

Leadership Perceptions of the Dehumanization of Black Children in Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if principals perceived that African American children experienced dehumanization during interactions within their schools. Revealed in the findings was that African American and White principals did observe that dehumanization of African American children was an issue within their schools.

Keywords: race, dehumanization, principals, leadership, schools

One of the most dominant topics of discussion in educational research is the plight of African American students in schools. African American children continue to underperform in the academic and social settings of schools. In response, many researchers rationalize the lack of success with factors that range from poverty and low self-esteem to single parent homes and lack of positive black role models. However, one area of research that needs more investigation is factors within the school. One school related factor that is significant to this discourse is dehumanization.

Dehumanization is defined as the denial of full humanness to others (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006; Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008). Dehumanization can occur in a variety of formats. One such approach is responding to children with harsh treatment, which is usually reserved for adults. Research has documented that African American children are more likely to be treated as adults than any other group of children (Goff et al., 2008). Given this outcome, research needs to examine if dehumanization is at the root of the harsh treatment of African American children in schools. Within this focus needs to be an inquiry into the extent to which school principals perceive that African American children experience dehumanization in schools. Thus, the purpose of this research was to investigate if school principals perceived dehumanization is a part of the schooling experiences of African American students.

Research Question

The research question for this study is as follows:

1. To what extent do principals perceive that African American children experience dehumanizing experiences in their schools?

Literature Review

Much research has highlighted the impact of dehumanizing experiences on marginalized groups. This experience has been especially impacting on African American people, particularly African American children. For instance, in 1944, a black 14-year-old child named George Junius Stinney Jr. became the youngest person on record in the United States to be legally executed by the state (Jones, 2007). In 1955, a black boy named Emmett Till was dragged from his bed and lynched for allegedly whistling at a white woman (Crowe, 2003).

Current research supports the dehumanizing components of these historical events. Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, and DiTomasso (2014) conducted a series of studies to determine if dehumanizing contexts impacted the way in which African American children were viewed by different groups of people. Key findings from the research are as follows:

- From ages 0–9, children were seen as equally innocent regardless of race. However, beginning at the age of 10, participants began to think of black children as significantly less innocent than other children at every age group.
- In a criminal justice context, researchers examined the extent to which innocence differed by target race and the severity of crimes committed. The results showed that participants overestimated the age of black targets and deemed black targets more culpable for their actions than white or Latino targets, particularly when those targets were accused of serious crimes.
- Another study examined sixty police officers of innocence in accordance to race. The findings showed that participants overestimated the age of black male children relative to white and Latino children. White children, on the other hand, were not subjected to such overestimations.

The significance of these contemporary, as well as historical, findings is their relevance to dehumanization. Specifically, these contexts can and do provoke dehumanization. More to the point, research by Goff et al. (2008) supports the hypothesized link between dehumanization and sanctioned violence. The purpose of this research was to determine if principals recognized acts of dehumanization towards African American children within their schools.

Methodology

This study consisted of 22 principals from a medium-sized school district. The school district consisted primarily of African American and white students. The teaching populations consisted mostly of white teachers. Of the participant population, 9 principals were white and 13 principals were African American.

The principals participated in a series of sessions on leadership effectiveness for African American children. During the first phase of the sessions, principals participated in a series of discussions on the dehumanization of African American children. The participants were provided with a copy of the article, “The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children” (Goff et al., 2008).

After engaging in a series of discussions about the article, the principals were asked to provide a written response to the following question: “Does this article reflect the plight of some or all of the African American students in your school?” Principals took the following steps to answer the question:

1. Principals reread the article.
2. Principals spent the following weeks on looking closely at the extent to which dehumanization was a part of the schooling experiences of African American students.
3. Principals recorded their observations in a “dehumanization documentation” notebook.
4. Principals organized their documentation into a written summary regarding the prevalence of dehumanization in the academic lives of African American children in their schools.
5. Principals returned their written summaries to me.

Findings

In this section, I provide a description of the principal summaries in accordance to race. I am using race as a descriptor because race influences the leadership styles and perceptions of school principals. The study consisted of 22 principals, but only 11 principals (4 African American and 7 White) returned written summaries to me.

African American Principals

Entry one. Black students are treated more harshly. This stems from the absence of cultural differences, sensitivity or consideration when communicating. Prejudice causes the devaluing of black males in the school as a whole. Black males are presumed guilty until proven innocent, stripping them of humanity during discipline.

Entry two. Some students are in my 4th and 5th grades. I will say the longer they have attended my school, the more culpable teachers tend to make them, presuming intent and guilt being the main factors (children being “older” than they really are). Two students from last year really stand out.

Entry three. The reason that I believe that this article reflects the plight of some or all of the African American students who experience discipline issues in my school is because black children are seen as less innocent, receive fewer benefits of childhood, and protection as other children. With this perceived lack of innocence of black children, some teachers lose the virtue that all children should be protected. Observing the data from the classroom referrals, black children are expected to receive harsh punishments such as suspensions for behavior that should be controlled in the classroom.

