



FACTORS THAT PROMOTE THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper discussed the factors that hinder academic achievement of African American males from disadvantaged backgrounds with emphasis on Mississippi. These factors are applicable to other disadvantaged students from the same backgrounds. The factors originate from homes, individuals, communities, and schools. In addition, the paper proffered what African American males from disadvantaged backgrounds can do to overcome home, individual, community, and school factors that increase the odds of dropping out of school. The paper concluded that the causes of disadvantaged African American males dropping out of school originate from many sources. Finger pointing can only exacerbate the problem. Therefore, all stakeholders should work together to minimize or eliminate the problem of dropout for disadvantaged African American males and others from similar backgrounds in the United States and other regions of the world.

Keywords

Academic, Disadvantaged Students, Achievement, Socioeconomic, Educational

Introduction

United States understands that education is the foundation for better life opportunities. As the wealthiest nation on earth, United States affords its citizens opportunities for socioeconomic mobility through access to free and subsidized education. Socioeconomic mobility is facilitated by education. But not all the states and racial/ethnic groups in the United States have been equally empowered to take advantage of educational opportunities as a vehicle for socioeconomic mobility. Mississippi and African Americans in Mississippi, especially African American males, have been disproportionately disadvantaged in accessing quality education as a means for socioeconomic mobility. Specifically, the lack of access to quality education by African Americans is reflected by their performance on standardized assessments administered by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP).

In 2013 NAEP mathematics assessment at the fourth-grade level, the average score for the nation's public schools was 241, the average score for Mississippi was 231, the average scores for White and African American fourth-graders in Mississippi were 243 and 220 respectively (U.S. Department of Education (2013)). The average mathematics scores for eighth-grade students were 284 for the nation, 271 for Mississippi, and 285 and 255 for White and African Americans in Mississippi respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). The NAEP 2013 reading average scores mirror those of mathematics. For example, at the fourth-grade level, the average score for the nation was 221, the average score for Mississippi was 209, and the average scores for White and African American fourth-graders were 222 and 197 respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). At the eighth-grade level, the average reading scores were 266 for the nation, 253 for Mississippi, and 266 and 239 for White and African American students respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

The purpose of this paper is three-fold. First, it will discuss the domino effect of disadvantaged background on academic performance. Second, the paper will present data to illustrate the low performance of African Americans on standardized assessments administered by NAEP. Third, the paper will discuss the odds that African Americans from disadvantaged backgrounds must overcome in order to succeed in school.

The Impact of Disadvantaged Background on Academic Achievement

Several studies have documented the negative impact of disadvantaged status on student achievement on standardized tests. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], (2011) reported that students who were eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch scored 24 points and 13 points lower than students not eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch respectively on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP] fourth-grade mathematics assessment. The averages scores were 252 for not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 239 for eligible for reduced-price school lunch, and 228 for eligible for free school lunch. At the eighth-grade level, the negative impact of low socioeconomic status on student performance on 2011 NAEP mathematics assessment was similar to that of fourth-grade. Eighth-grade students who were not eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch had an average score of 296 compared to 279 for eligible for reduced-price lunch and 268 for eligible for free school lunch. In essence, eighth-grade students who were eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch scored 28 points and 17 points lower than students who were not eligible for free and reduced-price school lunch respectively.

The 2011 NAEP data on reading are similar to the mathematics data. NCES (2011) reported fourth-grade reading average scores of 235 for students who were not eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch, 216 for students who were eligible for reduced-price school lunch, and 206 for students who were eligible for free school lunch. The fourth-grade students on free and reduced-price school lunch scored 29 points and 12 points lower than students who are not eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch respectively. At the eighth-grade level, the average reading scores were 275 for students not eligible for free or reduced-price school lunch, 261 for students who were eligible for reduced-price school lunch, and 250 for students who were eligible for free school lunch. Students who were eligible for reduced-price school lunch and students who were eligible for free school lunch scored 17 points and 29 points lower than students who were not eligible for reduced-price or free school lunch respectively.

