Factors Affecting Academic Success for African American High School Students

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Abstract

As public schools in the United States face new challenges, researchers and educators continually seek ways to serve the needs of their students. Of particular concern is the achievement gap separating the academic success of African American and white students. Due to innumerable factors, this gap persists, and educators continue to explore ways to address it. One approach that has been identified is Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programming, which is designed to support and foster students’ emotional and social health and competence. SEL programming has been found to produce improved academic performance with African American high school students. This review explores the factors that affect SEL program implementation in general and with this population in particular. While schools face various obstacles to implementing these programs, the research indicates that the benefits can offset the challenges, and that pursuing effective SEL implementation is highly recommended.
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Factors Affecting Academic Success for African American High School Students

Over the last few decades, the climate in public schools in the United States has undergone substantial shifts. As phrased by researchers, “Today’s schools face unprecedented challenges to educate an increasingly multicultural and multilingual student body and to address the widening social and economic disparities in U.S. society” (Elias, et al., 2003, p. 467). As communities accommodate members from countless national and cultural backgrounds, families face economic struggles, state and national institutions enforce budget cuts, and countless other factors, the role of schools has changed. (Elias, et al., 2003) Educators must now respond to new and complex needs of students, and demonstrate continued academic progress in order to compete in the modern world.

In addition to the issues facing all schools today, research indicates that a disparity exists between the academic achievement of African American students and Caucasian students. (Anderson, Hamilton, Rahman, & Vanneman, 2009) This disparity is referred to as an “achievement gap”, and has become one major focus of educators and policymakers in the United States. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found in 2007 that white students, as a whole, had higher scores on math and reading national assessments than black students. (Anderson, Hamilton, Rahman, & Vanneman, 2009) African American students also, on average, tend to receive lower grades, have a higher likelihood of repeating a grade, are less likely to graduate (Charkow Bordeau & Fusick, 2004), and tend to show diminished engagement and interest in academics than their white peers. (Becker & Luthar, 2002) Further, while black students have made some gains in academics over the years, the gap in achievement between black students and white students does not appear to have improved significantly since researchers began to study it some 30 years ago. (Becker & Luthar, 2002)
Examining the Achievement Gap

Economics

Because the achievement gap has become such a focus for educators, much research has been dedicated to determining the root causes of the gap. One such cause may be the economic differences between African American students and white students. African American students are more likely to be from a lower social economic status (SES) than white students, with 33% of African American students living below the poverty level (Kober, 2010). Studies have found that not only do students in lower SES perform lower academically, but they are also more likely to lose motivation to pursue post-secondary options, and are less likely to graduate than their higher SES peers (Caro, McDonald, & Willms, 2009; Condron, 2009; Dubow & Ippolito, 1994; Kober, 2010; Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, & Benson, 2006). This is especially significant for middle school and high school students, as this gap in achievement and motivation widens between the ages of 13 and 15 (Caro et al, 2009).

Kober (2010) explains that poverty can present many challenges to families and to students attempting to succeed academically. These challenges can include lack of proper nutrition and health care, frequent changes in schools, absenteeism, neighborhood deterioration, and the lapse in learning and retention that occurs over the summer when children are not in school or educational programs. Researchers stress the need for leaders in education to enact policies and to create programming that helps these families to address or overcome such challenges (Kober, 2010).

Lack of Parental Social/Emotional Involvement

The term “parental involvement” can be used to describe various concepts, but most researchers agree that it refers to parents’ support of their children in academic and career
pursuits, general parental emotional and social consideration and investment, as well as parental involvement in the children’s school(s) (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). Howard & Reynolds (2008) define parent involvement more specifically as “…‘distinctive parent-child interactions,’ namely helping students with homework, expressing their expectations of school performance and creating emotionally supportive learning environments at home” (Howard & Reynolds, 2008, p. 83).

Using these descriptions of parental involvement, research suggests that African American families have low rates of parental involvement compared to white families. (Simoni & Adelman, 1993) Further, other studies show that children from low SES receive less emotional support from their parents (Dubow & Ippolito, 1994; Shaw, Krause, Chatters, Connell, & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2003). Considering the higher instance of African American children being from low SES, these children are especially in need of increased support. Indeed, Shaw et al. (2003) found that parental support is particularly critical for children from minority backgrounds (Shaw, Krause, Chatters, Connell, & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2003). Because parental involvement also refers to a parent’s relationship with his or her child’s school, researchers have also studied what role race may play in this aspect of involvement. Studies have shown that African American parents have less connection to their children’s schools than white parents. This can be attributed to many factors, one of which being that African American parents may have less trust that the school system has their children’s best interests in mind (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010).

