

Culturally Appropriate Authentic Assessments: Exploring the Use of Authentic Assessments for African American Children at Risk for Special Education in Urban Settings

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Abstract: Authentic assessments provide an alternative to informal and formal assessments which may reduce the number of African Americans in special education programs. This literature review will explore the use of authentic assessment for at risk students in special education programs in urban settings.

Learning disability and emotional disorders continue to be overrepresented in minority children and have become a national dilemma that occurs in urban educational settings. Learning disability is “an inability to learn at an expected rate despite the fact that they [children] have experienced traditionally adequate instructional programs and typically have process-oriented deficits, as opposed to effect-oriented deficits” (Bernstein & Tiegerman, 1993, p. 328). Emotional disorders include “children or youth with schizophrenia, affective or anxiety disorders, in which behavioral or emotional responses of the individual in school are so different from his/her generally accepted, age appropriate, ethnic or cultural norms that they adversely affect performance in a variety of areas” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2005).

The most prominent group of minority students placed in special education classes are African Americans, followed by Hispanics. For the purpose of this literature review the term African American refers to black students of African or Caribbean decent, born in the United States, who refer to themselves as black, non-Hispanic. African American students are 2.9 times more likely than White students to be labeled mentally retarded, 1.9 times more likely to be labeled emotionally disturbed, and 1.3 times more likely to be labeled having a learning disability (National Alliance of Black School Educators & ILIAD Project, 2002).

The educational status of African Americans in urban schools has continually received scrutiny, due in part to the deplorable status these schools. Urban schools have low retention rates and test scores, comparatively poor grades, and disproportional representation of minorities in special education (Harris, Brown, Ford, & Richardson, 2004). This over-representation of African American students in special education has been a concern for over three decades; however, the attempts of the educational system to address and modify this problem have failed.

African Americans have been placed and maintained in special programs based on their perceived abilities rather than the actual abilities to interact within social constructs, including academic, behavioral, linguistic, and/or emotional. Referrals to special education are more than likely initiated during the elementary school years and are often based on formal and informal assessments and teachers’ misunderstanding of students’ cultural needs (Losen, Orfield, & Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2002). African Americans display the academic behaviors that do not emulate their non-minority peers; African Americans are more expressive, verbal, field dependent (in that they require contextual instruction), relational, and affectively oriented. African American students are expected to perform and test within a culture they may have little or no understanding of (Daunic, Correa, Reyes-Blanes, & Maria, 2004) and are expected to meet the same expectations as their peers from other cultural backgrounds. As a result, these students become frustrated, develop self-doubt stigmas, feel lost, and intimidated when instructed and

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evaluated in traditional settings. The term disability carries a distinct biological marker, in which the social stigma of the term denotes negativity and stereotypes (Conner & Ferri, 2005), especially for African American students.

The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University identified teachers' methods of teaching and concluded most teachers did not take into account the learning styles of their students, especially minorities (Losen et al., 2002). Without a basic knowledge of the needs of African American students, teachers allow for the same scenario for some African American students. They take formal or informal tests that do not account for their different learning styles and have their tests graded through one modality. Then, the students are erroneously labeled and assigned to special education (Daunic et al., 2004). Using research-based data teachers can gain an understanding of academic needs of African American students and provide those who continuously fail tests the opportunity to receive alternating forms of assessments.

Authentic assessments can be used as a secondary source and an alternative testing option for African Americans who have proven to be unsuccessful with standardized tests. Authentic assessments are often referred to as performance-based assessments, and the format allows for students to engage in real-world tasks and scenario-based problem solving more than traditional assessments such as multiple choice or true/false pencil-and-paper based tests (Darling-Hammond, 1997). In addition, authentic assessments are mostly open-ended and can be answered using multiple approaches. Authentic assessments can take the form of performances, projects, writings, demonstrations, debates, simulations, presentations, or other open-ended tasks (Cheek, 1993; Dana & Tippins, 1993).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the literature on the use of authentic assessments on African American students at risk for referral to special education. The over-representation of African Americans in special education has had a significantly negative impact on their achievement in school. The topic of over-representation has been significantly researched yet the use of authentic assessments as an alternative testing source for African American students is under-researched. The authors hope to contribute to the need for an increased effort toward the development of authentic assessments for African Americans students who are at risk for referral into special education programs.

Method

To collect data, we searched five databases for journal articles as well as Florida International University Library Catalog using key descriptors. The databases were: Psych Info, Educational Full Text, ERIC, Wilson Omnifile Full Text Mega, and Fact Search. The database searches were done on: ERIC - May 26, 2006, Psych INFO- May 27, 2006, Fact Search – June 7, 2006, Education Full Text – May 26, 2006, and Wilson Omni File – June 7, 2006. Each of the key descriptors, African American and Black American, was combined with the following key words: authentic assessment, achievement gap, intervention, ethics, academic achievement, at risk students, special education, overrepresentation, disproportionality, emotional disability, and learning disability. Incidences of authentic assessments and their use with urban minority students and the success rates of African American students as a result of authentic assessments in school-based settings were also searched as underlying thematic focus. To be included in this literature review, the research had to be published between 1990 and 2006.

The search resulted in 23,942 hits. ERIC database produced the most hits (7,548), followed by PsycINFO (6,942), Wilson Omni File (5,321), Education Full Text (3,923), and Fact Search (208). The distribution of hits resulted from using the key descriptor Black American is provided in Table 1 and African American in Table 2.

