “Rather than being forbidden or ignored, children’s dialects are resources from which to expand their language repertoires” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 3).

**Preparing a Student Who Speaks AAE for Success**

- Discuss code-switching at the beginning of the year with students and create explicit, shared expectations for language use in the classroom
- Provide Opportunities to speak both AAE and GAE
- Provide appropriate opportunities for students to practice GAE, explaining the purpose, and creating a nonjudgmental environment
- Use authentic language and dialect examples for discussions about the complexity of language Acknowledge the presence of linguistic prejudice in society and discuss with students
- Use literature to spark discussion about issues of linguistic prejudice and language differences

---

Recommendations for accurate and fair assessment of AAE-speaking students include incorporating a variety of methods in assessment, using alternative assessments, and practicing dialect-sensitive assessment. “Children who speak nonstandard dialects of English can be assessed informally, incorporating the assessor’s knowledge of dialects as well as observations and family interviews” (Cheatham et al., 2009, p. 9). Other assessment choices include curriculum-based assessment and ecological

One dialect-sensitive option for assessments “has been to modify their scoring so that appropriate dialect responses would be accepted. However, this practice invalidates the test’s standardization, and then results can only be used descriptively” (Wyatt, 2002, p. 427, cited in Pearson et al., 2013, p. 34). This strategy is consistent with the approach of testing the limits, where the assessors present selected items in a different form to determine if the student has an understanding of the concept tested. Testing the limits is done as a means to separate confusion with the instructions from understanding the concept examined.

Pearson et al. (2013) surveyed educational programs and based on the information gathered, they offer three program models for culturally responsive teaching.

**Program Models for Culturally Responsive Teaching**

1. Programs that harness the power of high expectations. They present new and challenging materials, not remedial exercises that focus on making up a deficiency.

2. Programs that appreciate linguistic diversity. They use multicultural materials in curricula that resonate with the children’s own experience and are designed to engage the students and motivate them to learn.

3. Programs that develop different kinds of linguistic awareness, especially dialect awareness. They give children tools to increase their awareness of what systematic changes are being asked of them when they learn the mainstream dialect.

While there continues to be a variety of concerns for AAE-speaking students in schools, there are actions that can be taken to improve the experiences and outcomes of AAE-speaking students. Educators must make thoughtful and purposeful changes to their approach and practice to better serve these students. Changes at a systemic level can help ensure a long-term commitment to the success of AAE-speaking students. Those who are responsible for monitoring the success of students should not be satisfied until African American students are no longer grossly overrepresented in regards to special education, and the achievement gap is closed.

---


Understanding Own Bias

As proposed by Corey, Corey, & Callanan, (2007) persons in professional development programs (teachers, counselors, school psychologists), “come into training knowing only their own culture, which can lead to cultural tunnel vision, a perception of reality based on a very limited set of cultural experiences” (p. 114\textsuperscript{58}). Faulty vision or misperceptions about the ability, skills, or behavioral intent of African American students contribute to erroneous judgment of those students, suggesting interventions that are not warranted or placement in services that are not appropriate. A model of one size fits all does not apply (Guerrero & Leung 2008\textsuperscript{59}).

All educators, professional support staff, and administrators must work from a culturally competent perspective. A culturally competent perspective is one that identifies behaviors, attitudes and policies within a school system and among professionals to enable the setting to be responsive to the needs of students. Cultural competence is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals to enable those involved to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989\textsuperscript{60}).

Educators recognize ethnicity, race, and culture as important factors in formulating their understanding of a child. Most professional training programs have specific guidelines or position papers that provide a framework for services to diverse populations. The American Psychological Association (APA), for example, states that psychologists assess how their own experiences influence their behaviors, while seeking to minimize prejudices or bias. Within the APA guidelines, emphasis is placed on the examiner recognizing the client’s background, belief systems, and language.

Educators and administrators need to develop an understanding of the process of acculturation, for the diverse students they work with, and their own process of identity formation and views of culture. Sattler (1998) defined acculturation as “a process of cultural change that occurs in individuals when two cultures meet; it leads the individuals to adopt elements of another culture, such as values and social behaviors” (p. 264\textsuperscript{61}). Acculturation may be an issue when a child from a traditional African American family seeks to work, socialize, or live within the majority culture.

Factors Which Impact Acculturation

- History of experience (brought against will [African Americans] or conquered [Native Americans])
- Length of experience in country
- Degree of ties and identification with native culture
- Make-up of neighborhood (integrated versus segregated); those in isolated neighborhoods are more likely to retain traditional beliefs and customs than those living in diverse neighborhoods
- Strength of language and customs (those with well-developed customs and beliefs will have a more difficult time “crossing cultures”).

