

## **IRRATIONAL BELIEFS THAT CAN LEAD TO ACADEMIC FAILURE FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO ARE ACADEMICALLY AT-RISK**

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**ABSTRACT:** This article describes how rational emotive behavior therapy and other cognitive-behavioral therapies can be used to improve the achievement of academically at-risk African American students at the middle-school level. Definitions of at-risk and a review of relevant literature are provided. This article offers an outline of several main irrational beliefs that can lead to academic failure for African American students at the middle-school level. This author suggested that escalating preferences for justice, acceptance within the African American community, and acceptance by European Americans are at the core for causing academic failure for many of these students. The author describes empirical data which show that once these students learn a realistic philosophy of life—to be more rational, tolerant, nonutopian, and nondemanding—the students improve in their academic self-concept and achievement.

### **INTRODUCTION**

After reading “Twelve Irrational Ideas That Drive Gay Men and Women Crazy” in the *Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive-Behavior Therapy* (Volume 12, Number 1, Spring 1994), an article by Ken Mylott, this researcher was inspired to write about how irrational beliefs can lead to academic failure for African American students at the

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middle-school level. This researcher, being of African American descent himself, could see parallels between the irrational thinking involving the gay and lesbian community, as discussed in Mylott's article, and that which exists in this researcher's community (African American). The researcher found this especially pertinent to the irrational beliefs that produce failure for African American students who are academically at-risk.

Before getting into the heart of this discussion, I will define the term "academically at-risk." Also, I will describe several studies, many of which were empirical, that demonstrated that cognitive-behavioral therapy, primarily rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT), is effective with African American students at the middle-school level. Finally, this article will underscore the irrational beliefs that can lead to the failure of these students.

#### DEFINITIONS OF ACADEMICALLY AT-RISK AND REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Academically at-risk students are those who are one or more years behind their cohort group. This is particularly problematic in the areas of reading and mathematical skills. Moreover, becoming a parent, being adjudicated a delinquent, or falling behind in the number of credits earned can place a student in the at-risk category for academic failure (Sapp, 1990a, 1990b). In summary, any factors that place a student at-risk for school failure connote being "at-risk."

Vernon (1989) developed an educational curriculum for grades one through six that can possibly prevent a student from becoming academically at-risk. Using a curriculum grounded on the principles of REBT, she teaches students appropriate thinking, feeling, and behavioral responses.

Sapp (1990a, 1990b) assessed the psychoeducational predictors of achievement for 250 at-risk middle school students, many of whom were African American. He found that cognitive factors such as measures of academic self-concept and general self-concept were statistically significant predictors of achievement for these students.

Academic self-concept was operationally defined by the Brookover Self-Concept of Ability Scale (Brookover). The Brookover is an 8-item Likert instrument designed to measure the academic self-concept of at-risk students. Scores on this scale range from 0 (very poor academic self-concept) to 40 (very positive academic self-concept). Brookover,

Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, and Wisenbaker (1979) and Brookover, Paterson, and Schailer (1962) found that this scale correlated .50 to .70 with academic achievement. Banks (1984) reported a Cronbach's coefficient alpha of .77 for the Brookover.

Sapp (1990a) found that the academic self-concepts of at-risk students were low. Moreover, even though academic self-concept and general self-concept or self-esteem correlate with the achievement of with these students, academic self-concept is a more specific measurement with greater predictive measures of achievement than general self-concept or self-esteem measures. For African American middle school students who are at-risk academically, they believe that because they were born into a culture where within-group (African American) and outside group (European American) expectations are low. In order to become acceptable to one or both groups, they dare not think along lines of academic success (positive or high academic self-concept).

REBT postulates that self-defeating behaviors stem from indoctrinating oneself in the present with irrational beliefs. Rein-doctrination occurs with these students on a social level (African Americans and European Americans) and on an individual level (self—reinforcement). In essence, the foundations for these students' failures are initiated and continue on a cognitive level. In addition, these students tend to have low degrees of self-acceptance, and they tend to sabotage plans that can lead to long-term happiness. Thus, what were originally these students' desires for social acceptance become irrational beliefs: "I must be socially accepted. I must be loved and approved. Life should not be difficult for me. The things I must have should occur instantly." Because these students are conditioned to respond in a predetermined fashion, they tend not to understand how their irrational beliefs contribute to their academic failure.

These students' self-concepts were measured by the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory School short Form (SEI). This instrument consists of 25 true-false questions that evaluate students' social, family, academic, and personal expectations. It quantifies the extent to which students view themselves as competent and worthwhile. Scores on the SEI have lower (0 = very poor self-esteem) and upper (100 = very positive self-esteem) boundaries. Reliability estimates were reported by Peterson and Austin (1985) employing Kuder-Richardson 20 estimates that exceeded .80.