Having established that African American children are less likely to receive the same level of parental support as their white peers, it is important to examine how this lack of support may affect these children as students. Research has found a significant correlation between parental involvement and academic success. Not only does parental involvement increase a
student’s likelihood of academic success, but the student is also more likely to pursue and enroll in college (Alliman-Brissett, Turner, & Skovholt, 2004; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Some researchers have even found that parental involvement can have a greater effect on academic success for African American students than white students (Howard & Reynolds, 2008).

**Academic Achievement**

Considering the above findings, it is not surprising that researchers continue to find that the achievement gap persists, and that African American students continue to perform academically below whites in areas of math, reading, and have lower rates of graduation (Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Kober, 2010; Lynn, 2006; Ogbu, 2003; Paul, 2004). Though some researchers state that the achievement gap has improved to some degree over the last several years, they note that the academic performance of white students has also improved. This leads to the reality that African American students must improve at a higher rate than their white peers, in order to truly affect the achievement gap (Braun, Wang, Jenkins, & Weinbaum, 2006; Paul, 2004).

While the achievement gap exists throughout the country, the data shows that individual states vary in the size of their gap. Of particular note is the performance of Minnesota on this metric. Included in Appendix B is a table that shows that African American students in Minnesota had some of the lowest scores in both math and reading. States with the largest achievement gaps should be even more focused on remedying this disparity.

Many causes for this gap have been explored, and some will be discussed in various sections of this review. One factor that bears noting is the idea that African American students may be actively avoiding academic success. For example, some researchers assert that African
American students, particularly males, may opt out of advanced courses, despite their ability to succeed in such classes (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, Promoting achievement for African American males through group work, 2007). This could result from perceived attitudes of educators toward the students. To explain, African American students may sense, accurately or not, that their teachers, school staff, parents, or society at large do not have confidence in their academic abilities or do not view them as academically oriented. Due to this, the students may then adopt this perception of themselves. This phenomenon was termed “academic disidentification” by Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey (2007). The term refers to African American students’ self-perceptions of being anything other than academic (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, Promoting achievement for African American males through group work, 2007).

The avoidance of academic success may also result from the students’ identifications with their cultural roles. Some scholars frame these students’ attitudes as a fear of “acting white”, turning their backs on their own culture, or betraying their cultural group. Academic success could lead to the students feeling that they may no longer belong in a cultural group, or that they would become a minority within a minority (academically gifted African Americans). (Butler, 2003) It is easy to see that these concerns are especially crucial for high school students, who are navigating the heightened insecurity and social navigation of adolescence, and for whom belonging and fitting in is often paramount.

**Success Variables for African American Students**

**Emotional/Social Connectedness**

Considering the findings that African American students do not receive adequate parental support, researchers have also explored how support in a school setting might affect these students. Tucker et al (2010) have found that “mattering”, feeling understood, valued, accepted,
and that they belong within their school community can have profoundly positive effects on student academic performance. The concept of mattering, which is described as “the experience of moving through life being noticed by and feeling special to others who also matter to us” (Tucker, Dixon, & Driddine, 2010), has been found to be crucial to a student’s academic success. Researchers explain that a sense of mattering can be fostered through a nurturing school climate, which is also one of the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) foundational elements (Van Velsor, 2009).

Mattering can also lead to an increased overall desire to succeed and investment in learning (Dixon & Tucker, 2008; Tucker, Dixon, & Driddine, 2010). One study found that African American students’ self-esteem decreases during middle and high school, while white students do not see this decrease (Lynn, 2006). In light of this, and because African American high school students may feel marginalized in schools and in society at large as a result of their race and developmental stage, this population may be even more influenced by the feeling of mattering than their white peers (Dixon & Tucker, 2008; Tucker, Dixon, & Driddine, 2010).

Having determined that African American students are in particular need of support from adults, educators must examine how schools are currently supporting them. Unfortunately, the research suggests that schools are not currently providing what these students need in terms of emotional support. Further, studies show that educators and school counselors may in fact avoid providing support to African American students, due to negative perceptions. (Tucker, Dixon, & Driddine, 2010) Perhaps resulting from this, African American students are more likely to become disengaged in their education than white students (McMillian, 2003).

**Post-Secondary Exploration**
The literature has established that African American students lag behind white students in academic performance. Naturally, academic performance has an impact on a student’s post-secondary options and exploration. If African American students do not perform academically in-line with white students, then it can be inferred that African American students do not pursue college or post-secondary success at the same rate as their white peers (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, Promoting achievement for African American males through group work, 2007). Indeed, studies show that African American students have lower high school graduation rates, and are underrepresented in professional occupations, and overrepresented in service and labor-related jobs (Alliman-Brisset, Turner, & Skovholt, 2004; Daire, LaMothe, & Fuller, 2007). African Americans are also underrepresented at every level of higher education, and their unemployment rate has remained twice that of their white peers over the last 20 years. Further, even when adjusted for comparable education, African Americans earn less than whites (Parris, Owens, Johnson, Grbevski, & Holbert-Quince, 2010).

