

HAITIAN STUDENTS: EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

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It goes without saying that many of our Haitian students pose numerous challenges to teachers and administrators. There is a Haitian proverb that says in Creole, “Anpil men, chay pa lou.” In English, this means, “With many hands, the load is not heavy.” Many Haitian students have proven that they can succeed if we provide appropriate support to them and their parents.

This paper will address the two groups of students who come to our schools, factors that contribute to their success or failure, the challenges they face, and practices that are successful with students and their parents.

To begin with, education is not free in Haiti. Parents must pay fees, purchase materials and uniforms. Some middle and upper-class families come to the United States due to the political turmoil and violence, not for economic reasons. Therefore, in Haiti, these parents could afford to send their children to quality schools. As a result, when these children arrive in our schools here, they are performing at or above grade level and are very successful. Their well-educated parents soon learn how to be engaged in their education partly by working closely with teachers. For example, I know one parent who met with a teacher after school to learn a new math program in order to help her daughter with math homework. Other families immigrate to this country to escape poverty as well

as the violence and political upheaval. In Haiti, either these parents could only afford inferior schools or no schools at all. Consequently, these children arrive in American schools performing below grade level. They continue to struggle because they do not receive the necessary support at school, and their parents, working 2-3 jobs and with little formal education, have difficulty being involved in their education. Some of our parents also do not know what it means to be engaged in U.S. schools. It is this latter group that I will focus on today.

When Haitian children step foot inside our classrooms in this country they are armed with a very powerful belief. They have been taught by their parents that education is the key to prosperity and dignity, and therefore, most come to school ready to learn. This is proven by looking at the excellent attendance records of most of these students. However, they soon learn that they have to overcome many obstacles in order to receive a quality education.

STRENGTH OF ETHNIC IDENTITY OFTEN CORRELATES WITH ACADEMIC SUCCESS OR FAILURE

Those of us who work with Haitian students find that those who succeed academically and socially often have a strong sense of ethnic identity and high self-esteem. Flore Zephir, author of The Haitian-Americans, groups Haitians in three categories: a) those who display a strong form of Haitianness; b) those who display a weaker form of Haitianness; and c) those who have (or want) absolutely nothing to do with Haiti, often called “the undercovers.” Those with a strong form of Haitianness “take great pride in their racial and ethnic origin and argue that Haitians are capable of great

achievements just as any White immigrant group. They unremittingly go after the opportunities that the United States offers and are determined to succeed and overcome the hardest obstacles.” A weaker form of Haitianness is exhibited when individuals are bicultural. They are comfortable with both Haitian and American cultures. They were either born in this country or have been living here from a very young age. As a result, they are more proficient in English than in Creole. Zephir says, “For them Haiti is linked to heritage, ancestry and roots—the United States, to everyday reality.” The third category tends to deny their Haitianness and identify with African-American culture. They go to great lengths to hide their Haitian identity. Zephir notes, “For them, Haiti and Haitians are symbols of shame and embarrassment and constant reminders of a difficult past that must be discarded...Covering up their Haitian ethnicity has become a strategy adopted by some Haitian youth to deal with the cruel reality of ethnic prejudice that is still very pervasive in the United States.”

In 2005, Dr. Lunine Pierre-Jerome, a Haitian teacher in the Boston Public Schools at the time but who now works in other capacities in the district, conducted a small study of 18-20 year-old male and female high school students in which she explored how low-literacy Haitian newcomers identify themselves; their perceptions of family, peer relationships, community and schooling; and their opinions about the literacy program they were placed in. Her findings are similar to Zephir’s.

The youngsters she studied had been in the United States for less than three years, had gaps in their schooling, and were illiterate in Haitian Creole. The highest grade these high school students completed in Haiti varied from third through sixth. According to Dr. Pierre-Jerome’s conclusions, the students with a strong sense of ethnic identity saw their

parents as role models, had high self-esteem and had their whole lives planned out. Those youngsters with a weak sense of ethnic identity were insecure and felt somewhat hopeless about their futures. In addition, when asked about their literacy program, all the students admitted that while it was useful, they felt embarrassed about being placed in the program because it implies that they are deficient in some manner. They also complained of being ridiculed by other youngsters and surprisingly school staff. Some felt constrained and wanted to leave the program. Furthermore, although their literacy skills were very low, the students were shocked that they were still expected to take high-stakes, standardized tests. Dr. Pierre-Jerome's conclusions were that the adolescents felt stigmatized, isolated, and humiliated by the program.

