

Identifying the School Support Networks of African American Boys

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

Low educational achievement contributes to and perpetuates socioeconomic, health, and other inequalities for African Americans across the life course (Holzman, 2004; Mincy, R. B., Lewis Jr., C. E., & Han, W., 2006; Polite & Davis, 1999). We have solidly established the important role that culture plays in the experience of teaching and learning for African American and other minority children (Delpit, 1995; Ford et al., 2000; Foster & Peele, 1999; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Scherff, 2005; Wlodkowski & Ginsburg, 1995). In recent years, we have gained insight from African American children about what they find supportive and what they find troubling in their school experiences (Ferguson, 2000; Lewis & Kim, 2008; Thompson, 2004; Wilson & Corbett, 2001). Finally, we have become keenly aware of the importance of parental involvement in the education of children (Epstein 1994; Jaynes, 2003, 2007; Sheldon, 2007), and the role that social support and social networks play in the academic outcomes of African American children (Carbonaro, 1999; Coleman, 1988, 1990; Crosnoe, 2004). However, many African American children, especially from low-income families, live in family structures and systems that do not reflect the assumptions of family involvement and support literatures. The purpose of this study was to identify the structure, content, and quality of school-related support for African American boys from low-income and working class families.

METHOD

Sample and Procedures

The following questions guided this study:

- 1) What kinds of school-related support do African American boys in elementary and middle school receive?
- 2) From whom do they receive school-related support?

We interviewed 16 African American boys in grades 4-6 to develop egocentric social support maps. Given the perceptions of school personnel can affect school outcomes, we asked school staff to nominate two types of students: boys that they viewed had relatively good support, and boys who they viewed as having relatively weak support for their education. Through semi-structured dialogues, we documented children's subjective appraisal of their social support and allowed them to report on the quality and differentiation of their social worlds (Reid et al., 1989). We identified individuals whom the boys reported as providing actual and potential instrumental, emotional, and informational support.

Most of the boys came from low-income families (i.e., qualified for free or reduced lunch).

We interviewed each child individually, in a private space at the host school. The boys consistently answered the interview questions thoughtfully, taking their time to formulate responses, and asked clarifying questions. They often provided concrete examples to support and elaborate on some of their responses.

Analysis

We analyzed these data throughout the data collection process, and included a series of content, descriptive, and dimensional analyses. Through a content analyses, we looked for patterns in the structure and content of the boys' reported networks. We organized the boys' individual responses into school-related network maps, and grouped supportive individuals for each boy by type of support.

RESULTS

The Support Boys Identify that Help Them Be "Good Students"

- 1) Instrumental Support for Academic Achievement
 - ✦ Help with homework
 - ✦ Insure the child's accountability
 - ✦ Provide enrichment or extra practice of school-related skills
 - ✦ Communicate with other adults and institutions

"[My father] had told my mom to be at the school...to come to school in the morning and sit in the office, and come and see me....She give me a 'test,' that say 'How do you think I know how you did in school today?'"

- 2) Support to Develop School-oriented Dispositions
 - ✦ Talk about expectations, give encouragement, share life lessons and strategies

"[My mother] tells me what happened at her job...and what she did do wrong and she admitted that she did it....And she got a week off of work, 'cause she told her boss the truth....It told me to tell the truth and not blame it on other people."

- ✦ Reward and punish
- ✦ Create opportunities to develop personal qualities and values

"[My mother] teach me not to be lazy....I have to clean, wash dishes, take out the garbage, shovel, do my chores, then I can go outside."

- ✦ Model and practice school-like situations

"If we play school at home, and [my brother] do all the things that [the teacher] be doing...and like if we go outside, and he going to say that's our field trip, and then he'll say, 'stay close, stay close,' and that's what they doing on a field trip."

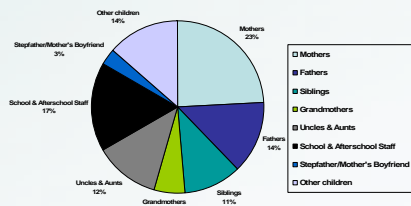
- 3) Support for the Care of Basic Needs
 - ✦ Insure care of practical needs
 - ✦ Provide emotional care and security

"It helps me a lot by knowing that [my mother's] really going to be there. Like when I get in trouble or something, or I need help with something. Then that makes me a lot happier so then I can concentrate up in school."

Who Provides Support

The 16 boys identified a total of 117 individuals who provide them with school-related support (range: 3-11 individuals identified; average: 7.3 individuals identified). These individuals included parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles, school and after school staff, friends, cousins, family friends, and the parents of their friends.

Example: Individuals Who Help with Homework



DISCUSSION

The Importance of Extended Family

The majority of the boys (13) received school-related support from extended family members. The support provided from extended family members often supplemented support provided primarily by mothers (6 boys) or by both parents (4 boys). For some boys (3), equal amounts of support were provided by immediate and extended family members.

	Mother (HH1)	Brother (HH1)	Uncle (HH1)	Grandma (HH2, non-local)	Aunt (HH3, non-local)	Friend (school)
Homework	X	X	X			
Bad day	X			X		
Award	X			X	X	
Trouble	X					X

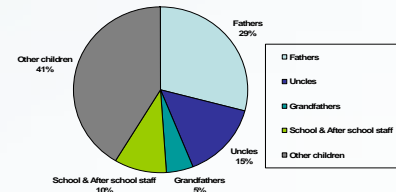
	Mother (HH1)	Father (HH2, non-local)	Aunt (HH3, local)	Grandma (HH4, non-local)	Grandpa (HH4, non-local)	Aunt (HH5, non-local)	Uncle (HH6, non-local)
Homework	X	X	X				
Bad day				X	X	X	X
Award	X	X					
Trouble	X	X					

	Mother (HH1)	Father (HH1)	Grandma (HH2, local)	Grandma (HH3, local)
Homework	X	X	X	X
Bad day	X	X	X	X
Award	X	X		
Trouble	X	X	X	X

Support from Males

Males were significant sources of support for the majority of the boys (14). Most often male providers of support were fathers, both co-residential and not, but others included uncles, grandfathers, school and after school staff, and siblings, cousins or friends. Males provided both instrumental and emotional forms of school support.

Male Providers of Emotional Support (Bad Day and Trouble)



Males comprised 47% (41 of 88) of the individuals boys identified as people they would turn to for emotional support when they have had a bad day or are in trouble. Boys often named other male children, including friends, brothers, and cousins, as providers of emotional support.