INCREASING PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AMONG ADOLESCENT AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

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ABSTRACT

African American adolescents disproportionately perform poorly compared to peers in both behavioral and academic aspects of their educational experience. In this study, African American male students participated in an after-school program involving tutoring, group counseling, and various enrichment activities. All students were assessed regarding their behavioral changes using attendance, discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions reports. The Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test (KBIT) and the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement (KTEA) were used to assess the adolescents' improvement in their skills in reading and mathematics. After the end of the two-year program, initial results showed that the adolescents had increased their daily attendance, decreased discipline referrals, and had no suspensions or expulsions. These results also indicated that although the students entered the program at different skill levels, they were assessed to have the ability to function at their appropriate grade level. Their average improvement in basic skills was at least two grade levels. Implications drawn from the findings include: (a) there is a need to emphasize appropriate assessment prior to beginning a skill improvement program; (b) a need to emphasize the use of individualized learning plans and tutors; and (c) a need to further investigate the role of assessment and intervention in after-school programming in order to close the achievement gap.

Behavioral Issues

Recent studies have indicated that African American adolescent male students are more prone to truancy and aggressive behavior in school environments than peers of other races (Alexander, Entwisle, &

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Olson, 2001). Within this at-risk group, African American adolescent male students stand alone in terms of the vast accumulation of negative factors affecting their future (Smith, 2004; Comer, 2004; Ferguson, 2000). For example, in the Minneapolis School system, enrollment of black and white students is nearly equal, but 43% of all suspended students were black males versus 14% of white males (Fremon & Renfrow-Hamilton, 2001). Research has shown that when black male students are compared to other students by gender and race, they consistently rank lowest in academic achievement (Ogbu, 2003), have the worst attendance records (Voelkle, Welte, & Wieczorek, 1999), are suspended and expelled the most often (Raffaele-Mendez, 2003; Roderick, 2003), are most likely to drop out of school, and most often fail to graduate from high school or earn a GED (Pinkney, 2000; Pollard, 1993).

Achievement Gap

The linking of academic achievement with clinical assessment and remediation has not been fully examined when attempting to help African American male adolescents. Because of the lack of skill achievement within this population, federal monies have been earmarked for improving skills and fulfilling the expectations of "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) legislation and state proficiency testing.

In the United States, African American adolescents disproportionately attend large, urban, comprehensive schools that have a high concentration of low-socioeconomic-status. Academic achievement and graduation rates in many of these schools are very low in comparison to national averages (Baker, 2005). These students are at higher risk for school failure, special education assignment, suspension, expulsion, and school violence (Ferguson, 2003).

Other researchers have attempted to connect high dropout rates and school failure of African American male adolescents with increased violence among this age group (Noguera, 2003). For example, African American male adolescents lead the nation in homicide, both as victims and perpetrators, have the greatest rate of suicide, and have the highest rate of incarceration, conviction, and arrest. One factor that has been consistently associated with the achievement gap among these students is poverty. For example, one out of three African American male adolescents is raised in a poor household (Carnoy, 1994). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2003), 24% of adolescents attending urban schools represent the highest percentage of households that are at the poverty level. These students also experience a lack of access to health care, inadequate nutrition,

crime-ridden neighborhoods, and access to sufficient education (Clark, 1991; Noguera, 2003). School facilities are limited, funding is scarce, and the community often does not provide support for their schools.

In almost every category of academic failure, African American male adolescents are excessively represented (Dallmann-Jones, 2002; Entwisle, 2004). One study documented that only 2% of African American boys enrolled in the public school system of a large Midwestern U.S. city achieved a cumulative grade point average of at least a 3 on a 4-point scale. The consensus among researchers is that minority students are lagging behind their counterparts and not achieving academically (Dimitriadis, 2001). According to the Education Trust, 61% of African American students performed below basic levels on an eighth-grade measure of math attainment in comparison to 21% of Caucasian students. By the end of high school, African American students' math and reading skills are comparable to white eighth graders (Hoffman & Llagas (2003).The graduation rate in 2001 for black adolescents was 55%, a 2% increase since 1988 (Greene & Winters, 2002).

Academic achievement of African American male adolescents is critically influenced by the social environment (Clark 1991). The home life of African American male adolescents is quite different from that of their white peers. Many do not have as many resources for their educational needs. Family support may be lacking if the school environment denies their cultural expression and heritage (Baker, 2005; Pinkney, 2000). In addition to minimizing their academic abilities, many black adolescents limit contact with other students and increase contact with same-race peers to help maintain positive self-esteem and minimize stress (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005).

