

## The Influence of Others on the Success of a Student

It has been shown that the many different people or groups of people that a student comes into *direct* contact with greatly influence the level of success a student can and will realize throughout their school career. Such influential people could include parents, peers, and teachers. The relationship between such individuals and these students are also significant factors contributing to the persistent racial achievement gap in American schools. This paper seeks to discuss specific factors related to the relationships between a student and such groups of people and how these factors influence success and affect achievement gaps.

### **Parents**

*Beliefs and Values.* From birth, parents are the most influential people in a child's life. They quickly introduce their children to the values and beliefs that they hold, and as the child grows, these values and beliefs help to shape what kind of person the child will become. One of the most influential introductions a parent makes is to the beliefs and values they hold toward education. In the book, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Achievement Gap in Learning*, the authors discuss how different cultures view education.

Cultures that embrace education and have high expectations for academic success breed academic success in return. If a culture does not value something, they will not teach their children to value it. The Thernstroms state that, "parents who say, "Obey your teachers", "Do your homework", "Keep trying harder", and kids who actually follow their parental orders: what an advantage when it comes to academic achievement!" (2003, p. 83). Parents must be mindful that they speak highly of learning and strive to show their children the value of a good education. John Ogbu, author of

*Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb*, states that, “parents should explain to [their children] it is important to go to school” (2003, p. 237). A lack of such an understanding by students may breed ill actions in the classroom.

***Social and Economic Capital.*** Another influential factor affecting students, is their parents social and economic capital. According to Noguera and Wing, authors of *Unfinished Business: Closing the Racial Achievement Gap in Our Schools*, “economic capital, that is, the wealth and income of parents, is one of the primary factors influencing student achievement” (2006, p. 31). Parents with low economic capital likely have lower levels of education and may not know what is necessary for students to complete in order to graduate with the knowledge and requirements needed to attend college. Ogbu stressed that, “this lack of understanding of what and how their children were taught might be one reason why the parents did not prepare their children more effectively” (2003, p. 237). Also, these parents may not be able to afford tutors or other advisors for their children if they fall behind in school.

In addition, achievement is greatly affected by the possession of social capital, “the benefits derived from connections to networks and individuals with power and influence” (2006, p. 31). Parents with low social capital may not have access to others who may know more about the educational system or more about the subject their student is studying. Students who come from a background of low economic and social capital are in danger of making poor educational decisions because they do not know better and have little help to direct them down the right path. Students need adults who have current knowledge of the educational system (need for college level classes, requirements for college admission, financial assistance) and connections to people who

can help (counselors, tutors, experts, financial planners) or they risk falling behind on the path to success.

*Presence and Monitoring.* Students, especially in the world in which they live today, need more support and parental involvement. The Thernstroms stressed that, “how much parents talk to their children, deal with their children’s questions, how they react when their child learns or fails to learn” greatly influences the gaps in achievement (2003, p. 133). Children have a need to feel supported in what they do and *parental* support proves to be the most influential. Reading to a child, attending school functions and programs, and joining school organizations are a few ways in which parents can become more involved (Ogbu, 2003, p. 222). Children who received physical affection and non-physical punishment were found to test higher according to the Thernstroms, providing additional reason for parents to show more support (2003, p. 133).

In addition to support and involvement, parents must monitor their children’s use of time. In order to be successful in school, children must devote time at home to homework and other education activities, such as reading. Ogbu mentions a school that found, “that many students did not take their homework seriously and that their parents did not adequately supervise it” (2003, p. 239). Often times, when parents are not monitoring, students will fill the time that should be spent on homework and reading with other activities such as television. He went on to describe how parents were not monitoring how much time was devoted to television or even what sort of programs were watched. This lack of supervision resulted in students spending, “too much time watching television” and watching, “programs that exposed them to role

models that were detrimental to their school interest and striving” (2003, p. 240).

Parents must realize the critical role they play in the education and motivation of their children.

## **Peers**

*Peer pressure.* After parents, a child’s friends and classmates prove to be one of the most influential groups of people a child will encounter. Friends and other peers have been known to exert pressure upon each other in order to influence and control behavior for their personal benefit. Peers play a significant role in the academic disengagement of students and the victims give into this pressure for a number of reasons. Such reasons include, but are not limited to, looking “cool”, trying to do the popular thing, keeping friends, and the desire to engage in other nonacademic activities that seem more exciting and important (Ogbu, 2003, p. 213-215). Students become so concerned with keeping up with what their friends are doing and what their friends want them to do, that academic priorities fade to the background.

*Acting White.* Also important to note is that the extent and type of peer pressure varies among racial groups. The group most negatively affected by peer pressure are African Americans. There has been increasing pressure for Blacks to avoid conforming to the White ways because it will strengthen the ideas of, “White ways as the right ways to talk and behave and Black ways as the wrong ways” (Ogbu, 2003, p. 189). Black students do not want their Black peers to think that they are acting and talking White, so they disengage from those behaviors. Unfortunately, “some of the attitudes and behaviors labeled “White” and avoided by the students were those that enhanced school success” (Ogbu, 2003, p. 189). In general, it is perceived by Blacks that studying,

doing homework, working with others to do assignments, looking smart, and succeeding in school is White student behavior. Anyone who engages in such activities is labeled as “acting White” and thus pressured and bullied by their peers for doing so.