Table 1

Results of Combination of African American and Key Words by Database

Descriptors & Black American	Wilson Omni File Full Text Mega	ERIC	Psych INFO	Education Full Text	Fact Search
Authentic assessments	3	12	0	0	0
Achievement gap	52	301	22	102	0
Intervention	650	394	163	228	7
Ethics	240	60	21	72	0
Academic achievement	337	1,765	139	507	0
At risk	650	756	416	249	5
Special education	656	929	27	1,139	1
Overrepresentation	48	40	6	31	0
Disproportionality	5	6	2	3	0
Emotional disability	5	22	4	3	4
Learning disability	7	34	4	10	2

We declined the articles with studies that were too broad. We chose to use a deductive analysis for the selection of the articles because we had a preconceived focus related to African American and authentic assessments.

Table 2

Results of Combination of African American and Key Words by Databases

Descriptors & African American	Wilson Omnifile Full Text Mega	ERIC	Psych Info	Education Full Text	Fact Search
Authentic assessments	2	12	2	2	0
Achievement gap	51	247	1,309	106	8
Intervention	669	40	1,270	226	10
Ethics	173	61	45	36	1
Academic achievement	368	1,259	1,021	399	8
At risk	583	710	2,225	213	139
Special education	716	796	214	943	18
Overrepresentation	62	37	29	38	3
Disproportionality	5	11	9	3	1
Emotional disability	20	22	5	4	0
Learning disability	19	34	9	9	1

Discussion

Urban special educational programs in inner cities face unique challenges. The design of appropriate educational programs for urban special education students needs to be examined. Morse (2001) provides reasons why educational programs should meet the needs of this population. Morse addresses the fundamental differences between urban schools and rural or suburban schools, focusing on the labeling of students in urban special education and the evolution of their disabilities. Urban special education students differ from their peers in that they require a more extensive form of instruction that involves authentic, culturally relevant activities to meet their individual needs. Additionally, students in urban schools are susceptible to at-risk factors, such as poverty, single parent households, higher dropout rates, and parents with a lowered educational level.

Standardized Assessment and African American Students

Race as an academic achievement predictor is important when determining the appropriate assessments to use for authentic assessments. Traditionally, schools systems track performance on achievement test by race (African American, Hispanic American, Native American, Asian American, and White) to compare different groups of students and their performance on standardized assessments. African American and Hispanic students are at a disadvantage compared to their White peers on achievement tests. The knowledge of being tested on their academic abilities (stereotype threat) inhibits African American students from performing at higher achievement levels (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002). In a study comparing reading and math performance of African American and European American students in Ohio's urban districts the big eight average (Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown), African American students' reading performance was an average of 28.5%, where White students performed an average of 36.9%. In math African American students performed 16.3% on average whereas White students performed at 41.0% (Ohio Department of Education, 1999). These discrepancies continue to support the gap in achievement between African Americans and their White peers. The implications for African American student are critical and students need to be exposed to high quality, well-designed assessments that take into consideration the risk factors associated with certain racial groups. Designing appropriate authentic assessments will aid in lessening the gap in performance of students from different races.

Authentic Assessment: Steps to Creating Achievement in African Americans

Authentic assessments provides for modification of curricular forms of assessments that alters the assumed outcome of African American learners (as to prevent harm or improve their academic achievement). Creating appropriate alternative assessments for African American students involves the following steps. The first step involves an intervention that focuses on redesigning the urban school by incorporating a school-wide implementation of culturally responsive practices, such as teacher dialogue, student cultural activities, and parental involvement. Next, schools must infuse authentic assessments that involve content-rich pedagogy that is relatable for minority, high-poverty or urban poor populations and focus on the curriculum, assessments, teachers, and systems to monitor students progress (see Table 3). Finally, designing instructional practices, such as a comprehensive curriculum, in which goals, objectives, and parental input and involvement are aligned with the diversity of students' cultures and learning styles provides for a more appropriate means of providing a quality education for African American children at risk for special education in urban settings.

Table 3

Key Attributes of Effective Urban Schools

1	Use standards extensively to design curriculum and instruction, assess student work, and evaluate teachers.
2	Lengthen instructional time in reading and mathematics as a strategy for increasing the number of students meeting the standards.
3	Use the available flexibility in the law to spend more on professional development for tractors that can improve instructional practice.
4	Have comprehensive systems to monitor students' mastery of standard through authentic assessments and provide extra support to students who need it.
5	Tightly focus parental involvement efforts on helping students meet standards by helping parents understand the standards and assessments formats and procedures.
6	Tend to be located in districts and/or states that have accountability systems with built-in consequences for school staff.

Note: Adapted from the *Alliance for Excellent Education* (2002, p. 20).

Students' self-esteem is related to their academic success. Teaching and assessing minority students must involve honoring ancestral culture and building on students' strengths (Delpit, 1995). Creating authentic assessments that involve tasks such as oral retellings or tactile physical activities may be a better alternative for African American students. Once students realize their culture and community are valued, they will take pride in their community and will be more apt to perform better on assessments.

Implications

Designing appropriate assessments for African Americans with and without disabilities will allow them to become full participants in their academic careers. Policy makers should understand the uniqueness of these students. Designing school curriculum and assessments that provide an embedded alternative to assessment will meet their individual needs (Morse, 2001), allow for a more equal playing field, and help bridge the gap between this population and their White counterparts. African American students must be enrolled in schools that nurture and support them while stimulating high quality instruction. Performance of African Americans, more so than other students, is influenced to a large degree by the social support and encouragement that they receive from teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Noguera, 2003). Any negative interactions will have the same effect, however, in a diminishing manner.

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