Performance of Mississippi Fourth- and Eighth-Grade Students on NAEP

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports NAEP results by state, race, socioeconomic status, and other measures. At state level, the NCES (2011) documented that the 2011 mathematics average score for fourth-grade students in Mississippi was 230 compared to the national average 240 for public schools. This Mississippi fourth-grade students' average score was lowest among the 50 states in the Union. Mississippi fourth-graders outscored only the fourth-grade students in the District of Columbia with an average score of 222. At the eighth-grade level, Mississippi students' average score on the 2011 NAEP mathematics assessment was 269 compared to the national average score of 283 for public schools. Mississippi was ranked 49 with Alabama and outscored only the District of Columbia which had 260 points.

Data from 2011 Reading assessment at the fourth-grade level showed that Mississippi students posted an average score of 209 compared to the national average of 220 for public schools. Mississippi students outscored only fourth-grade students in Alaska – 208, New Mexico – 208, and the District of Columbia – 201. On the performance of the eighth-grade students on 2011 Reading assessment, Mississippi had an average score of 254 compared to the national average of 264 for public schools. Mississippi outscored only the District of Columbia which had an average score of 242.

Achievement on NAEP assessments is classified by levels. The levels are basic, proficient, and advanced. Each achievement level generally defines what students should know and be able to do on NAEP assessment. Achievement results are reported on a scale of 0-500. NAEP assessment data are reported for sub-groups of students by race/ethnicity, gender, eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, region of the country, and other variables of interest (National Assessment Governing Board [NAGB], 2010). There are some students who don't meet the criteria for achieving at basic level. Such students are classified as performing below the basic level, thereby creating below basic level by default.

Mississippi has one of the lowest scores in NAEP mathematics and reading assessments. Data from NCES (2011) showed that Mississippi was the worst or one of the worst states/jurisdictions in academic achievement. In 2011 NAEP reading assessment, data showed that 34%, 34%, 25%, and 7% of fourth-grade students in the U. S. public schools performed at below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced respectively as compared to 45%, 33%, 18%, and 4% for Mississippi fourth-grade students who performed at below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced levels respectively. At the eighth-grade level, 25%, 43%, 29%, and 3% of students in the U. S. public schools performed at below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced levels respectively as compared to 35%, 44%, 20%, and 1% of students in Mississippi who performed at below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced respectively.

The performance of fourth- and eighth-grade students in mathematics mirrors that of reading. Eighteen percent, 42%, 32%, and 6% of fourth-grade students in the U. S. public schools performed at below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced levels respectively. The performance of fourth-grade students in Mississippi was 28%, 47%, 23%, and 2% at below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced levels respectively. At the eighth-grade, 28%,

38%, 26%, and 8% of the students in the U.S. public schools performed at below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced levels respectively. Compared to Mississippi, 42%, 39%, 16%, and 3% of the students performed at below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced levels respectively.

Mississippi's fourth- and eighth-grade students have consistently performed at or near the bottom of the nation on NAEP mathematics and reading assessments. This is not surprising as Mississippi is noted for disadvantages that predict low academic achievement. Mississippi has the highest percentage of public school students who are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. For example, Snyder and Dillow (2013) reported that in 2009-2010, the percentage of Mississippi public students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch was 70.5% as compared to 47.5% for the nation. In 2010-2011, 70.6% of Mississippi public school students were eligible for free and reduced-price lunch as compared to 48.1% for the nation. Only the District of Columbia had higher percentages of public school students receiving free and reduced-price lunch at 72.3% in 2010 and 73.0% in 2011.

The odds that Mississippi's African American males must overcome to achieve in school consist of home, individual, community, and school factors. These factors are what hinder academic achievement for African American males in Mississippi and disadvantaged students in other places. The remaining part of this chapter will discuss what African American males in Mississippi can do to overcome home, individual, community, and school variables that increase the odds of dropping out of school.

Home Factors

The home factors that African American males must overcome to beat the dropout odds include low socioeconomic status, low level of parents' education, and language spoken at home. African American males who succeed in school understand that United State is a country of economic and social mobility. They know that education is an enabler for upward socioeconomic mobility. They understand that their parents' low level of education correlates with their low socioeconomic status, and that education will equip them with the knowledge and skills to escape poverty. They are able to differentiate between languages spoken at home and at school. In other words, they can easily transition from the language spoken at home to that spoken at school and vice versa. Lehmann (2009) found that first generation students in Australia developed good work habits and were highly motivated with the understanding that these characteristics will enable them to overcome the limitations their parents had encountered due to their limited education.