Clearly, African American students are in need of particular support in regard to post-secondary exploration and career development. Unfortunately, the literature suggests that counselors do not provide African American students with comparable time and resources, and particularly support related to college planning (Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). This may be in part because African American students may be less likely to seek out school counselors. Another factor is that African American students are more likely to attend schools with no school counselors, higher student to counselor ratios, or underprepared counselors. The counselors in these schools are also more likely to be required to allocate their time away from college counseling and toward other counseling or non-counseling-related tasks (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009).
These facts are particularly concerning because students of color and students from lower SES are in greater need of post-secondary support from school counselors than their white or higher SES peers. Because African American students are more likely to have parents with less education, a school counselor may be one of few people in their lives who has knowledge of higher education options (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009). These students are also less likely to seek out school counselors if the counselors do not express high aspirations for them regarding college, implying that the counselors’ attitudes toward the students can have a significant impact on the students’ academic striving and pursuit of post-secondary education (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009).

Also important to note is that due to cultural factors, African American students may not have the same attitudes toward higher education and occupations as white students. Students of color may not see certain career paths as attainable because of “cultural (e.g., acculturation, gender, ethnic and racial identity, and values), familial (e.g., parental education attainment), and environmental (exposure to poverty, violence, and crime) factors” (Constantine, Kindaichi, & Miville, 2007). Some researchers argue that these students also may fail to believe that academic performance could translate into future success for them, but that such opportunities are available only to members of other cultural groups (Ogbu, 2003; Parris, Owens, Johnson, Grbevski, & Holbert-Quince, 2010). Relatedly, studies suggest that the factors motivating students of color toward career options may be different from those factors that motivate white students (Daire, LaMothe, & Fuller, 2007). In light of this information, school counselors may need to explore more culturally-informed ways in order to find success in supporting African American students’ post-secondary pursuits.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)
As previously stated, much research and analysis has been spent on trying to understand and remedy the achievement gap that has been found in schools today. Many researchers have concluded that one significant way to help students academically, socially, and in regard to career development, is to provide services that foster students’ emotional and social health and competence (Durlak, Dymnicki, Schellinger, Taylor, & Weissberg, 2011). From highly publicized reports like The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development’s 1987 document, “Turning Points,” to a report published in 1994 by the U.S. Department of Education titled “Education Reforms and Students at Risk: A Review of the Current State of the Art,” researchers emphasize the need for and benefits of providing students with such emotionally supportive programming (Becker & Luthar, 2002).

These reports assert that a student’s emotional and mental health can have significant impacts on his or her academic performance (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Bemak, Chi-Ying, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005; Bruce, Getch, & Ziomek-Daigle, 2009). In consideration of this, determining programs that can effectively improve students’ emotional and mental health may lead to higher achievement, and a narrowing achievement gap. SEL programs have been found to facilitate improvements in this way (Brackett, Elbertson, & Weissberg, 2009; Durlak, Dymnicki, Schellinger, Taylor, & Weissberg, 2011; Elias & Zins, 2011). Such improvements can only take place, however, if the chosen programs are implemented, and implemented effectively. In the current educational climate, the widespread effective implementation of such a program does not exist (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000).

To address this void, a group of experts in the field was formed to research, create, and promote comprehensive, evidence-based programs that can be implemented in schools and that can offer the kind of social and emotional education that students appear to need. The group was
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named “The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)”, and they have termed these programs “Social and Emotional Learning” (SEL) programs. CASEL describes SEL programming as, “The process of acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to recognize and manage emotions; developing caring and concern for others; making responsible decisions; establishing positive relationships; and handling challenging situations capably” (Elias & Zins, 2011, p. 1).

SEL programming has also been described as “a framework for providing opportunities for young people to acquire the skills necessary for attaining and maintaining personal well-being and positive relationships across the lifespan” (School-Based Social and Emotional Learning SEL Programming: Current Perspectives, p. 1017). SEL programming can be offered through many different channels, including mentoring relationships, volunteer activities, counseling groups, and classroom lessons. Such social and emotional enrichment has been found to have positive effects on students, not only in the social realm, but also in their academic performance and their pursuits in careers and post-secondary options (Zins & Elias, 2011).

