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The Gift That Can Save Lives: Teaching Black Students to Become Good Readers

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Keywords

African American males, reading proficiency, prison pipeline, achievement



THE GIFT THAT CAN SAVE LIVES: TEACHING BLACK STUDENTS TO BECOME GOOD READERS

Gail L Thompson and Cynthia T. Shamberger

Abstract

This article provides a critical look at the historical barriers to learning for African American students attending public schools. It includes an emphasis on the negative school experiences of Black students, as well as statistics on the academic performance of the Black student population. Strategic tools to help educators address the unique needs of Black students and ways of engaging parents to support the academic progress of their children are included.

Introduction

In a study involving nearly 300 high school students, Thompson (2007) found that approximately 60% of the students said that their classes were boring, and African Americans and Latinos were more likely than Whites to say this. The researcher concluded that student apathy is often caused by low teacher expectations, ineffective instructional practices, a culturally irrelevant curriculum, an over emphasis on standardized tests, weak classroom management skills, and racial tensions at school. In, "Four Effects of the High Stakes Testing Movement on African American Students," Thompson and Allen (2012) stressed that the current high-stakes testing movement has been harmful to Black students and has resulted in teaching methods and a school culture that lead to apathy among Black students. Other researchers have reached similar conclusions (Advancement Project, 2010; Kozol, 2005).

Apathy often leads to misbehavior. Today, Black students labeled as "discipline problems" are more likely to be suspended and expelled from school than any other group of students. Since 2003, the number of Black students who have been suspended and expelled has increased dramatically. For example, in 2003, 30% of Black high school students were suspended from school, compared to 18% of Whites. In 2007, 49% of Black high school students were suspended, but only 17% of their White counterparts were. For Black males, the percentages were even more dramatic. In 2007, nearly 60% of Black male high school students were suspended, while 36% of Hispanic males, and 24% of White males were suspended. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

Underachievement is one of the most potent weapons that many Black students use to express their displeasure with the public school system. A glaring example is the Black-White test score gap on the national reading assessment. Although the gap between the scores of Black and White fourth graders has narrowed since 1992, in 2009, there was still a 25-point difference between the two groups (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2009). There was a similar pattern for eighth graders. In 2009, reading scores were higher for most eighth graders in all racial groups than they were in 1992, but there was no significant difference between the 1992 Black-White reading gap (30 points), and the 2009 gap (27 points). Furthermore, in 2009, the gap between the reading scores of White and Black eighth graders was larger than the gap

between Whites and all other racial groups (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2009, p. 27). As Tables 1 and 2, illustrate, in 2011, there was still a 26-point gap between the scores of Black and White fourth graders, and a 25-point gap between the scores of Black and White eighth graders.

Table 1: Fourth Grade Reading
2011 NAEP 4th Grade Reading Report Card

Year	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian/Alaska Native	Two or more races
2011	231	205	206	235	202	227
2009	230	205	205	235	204	226
2007	231	203	205	232	203	225
2005	229	200	203	229	204	223
2003	229	198	200	226	202	223
2000	224	190	190	225	214	+
1998	225	193	193	215	+	+
1994	224	185	188	220	211	+
1992	224	192	197	216	+	+

+ Reporting standards not met

National Center for Education Statistics (2011a). *The Nation's Report Card. Grade Four National Results*. Retrieved from http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2011/nat_g4.asp?subtab_id=Tab_3&tab_id=tab1#chart

Table 2: Eighth Grade Reading
2011 NAEP 8th Grade Reading Report Card

Year	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian/Alaska Native	Two or more races
2011	274	249	252	275	252	269
2009	273	246	249	274	251	267
2007	272	245	247	271	247	265
2005	271	243	246	271	249	266
2003	272	244	245	270	246	266
2002	272	245	247	267	250	265
2000	-	-	-	-	-	-
1998	270	244	243	264	+	+
1994	267	236	243	265	248	+
1992	267	237	241	268	+	256

+ Reporting standards not met

-Not available

National Center for Education Statistics (2011b). *The Nation's Report Card. Grade Eight National Results*. Retrieved from http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2011/nat_g8.asp?subtab_id=Tab_3&tab_id=tab1#chart

Obviously, after decades of reading research and reading interventions, there is still a major reading crisis, especially for Black students, which warrants national and intensified attention. Poor reading skills are correlated to poverty during adulthood (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010), prison incarceration rates (Kunjufu, 2005), dropping out of school, and struggling academically in other subjects besides reading (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010). Because Black youth are overrepresented among students who drop out of school, get trapped in the School-to-Prison Pipeline (The Children's Defense Fund, 2008), and underperform academically, educators at all levels have a professional obligation to work harder to help them develop good reading skills, thereby increasing their chances of having a bright future as adults. The five research-based strategies that follow can help educators do this.