Teachers have voiced their opinions to administration because of the lack of severity of the consequence when students are removed from their classrooms. Several conversations with staff concerning black students have produced mixed results with the staff. Until recently, when staff actually took time to really try to figure out the root cause of the black students’ behavior, the innocence of the children surfaced and protective measures were put in place.

For years, public perceptions have defined the black students in Claris Elementary School. From the perceptions, a history of high disciplinary referrals, over representation of black males being suspended, and high staff turnover have resulted. To be fair, the question remains to be asked, “Are we looking at the problem from the lens of prejudice versus dehumanization?” In essence, as the article eloquently states in the last sentence, “Although most children are allowed to be innocent until adulthood, black children may be perceived innocent only until deemed suspicious.” This sums up my belief why this article reflects the plight and history of Claris Elementary School.

Entry four. It appears that some faculty “dehumanize” black children (particularly black children who may be viewed as “big for their age”). This dehumanization is reflected by the overall physical disposition (body language) of the faculty member(s) that may be perceived as less welcoming or protective. This in turn escalates the issue as it relates to discipline (the number/types of referrals), not being viewed as a child worthy of protection and perceived as lacking innocence.

White Principals

Entry one. The dehumanization happens when we cease to see any child as a being in the growth process and we place them in a category or define them as one thing. They are therefore “bad” so all they can be is bad. They may be less bad some days but they are still defined by the observer as that one thing. “They were not too bad today,” may sound nice but it is still placing the child in the same category.

One root cause I did not see reflected in the article is the drive for persons of authority to be “above reproach.” It may not sound like dehumanization, but we expect more of our police officers, our teachers, our political leaders, (well, maybe not political leaders) than is likely possible to sustain. For us to bridge cultural divides, for us to open up new categories for our children, we must first be able to be imperfect. More simply, we must be able to function in an environment that lets us say, “I was wrong about you,” and learn from that process. I will tell you that the best of people I have ever known have this ability to admit they were wrong. However, it is not a valued response in our society today. An admission of guilt is an invitation for prosecution and persecution no matter which side of Ferguson you stand on.

Entry two. I think oftentimes that black students seem older/more mature than their peers because they’ve been exposed to more things in their home environments that other kids may not have experienced, such as violence and adult language. When children exhibit behaviors that aren’t age appropriate, adults may be more willing to treat them according to their behavior, not their actual age.

Entry three. As I read this article, a few teachers come to mind. Over the years as administrator, I began to notice that these teachers were exceptionally hard on black males. Very little tolerance is shown for misbehavior and they are treated as though they are much older, forgetting that they are merely children. I have noticed this as much with black females, and I don’t notice primary grade teachers displaying this intolerance. While not widespread among my staff, I more often notice this behavior in my white parents. They seem to want black males “tried” as adults and severely punished for misbehavior.

Entry four. I do believe that some teachers, both Caucasian and African American teachers, do raise their voices “yelling” at students, specifically African American boys when addressing behavior. I also have been receiving complaints from parents (African American parents) regarding one teacher who is antagonizing certain students in her class and specifically African American students.

Entry five. Teachers do not see the need to plan lessons that will focus only on black students. There may be only two or three black students in a class, and teachers have been asked to focus on black students to make them feel successful along with being inclusive. They feel that all children are equal, and they are meeting their needs when teaching the class as a whole.

Entry six. I do see some students who are dehumanized because teachers do not treat them with the same innocence as white children. The article really struck this home with me. Many times teachers view these students with discipline issues as already gone, hardened to their culture and socioeconomic plight. They are treated as unreachable, given up on and only “taught at” instead of “taught to” or guided through their instruction.

Entry seven. There are some black males that will undergo the dehumanizing category and will receive punishment for what is almost a “nothing violation.” These black males are mostly darker in complexion, sagging or appear not interested in an education. On the other hand, black males that are larger and louder will be feared and punished to the full extent and sometimes beyond the handbook for student conduct. Black males that speak up for themselves are viewed as aggressive and pose a threat to the safety of those in charge. Black males that experienced the loss of a close family member are expected to get over the hurt of that loss and stop crying. No sympathy is shown towards them, plus all work is due despite the loss of a loved one.

Conclusion

Both African American and White principals observed that dehumanization was a part of African American children’s experiences in their schools. The forms of dehumanization found in this study are:

1. Embarrassment and Humiliation
2. Yelling
3. Invading Personal Space
4. Denying Student Voice
5. Disrespect
6. Talking Down
7. Ignoring Students
8. Throwing Students Out of Class

The principals in this study need to address the prevalence of dehumanization with their teachers. Principals should also conduct professional development training on dehumanization. Lastly, teachers and principals should discuss how dehumanization adversely impacts African

American children. These discussions could foster cultural diversity and acceptance that should be a part of schools (Banks, 2008; Baron, 2007; Howard, 2007; Terrell & Lindsey, 2009; Young, Madsen, & Young, 2010).

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