Limitations

Since much research has hailed the effectiveness of SEL programming, it may be useful to determine why it has not been more frequently implemented (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to explore the factors affecting implementation of SEL programs, particularly with African American high school students. If these factors can be understood, educators may gain a better understanding of what is required to implement these programs, and may therefore be more likely to do so, and to do so effectively. Based on the research, a national public education system that incorporated culturally appropriate comprehensive SEL
programming for all students could lead to many positive outcomes (Elias & Zins, Social and Emotional Learning, 2011).

This review will explore the factors affecting implementation of SEL programming with African American high school students. It can be assumed, based on extensive previous research that SEL programming is effective for improving student emotional health, academic achievement, and sense of connection with a school (Brackett, Elbertson, & Weissberg, 2009; Durlak, Dymnicki, Schellinger, Taylor, & Weissberg, 2011; Elias & Zins, 2011). While some of this research will be referenced, the primary purpose of this review is not to explore the topic of SEL effectiveness in general, but rather how to effectively implement it. It can also be assumed that improving the academic success of African American students is of interest to educators and policymakers, and that professionals in the field would seek to understand and implement effective programs in regard to that interest.

While innumerable factors, such as racial discrimination, cultural differences, socio-economic status, and parental involvement play a large role in the academic performance of African American male students, these factors will not be explored at length in this paper. Additionally, this paper will neither outline all of the SEL programs that are available for implementation, nor will it explore which specific SEL programs might be most effective for African American high school students.

**Effectiveness**

SEL programming has been researched extensively, and many researchers have concluded that SEL programs can have numerous powerful benefits for students (Dixon, Griddine, & Tucker, 2010; Durlak, Dymnicki, Schellinger, Taylor, & Weissberg, 2011; Elias & Zins, 2011). For example, the emotional competency that SEL programming can instill in
students can impact their motivation and engagement in the classroom (Izard, 2002; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). The positive relationships and enhanced connections among students, teachers, and the school that SEL programming can facilitate, can lead to more positive self-perceptions and better academic performance in students (Osterman, 2000; School-Based Social and Emotional Learning SEL Programming: Current Perspectives). Some studies have found that SEL programming can reduce destructive behaviors in students, such as chemical use, reckless sexual behavior, violence, and truancy (Elias, et al., 2003). Simply put, enough research exists in support of SEL programming that Elias, et al. (2003) state that “There is a solid and growing empirical base indicating that well-designed, well-implemented school-based prevention and youth development programming can positively influence a diverse array of social, health, and academic outcomes” (Elias, et al., 2003, p. 470).

**SEL Effectiveness with African American High School Students**

While SEL programming is generally considered to lead to positive outcomes for students, researchers stress that selecting culturally appropriate SEL programs is paramount (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000). For example, not all SEL programming may be useful with African American high school students, but many studies exist that outline the success of certain programs used with this population. For example, Charkow Bordeau & Fusik (2004) recommend that school counselors facilitate ethnic identity groups with African American students, to help the students explore their identities, cultivate positive self-concepts, and form meaningful relationships with peers and staff. The researchers describe several programs including group counseling, peer-mediation, and family outreach, which can positively impact African American students’ academic performance and behavior (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Charkow Bordeau & Fusick, 2004; Muller, 2002; Wyatt, 2009).
To outline in more detail one of these programs, Wyatt (2009) describes a mentoring program used in Chicago public schools called “the Brotherhood”. This program is designed to help African American male high school students transition from boys to men and from at-risk students to leaders in their school and community. Its more concrete goal is to increase the graduation rate of African American male students. Started in 2004, by 2011, The Brotherhood has averaged 100 members. As of 2011, 100% of active members had graduated from high school, and 60% had continued on to college (Meier, 2011; Wyatt, 2009).

The Brotherhood meets after school weekly to discuss issues and topics related to African American male development, build leadership skills, participate in peer to peer mentoring, gain exposure to enrichment opportunities (e.g. field trips), and to practice positive conflict resolution techniques. During meetings, the students engage in discussion, and later do journaling to further explore their thoughts. To become a member, students do not need to earn a certain GPA, but once in the Brotherhood, members must pass all of their classes. The members’ grades are regularly checked, and peer tutoring is provided when needed. The researchers found that Brotherhood members earn higher grades than nonparticipants in the same population, and members report greater understanding of the importance of education and academics to the real world, and improved goal setting in the areas of academics, personal/social, and career development (Meier, 2011; Wyatt, 2009).