African American adolescent male students have poor self-evaluation regarding their academic abilities. They lack motivation to perform and achieve because they believe that their teachers do not expect much of them and do not care. Black adolescent students are repeatedly denied access to adequate education, are subjected to low teacher expectations, and often placed in special education classes and excluded from school (Pollard, 1993).

Participants

African American adolescent students (n = 33) who had been expelled or suspended from school at least one time were included in this research. The age range was between 13 and 17 years (M = 15). In addition, 69% had been suspended from 2 or more home schools. The students had averaged over 40 days absent or truant the previous year with over 35% being absent 50 days or more. All students in our sample

had at least 20 discipline referrals the previous year with 18% averaging over 40 discipline referrals in that period. Upon arrival at the school, they were immediately enrolled in an hour long tutoring intervention program after school as well as group counseling, enrichment and social activities. All had been assigned to an alternative school because of previous aggression behavior and school failure. All were eligible for free and reduced cost school lunch programs and all families met federal poverty guidelines.

Description of After-School program

All students enrolled in the after-school program were students of a new alternative school in the city school district of Youngstown, Ohio. This school district of over 6,000 students copes with a variety of issues that are inherent in urban schools, including a high rate of poverty, a lack of funding, and minimal parent involvement. The graduation rate in the district is approximately 55% with the rates for African American adolescent males approximately 10% lower. In addition, educational attainment of adults in the community is often below high school graduation.

This project was initially funded through state and federal monies primarily by a Century 21 after-school project grant. The program team involved a significant number of local community agencies including mental health, city library, cultural and recreational organizations, and the Mahoning County Educational Services Center. This team helped develop the grant effort and provide leadership for the after-school project components.

METHOD

Each student upon entering the after-school program was evaluated using The Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test, Second Edition (KBIT) and the Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement-Second Edition (KTEA). Comparison of the results provided a predictor of how well the student would perform in academic subjects. The KBIT established a reliable normative assessment of intelligence based on verbal and nonverbal abilities while the KTEA provided a flexible, thorough assessment of each student's key skills in reading and math.

Two years after the inception of the program, students were re-tested using the KTEA. Each student attended an after-school program for approximately 3 hours, five days a week. Activities varied each day and consisted of tutoring, group counseling/social skills training, cultural, and recreational activities.

Behavioral Changes

Upon completion of the two-year program, the results were reported regarding attendance/truant behavior (Table 1), discipline referrals (Table 2), and expulsion suspensions (Table 3).

Academic Achievement

Results of this study indicated that almost all participants were of average intelligence and increased their basic skills in reading and mathematics (see Table 4 and Table 5).

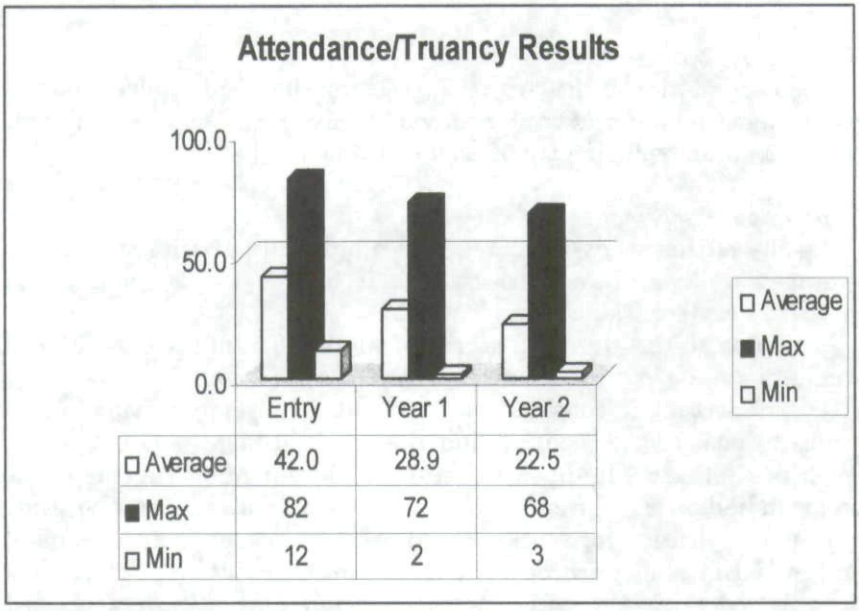
According to the standard scores of the KBIT and the Post KTEA, students met or exceeded their predictive ability scores.