*Racial Segregation.* Students were not only influenced and pressured by their own racial groups, but also by other racial groups. Noguera and Wing studied the extracurricular activities of students at Berkeley High School in California and discovered that “peer-driven social dynamics” led to segregation among the different racial groups present in the school (2006, p. 78). Most of the, “clubs have been racially identified” and “it is unlikely that students will cross these racial borders on their own” (2006, p. 79). Students like to associated themselves with peers of the same race and thus, feel pressure, whether consciously or not, to continue to join their peers in the racially segregated activities. At Berkeley and many similar schools, “clubs and their participants reflect and reinforce the racial patterns at the school” and additionally, “reinforce racial stereotypes and send the message that a student’s racial identity determines what he or she can or cannot do, both inside and outside of the classroom (2006, p. 81). Peers are not always conscious of the pressures they are exerting on others, but this type of pressure is equally, if not more, influential than intentional peer pressure.

## **Teachers**

*Quality and Effectiveness.* At some point, a child will enter school, only to encounter another group of influential people: their teachers. Several factors determine the success of teachers in this pursuit. First, the overall quality of a teacher is invaluable for students, and, “almost everyone agrees that good teaching makes an enormous

difference, and this is especially true for Black and Hispanic students, who typically arrive in school already behind (Thernstrom, 2003, p. 249). Research has found that, “high need children need high quality teachers” (Thernstrom, 2003, p. 207). Teachers who have been certified to teach, achieved high academic success for themselves, scored well on competency exams, and have a clear understanding of the content in which they are teaching, have much greater success with students in the classroom (Thernstrom, 2003, p. 190-210). Unfortunately, schools with many disadvantaged students often have low quality teachers who possess very few of the characteristics described above.

Low quality teachers also prove to be ineffective teachers. First, those with little knowledge of the subject they are teaching will have an unclear understanding of what to teach, when to teach it, and how to teach it. Lessons will be less organized and teachers will struggle in clarifying content to students who have difficulty understanding. Teachers may also be unable to present material in different formats and create creative and engaging means of learning. In addition, less effective teachers do not stress the importance the reinforcement of knowledge. One teacher noted that, “if students did not do homework or received no homework, then the knowledge and skills they learned in class would not be reinforced much” (Ogbu, 2003, p. 131). Effective teachers need provide students with opportunities to reinforce the material learned, whether through homework or other creative means, and additionally provide appropriate feedback for such work through meaningful reflection, discussions, and grading practices.

In addition, teachers who go out of their way to find ways to help their students will breed success. As Leslie Ann Plettner states, “inquiry is the centerpiece of

understanding” (Noguera and Wing, 2006, p. 184). Teachers who inquire into the ways in which their teaching is falling short and find ways to be more beneficial will have the most successful students. Teachers who ask themselves difficult questions such as, “how can I make the reading assignments and homework more accessible?”, “Why is [this student] not turning in homework or is not fully engaged in the class discussion?”, or “What other problems could be causing [this student] to struggle”, and then inquires into possible answers and solutions, will prove to be most effective in reaching students and uncovering road blocks to success (Noguera and Wing, 2006, p. 183).

Lastly, effective teachers are those in the classroom who genuinely care for their students. As one student noted, “I think your teachers have a big part in how well you’re doing because if you have a teacher...that doesn’t want to teach you, or doesn’t want to help you, then you’re not gonna have any motivation either” (Ogbu, 2003, p. 124). Susannah Bell, a contributor to *Unfinished Business*, noted that, “what mattered was the climate and tone set by the instructor” (Noguera and Wing, 2006, p. 188). Instructors that set a threatening, authoritarian, and inequitable tone, had little success in managing an engaging and meaningful classroom. On the other hand, teachers who set an encouraging, relaxed, and productive tone, reaped the rewards of a well managed classroom of engaged students (Noguera and Wing, 2006, p. 188-190).

*Normalization of Failure.* In research done by Noguera and Wing, students reported how some teachers, “made automatic assumptions about them from the outset of the school year” because, “staff have grown accustomed over time to the idea that some students (especially African Americans) will get into trouble and fail academically” (Noguera and Wing, 2006, p. 182, 149). These teachers assumed from past

experience that because of their race and cultural background they will likely be problem students and not achieve a high level of success throughout the school year.

This process, known as the "normalization of failure", leads teachers to set low expectations and leads students to feel as though not even their teachers believe in their ability to succeed. As a result, the students "pick up on the "doubts" of their teachers and tune out of school", seeing little reason to work hard to complete work and perform to a high standard (Thernstrom, 2003, p. 195).

This normalization also affects classroom management as teachers come to expect poor behavior from such students, identifying and punishing minor behavioral issues by minority students more than those of white students. According to Ogbu, "because school authorities usually assumed that Black students would misbehave, they more often noticed it among Black students" and would reprimand accordingly (2003, p. 138). In order to help rid their classrooms of racial assumptions, "teachers must link their own personal beliefs about race and achievement to their own classroom practice" (Noguera and Wing, 2006, p. 165). Teachers need to analyze their personal biases to determine what areas they may be jumping to conclusions. Self-evaluation and reflection is key to breaking down inequalities in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

It is clearly evident that the people in a child's life can directly affect their ability to be successful in school. It has been said that it takes a village to raise a child, and in a sense, this is true. Many people work together, whether directly or indirectly, to help a student reach their potential. All people, especially those described above, need to recognize the power of influence they have over young people and analyze their actions



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in order to ensure that their influence is positive and leads to the increase of success for  
all students.