REBT's concepts of low frustration tolerance (LFT) and self-acceptance would explain how African American students at the middle-school level who were academically at-risk would maintain a low level

of self-esteem. If these students had high frustration tolerance, that is allowing African American and European American communities the right to be wrong. These students could work toward changing conditions that could be altered and not damn themselves, others, or the world for having inappropriate behaviors. In contrast to African American students rating themselves based on African American or European American achievements, these students would accept themselves unconditionally as having intrinsic worth if they endorsed REBT's concept of self-acceptance. To summarize, LFT and the lack of self-acceptance help explain how African American students develop low self-concepts.

Using a randomized pretest-posttest design with 60 at-risk African American students at the middle-school level, Sapp, Farrell, and Durand (1995) found statistically significant changes on grade point average and the number of days absent and tardy following the participation of those students in cognitive-behavioral therapy. The therapy was basically REBT. A path analysis found that academic self-concept was the mediating variable operating between cognitive-behavioral therapy and academic achievement. These data were part of a preliminary study, although published afterwards, for Sapp (1994). Sapp (1994) will be discussed in detail later in this article.

Sapp and Farrell (1994) described interventions that teachers can apply to prevent academic failure with academically at-risk students and special education students. Again, the principles were basically REBT.

Employing principal component analysis, Farrell, Sapp, Johnson, and Pollard (1994) assessed college aspirations among at-risk high school students and found that aspiration to attend college was primarily a cognitive factor or component. This study suggested that REBT and cognitive-behavior therapy would be effective in enhancing college aspirations.

Sapp (1994) presented the strongest empirical evidence that cognitive-behavioral therapy is effective with African American middle school students who are academically at-risk. Employing a randomized pretest-posttest 2 by 3 factorial multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) design, Sapp (1994) found that cognitive-behavioral therapy improved academic achievement, academic self-concept, and self-esteem with 60 at-risk African American students when compared to a wait-list control group. A four-week follow-up found that treatment gains were maintained. As previously stated, the Sapp et al. (1995) study was a precursor to this study.

Sapp conceptualized cognitive-behavioral therapy within the REBT psychological interactionism perspective; that is, cognitions, affect, and behavior occur simultaneously (Ellis, 1985, 1995; Livneh & Wright, 1995; Weinrach, 1995). He took into account that these students had difficulties taking tests, and studying, as well as had low levels of academic self-concept (Sapp, 1993).

Each student received 15 sessions of cognitive-behavioral therapy from a therapist using three treatment scripts (four sessions of cognitive-behavioral constructed study skills counseling, four sessions of cognitive-behavioral relaxation therapy, and seven sessions of REBT designed to improve academic self-concept). This article will only describe the REBT sessions. Below are descriptions of the seven REBT sessions.

### SEVEN REBT SESSIONS

*During session one*, the meaning of academic self-concept was discussed with students. Specifically, students were told that academic self-concept is the way a student sees himself or herself achieving academically. In addition, it was indicated to students that a statistically significant relationship exists between achievement and academic self-concept.

Moreover, students were given examples of how irrational beliefs can influence thinking, feeling, and behaving. At this point, it was suggested that irrational beliefs were those beliefs that cannot be empirically verified.

*Session two* was employed to show how 7 of Ellis' (1995) 13 irrational beliefs can be internalized at a societal level and result in lowered academic self-concept. The following beliefs were discussed:

1. *The idea that there is a dire need that one has to be accepted by the African American community.* It was indicated to students that it was desirable to be accepted and approved by the African American community, but that such acceptance and approval was not a true biological need. Students were taught that approval was preferable, but that such approval was not necessary to have a healthy sense of academic self-concept and a general sense of self-esteem. Students were taught to accept themselves, even if they were not accepted by their community.

2. *The idea that one must be an "A" student to be respected and worthwhile.* This concept was used to show how striving for perfection

was irrational. Students were taught REBT's principle of ethical humanism; that is, they were worthwhile simply because they existed.

3. *The idea that certain individuals and students are bad and should be punished.* This principle was used to teach the REBT distinction between behavior and personhood. It was pointed out that bad students were just simply those who performed bad acts, but they were not necessarily bad as persons. Also, students were taught that the concept of universal fairness was irrational.

4. *The idea that it is easier to avoid than face difficult academic situations.* It was suggested that personal responsibility was the way to improve academic achievement and that avoiding studying would not improve school performance. It was pointed out that only studying could lead to better grades.