Another study also encourages facilitating groups, having found positive outcomes for African American high school students, using a specific program called “Empowerment Groups for Academic Success (EGAS)” (Bemak, Chi-Ying, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005). Other researchers suggest that male minority students in particular can benefit academically from what they term “mattering,” which refers to an individual’s sense of significance and acceptance within a social
group, which SEL programming often facilitates (Dixon, Griddine, & Tucker, 2010). In short, countless studies stress the effectiveness of SEL programs with African American male students, as well as the need for such programs with this population in particular (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010; Bruce, Getch, & Ziomek-Daigle, 2009; Bryan, 2005; Dixon, Griddine, & Tucker, 2010; Durlak, Dynmnicki, Schellinger, Taylor, & Weissberg, 2011; Muller, 2002; Wyatt, 2009).

**Implementation**

**Impediments to Implementation of SEL Programming**

Though research tends to support the implementation of SEL programming in schools, such programs remain underused or ineffectively used in schools in general, as well as with African American male students in particular (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000). To understand the reasons surrounding implementation for a specific population, first the principal factors affecting implementation of SEL programming in any school setting will be explored.

**Lack of Data**

As school counselors are the natural champions for programs like SEL, their involvement and support are paramount to the selection and implementation of the programs (Van Velsor, 2009). In recent years, as schools have increasingly focused on academic performance and student test scores, school counselors have lost the time and energy to devote to issues of social and emotional development (Van Velsor, 2009). While research suggests that SEL programming could in fact have profound impacts on student academic achievement, it may not be adequate to provide counselors and educators with the evidence to lobby for program implementation.

School counselors are expected to align themselves with the standards outlined by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). ASCA’s National Model for effective school counseling stresses the importance of using data driven decisions when considering program
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implementation (Sink, 2005). Additionally, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 also emphasizes the use of scientifically supported program planning (Elias, et al., 2003).

Unfortunately, in the arena of educational reforms, proving causal relationships seems to be difficult. As Sink (2005) explains, “Sharply put, no matter what research design is deployed in school counseling studies, it is virtually impossible to make airtight causal statements about the direct effects of any small-scale (proximal) educational innovation let alone systemic programs such as [comprehensive school counseling programs]” (Sink, 2005).

Indeed, while many of the studies referenced in this review seem to point toward clear recommendations for implementing appropriate SEL programming, the results are often qualitative, and may rely on the researchers’ informed interpretations of events rather than on statistical data. Further, when research is conducted on SEL programming, it is least likely to be done in high schools, which could decrease SEL programming even more at that level (Durlak, Dymnicki, Schellinger, Taylor, & Weissberg, 2011). Thus, while the conclusions that researchers draw in support of SEL programming may be valid, it may still remain insufficient to convince counselors, educators, and school administrators to implement it.

Lack of Training

According to researchers, one major requirement for effective implementation of SEL programming in a school is that the teachers be well-trained in the specific SEL program (Brackett, Elbertson, & Weissberg, 2009). This may sound self-evident, but considering the aforementioned difficulty in finding empirical support for SEL programming, it may be similarly difficult to convince schools to fund and facilitate quality training programs for staff. Indeed, Elias & Zins (2011) state that the number of professionals trained in SEL programming is inadequate, and stress the need for increased training. As a consequence of this lack of training,
schools may either fail to institute SEL programming at all, or they may attempt to implement SEL programming without training. Such disorganized efforts can have adverse effects, not only because the SEL program may not be effective, but because it may foster attitudes toward SEL programming in general. To elaborate, the failure of one SEL program can send students, staff, and communities various messages including that SEL programming in general is ineffective, that the students at a particular school or of a particular demographic are incapable of improvement, or that the school staff are incompetent (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000).

Complexities of Implementation

One repeated theme in the research is that the implementation of SEL programming in a school must be whole-hearted, school-wide, pervasive, and highly visible in order to be effective (Berends, Kirby, & Naftel, 2001; Brackett, Elbertson, & Weissberg, 2009; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Elias & Gager, 1997; Elias & Zins, 2011). As stated by one study, “For effective programming to take place and to last, a school-wide commitment, across all classrooms, teachers, and administration, should be embraced” (Brackett, Elbertson, & Weissberg, 2009, p. 1021). This requires a great deal of time, energy, and effort, so it is no surprise that SEL implementation is not always successful. Researchers tend to lament efforts that are termed “piecemeal,” that do not include coordination among staff and administration, and that are not supported school-wide, but are rather short-term, sporadic attempts to put some sort of program in place without the necessary preparation. As described in one study:

Yet, the current impact of these programs is limited because of insufficient coordination with other components of school operations and inattention to implementation and evaluation factors necessary for strong program impact and sustainability. Widespread implementation of beneficial prevention programming requires further development of
research-based, comprehensive school reform models that improve social, health, and academic outcomes; educational policies that demand accountability for fostering children’s full development; professional development that prepares and supports educators to implement programs effectively; and systematic monitoring and evaluation to guide school improvement. (Elias, et al., 2003, p. 466)

Impediments to Implementation for Specific Population

Disadvantaged Schools

Many African American students attend urban, disadvantaged schools, which can result in many issues, some of which relate to SEL program implementation (Charkow Bordeau & Fusick, 2004). First, according to some researchers, schools in poorer communities tend to employ inexperienced, poorly trained, or inadequately prepared teachers and staff. Further, such schools often fail to receive adequate professional development funds, making it difficult for these teachers to improve (Becker & Luthar, 2002). As previously noted, lack of teacher training and competence can be detrimental to effective SEL program implementation.