The issue of cultural adaptation can be placed on a continuum, ranging from Traditionalism to Biculturalism (Sattler, 1998\(^{62}\)).

- **Traditionalism**: the practices of a culture are followed.
- **Transitional Period**: old and new cultures are used, with some individuals struggling with identity issues as they compare values of home culture and new culture.
- **Marginality**: struggle continues for the individual, where they may experience isolation from both cultures due to uncertainty about where they should be.
- **Assimilation**: person may embrace the new culture while rejecting the old.
- **Biculturalism**: person is able to integrate the traditional and new by following positive aspects of both, while maintaining a sense of identity.

Those involved in the assessment of children from diverse backgrounds should be sensitive to cultural development and consider stages of acculturation. Issues such as lack of identification with majority culture values might account for differences in test scores. A child from a family that maintains strong identification with traditional culture, such as an African American family that reads African fairy tales or folk stories, may have a strong literature base, but not score as well on tests that assume a majority culture focus of experience, with questions drawn from folk stories more common to White or Euro-centric literature.

Members of evaluation teams must use sound professional judgment based upon a review of comprehensive information about a child when recommending services and change of placement for students. Such decisions should also be based on sound data and incorporation of collaboration with caregivers. Professionals need to demonstrate that they are using sound practices in their decision-making about services and interventions for students. The ethical and professional guidelines provide structure to the services they provide. **Professionals will always need to attend to and be held accountable to issues of validity, reliability, or appropriateness of methods used with their populations.**

---

Stress for Some African American Students

Child welfare data from the Minnesota Department of Human Services indicates that African American Children are five times more likely than students of other races to be in out of home care. The reasons for out of home placement vary, but potentially include exposure to domestic violence, homelessness due to poverty (the child is removed for protection and provision of basic needs such as shelter), or limitations to the caregiver’s ability to provide support through problems such as chemical addiction. It is important for educators to recognize the support needs of children in out of home placement, while recognizing that family stress may momentarily interfere with academic focus. Assisting the student through developing social support networks becomes a goal.

The Role of Cultural liaisons

A cultural liaison is a person who has experience, expertise, or training in issues related to services for diverse populations. The broker may be a member of a specific cultural group, or a person who otherwise has training in working with diverse populations. Cultural liaisons are available in some school districts to support families through the special-education process, or to assist in mediating conflicts between families and educators. They are hired as a means of outreach and collaboration with families. Cultural liaisons provide support to caregivers through clarifying questions and consulting with educators on issues related to the evaluation process, and on issues related to diversity. They also work to help other school staff understand the impact of culturally specific behaviors so that fair assessments are conducted.

Cultural liaisons work directly with caregivers and can provide direct student support. Direct support with students may involve organizing assignments or monitoring completion of homework assignments. With caregivers, the role of the cultural liaison is to work as guides through the assessment process for families from diverse backgrounds. Cultural liaisons attend child study conferences and conduct home visits to communicate information about a student's need to caregivers. They may also work directly with students, such as with assisting students with organization of materials and monitoring the student’s completion of assignments. A cultural liaison may work with students and caregivers in school, home and community settings.
Position Description Cultural Liaison

A review of position descriptions for cultural liaisons emphasize attainment of a Bachelor's degree in either education or a behavioral science (psychology, social work, counseling) or a related field, and some experience providing outreach services to diverse populations through public relations work, training, and/or supervised experience.

Cultural liaisons are expected to have knowledge of diversity and cultural issues and knowledge of community resources so that they can provide families with information about community resources to support the family. A successful cultural liaison has strong interpersonal communication and organizational skills.

**Responsibilities of a Cultural Liaison:**

Specific responsibilities of cultural liaisons are set by the position description created by the school district. Examples of elements that are associated with a cultural liaison position include:

| Facilitate meetings between students, parents and school staff from diverse cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds to facilitate communication and assist in the resolution of misunderstandings and conflicts. |
| Meet individually with students to gather information about needs or concerns. |
| Provide direct assistance to students experiencing a variety of academic, social and/or emotional concerns; work with students of color and monitor their academic progress, behavioral adjustment and attendance. |
| Serve as a role model and mentor for students; encourage good attendance and promote and support achievement. |
| Serve on school committees representing caregivers and/or students of color; represent the views of diverse families; explain the goals and objectives of the school in culturally sensitive language. |
| Assist families in overcoming barriers to attendance at parent - teacher conferences; help identify barriers and suggest methods to overcome barriers; attend conferences to assist parents to communicate with school staff when necessary. |
| Support educators in interactions with culturally diverse students and their families. |
| Consult with administrators to develop strategies to include families in the implementation of school behavior and social skills programs. |
| Consult with administrators and/or the district volunteer coordinator to recruit, train, and schedule tutors and volunteers from diverse communities that mirror the school's student population. |
Consult with parents and seek their suggestions on methods to make the school an inviting place; assess environment for respect for diversity and inclusivity.