Other home disadvantages that African American males must overcome to succeed at school are lack of educational resources at home, single parentage, lack of parental involvement in their education, and lack of role models at home. Resilient African American males understand how to access school and local libraries to improve their educational fortune. They understand that resources in the school and public libraries can compensate for what is lacking at home. They overcome lack of parental involvement at home by relying on the guidance of their teachers and other school personnel. They understand that single parentage does not define one's capacity and ability to succeed in school. They listen and learn from their teachers and other successful adult males in the community as their role models thereby compensating for the absence of role models at home. This becomes the fulfillment of an Igbo proverb which states that when a father is admonishing his child, a child without a father learns from it. Igbo is an ethnic group in Southeastern Nigeria. The Igbo people are known for their industry, access to education for socioeconomic mobility, and social reconstruction that recognizes individual achievement.

Individual Factors

The individual factors that promote the achievement of African American males in Mississippi include resilience, high aspiration, self-motivation, persistence, high degree of metacognition, belief in one's ability to achieve, capacity for logical and systematic thinking, avoidance of risky behaviors, engagement in academic and socially enrichment activities, ability to differentiate between home and school culture, postponing immediate gratification, ensuring that peer acceptance does not hinder academic success, positive use of time, regular class attendance, being attentive while in class, taking more challenging courses, positive approaches to learning, utilization of social capital and support systems, and understanding that education is a vehicle for social and economic mobility.

Disadvantaged students are generally regarded to be low achievers in school. But some disadvantaged students who overcome their disadvantages to exhibit high levels of academic performance are regarded as resilient. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], (2011) defined resilient students as disadvantaged students who attain high academic achievement despite their disadvantaged background. These resilient students are high achievers as compared to their peers from the same background who are low achievers.

Resilient students possess certain characteristics that promote high academic achievement. OECD (2007a, 2009a) documented some of these characteristics of resilient students as greater motivation to learn, greater confidence in their academic abilities, greater effort on coursework, positive approaches to learning, and spending more time in learning. OECD (2011) stated that resilient students in countries like France, Germany, and Netherlands spend close to two hours more learning science more than disadvantaged low achieving students.

Disadvantaged African American males who succeed in school show persistence while engaging in school and out-of-school work. They don't easily succumb when faced with difficult and challenging academic work realizing that persistence will eventually pay off. Resilient African American males exhibit high degree of metacognition. They understand when their learning methods are not working and they devise a new strategy. Their capacity for logical and systematic thinking enables them to avoid risky behaviors, engage in academic and socially enrichment activities, differentiate between home and school culture, and ensure that peer acceptance does not hinder their academic success.

Resilient African American males make positive use of time in school and out of school; they understand the importance of regular class attendance and being attentive while in class; they take more challenging courses and exhibit positive approaches to learning; they utilize social capital and support systems and engage in academic and socially enrichment activities; they have the ability to differentiate between home and school culture; and they understand the importance of postponing immediate gratification. Examples of postponing immediate gratification abound. For example, when resilient African American males are faced with the opportunity cost of buying a textbook or a designer watch, they buy a textbook. They rationalize that the textbook is needed to be successful in the course. They understand that succeeding in school will increase their opportunities for good jobs. Good jobs mean higher income and buying power. Resilient African American males understand that higher income will enable them to meet their needs, including deferred needs while in school.

Community Factors

African American male students are more likely to live in difficult neighborhoods than their White counterparts. Difficult neighborhoods are more likely to be drug and gang infested, lack social and recreational facilities, and may not boast of cutting-edge schools with top-rated teachers and school leaders. These aforementioned factors are enablers of low academic achievement and school dropout. But resilient African American males understand how to maneuver through their tough communities.

Resilient African American males who excel in school know how to navigate their difficult neighborhoods unscathed. They avoid peers in their neighborhoods who engage in gang and other illicit activities, distaste hanging out on the street wilding away time, and gravitate away from risky behaviors such as participating in unorganized sports activities on the streets and dangerous parks. Resilient African American males who overcome the odds associated with peers who work hard in school and believe that they have the capacity to succeed.