Regardless of teacher competence, some researchers find that at-risk schools can be under unique stressors that make supportive counseling services difficult to implement. As one study notes, “… as a response to the oft-experienced chaos and lack of structure in at-risk schools, teachers often resort to authoritarian teaching styles that limit students' abilities to express themselves, engage in identity exploration, and perform to their potential.” (Charkow Bordeau & Fusick, 2004) Since teacher involvement is generally expected in SEL programming, this can not only impede an SEL program from being implemented, but it can also prevent an SEL program from being effectively executed.
One interesting theme from the research is that though cost can play a large role in the implementation of SEL programs, some researchers note that more funding is not necessarily a prerequisite for a successful SEL program. The researchers warn against the practice of lobbing money at an issue, without considering thoughtfully where and how the money should be spent. The finding is that this kind of financial carelessness can lead to misallocation and poorly executed programs (Becker & Luthar, 2002). Additionally, some researchers note that though educators and policymakers bristle at the cost of implementing SEL programs, the gains made under the programs have been found to outweigh the costs required to implement them (Elias & Zins, 2011). Moreover, some researchers argue that the costs of failing to put such programs in place outweigh the costs of the programs themselves. As they phrased it:

Providing highly reliable schools for at-risk students is less costly than paying for further expansion of welfare, police, and prison programs. In fact, society pays six times more to maintain an uneducated adult than it pays to keep a student in school through graduation. Thus, for those who are unconvinced of the need for intervention, the economic costs incurred for failing to do so may foment a commitment to intervene. (Becker & Luthar, 2002, p. 209).

**Cultural Issues**

In addition to financial issues, SEL programming for African American students may face impediments due to cultural differences and bias. To begin, African American staff members are underrepresented, even in schools whose student populations are predominantly African American (Charkow Bordeau & Fusick, 2004; Muller, 2002). It is understandable, then, that the lack of cultural awareness or the presence of cultural bias may play a role in counseling services provided to this population. One study stated that school counselors rarely make contact
with at-risk students (a group which African American students tend to comprise). Even more notable is the study’s finding that when they do make contact it is often in the aftermath of punishment (Charkow Bordeau & Fusick, 2004). One can surmise that a positive, supportive relationship in this situation is unlikely to develop. Additionally, if counselors associate at-risk students solely with punishment and negative interactions, then they may be less likely to express interest in providing them with supportive services like SEL programming. One study did in fact find that school principals and teachers in urban schools frequently had negative attitudes toward low-income and minority students and families (Bryan, 2005).

Beyond the student-counselor dynamic, as has been noted already, cultural issues can also have an impact on school-parent relationships. According to one study, “Positive relationships between schools and families in many urban schools are infrequent because parents often do not trust the schools and school professionals in turn do not trust minority and low-income families and communities” (Bryan, 2005). Such tenuous relationships between parents and schools are described throughout the literature (Bryan, 2005; Howard & Reynolds, 2008; Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Family involvement has been found to have a significant impact on effective SEL program implementation, so a lack of positive family-school relationships could clearly be an impediment (School-Based Social and Emotional Learning SEL Programming: Current Perspectives).

**Implications for School Counselors**

Based on the research, many factors affect implementation of SEL programs in general, and with African American high school students in particular. Such factors can be complex and can make implementation a challenge. However, the outcomes of the studies suggest that the benefits of SEL programs with students in general, and with high school African American students in
particular are significant. The research indicates that the benefits outweigh the challenges, and that schools should continue to strive to implement well-designed and culturally appropriate SEL programming. If educators could use the information from this research to address the factors impeding SEL program implementation, such programming could be more frequently implemented and executed effectively, particularly with African American high school students. As a result, the nation could see higher test scores, higher graduation rates, lower incidents of violence and behavioral disruptions in schools, decreased crime rates, and innumerable other benefits to society (Elias & Zins, Social and Emotional Learning, 2011).