Develop resources on after school and community based programs to meet the academic, cultural and social needs of the school's diverse student body. Work with the administrators to develop team-building and leadership opportunities for students of color and facilitate leadership development opportunities for culturally diverse families.

Refer students and/or their families to appropriate social service agencies or community groups.

One Caregiver’s Experience: African American Case Study 1

Background:

One African American parent spoke of her experience with her two sons in an urban school district. The students were a second grade student, and a fourth grade student. The young boys attended different schools within the same district. As they progressed through school the parent developed concerns about specific skills, such as their ability to stay focused on tasks, follow through on requests, or complete activities once they started them. The lack of development in these areas made it difficult for the boys to learn from typical activities for their ages. In addition to concerns about their ability to acquire academic material, social concerns developed due to the frequency of off task behavior.

As the parent began to communicate her concerns about her sons to classroom teachers and administrators associated with the schools the boys attended, she noted that her experience with her children varied greatly from the two settings her children were placed. In one setting the parent felt school staff listened to her concerns about her child and were responsive to her concerns, while in the other setting from her perspective school staff either ignored her concerns or failed to validate her concerns about the needs of her son.

Experience with the referral process:

Action related to the referral process was one domain where the parent reported significant differences between the settings her sons were placed. When she made a formal request for an evaluation, the reactions she received from the schools differed. For her son in second grade, within a few days of making her request she received information about due process and the timeline for processing the evaluation for her son, complete with a targeted date of an assessment conference, within the timeframe according to state guidelines. An administrator followed up with a personal telephone call to find out if she had any specific questions about the evaluation process, and asked if she understood or had any questions about how the referral process would unfold.

In the second school setting for her older son, the reaction she received was much different. Initially educators spoke with her about her request for a referral. From her perspective it was clear that school staff did not support her request for an evaluation, and they made specific suggestions that she should withdraw her request for an evaluation. She stated she felt confused
by their suggestions that she withdraw her request, as she thought she was within her rights as a parent to make the request based on her concerns about her child’s academic and social skill development.

Despite her stated concerns that her son had failed to make progress after several months of the current school year, together with minimal academic skill development in reading from prior exposure to education, she believed that a continued lack of intervention would leave her son further behind and impair his ability to gain any enjoyment out of the act of reading. Reading had become a significant struggle for him, and she was concerned that he was developing a resistance to looking at books and attempting to read because reading was difficult for him. The parent believed that school staff minimized her concerns about her son's lack of progress, despite their own academic evidence based on grade reports and state testing results that placed the student well below his peers as far as reading ability.

The parent persisted with pursuing her request, but did not get an official letter to begin the process until another three weeks had passed; time where her son continued to operate in school without meaningful interventions. One educator told the parent the school hesitated because they did not want to “label” her son. The parent's reaction was that she understood that labeling is a sensitive issue, yet her concern was about accessing services so that her son could get help, and less about the use of a label. As well, she was concerned that her son was already being labeled as a bad kid as a result of behavioral reactions related to frustration with reading, and off task behavior when he was confused in school. More than concerns about his reading ability, school staff (classroom teacher and administrator) stated concerned about her son’s behavior. However a possible links to reading frustration and off task behavior were rejected by the teacher and administrator.

**Differences in Definition of the Problem:**

Despite feeling support in one setting for the referral requests, in both settings the parent and school staff disagreed about the central issue regarding the needs of her sons. The parent had a clear understanding that her children were not meeting academic goals. However teachers and administrators responsible for discipline in her son's schools suggested that her son's issues were primarily behavioral.

The parent reported that she struggled with the perception that she had bad kids. She acknowledged that her boys had challenges with off-task behavior, but she considered her son's challenges as more attentional than behavioral. As well, given their frustrations with learning to read, it was reasonable to consider that some of their off task behavior were related to frustrations with decoding content and understanding information. She sought an outside opinion and an investigation from an outside assessment documented evidence of both young boys meeting the criteria for a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
Resistance:

Following the diagnosis of ADHD for her children, the parent educated herself on the meaning of the diagnosis, including books on the subject and resources from Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (CHADD). She conducted her own review of information on the Internet so that she could become a better advocate for her kids. She found material that discussed school based interventions and she sought to share interventions she found with educators at school.