Educators Must Change Their Beliefs About Black Students.

Historically, the prevailing notion about teaching has been that any teacher who uses effective teaching strategies should be able to teach any student. In terms of reading instruction, a plethora of research suggests that in order to improve students' reading skills, teachers must teach them to decode and comprehend various types of texts (McEwan 2009; Shaywitz, 2005). However, the low reading test scores and widespread underachievement of many Black students highlight the failure of this notion. Nationwide, countless teachers trained to use good teaching strategies continue to fail to meet the academic needs of many Black students. What is missing from the equation is the connection between teachers' beliefs about Black students and Black students' achievement.

Too many educators *claim* to be "colorblind" (Bonilla-Silva, 2003) and insist that they want to work effectively with Black students, but in reality, engage in practices that are driven by low expectations (Delpit, 1995; Landsman, 2004). Buried beneath these low expectations is the fundamental belief that Blacks are incapable of academic excellence, and the belief that they are not as smart as their White counterparts (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Comer, 2002; Perry et al, 2003; Wing Sue, 2003). Thompson (2010) conducted a study involving 237 educators, and found that 92% of the respondents said that most teachers do not know how to work effectively with Black students, and 60% said that most teachers do not believe that Black students are capable of academic excellence. In addition, 77% said that most teachers do not treat and view Black students in the same ways as non-Black students, and 54% admitted that most teachers do not believe that Black students are as intelligent as non-Black students are.

Unexamined beliefs can be dangerous (Trepagnier, 2006; Wing Sue, 2003), and can cause even well meaning teachers to engage in racist practices. Thompson (2010) concluded that in order to increase their efficacy with Black students, teachers must examine and address their negative beliefs about Black students through ongoing personal and professional development work. This recommendation also applies to Black teachers, for Kunjufu (2002) stated that both White and Black middle-class teachers have negative stereotypes about low-income and urban Black students. Teachers who do not believe that Black students can become good readers will subconsciously engage in ineffective practices and create a classroom climate that is designed to make this belief reality. Conversely, teachers who are willing to improve their relations with Black students are more likely to be able to work successfully with them (Kunjufu, 2002).

Educators Must Use Diverse Teaching Strategies.

Although experts now agree that phonics and instructional methods designed to teach students how to sound out words must be included in the reading curriculum (Delpit, 1995; McEwan, 2009; Rhodes Hoover, 2005; Shaywitz, 2005), a related problem is that some school

officials require teachers to use reading programs that “drill students to death” (Kozol, 2005). This means that even after students learn to decode words, teachers have to keep focusing on skills that students may have already mastered. Though crucial to reading instruction, skill development work may seem tedious and monotonous. As a result, students and teachers may quickly become bored. Teachers complain that skill-based programs prevent them from designing creative lessons, and students may become apathetic (Kozol, 2005). However, teachers can address this problem by providing student-friendly corrective feedback, incorporating multisensory learning during reading opportunities, and promoting motivation by supporting student choice of some reading materials (Hiebert, 2009; Rasinski, 2010).

Because the end of third grade is a critical period for struggling readers, and reading below grade level at this time is a predictor of many negative outcomes (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010), helping Black students develop good reading comprehension skills must begin well before third grade. A failure to do so has contributed to the high number of students who arrive at middle school and even high school with poor decoding and inadequate comprehension skills (McEwan, 2009; Shaywitz, 2005). Consequently, secondary school teachers, who have a limited background in teaching fundamental reading skills, struggle to address these deficits. Therefore, all teachers, both elementary and secondary, need training that will enable them to use diverse teaching strategies to provide intensive instruction to struggling readers (McEwan, 2009; Shaywitz, 2005). Furthermore, it is imperative that teachers base instruction on scientifically validated instructional practices, like multisensory structured language education (Moats & Farrell, 2005).

Giving students multiple opportunities to discuss what they read, doing frequent checks for understanding by questioning students, and modeling the comprehension process that teachers use for their own reading purposes are a few of the ways that teachers can improve Black students’ and other students’ reading comprehension skills (McEwan, 2009). Teaching students how to determine when comprehension breaks down and when “mindless reading” occurs (McEwan, 2009), how to “read for different purposes,” good note-taking skills, vocabulary-building skills, and what the “thinking process” entails are methods that have helped many struggling readers (Marnell Sr. & Hammond, 2005). Hammond, Hoover, and McPhail’s (2005) *Teaching African American Learners to Read* and Tatum’s (2005) *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap* are additional resources that contain strategies that can help teachers increase Black student interest and improve their reading skills without boring them. Moreover, an often-overlooked strategy for reading instruction is to provide increased opportunities for students to read in class. In her book *Reading More Reading Better*, Elfrieda Hiebert (2009) argues that teachers who provide multiple opportunities to read in class help promote reading proficiency when students actively practice reading.

