
Ready or Not!

African American Males in Kindergarten

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The Problem

Educational problems for African American men don't originate in middle school as popularly believed, but are manifest as early as kindergarten. This has implications for early intervention in family and schools, especially regarding the teacher-child relationship.

The Problem

- African Americans score significantly lower than European Americans on tests of vocabulary, reading, math and scholastic aptitude.
 - This underachievement contributes to a snowball effect that locks African American men out of college, graduate schools, and other gateways to professional status.
 - Why are there such academic problems for African American males who have the capacity to learn? What else is causing this?
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Onset of Underachievement

- A study of beginning kindergarteners shows that African American males start behind others in terms of emerging reading and math skills.
 - Thus, reading problems in elementary school may have roots in preschool years.
 - On average, African American 3-4 year olds score in the 20th percentile on standardized tests.
 - BUT – AA kids aren't behind in all areas. They are equal to European Americans in their ability to recognize letters and count to 20.
 - BUT – they are behind in the ability to recognize primary colors and to read and write their names.
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Onset of Underachievement

- These skill differences may reflect a differing emphasis in European and African American homes on skill development and what skills are expected at the onset of formal schooling.
 - African American kids may lag in reading skills because they enter school with smaller vocabularies than European American kids.
 - The problem is that the current structure of kindergarten can't make up for this gap. These early differences are key because later elementary education never closes the gap.
 - It is estimated that about half of the achievement gap in middle and high school can be accounted by the differences detected at the kindergarten level.
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Gender, Ethnicity, and Academics

- Across all ethnic groups, more females demonstrate reading competence in early years of school.
- Reading requires a combination of lots of skills. Female and males' differences in advanced reading probably reflect differences in the development of these precursor skills (letter recognition/sound awareness, etc.).
- Ethnic differences are striking among males.
- Among African American males, 18% show competence at sound recognition at start of kindergarten and 36% by the end.
- For Euro-American males, 18% show competence at start and 54% by the end of kindergarten.
- African American boys = 1% show sight reading at start of kindergarten; 7% by end
- European American boys = 3% at start, 17% by end

Gender, Ethnicity, and Academics

- The same ethnic differences can be seen in math skills:
 - African American boys = 1% proficient in addition and subtraction at start of kindergarten; 8% by end.
 - European American boys = 5% proficient at start; 22% by end
 - When considering the developmental status of African American boys, we need to recognize that boys **as a group**, not just African American boys, exhibit lower performance in various dimensions than girls.
 - So, with African American boys, the key thing we need to focus on is the **DUAL risk** of ethnicity and gender.
 - These early deficits set the stage for a self-perpetuating process of under-performance that runs through all of the school years.
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Emergence of Emotional and Behavioral Self-Regulation

- The preschool period is critical to the development and consolidation of many socio-emotional competencies grouped as “self-regulation.”
 - **Self regulation** – the ability to get along with others, to clearly communicate needs, to follow directions, to work independently, to sit still, to wait one’s turn, and to solve disagreements verbally, rather than physically.
 - **ABLE Model:** Self-regulation of **A**ttention, **B**ehavior, **L**anguage, and **E**motions.
 - Young men as a group are more likely to exhibit problems with immature self-regulation and social skills in the form of aggression, disobedience, inattention, hyperactivity, etc.
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Explaining the Reading Gap among African American Males

- What is going wrong for African American boys in the process of language development?
 - Low socio-economic status (SES) is a powerful determinant of African American males' underachievement.
 - But -- this data doesn't tell us much about **HOW** delayed achievement is linked to low SES. This is partly because low SES is a proxy for lots of other causes and problems.
 - SES is too complicated to explain the development of underachievement.
 - It is probably more accurate to consider the influence of SES as indirect and mediating --- it exerts influence on achievement outcomes through its impact on the quality of life and functioning of families, schools, and communities.
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Socio-Emotional Development and Academic Achievement

- Problems in emotional competence are important in their own right, but become increasingly significant when we consider their possible role in academic problems.
 - Problems in socio-emotional competence do not only decrease academic achievement, but also complicate efforts to remediate problems in skill acquisition by African American males.
 - Socio-emotional competence is critical to school success because it is prerequisite for effective instruction and learning.
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African American Male Underachievement and Social Development

- Young African-American males were rated by their mothers as having more symptoms of depression than their female peers. Why?

- It could be that:

Higher levels of inattention, restlessness, disruptiveness, and misbehavior

→ Lead to →

Disapproval and sanctions that are more personally judgmental, harsh and punitive

→Lead to →

Internalization of disapproval in a way that is demoralizing, and destructive to sense of self. These boys may have trouble forming a self-concept as competent and worthwhile.

- This cycle may lead to increased depression among African-American boys.
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The Influence of Racial Stereotypes

- Do racial stereotypes have a role in the African American achievement gap?
 - Considering racism as an explanatory variable runs into the same problems as considering SES – there’s no real way to know **how** it is linked to lowered achievement.
 - A balanced explanation:
 - **African American males’ lower achievement scores represent a compounding of the adverse effects of ethnicity and gender on both achievement and socio-emotional competence.**
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Importance of Early Intervention

- Because many academic skills are acquired in a sequential fashion, differences in skill development in lower grades set high barriers to acquisition of the more complex skills a child needs to succeed as he or she matures.
 - These problems won't be changed without focused effort and attention to reform of multiple aspects of schools.
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References

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