Despite evidence from an assessment that documented ADHD, the parent was met with resistance from school staff who seemed to be unwilling to consider attentional problems as a factor in her sons' behavioral difficulties at school. The parent was aware that services under a category of health impairment were an option, as opposed to services under the category of emotional or behavioral disorder. From a labeling perspective, the question was about which category was a more accurate representation of the needs of the children. It is possible that a student with ADHD can be served under services for Other Health Impaired (OHI) or EBD, so long as they meet the criteria for the specific category of service and have an educational need. However, negative connotations for EBD are stronger than for OHI.

The parent reported her dismay that school staff were uninterested in the information she gathered to help her be a better parent to her children, or the modifications suggested to increase the chances for school success. The parent asserted that "I feel it didn't matter what I suggested, the teachers were not willing to allow me to educate them on issues”. The parent stated her respect for the knowledge educators had for the areas they were responsible for, but she did not feel that most school staff reciprocated their respect for information she could share about what might help her sons.
Methods to Support Parents:
As she reflected on her own experience, the parent discussed ideas to support other parents who have a background similar to hers:

• Develop a network of parents who have been through the assessment process and who can provide mentorship to other parents who are new to special-education assessment procedures.

• Investigate parent concerns with the same degree of value that teacher based reports are responded to: school staff should be receptive to the idea that although parent concerns may be different than those expressed by a teacher, they are important.

• Use components of active listening where restating the concern to the parent is used to assess accurate perception of the caregiver's perspective.

• Understand that resistance from parents and caregivers can be a natural protective reaction when concerns are raised their child. It is important to recognize that parents and caregivers can be vulnerable to feelings such as loss of hope when educators express concerns about their child's development. Some of this resistance occurs when potential labels are used to describe the condition, and caregivers understand that many labels have negative connotations associated with them, as well as the potential for reduced expectations about the child.

Policies and procedures should be addressed to increase fairness in services for African American students. Policies developed within a district that focus on reducing overrepresentation should have an evaluation component, completed by teachers, parents and students, if appropriate. Aspects of policy and procedures include:

• Assuring that the academic content is free from bias and stereotyping
• Adapting the curriculum to the cultural needs of the students (e.g. infusing African American stories, traditions, and history in course content)
• Using evidenced-informed instructional strategies and interventions
• Teaching about the various cultures represented in each classroom
• Implementing data-based assessment systems
• Including culturally relevant material into the curriculum to show a need for learning specific academic material
• Obtaining sufficient bias-free materials and supplies to meet the needs of each student in the class (textbooks, materials represent a variety of cultures)
• Using hands-on, visual and kinesthetic instructional activities to teach concepts and skills
Conclusion: Moving to the Future

Many factors contribute to the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education programs. Solutions to overrepresentation in special education programs, or in suspensions/expulsions from school require dedicated efforts from educators and administrators working collaboratively with parents and caregivers to identify interventions and services that benefit students without reliance on services that remove and separate students from their peers.

The culture of African-American students is broad, encompassing degrees of use of African American English and cultural identification. Educators and administrators who operate from a culturally competent perspective support the culture of African American families.

- Ford summarized previous research regarding educators’ response to overrepresentation. Educators must “(a) neither ignore nor negate cultural differences, (b) not misunderstand cultural differences, and (c) not penalize children for their cultural differences” (Ford, 2012, p. 406).
- Ford cited previous research regarding the various ways to measure overrepresentation, and she suggested the field forms consensus on how to measure overrepresentation.
- Bias and unfairness in testing must be addressed regarding how they contribute to overrepresentation, accommodations must be addressed, and differences in outcomes between various minority populations must be determined.
- Special educators need to “examine the pipeline to special education, which often begins with suspensions and expulsions, primarily among Black and Hispanic males” (Ford, 2012, p. 402).
- Prevention should be emphasized (family collaboration, early childhood programs) to prevent developmental issues from requiring special education services.
- Special educators must acknowledge the impact that overrepresentation has on our nation’s place in the world, as it leads to fewer students being appropriately prepared for college.
- An emphasis on data on teacher referral rates by race/ethnicity/gender may help understand overrepresentation, and strategies to prepare culturally competent educators may be helpful.

---

Formal preparation in “culture and cultural similarities and differences (Ford, 2012, p. 403\textsuperscript{64}) is necessary for special educators to reduce referrals and overrepresentation.