Teachers Must Make the Curriculum Interesting and Relevant.

For decades, many researchers have emphasized that in order to improve Black students’ academic skills; teachers must make the curriculum interesting and relevant (Bennett, 1999; Delpit, 1995; Duncan-Andrade, 2002-2003; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). When Black students’ cultural backgrounds are integrated into lesson plans and required readings—including relevant and real-life stories to which they can relate—they are more likely to find the curriculum interesting (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The problem is that many teachers report that they did not learn much about Black history or Black culture during their own schooling experiences, and therefore, they do not know how to make the curriculum culturally relevant for Black students (Thompson, 2007).

However, there is no excuse for teachers not to include Black culture and Black history into the curriculum on a regular basis, not just during Black History Month. Effective ways of doing this include assigning students a variety of reading opportunities to explore fiction and non-fiction works written by Black authors. It is important for educators to assign literature featuring positive Black characters, and to allow them to read and write about the issues that pertain to the community in which they live (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Gay's *Culturally Responsive Teaching* (2000), Kunjufu's (1986) *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys* Vol. 11, and Kafele's (2004) *A Handbook for Teachers of African American Children* contain a wealth of information that can help teachers understand why students of color need a culturally relevant education, and examples of ways in which educators can improve the curriculum.

Teachers Should Improve Their Relations with Black Parents.

Research has consistently shown that parent involvement has a positive effect on K-12 students' education. When parents are highly involved in their children's education, the students are more likely to earn good grades, attend school more frequently, have high-test scores, behave better, graduate from high school, and attend college (National PTA, n.d. U.S. Department of Education, 2001). In spite of the importance of parent involvement, historically—because of a widely believed myth that Black parents don't care about their children's education--the relationship between Black parents and K-12 educators has been strained (Thompson, 2009a). However, researchers have repeatedly insisted that this assumption is wrong (Clark, 1993; Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Thompson, 2009a). In his seminal study *Family Life and School Achievement: Why Poor Black Children Succeed or Fail*, Clark (1983) emphasized that most Black parents are extremely concerned about their children's education. According to Clark, this fact remains true, even for the parents of low achievers. Although the parents of low-achievers are often overwhelmed by life's stressors, they still care about their children's education. Therefore, one way for educators to improve the reading skills—and thereby, test scores—of Black students is to make parents their allies, instead of viewing them as adversaries (Thompson, 2010). The first step in making Black parents allies requires educators to get rid of their negative beliefs about Black parents. This means that educators must eradicate their negative stereotypes about Blacks. In Thompson's (2010) study, 80% of educators said that most teachers do not believe that most Black parents are concerned about their children's education. She concluded that just as educators must examine and address their deficit mindsets about Black students through ongoing, intensive personal and professional development work, they must also do the same regarding their negative beliefs about Black parents. Second, educators must make the school and classroom environment more welcoming. Viewing and treating Black parents, as allies will require teachers and other school personnel to treat them respectfully, so that the school does not appear to be a hostile and unwelcoming environment for them.

Teachers can also improve their relations with Black parents by providing them with resources to help them improve their children's reading skills. Sharing reading strategies from Shaywitz's (2005) *Overcoming Dyslexia* can provide parents with decoding and reading comprehension strategies. Shaywitz's reader-friendly book can also help parents understand the differences between ordinary struggling readers and dyslexics, and can provide them with a list of characteristics of dyslexics, as well as ways that they can help a dyslexic child. Numerous organizations, such as Reading Rockets, the National PTA, and many state departments of education, the National Institute for Literacy, the National Reading Panel, the International Reading Association, and the National Black Parents Association have reports, strategies, guides, and tips that both parents and teachers will find useful in helping Black students become better

readers. Teachers can also find additional suggestions for improving their relations with parents by reading Henderson, Johnson, Mapp, and Davies's (2007) *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family/School Partnerships*, and the National PTA's (2000) "A Guide to Developing Parent and Family Programs." Sharing these resources with parents is another way that teachers can improve their relations with Black parents (Thompson, 2010).

Teachers Must Understand that Having Good Reading Skills May Save a Black Students' Life.