CHALLENGES FACED BY HAITIAN STUDENTS

In my role as a teacher, for the past 15 years years, I have seen some common challenges for the group of students who arrive with poor academic preparation and/or less developed ethnic identity. Some of the common challenges faced by Haitian immigrant students fit into the following categories:

- Student academic realities
 - Students often arrive in this country performing below grade level, sometimes as much as 3-4 years. Most school districts do not provide them the necessary support and services such as native language assistance
 - In the high schools, some Haitian students might arrive with a report card showing they completed the ninth grade, but in reality, they are performing at a

fifth or sixth grade level. As a result, young men and women as old as 20 or 22 are attending some high schools.

- Low-performing students are expected to pass Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Systems (MCAS) and other standardized tests. Many often fail and drop out of school. One Haitian parent complains that six weeks of test preparation, at four hours a week, is not enough for her child who is performing at a second-grade level to take the 10th grade MCAS test.
- Student social and cultural realities
 - These students experience prejudice and are sometimes discriminated against by school staff and American students. For example, Haitian parents complain that their children are sent out of the classroom or to the office for minor infractions while other students are not punished as harshly.
 - Some students, especially the newcomers, are sometimes victims of violence at the hands of American students who often go unpunished. One of my former students, a fourth-grader, moved to another city this year. He got into a scuffle with another student who called him “n-----.” Not only was the other child not punished, my former student was suspended. Also, when I taught in Malden, I personally witnessed some American students at the school where I worked actually calling each other “Haitian” as an insult.
 - Living in two cultures has proven daunting for Haitian students. As they try to fit into American culture, their parents complain that they are becoming Americanized. For example, Yvon Lamour, a Haitian guidance counselor at Cambridge Rindge & Latin School, illustrates what these youngsters face. In

Haitian culture, it is disrespectful for a child to make eye contact with an adult when he/she is speaking to that person. However, in schools in this country, teachers expect students to make eye contact with them. Therefore, Lamour says, “I have to educate Haitian parents and American teachers about the difficulties these youngsters are dealing with.”

- Lamour also talks about life for Haitian students and parents reunited after years of separation. He says, “If a parent leaves his 7-year-old child in Haiti and comes to the United States, it can take up to 10 years to send for that child. When they’re reunited, there’s a “honeymoon period.” However, soon thereafter problems begin to surface when child and parent find that they are practically strangers to each other.
- Teacher preparation
 - American teachers are often not trained to teach Limited English Proficient (LEP) students. In addition, some teachers need to become culturally sensitive. Beverly Daniel Tatum, author of “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria” says, “Many white educators have grown up in predominantly white communities, attended mostly white schools, and may have had limited experiences with people of color and that is a potential barrier. But what that means is that people need to expand their experiences.” She suggests the book *Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* by Gloria Ladson Billings. This book profiles teachers, some of whom are white, who have found ways to successfully teach kids of color.

- Some teachers have low expectations of these students based on their race, ethnicity and socio-economic background.
- There are not enough Haitian teachers, administrators and guidance counselors to serve as role models and mentors.
- School culture
 - Haitian students, especially newcomers, are sometimes placed in unstructured classrooms, contrary to the structured environment they are used to in Haiti.
 - A number of schools with large Haitian populations do not have parent liaisons. These individuals can be a lifeline for students and their parents.
- Family support
 - Many parents are not involved by American standards because they feel intimidated by the school system and do not know how to help their children. They often do not speak English and work 2-3 jobs which prevent their participation in school meetings and events. Further, schools do not make much of an effort to engage parents. Many do not provide interpreters or translators to enable parents to participate in their children's schooling.

PRACTICES THAT HAVE PROVEN TO BE SUCCESSFUL

From my experience in my own teaching and work with the Haitian community, I would like to share with you practices that I have observed to be successful with Haitian immigrant students. I group these into three categories.