It is important to consider that student achievement prior to program initiation was negative and that each student was two grade levels behind peers. It appears that the achievement of students in the program had no correlation with previous academic reports. The study indicated a positive correlation of .96 between academic improvement and the KBIT ability scores. It appears that there was a positive relationship between the after-school program and achievement test scores.

DISCUSSION

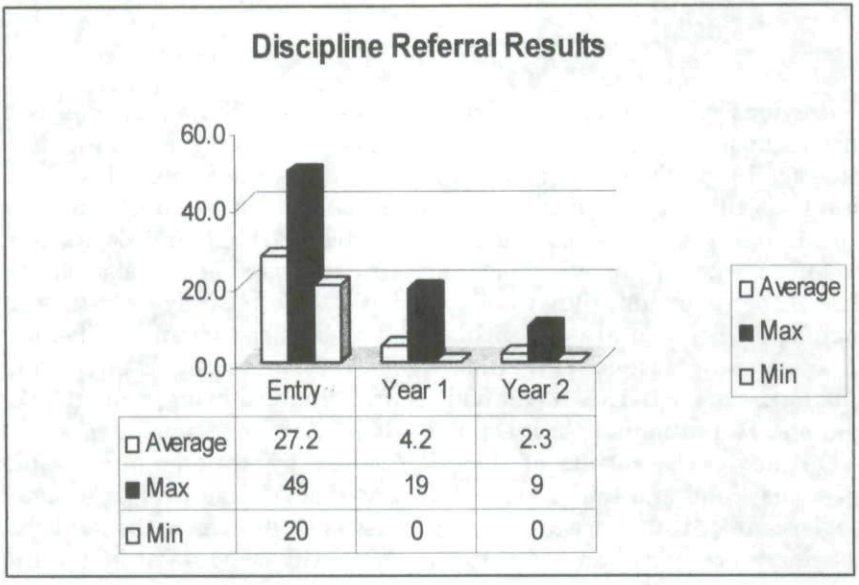
Previous research has shown mixed results on the effectiveness of after-school programming with students of poverty (McDonald & Sayger, 1998; Noguera, 2003; Simmons, Black, & Zhou, 1991). The results of this study indicate that comprehensive after-school intervention is effective in increasing academic achievement and decreasing negative behavior among adolescent African American male students. The students in our study were considered to be severely at risk, with significant behavioral problems as well as being academically behind their peers by at least two grade levels. Intervention in the program included such activities as individual and group tutoring; cultural, social and recreational activities; and nutritional meals and snacks.

Obviously, the results of this study have limitations; our sample size was small and limited to severely at-risk African American male adolescents. Attendance at our program was high because the students considered the program as a reward. Since all students attended the program, this decision negated the use of a control group. However,



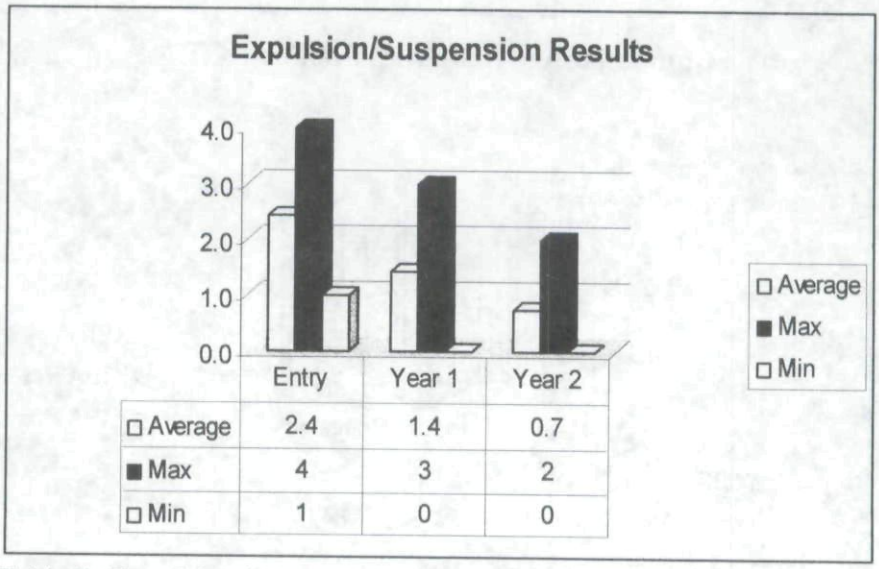
	Entry	Year 1	Year 2
Average	42.0	28.9	22.5
Max	82	72	68
Min	12	2	3

