



FPG Snapshot
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Family Practices and School Performance of African American Children

Abstract

On most indicators of achievement African American students lag behind European American and Asian American students, beginning with school readiness at kindergarten and early achievement in elementary school and continuing through to differential rates of high school and college graduation.

These gaps tend to widen rather than close over time even when African American children begin school with similar scores as their age mates on pre-literacy tests. A large body of empirical studies shows clearly that families make important contributions to the development and learning of children from pre-K to high school.

This *Snapshot* contains excerpts from an article that attempts to synthesize what has been learned from such studies into a systematic account of how and why various aspects of family life (e.g. family structure, parent practices, home learning experiences, socio-emotional climate within the family, ethnic and religious socialization, parental academic expectations, and home school relationships) relate significantly to the academic success of African American children.

EXPLAINING ETHNIC DIFFERENCES IN ACHIEVEMENT

Does the focus on an ethnic achievement gap direct attention in the wrong place and obscure the principal role of income inequality? Ethnically based income inequality places African Americans disproportionately among the poor. Studies show socioeconomic status (SES) and poverty as consistent and robust predictors of academic achievement.

Although SES clearly impacts children's academic achievement and motivation, significant effects remain for ethnicity on academic achievement even after the effects of SES are statistically controlled, suggesting that ethnic gaps exist across SES levels, even at higher SES levels.

The effect of ethnicity above and beyond SES may be due to differences in cultural family values, expectations, and families practices. In addition, they may be a product of how teachers, school administrators and others view and respond to African American students and their families (racism).

PARENTING PRACTICES

Among the cultural values that African American families tend to pass on to their children are notions of interdependence, perseverance, and group efforts for common interests in addition to self-sufficiency. Flowing from these are parenting styles that are depicted as firm or authoritarian, which have been associated with higher achievement levels for African Americans.

Specifically, among African Americans, parents who create a calm and controlled environment, who reinforce clear interpersonal boundaries between themselves and their children, and who impose fair rules foster academic competencies in their children.

TEACHING INTERACTIONS AND HOME LEARNING EXPERIENCES

The extent to which principles of expand and dialogic reading strategies (i.e., asking what has happened in the story, why it happened, and asking the child to make an evaluative judgment about the story) are incorporated into the practices of African American parents across SES groups is not well understood.

It is clear that cultural differences in the learning strategies that parents use exist; what remains unclear is whether African American parents engage in other practices that may make a difference in children's reading skills.

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

What seems to be most important when considering the negative impact of single parenthood on school achievement is to consider the ethnic and cultural context in which it occurs.

One study reports that the risk of high school dropout for students from single-parent households as compared to students from two-parent households is considerably greater among European American and Latino families than among African American families. This is consistent with the view that African American families have traditionally been more supportive and provided adaptive responses to single parenthood, buffering some potential negative consequences for children.

Perhaps other variables such as the dependence ratio (i.e., number of children to adults per household), the lack of social, material, and economic resources needed to support quality parenting, and negative self-perceptions about being a single mother are responsible for the effects formerly attributed to marital status.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL CLIMATE OF FAMILY LIFE

Although family life is often constrained by economic disadvantage and cultural forces, individual family strengths—e.g., close, supportive relationships, high expectations, and fair, consistent discipline—can sometimes mitigate the adverse effects of stressful living conditions on children's achievement.

For example, low SES often correlates with academic deficiencies, yet when poor families provide a supportive environment for learning, their children do in fact develop the social and cognitive skills necessary for academic success. High levels of parental distress seem to impair education performance by children; conversely, warm, emotionally supportive relationships, along with a cohesive family structure, optimizes parent functioning and in turn contributes to favorable academic outcome for children. In addition, a family atmosphere characterized by parental acceptance, nurturance, encouragement, and responsiveness to the child's needs and level of development is positively associated with academic achievement.

PARENTAL ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS AND BELIEFS

Among low-income African American families, parental expectations were one of the only consistent predictors of academic achievement, once other demographic variables were controlled. Parental expectations seem to affect children's school performance by increasing children's own expectations and perceptions about their own competence.

TEACHER EXPECTANCIES AND PRACTICES

Teachers have higher expectations for Euro-Americans and for children from high SES than for African American and low-income children. Teachers are more likely to stereotype and prejudge ethnic minority students from lower SES backgrounds.

Moreover, teachers often evaluate children's behavior differently across ethnic groups. One study found that when African American children acted out in class, teachers attributed it to lack of interest or a limited attention span; whereas the same behaviors by European American children were attributed to needing more stimulating material. Teachers reported they enjoyed working with European American children more than with African American children and rated European American children as having higher academic and social competence.

EMOTIONAL CONNECTION OF PARENT TO CHILD

Parents of African American children who excel academically tend to stress the importance of education and encourage the development of self-esteem and belief in personal efficacy (i.e., ability to get things done). At the same time, they acknowledge that their children may encounter racial prejudice and discrimination and try to prepare them to cope with it.

ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS SOCIALIZATION

In comparison to European Americans, more African American youths are involved in religious services, activities and practices, although all youth involvement in religion decreases with age.

Nonetheless, across a number of areas of concern (e.g., underachievement, low levels of self-worth, feelings of rejection, and other maladaptive coping responses), several studies have shown that ethnic and religious socialization can shield African American adolescents against negative social stereotypes and environments that may be antagonistic.

Church attendance also appears to act as a positive influence against dropping out of school for some African American youth.

More research is needed in this area.

HOME SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP

Although many African American parents readily volunteer for school-based activities and are active in their children's learning at home, others are reluctant or unable to participate. Some research shows that parents reported that their own school experiences, economic and time constraints, and differences in linguistic and cultural practices presented significant impediments to their participation in school-based activities. Also, African American parents reported feeling less welcomed at their children's school than European American parents reported.

The degree to which parents believe they are important and efficacious in their children's learning and that their presence in schools is valued and welcome can greatly impact how parents and families involved themselves in school experience. Negative perceptions of parental involvement by both parents and educators can reduce the opportunities for communication between home and school.

African Americans often are more involved in home-based school activities (e.g., influencing the time spent on homework, limiting TV, and promoting school attendance), whereas European American parents often are more involved in school-based activities (e.g., volunteering and serving on school governing boards). ■

This Snapshot is based on the chapter "African American Families" by Oscar Barbarin and Terry McCandies of the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina in James J. Ponzetti Jr. (Eds), *International Encyclopedia of Marriage and Family* (pp. 50-56), published in 2003 by Macmillan Reference USA in New York City.



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