They understand that the odds of succeeding through academics are much higher than through sports. Resilient African American males who beat the odds take advantage of after-schools activities where they utilize the benefits of a safe environment, availability of resources, homework help, and access to facilitators to extend their learning. They know which quality community resources and activities to access and which ones to avoid by evaluating the risks involved in accessing each. Resilient African American males who beat the odds look up to successful adults in their neighborhoods as mentors. They are neither shy of crossing ethnic boundaries to be mentored nor being intimidated of being regarded as acting White.

School Factors

It is the responsibility of a school to create an enabling environment for all students to succeed. Doing so will require the involvement of all stakeholders in developing the mission, vision, goals, and objectives for the school. The school climate should be conducive for teaching and learning, and welcoming to all stakeholders. Students come to school from various backgrounds and bring different levels of knowledge, skills, and capacity to learn to school. They have different learning styles, levels of motivation, parental support, and other idiosyncrasies. While some students learn fast, others may need average or extended time to master the concepts taught. As a result, students should be treated as individual learners rather than as a number in a group.

The role of schools in promoting the academic achievement of disadvantaged students cannot be overemphasized. Research has shown that school-level factors greatly influence student academic performance. For example, it has been found that school-level factors, such as smaller class sizes and teacher quality impact student achievement (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). Therefore, it is very important that schools should have smaller class sizes and highly qualified teachers. Small class sizes and highly qualified teachers will be more beneficial for disadvantaged students. Why? Disadvantaged students usually attend schools where large classes and less qualified teachers are the norm. Having more highly qualified teachers teaching disadvantaged students in smaller classes will be a way of closing the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers.

Schools should endeavor to steer more African American males away from special education track and place more of them in high school honors and advanced courses. There is no doubt that special education track hinders that academic achievement of students while participating in honors and advanced placement (AP) courses promotes academic performance. Taking these steps will address what research has stated that African American males are overrepresented in special education classes (Garibaldi, 2009) and underrepresented in high school honors and advanced placement courses (Whiting & Ford, 2009). The U. S. Department of Education (2014) stated that African Americans and other minorities lack access to advanced courses. For example, only 19% of Asian-

American high school students and 29% of White high school students do not have access to full range of math and science courses as compared to 57% of Black students, 67% of Latino students, and 63% of students with disabilities.

Other school factors that can enable African American males to succeed in school are extended learning time and after-school enrichment programs. Extended learning time can lead to higher academic achievement and other advantages. For example, Davies and Peltz (2012) stated that increased learning time not only promotes academic knowledge and skills, but can equally promote self-confidence, study skills, and commitment to school. VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh (2007) stated that academic enrichment activities offer many advantages to disadvantaged students who lack access to extended learning opportunities. The advantages include enhanced academic engagement, higher educational aspirations, and self-confidence.

Disadvantaged students who have greater motivation to learn, more confidence in the capacities to perform, and invest more effort in their classes are more likely to achieve higher than their peers from the same background who lack these qualities (OECD, 2009a). American PreK-12 schools should endeavor to build the foregoing qualities in African American males in order for them to succeed in school. In addition, implementing the recommendations for dropout prevention made by Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, and Smink (2008) will help to lower the number of African American male dropouts. The recommendations include using data to identify students at high risk of dropping out, providing academic enrichment to students at the risk of dropping out, individualizing instruction, and exposing students to rigorous and relevant academic experiences.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the factors that hinder academic achievement of African American males from disadvantaged backgrounds. These factors are applicable to other disadvantaged students from the same backgrounds. As can be gleaned from this paper, the factors originate from homes, individuals, communities, and schools. In addition, the chapter proffered what African American males from disadvantaged backgrounds in Mississippi and elsewhere can do to overcome home, individual, community, and school factors that increase the odds of dropping out of school. The causes of disadvantaged African American males in Mississippi and elsewhere dropping out of school originate from many sources. Finger pointing can only exacerbate the problem. Therefore, all stakeholders should work together to minimize or eliminate the problem of dropout for disadvantaged African American males and others from similar backgrounds in the United States and other regions of the world.

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