5. *The idea that it is terrible when things do not turn out the way one wants.* Examples of school situations were used to show students that it is not the end of the world when a person does not get what he or she wants. This concept was used to teach the REBT concept of high tolerance for frustration.

6. *The concept that happiness is externally determined by external things such as wealth and social status.* This belief was used to show students how happiness is intrinsically related to a person's belief system. This was an extremely important point to stress, since many of these students had high external locus of control scores.

7. *The idea that once a student is an at-risk student, he or she will always be academically at-risk.* It was admitted that a poor academic background, lack of access to a quality education, racial discrimination, and so on had an influence on academic performance; but it was noted that this influence did not have to be indefinite. Also, it was noted that when students assume that the past totally determines behavior, this prevents an individual from solving his or her academic or personal problems.

*Session three* was used to teach students the three insights of REBT. Student were introduced to *Insight No. 1: psychological disorders are the result of absolutistic irrational thinking that students and people cling to after experiencing a negative life event.* It was suggested that individuals hypothesize that negative events cause emotional disturbances, and people attempt to change negative events rather than to change their irrational belief systems. It was pointed out that rational beliefs lead to positive and self-enhancing behaviors, while irrational beliefs lead to self-defeating behaviors. *Insight No. 2: constant indoctrination with irrational beliefs and the seeking of historical causes*

*of irrational beliefs lead individuals to maintain emotional disturbances.* Students were taught to challenge and confront irrational beliefs in the present and not to seek causes of irrational beliefs from the past. This insight stressed REBT present, which is in contrast to the past orientation or psychoanalysis. Finally, students were given *Insight No. 3: It takes constant work and practice to change irrational beliefs and to be minimally disturbed.* For these students, this translated into the constant work and practice needed to change their status of being academically at-risk.

*Session four* students were taught REBT's expanded ABCs. It is known that Ellis (1995) developed a simple ABC model to conceptualize emotional concerns. A was defined as an activating event, and B was defined as the person's (or student's in this case) belief system about A. C was defined as emotional and behavioral consequences. Students were taught how people assume that A causes C. It was indicated that B largely causes C even though, mathematically,  $C = A \times B$ . Students were taught how to apply disputing interventions (D) to B. Also, students were shown how they could arrive at an effective philosophy of life (E). Finally, students were shown that when inappropriate cognitions were replaced with appropriate ones, this can lead to new feelings (F). In summary, age-appropriate examples were used to teach students how to apply the ABCs and D of REBT.

*Session five* employed rational emotive imagery to improve students' academic self-concept. Students were asked to imagine items from an academic self-concept inventory. Next, they were asked to write out irrational beliefs associated with each statement on the academic self-concept inventory. Afterwards, students were taught to modify irrational beliefs associated with this inventory. The purpose of rational emotive imagery was to show students that their imaginations or imageries could influence feelings and, ultimately, academic performance.

During *session six*, rational emotive imagery was used again, but this time for cognitive restructuring. Students were again asked to imagine items from an academic self-concept inventory, but they were asked to imagine rational beliefs while they imagined items from the academic self-concept inventory. This procedure was designed to restructure irrational cognitions into rational ones.

*Session seven* involved requesting that students apply REBT to the real world. That is, students were instructed to apply REBT outside of the treatment sessions. The goal of this procedure was to establish a transfer and maintenance of change from the treatment sessions to

the actual world of the students. This session underscored REBT's emphasis on homework exercises.

### REBT AND CHILDHOOD PROBLEMS OF AT-RISK AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

Slavin, Karweit, and Madden (1989) found that collaborative learning methods are more motivational and effective than traditional teaching methods (lecture formats) with at-risk students; however, Vernon (1989), Sapp, Farrell, and Durand (1995), Sapp and Farrell (1994), and Sapp (1994) approaches are fairly didactic, teacher-driven, and not very collaborative. One difference between collaborative learning and REBT practiced within an educational setting is REBT's psychoeducational and preventive emphases. Many collaborative learning models are established once children are at-risk for a variety of difficulties such as delinquency, psychological disorders, excessive absenteeism, and dropping out of school. These issues are more salient for African American children.

The building of self-esteem and self-concept are critical factors for children's development at the elementary school level (Gibson, Mitchell, & Basile, 1993). Promotion of healthy self-esteem and self-concept is seen as a prevention for later at-risk status; here, again, REBT has applications that extend beyond collaborative learning models, since it can not only increase African American students' self-esteem and self-concept, but REBT can be used to promote good psychological health.

Before REBT therapists can attempt to work with African American children, developing a background in developmental psychology and multicultural counseling is important. From a developmental standpoint, Vernon (1989) has a sound curriculum that can be adapted to African American children.