- Within the classroom

- Pedagogy: In the absence of transitional bilingual programs, Haitian newcomers are doing well in sheltered English programs that contain the following components: literacy programs encompassing phonics, teacher read-alouds, guided reading, independent reading, writer's workshop and listening center. For example, in Cambridge, our literacy curricula are complemented by Reading Recovery, Literacy Collaborative and Making Meaning. In my school, a few years ago, thanks to a grant from the Rotary Club of Cambridge, I started sending home books- on-tape with tape player and headset with our students. The books-on-tape are now so popular that even the students' parents and siblings use them.
- Assessments given to English Language Learners should be fair, meaningful and inform instruction and curricula. In Cambridge, literacy and math assessments throughout the school year not only inform our instruction but they keep teachers abreast of students' progress. These assessments are given in English but directions can be given in Creole. It is not fair to English language learners, especially newcomers, to take tests such as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Systems (MCAS) that require complex English language skills and knowledge of American culture until they are ready. Our students perform best in criterion-referenced tests that compare their performance to a standard or skill, not to others taking the tests.
- Curriculum: Since bilingual education was abolished in Massachusetts, it has been very difficult to incorporate Haitian history and culture in schools' curricula. However, finding ways to use them during and social studies blocks helps

increase Haitian students' self esteem. Beverly Daniel Tatum agrees. She says, "I think students of color really need to see themselves reflected in positive ways in the curriculum." She suggests that teachers ensure that students of color "see themselves represented not just as victims but as agents of their own empowerment." For example, when teachers teach about slavery, if they have Haitian students in their classroom, they should emphasize how Haitian slaves fought their enslavers to become independent. In my classroom, in social studies, we learn about the Haitian revolutionary leaders when we study black heroes. Also, when we study islands, one of the ways the students learn about Haiti and its culture is through folktales. One monolingual teacher in my school incorporates Haitian culture in her day by having students share stories and traditions from Haiti as well as greet each other in Creole. Her students also write poems, legends and folk tales from different cultures, including Haiti. Further, one Haitian teacher and one American teacher at my school created the "Lamitye Program" during the days of bilingual education so that Haitian and American students could learn about each other's culture. Lamitye is a beautiful flowering vine that grows in Haiti. It is also the word for friendship in Haitian Creole. However, their collaboration has endured even as Sheltered English Immersion replaced bilingual education. Their students continue to have science together, eat, play, go on field trips and share specialist classes together.

- Class sizes that do not exceed 20 students also enable us to give our low-performing children extra support.
- Within the school

- Primary review in the lower grades by a team of teachers, specialists and administrators at the beginning of the school year and mid-year address concerns early on. Identifying Haitian students who are below grade level in October allows us to quickly provide them with literacy and math tutors as well as after-school programs. I believe that this program would also benefit students in the higher grades.
- Teacher and Administrative Team (TAT) meetings during the school year focus on students who are not progressing satisfactorily due to social, behavioral and/or academic issues. Right now, this is left to teacher's discretion. I believe teachers should be held accountable for requesting these meetings.
- Haitian parent liaisons help families with any concern that affects students' schooling. When one of my Haitian students and his family became homeless recently, they called the liaison. She worked with them every step of the way to help them find housing and connect to social service agencies. Parent liaisons also translate documents and interpret at meetings with teachers and administrators. Most importantly, they conduct meetings en masse with parents to educate them on relevant issues.
- Beyond the school
 - Trained, volunteer tutors support struggling students in reading and math twice a week.

- Homework centers help students with homework and provide tutoring in literacy skills.
Summer enrichment programs prevent regression of skills during the summer months.
- We also educate parents on the American culture as well as relevant parenting, educational and health issues through the Boston Haitian Reporter articles
- Teachers advocate for students within and outside of school. One teacher in my school noticed that one of her Haitian students was very good in science. She convinced his parents to allow him to attend a science program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) on Saturdays. She also helped his family complete the required paperwork and provided guidance until he graduated from the program. In addition, some teachers come to school early, leave late and hold weekend tutoring sessions to help our students. For example, at Boston International High School, teachers locate temporary housing for students, find after-school jobs and conduct Saturday classes. As the headmaster, Oscar Santos, says, “Before you can even teach someone science, history, or math, you need to know all the challenges they are facing.”

In conclusion, helping Haitian students succeed in our schools is an attainable goal.

These children will have strong ethnic identity and will succeed if educators have high expectations for them and if they see themselves and their culture reflected in a positive manner in the curriculum. Haitian students, like all students, should be treated fairly and

respectfully by staffs and other students. Schools must also provide Haitian students and their parents the necessary support and services to overcome the obstacles they face. School leaders must also hold their staffs accountable for searching for and using strategies that will make Haitian students successful.