The researchers on this topic suggest a multitude of approaches and programs to institute, and the vast majority of researchers stress the importance of the school counselor’s role in implementation of these programs. Many of the studies emphasize the need for more appropriate student to counselor ratios, and urge counselors and administrative personnel to campaign for more counseling positions in the field (Bryan, Holcomb-McCoy, Moore-Thomas, & Day-Vines, 2009; Farmer-Hinton & Adams, 2006). As a way of integrating the outcomes described by the research, and the ASCA guidelines, the author recommends that school counselors organize their efforts into a series of five action steps in order to pursue effective implementation of SEL programming with African American high school students.

Step I: Individual Counselor Growth

First, school counselors must seek to better understand and empathize with this cultural group. Throughout the literature, the message is made clear that the school counselor’s attitude and approach with a student has a significant impact on that student’s academic and post-secondary success. To that end, school counselors must make every effort to gain cultural awareness of African American students, to better understand the challenges that they face, and
to express consistent positive expectations and confidence in their abilities. Further, because African American students may be less likely than their white peers to seek out their counselors, it would be advisable for the counselors themselves to create opportunities to reach out to this group and to make contact with them under positive circumstances.

Step II: Gather Data

As recommended by ASCA, school counselors should always use data to support their decisions, so counselors should gather appropriate data to determine what types of SEL programming would be most effective in their schools. This can be achieved by conducting focus group discussions, retrieving school data-base statistics (e.g. attendance, GPAs, graduation rates), or administering surveys to students, teachers, parents, or any other related group. An example of one such survey is provided at the end of this review in the Appendix.

Step III: Form Partnerships

School counselors serve as liaisons between many groups in and related to schools, so in order to implement effective SEL programming, counselors must ensure that relationships between key players are strong. To begin, counselors must of course reach out to African American students and their parents. If a school has a cultural liaison or other culturally appropriate leader, it would also be advisable to collaborate with these individuals and to keep them involved whenever possible. Counselors should always communicate closely with school administration whenever attempting to make changes or take widespread action. Other partnerships to consider would be intra-school programs like special education or alternative program staff, extracurricular departments (e.g. athletics, art, drama, music, dance, volunteering, etc.), or organizations within the community.

Step IV: Take Action
Considering the data collected and the needs that have been determined, a school counselor can then begin to put an SEL program in place. Such programs can include mentoring partnerships with individuals in the community, counseling groups, student success groups, academic support, post-secondary information sessions, peer mentoring, staff trainings, or community connections (e.g. field trips to companies or colleges, volunteer programs, career fairs, etc.). Many of the studies cited in this review outline specific SEL programs that have been found to be effective, and that are ready to be implemented in more schools.

Step V: Post-Assessment

After an SEL program has been attempted, counselors must then assess the effectiveness of the program. As in Step I, data can be gathered in various ways including standardized test scores or attendance statistics. Surveys like the one included in this review could be administered prior to SEL program implementation as well as after the program has been executed. This can provide counselors with insight into where the program may have succeeded, what needs remained unaddressed, or even if new issues were uncovered throughout the process. Post-Assessment is crucial in ensuring that an SEL program is reasonable and successful for a particular school, so it should not be omitted.

Adlerian Implications

SEL programming relates closely to many of Individual Psychology’s most fundamental concepts. Two such concepts are that of belonging and contributing. As Adlerian theory would argue, to belong is the strongest motivating factor for people, and to contribute to one’s community is the only means of combating the feelings of inferiority that are universal within mankind (Griffith & Powers, 2007). SEL programming can provide students with an opportunity to feel valued and accepted for who they are, and to feel that they matter, or that they belong.
Such programming can also allow them to contribute to their fellow students, their school, or their community. This can be particularly profound for students who feel alienated or marginalized, as African American students frequently do.

This contribution to society leads into the concept of social interest, another of Adler’s basic concepts. Social interest refers to an individual’s concern for others and the community around him or her, as well as that individual’s expression of that concern. Adlerian scholars use the following description to encompass the spirit of the term: “To see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another.” (Ansbacher, 1964, p. 135) It is this empathy, or concern for one’s community that keeps society moving forward in a positive way. While the seed of social interest is universally inborn, Adler asserts that social interest must be fostered in children. “Social interest is innate, …however, that social interest must be developed, and that can be developed only when the child is already in the midst of life.” (Ansbacher, 1964, p. 134) When Adler uses the phrase “in the midst of life”, he means that social interest must be developed through genuine interpersonal interaction, rather than through classroom lessons or abstract philosophical discussion. With this in mind, SEL programming can serve as real-life experiences that can support the development of social interest in these students.