She provides a developmentally appropriate model for infusing REBT into elementary curriculums. For grades 1-2, she introduces the concepts of feelings and self-acceptance. Later, using developmentally appropriate exercises, she shows children how feelings, behavior, and thoughts are related. With grades 3-4 and 5-6, Vernon uses more advanced exercises to cover additional details of REBT.

This researcher has adapted Vernon's curriculum to African American children. One modification that was made within this curriculum was adjustments in terms of language expressions. For example, this



researcher used African American communication styles to teach principles of REBT. In addition, this researcher introduced characters to African American students called Super African American Man and Super African American Woman. Of course, these are variants of Superman and REBT man. The children were able to identify with these characters and were able to learn REBT principles and to practice them within their environments.

Several additional modifications were made when discussing REBT's irrational beliefs. First, each belief was presented within a familiar African American context. This researcher created several other REBT characters for these modifications. Moreover, the irrational belief that certain children are bad and should be punished was presented within the perspective of the African American church, which tends to emphasize forgiveness. Skits were performed to underscore this belief.

This researcher believes that collaborative learning models are appropriate when more academically advanced students can teach lower achieving students, but it is not uncommon to find almost all students within at-risk elementary schools requiring intensive individual and small group academic remediation. As previously stated, self-esteem and self-concept are the most important psychoeducational correlates for becoming at-risk, REBT would be the logical strategy for the enhancing of these factors, thus preventing students from becoming at-risk.

It is important for REBT interventions to occur during the elementary period, because studies have found that at-risk children in general and African American children specifically can be identified as at-risk by the third grade (Sapp, 1990a; Slavin et al., 1989).

Overall, this researcher has been able to adapt REBT to African American children by taking their language and contextual features into account. In contrast to what was once thought (Gibson et al., 1993), this researcher found that African American children were able to learn REBT principles, and these experiences tended to generalize because homework was made an integral part of the curriculum.

Knowledge of African American communication styles and social structures will facilitate the adaptation of REBT theory and practice to these children. Furthermore, an understanding of the history of slavery in America and legal segregation are other factors important for understanding the racial identity of African American children.

In summary, REBT theory and practice is applicable to African American children who are at-risk. REBT can be slowly introduced to

these children by gradually showing them the connection among thinking, feeling, and behaving. In terms of therapeutic maintenance, these children can learn when they are middle students that it takes constant work and practice to remain minimally at-risk; nevertheless, if REBT interventions occur early in these children's development, their potential for becoming at-risk diminishes.

### SUMMARY

This article presented a summary of empirical studies demonstrating that cognitive-behavioral therapy, largely REBT, is effective in improving achievement of African American middle school students who are academically at-risk. Moreover, this article discussed how REBT can prevent African American children from becoming at-risk.

Many researchers and therapists attempting to work with at-risk African American students do not take into account these students' philosophies of life and irrational belief systems. In an unpublished randomized pilot study, Sapp (1991) found that the race of the therapist was not the sole determining factor in the credibility of therapists who disputed these students' irrational beliefs related to achievement. More important than the race of the therapist was the ability of each therapist to confront his or her personal and irrational beliefs concerning race and to have basic competence in the cultural issues that apply to African Americans.

Many African American students held the belief that people should not be racists-and many readers of this article would probably agree-but these students did not understand that demanding something only produces frustration and negative emotions. Once students were able to change "shoulds" into preferences, they were less resistant to instructions and stopped blaming all European Americans for negative social situations that exist in the United States. It was emphasized to students that it was important to work diligently to eliminate racism, but that it is meaningless to demand that something which exists should not. It took a forceful approach to emphasize to these students that the universe does not care about African Americans, for that matter, or any other people (Ellis, 1985, 1995; Weinrach, 1995).

Another irrational belief that many of these students held was that European Americans must accept African Americans. It was pointed out that while acceptance was preferable, it was not necessary for the happiness or academic success of these students.

In summary, the difficulties that African American middle-school students experience academically is connected with their philosophies of life. Many of the issues affecting these students were similar to the irrational beliefs discussed by Mylott (1995). This article summarizes relevant quantitative and qualitative literature which demonstrates that REBT and other cognitive-behavioral therapies are effective for improving achievement of African American students at the middle-school level who are academically at-risk.

Finally, conclusions underscored in this paper were based on several quantitative and qualitative studies (Farrell, Sapp, Johnson, & Pollard, 1994; Sapp, 1990a, 1990b, 1993; Sapp & Farrell, 1994; Sapp, Farrell, & Durand, 1995).

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