Table 1: Attendance/Truancy Results



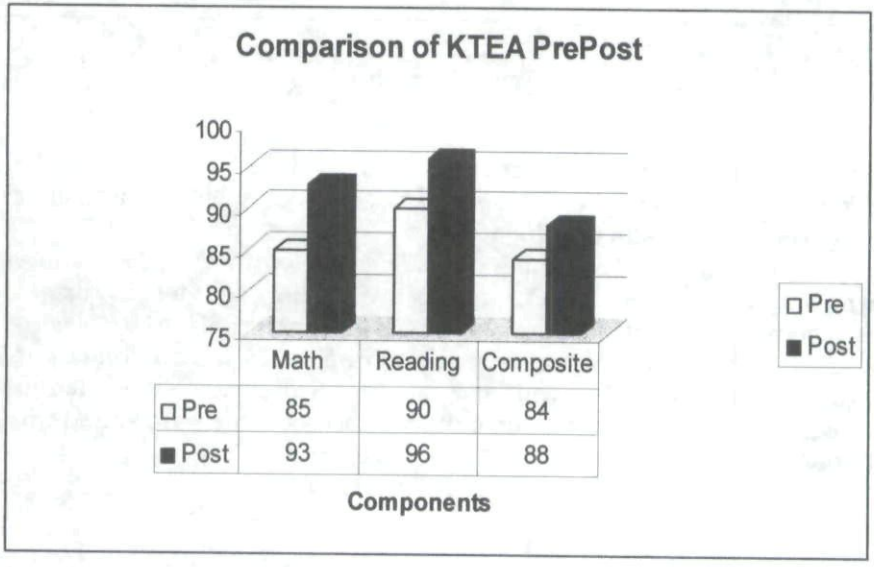
	Entry	Year 1	Year 2
Average	27.2	4.2	2.3
Max	49	19	9
Min	20	0	0

Table 2: Discipline Referral Results



	Entry	Year 1	Year 2
Average	2.4	1.4	0.7
Max	4	3	2
Min	1	0	0

Table 3: Expulsion/Suspension Results



	Math	Reading	Composite
Pre	85	90	84
Post	93	96	88

Table 4: Comparison of KTEA PrePost

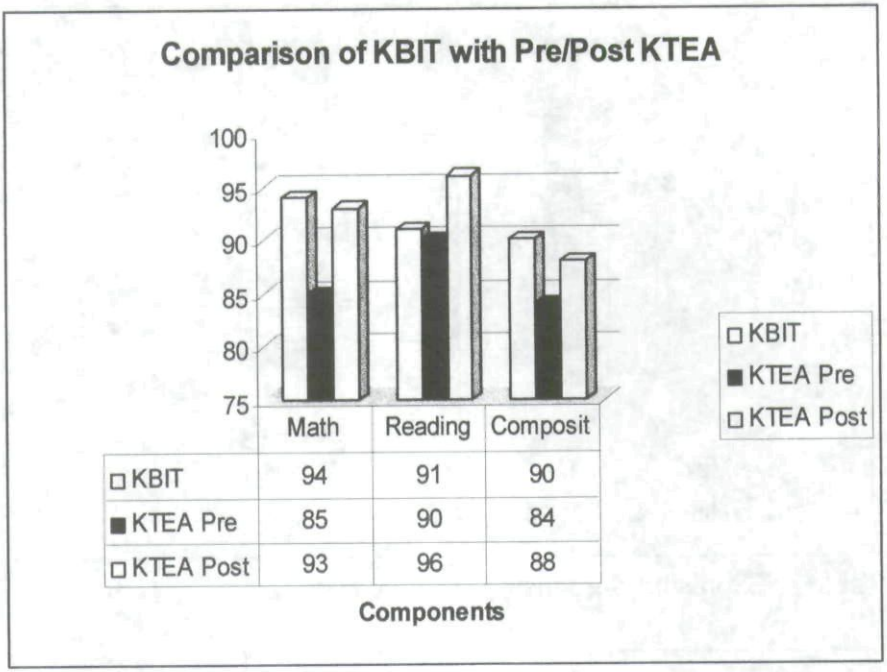


Table 5: Comparison of KBIT with Pre/Post KTEA

our belief is that a control group would provide little data, since the profile of our sample was consistently doing poorly both in academic achievement and school behavior.

The involvement of a number of local agencies within the community was crucial to the success of this project. We believe that it is important for community involvement to be extensive if programs are to be successful. In addition, it appears that programs must be comprehensive in nature and include a wide variety of critical components such as tutoring, social skills training, cultural and social activities, and nutrition.

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