Barriers Facing African American Women in Technology

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**INTRODUCTION**

In technology education, African American women are normally in the minority. Contributing factors include the continuation of discrimination based on race and/or gender in American society, together with African American women’s own self-perception, which is itself influenced by their history of discrimination. These factors in turn affect their access to technology and technology education.

**BACKGROUND**

According to Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight (2004), for many individuals, race, gender, and social class—and their influence on identity—cannot be separated. The influence of multiple identity factors must be examined, particularly for groups that experience multiple sources of oppression, such as African American women (Thomas et al., 2004). Scon (2003) suggests that race, class, and gender affect the perceptions and the expectations of the viewing audience as well as the performance of the observed individuals.

To understand a group and issues that confront them, you must look at their history (Jeffries, 1995). Emancipation from slavery in 1863 and the beginning of reconstruction in 1865 brought freedom for African Americans, but sadly they were still treated unjustly and viewed in a subordinate and inferior fashion (Christensen, 2005). Just as the larger American society believed that women were responsible for socializing children and men, and uplifting families and communities, those engaged in the process of creating an African American professional class also believed that the black woman alone had the power to uproot ignorance, break down prejudice, and solve the great race problem (Shaw, 2004).

African American women teachers who taught during the early days of desegregation experienced conflicts with colleagues, administrators, and white parents—the latter often challenging their competence as teachers solely on the basis of race (Foster, 1990). Though frustrated by conflicts with white parents, some teachers recognized that their presence and success forced white parents and students to confront their own feelings of superiority (Foster, 1990) and were determined to remain in education.

Research indicates that due to differences, the majority group creates boundaries that impose limits on how minority workers will be defined in the workplace (Mabokela & Madeson, 2003). European American colleagues failed to understand the differences in other ethnic groups and projected narrowly defined roles for African American teachers (Mabokela & Madeson, 2003). African American women educators feel that other groups lack certain awareness or have a lack of exposure to the perspectives of people of color, and they feel that they must be bicultural: operating not only in their own world, but in one created for them by others (Roberts & Winiarczyk, 1996).

Historically paid less than their white counterparts, rarely employed except to teach African American pupils, opposed by unions seeking to preserve seniority...
rights for their largely white constituencies, dismissed
in large numbers following the Brown v. Board of
Education decision, and denied access to teaching posi-
tions through increased testing at all levels, the lives
and careers of African American teachers have been
seriously affected by racism (Foster, 1990). African
American women teachers in particular are often bur-
dened with the extra pressure of having to prove their
worth because their expertise is frequently questioned
by their colleagues, as well as by their students and
parents (Mabokela & Madeson, 2003).

Through being thought of as inferior teachers in their
technology profession to having to prove themselves
almost on a daily basis, African American women
have remained a strong force in education despite the
multiple barriers presented to their success.

BARRIERS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN TECHNOLOGY

Before entering technology education, African Ameri-
can women had reservations about a career involving
technology, and according to a report by the American
Association of University Women, there is a gender gap
in technology education (Brunner, 2003). Girls are more
ambivalent about technology than boys, who are more
positive regarding technology (Brunner, 2003). Young
girls are conditioned to believe that skills associated
with technology are for boys, and therefore girls take
fewer computer science and computer design courses
than boys do (Pinkard, 2005). Due to society’s increas-
ing dependence on technological skills, the continued
existence of the technological gender and cultural gap
is a problem that must be addressed in order to ensure
that the technological tools are equally accessible to
women and children of color (Pinkard, 2005). The
gender and cultural technology gap is also contributed
to by the level of computer usage in the home, unequal
access to technology in some communities, lack of
female technologically literate role models, and the
negative climate in higher education toward females
and minorities (Pinkard, 2005).

Computer usage in the home is very important when
it comes to a child’s view of technology (Pinkard, 2005).
If computer usage is at a high level in the home, the
child will come to view technology as very important,
but if usage is low, they may not view technology as
important and shy away from technology courses
completely. Also when placed in a technology class,
children may have a feeling of failure because they
are not as computer literate as the other students. In
education it is important that every child, regardless
of race, gender, or class, have access to technology in
all levels of education.

Unequal access to technology in our schools is
due once again to society’s view of technology as an
area that is dominated by males (Bush, Henle, Cohen,
Jenkins, & Kossy, 2002). Counselors and parents play
an important role in the selection of courses, and most
young women are not encouraged to enroll in technical
classes. Some educators feel that schools have
unknowingly contributed to the limited enrollment of
minorities and women in classes that would prepare
them for high-tech careers (Brown, 2003). Career coun-
selors should become more open to the technological
potential of minorities and women, ensuring that they
do not allow prejudicial thinking to keep them from
offering appropriate career guidance (Brown, 2003).
Those women and minorities that are in technology
courses are generally there because they or their parents
had to make a request to be there.

Lack of community resources is also a major factor
restricting minorities and women to needed technology
(Bush et al., 2002). Some African American communi-
ties may not have the funding to provide technical train-
ing for their citizens, and the only access to technology
often may be what they have in the school system and
the public library, but time constraints may limit the
use of these resources. School districts should make it
a priority for all students, regardless of race, gender, or
parents’ economic status, to be exposed to technology
as part of their educational development.

Women of color are traditionally under-represented
in technology careers as well as in most state-approved
certificate and degree programs (Bush et al., 2002).
One of the reasons is the lack of peer role models
with technology backgrounds. Under-representation
discourages African American women from entering
technological careers because they do not see people
like themselves (Bush et al., 2002). To remedy this situ-
uation, educational institutions should provide minority
women with appropriate career information, support,
and training, encouraging them to enter technology
fields (Bush et al., 2002). Providing role models and
mentors for African American girls would also help to
engender their interest in technology careers (Brown,
2003).