Historically, the U.S. has had a negative reputation in educating Blacks. The origins of this negative legacy began during the slavery era when numerous anti-literacy laws were passed to punish Black slaves who learned to read. Whites who tried to teach Blacks to read were penalized and schools for Blacks were destroyed. The widespread efforts that were designed to prevent Blacks from becoming literate were rooted in fear by Whites that literate Blacks would be more likely to fight for their rights and freedom (Woodson, 1919). Despite the danger of learning to read, many Blacks were willing to risk their lives to become literate, and according to Woodson, "White men in every southern community made it possible for many of them to learn in spite of opposition" (1919, p. 7).

Statistics reveal the degree to which Blacks valued formal education. At the end of the Civil War, because of the anti-literacy laws, the majority of Blacks in the U.S. were illiterate. After the abolishment of slavery, many Whites still tried to prevent Blacks from attending school. Nevertheless, the Black illiteracy rate decreased dramatically over time. For example, in 1890, 57% of Blacks ages 10 years of age and older were illiterate; in 1900, 45% were illiterate, and in 1910, 30% were illiterate (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1918, p. 404). Clearly, slaves, slave owners, and freed Blacks equated literacy with empowerment.

Today, literacy remains one of the most empowering tools for Blacks. A Black student who is reading at grade level by the end of third grade is less likely to end up in Special Education classes, drop out of school, live in poverty during adulthood, or end up in the prison pipeline (Kunjufu, 2005; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012). Ironically, many Blacks who do end up in the prison pipeline learn to become good readers after the public school system has failed them. For example, as a child, Stanley Tookie Williams, a Black man, had strong leadership skills, as well as other strengths. He became a co-founder of the notorious CRIPS gang and was later convicted of murder. While spending 23 years on California's Death Row, he wrote several children's books, an autobiography, and used his influence to dissuade youth from joining gangs (Williams, 2004). In 2009, Williams was executed. At age 10, another Black male, Jamel Paschall, was the primary income-earner for his family. Because his mother was incarcerated and there was no father in the home, Jamel believed that he needed to take care of his siblings. Therefore, he became a drug runner. He stayed out late, misbehaved at school and was eventually sent to Riker's Island at age of sixteen. While incarcerated, Paschall wrote more than 500 songs, and dreamed of becoming a rapper (Gonnerman, 2004).

In the average public K-12 school classroom, most teachers would view students like Paschall and Williams negatively. At a young age, Black males infer that teachers fear them and look for excuses to send them out of their classrooms (Thompson, 2007). Unfortunately, teachers who are quick to label Black students as discipline problems, fail to realize that when they push them into the School-to-Prison Pipeline, they can destroy a child's life and chances for a good future. Kafele has worked with numerous Black boys who came from backgrounds that were similar to Paschall's and Williams' and has been successful with them. When teachers address their stereotypes and choose to form positive relationships with Black students, by

understanding and respecting their culture, and use effective teaching strategies, they can reach students like Paschall and Williams long before they enter the prison pipeline (Kafele, 2004).

Dr. James Comer, a preventative child psychiatrist, has worked in challenging schools for more than three decades. The School Development Program that he created consists of a multi-dimensional framework that is designed to transform underperforming schools. The framework rests on the premise that all stakeholders of the education community, including parents, teachers, school leaders, and school support staff must work together to meet students' needs, especially relating to mental health (Comer, 2004). This framework could be crucial in helping Black students in high-risk neighborhoods gain the academic skills, especially reading proficiency, that they need in order to avoid the prison pipeline.

Kafele (2004) emphasized that teachers must adopt a mindset that is crucial in order to work effectively with Black students. "In your classroom, failure cannot be an option," he said. "You simply cannot allow failure to occur amongst the students you teach" (p. 147). He repeatedly urged teachers to share the failure is not an option message with Black students on a regular basis, accept responsibility for educating Black students, engage in ongoing self-reflection and self-assessment, stop making excuses, and refrain from blaming parents and others. He concluded that when teachers accept the responsibility of educating Black students, they become effective instructional leaders. They may also protect their students from a negative schooling path, the prison pipeline, and numerous other problems.

Conclusion

The reading score gaps between Black and White students indicate that the U.S. public school system continues to underserve Black students. Because of low expectations and an increased likelihood of being assigned to classrooms with under qualified or inexperienced teachers, many Black struggling readers are promoted from one grade level to the next, even if they read far below grade level. Working with students who perform far below grade level can be frustrating for teachers. Consequently, some teachers decide that because the students' former teachers failed to bring them up to grade-level standards, the fault or blame rests on the former teachers alone. On the other hand, teachers who truly want to work effectively with Black students must (1) adopt the mindset that they *can* help these students become better readers, (2) adopt the mindset that it is their professional responsibility to do their best to bring *all* students as close to grade-level standards as possible, (3) form alliances with parents, and (4) use effective and culturally relevant teaching strategies.

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