Culture or Disorder? African American Children Identified as Having Behavioral/Emotional Disorders in Special Education


African American students, particularly males, are overrepresented in special education classes. They make up 17% of the U.S. public school population, but 26.4% of youth identified to receive educational services for children with emotional and behavioral challenges, whereas the referral rates for European, Hispanic, Native, and Asian Americans are proportional to their representation in the public school population. In this article, the author suggests that culturally-based forms of expression that differ from established classroom norms may be misinterpreted. The behavior of African American males is perceived differently than those of their school-aged counterparts. For example, high levels of activity or “verve” manifested in African American boys is often mislabeled as ADD/ADHD, resulting in disproportionately high rates of suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to classrooms with extra behavioral supports.

The author describes the results of an ethnographic study of expressions of African American culture and coping styles among students identified as having behavioral/emotional disorders (BED). The study was designed to examine coping styles enacted in special education classes that demonstrate African American cultural norms, to describe teacher perception of those behaviors, and to discuss the possible impact on academic success.

**Methods**

Thirteen field observations (2-3 hours each) of student behavior and interviews with classroom teachers were completed at a Midwestern, urban public school over a four-month period. Extensive field notes were taken and teacher interviews were tape-recorded. Data were collected on 21 males and 2 females, 10-12 years of age, observed in two special education classrooms as well as during lunch and recess periods. African Americans made up 61% of the students observed in two classrooms and European Americans 39%. Students were observed during class, recess, and lunchtime. Both instructors were African American. Data were analyzed by identification of themes and patterns of observed coping strategies and displays of African American cultural dimensions.

**Results**

The author notes nine cultural dimensions emphasizing expressive individualism, the “cultivation of distinctive personality and proclivity for spontaneous and genuine personal expression” (p. 654) and three active coping strategies employed by the students that manifested as behavior outside of expected classroom norms. These strategies were: (a) dissembling – behavior that camouflages subversive acts and conceals true feelings, (b) game playing – attempts to outwit the power broker, and (c) defiance – aggressive techniques used to defy the system. The author reports examples of the observed behavior and explains that these active coping strategies, although perceived as challenging behaviors, are attempts to “save face” and preserve a sense of belonging in environments that do not capitalize on the psychosocial strengths developed from their cultural frame of reference, and thus thwart academic achievement. Also noted was the fact that when students were academically engaged the teachers used fewer behavioral or disciplinary measures. The children were observed expressing learning styles that were relational, vervistic, and communal. However, most of the observed instructional activities used only one type of learning technique – either visual, auditory, or memorization. This was interpreted as failing to provide a supportive learning environment for students whose sociocultural frame of reference is multidimensional.
Implications for Practice

Although the present study was limited in sample size and scope, the findings offer insight that may aid educators in meeting the academic needs of African American youth by using instructional interventions contextualized within an appropriate cultural framework. This supports previous research on teacher-effectiveness that has shown that African American students benefit academically from culturally responsive pedagogy (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). The author recommends that educators, and those who design, implement, and evaluate instruction for African American children, develop practices that are three-pronged, emphasizing high academic, behavioral and cultural responsiveness standards.

Reference