As previously mentioned, Adler believed that all people are burdened with feelings of inferiority. These feelings are present from birth, and can place barriers in the way of an individual’s happiness and success in life. Adler also explains that people develop self-concepts, or mental image of oneself that can present challenges (Griffith & Powers, 2007). These issues are especially relevant to the population of African American high school students. It has already been discussed that these students may feel inferior or inadequate among their higher-scoring,
higher SES peers. African American students may also have self-concepts that rely on the rejection of academic success or participation in what is perceived as “white culture.” Because of these factors, it is all the more important that these students be given directed attention and support.

These feelings of inferiority can lead to a sense of discouragement, which in turn can lead to unhealthy, unproductive, or disruptive behavior. Adler posits that those who feel discouraged seek to overcome this sense of inferiority by pursuing a feeling of superiority over others. He would consider this to be behaving on the “useless side of life. Adler would also categorize such negative behavior into four different goals. He explains that these individuals seek to obtain undue attention, gain power or control, enact revenge, or display their inadequacy. African American students, like all people, can operate under any of these goals, but “display of inadequacy” would seem to be especially prevalent in this population (Griffith & Powers, 2007).

The most effective way to offer support and to address these challenges, as well as many others, is to provide students with encouragement. As Adlerian scholars explain, “To encourage is to promote and activate the [social interest], that is, the sense of belonging, value, worthwhileness, and welcome in the human community” (Griffith & Powers, 2007, p. 20). SEL programming allows schools to offer encouragement to students not only through the activities and experiences of the program itself, but also through the mere message to students that they are valuable enough to warrant such a program.

Conclusion

While schools today face new challenges in meeting the evolving needs of their students, the achievement gap separating African American and white students is of particular concern for educators. Many factors contribute to the achievement gap, including economic challenges and
cultural differences. Though schools continue to explore ways to address the underlying causes of the disparity, the gap persists. This review described some specific issues that may remain unaddressed by schools when working with African American students, including the lack of parental involvement, and lack of emotional and post-secondary support.

In consideration of these needs, it is recommended that schools (and school counselors in particular) seek to implement Social and Emotional Learning programs that would be used with African American students. Research indicates that when a student’s social and emotional health is supported, his or her academic performance can improve significantly. Before implementing a program, educators must complete research and explore multiple options, as SEL programming must be appropriate to the particular population and must be fully integrated into the school’s environment in order to be successful.

While research exists that explores the effects of particular social and emotional learning programs with African American students, the argument for SEL programming would be stronger with more widespread research on the topic. Many of the current studies follow smaller groups of students within one school experiencing a particular SEL program (e.g. a counseling group). Taken all together, these studies demonstrate a compelling pattern in the effectiveness of SEL programming, but the message could be more powerful if the research showed a broader, more cohesive picture of the approach’s effects on a wide range of African American students. In order for a school to make the significant investment that SEL programming involves, overwhelming proof of its efficacy must be readily available. As a result, the research on this topic must be undeniably convincing.
References


Paul, D. G. (2004). The train has left: The No Child Left Behind act leaves black and Latino literacy learners waiting at the station. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 47*(8), 648-656.


Appendix A

Student Experience Questionnaire

Thank you for participating in this survey! The purpose of this questionnaire is to learn about your experiences as a student while at this school, so that we can design better services to meet your needs. Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Your responses will be anonymous.

1. Is there an adult at this school that you can go to when you need help? Check one:
   __Yes    __No    __Not Sure

2. Do you have friends at this school? Check one:
   __Yes    __No    __Not Sure

3. How many days in the last month did you use illegal drugs? Circle one:
   a. 0    b. 1-3    c. 4-8    d. 9+

4. How many days in the last month did you consume alcohol? Circle one:
   a. 0    b. 1-3    c. 4-8    d. 9+

5. In the past month, how many times were you absent from school? Circle one:
   a. 0    b. 1-3    c. 4-8    d. 9+

6. In the past month, how many times did you arrive to school late? Circle one:
   a. 0    b. 1-3    c. 4-8    d. 9+

7. Are you on track to graduate at the end of your senior year? Check one:
   __Yes    __No    __Not Sure
8. Circle the sentence that most closely matches your plans for after high school:
   a. I’m not sure what I’m doing after high school
   b. I plan to continue my education (college or other schooling)
   c. I plan to have a job after high school
   d. I plan to travel, volunteer, or work on a project
   e. other

9. Please circle your current Grade Point Average (GPA):
   a. 0-2.0        b. 2.0-2.5        c. 2.5-3.0        d. 3.0-3.5        e. 3.5-4.0

10. In the past month, how many times were you disciplined by school staff?
    a. 0        b. 1-2        c. 3-5        d. 6+

Thank you again for your responses! Please place this survey in the drop-box in the Counseling Office.
### Table 4.
States in which the African American subgroup had the lowest percentage proficient among racial/ethnic subgroups at all tested grades (3-8 and one high school grade), 2008

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