MASSI: A Framework for Achievement Through Diversity

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Educational systems across the country are being challenged to move from a social order where cultural differences between children and between children and teachers result in academic deficits. The poor academic performance of many "minority" children, across socioeconomic levels, certainly reflects the critical need for the educational movement of Achievement Through Diversity. When the Howard County Public School System's Office of Human Relations conducted a review of research on African American academic achievement, a number of exemplary programs across the country were found to have successfully educated African American students (Ascher, 1991; Bempechat, 1992; Bowers & Flinders, 1991; Comer, 1980; Comer & Haynes, 1991; FulWove, 1990). An analysis of these programs suggested that African American academic achievement resulted when an integrated and systematic approach to academic achievement was utilized.

The research review revealed that exemplary programs tended to be comprehensive in nature and focused on ways to motivate students; to effectively assess the learning and progress of students; to structure the instructional environment to create an optimal learning environment for all students; to utilize internal and external support systems and work with these systems in a collaborative manner; and to utilize effective instructional techniques. Analyses of exemplary programs suggests that when all five of these components are purposefully and simultaneously integrated into a unit and/or lesson plan we have the foundation for a wholistic, integrated educational process that results in achievement for a diversity of student learning needs. MASSI is the acronym for the integrated Motivation, Assessment, Structure, Support, and Instruction framework derived from a review of the work of exemplary programs and teachers.

African American Academic Achievement

When the MASSI framework is used to design education for African American students, the research suggests a number of considerations:

Motivation

One of the dimensions of African American culture is its emphasis on affect (Boykin,1986). According to Boykin, African American culture places an "emphasis on emotions and feelings together with a special sensitivity to emotional cues and a tendency to be emotionally expressive." An African American cultural emphasis on affect does not de-emphasize the importance of intellect, but rather implies the complimentary use of both domains in acquiring knowledge (Pasteur & Toldson, 1982). Consequently, many African American children are socialized to be affective learners who value a caring and nurturing teacher-student relationship. Teachers who successfully nurture their relationship with students assume the role of a positive Academic Significant Other. Positive Academic Significant Others can influence the achievement motivation of

African American students in the following ways:

- utilizing an additive approach to teaching that recognizes the indigenous skills students bring with them and attempts to build upon those skills

- utilizing strategies that enhance self-esteem and also promote higher levels of self-efficacy

- recognizing the different forms of educationally inviting and uninviting messages for African American students

- identifying and teaching through students core interest areas

- helping students view themselves as academically able, valuable, and self-directing; consistently and encouragingly state high academic expectations

- give usable and constructive corrective feedback that will encourage continued academic efficacy

- develop a clearly articulated mission in which preparation for higher education is a priority

- incorporate learning about diverse groups, including themselves, across the curriculum

- develop presentations in science, math, language arts, and social studies that are inclusive of African American contributions.

Assessment

In Achievement Through Diversity, the educator must rephase the following traditional assessment questions. "How smart are you" must be changed to "how are you smart?" "Show me how smart you are (via standardized tests)" must be amended by the offer to "show me what you know in your own way" (Brown, 1992). Because most African American children really do know the answers -- they just don't recognize the question in standardized test format, it is incumbent that demystifying the testing format and language for students become an integral part of the assessment process.

Researchers and educators have concluded that assessments make positive contributions to African American academic achievement when they have clear pedagogical applications (Hilliard, 1982; Hilliard, 1987; Jensen & Feuerstein, 1987; Jensen, 1990). Educational studies indicate that assessments which place emphasis on learning processes over learning outcomes provide teachers with valuable instructional information about what is being learned and what is not being learned and why. Assessments that focus on the process of learning assist teachers in fine tuning the higher order thinking skills African American students need to meet the technological demands that will be required in the work world of the 21st century (Ascher, 1990).

Researchers have suggested that African American students' classroom performances

might be better addressed if educators use the students' indigenous cultural skills as a resource when measuring their academic progress with performance based assessments. For example, African American culture is characterized by an oral tradition or a preference for oral/aural modes of communication in which both speaking and listening are treated as performances. Consequently, oral virtuosity and stylized verbal skills are emphasized and cultivated (Boykin, 1986). Performance based assessments which use oral presentations might provide information about students' levels of understanding that written assessment practices might mask (Gilbert & Gay, 1985; Tharp, 1989).

Structure

Time is a classroom structural issue that impacts the learning of African American students. The amount of time devoted to a subject appears to serve as a structural indicator of importance to African American students. Research on learning time suggests that effective changes in student achievement can be achieved by: (1) increasing the total amount of time which is allocated to learning; (2) increasing the portion of that allocated time which is actually allowed for leaning; and (3) increasing the amount of this allowed time which pupils actively devote to learning (Hamischfeger and Wiley, 1981). Educational studies and exemplary programs have repeatedly supported this research by demonstrating that adequate instructional time is critical to improving the achievement of African American students (Stein, Leinhardy & Bickel, 1989; Hale-Benson, 1987).

Grouping is another structural factor that has an impact on African American academic achievement. Educators and researchers have consistently reported that African American students excel in heterogeneous academically oriented groups (Hale-Benson, 1987; Fullilove & Treisman, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1992). Heterogeneous groupings which promote cooperation, sharing and the development of social bonds and responsibilities that transcend individual privileges are closely aligned with the African American cultural dimension of communalism (Boykin, 1986). Educators who allow African American students to interact with others in the mutual construction of knowledge will help them to make better connections with the information. This will result in a type of learning that becomes incorporated by the child and will be experienced by the child in the future as "felt knowledge" (Hanson, 1992).

Support

A review of the literature on African American achievement suggests that African American students excel when schools develop an organized system of support that includes the following four sources of support working coraboratively to effectively impact African American students academic achievement.

Parents/Caretakers. A consistent body of research suggest that the academic achievement of African American children is likely to increase when parents are frequently involved in their children's schooling (Lee, 1985; Sheilds, 1983; Clark, 1983; Franklin & Boyd, 1985; West, 1987; Royal, 1988). Researchers have indicated that maximum support is provided when (1) parents impact both school achievement and educational aspirations; (2) parents are provided with inservices that increase their awareness of the types of academic socialization experiences that influence African

American children's academic achievement -- such as parental school involvement, academic encouragement, firm and consistent monitoring of time and space, a future time orientation, a belief in the education ethic despite widespread evidence of discrimination in the workplace, and survival skills for persevering in environments that may be discriminatory; (3) in-school parent programs and parent outreach programs are created to familiarize parents with the relationship between career opportunities and academic course selection.

Community. There are a variety of studies that report the powerful effect that mentors had on the lives of high achieving African American adults (Bempechat, 1992). Along with churches there are sororities, fraternities, and other civic organizations that are available to collaborate with the schools to provide mentoring, role models, and offer tutorial support, social and job training skills. School programs that have been successful in fostering academic excellence among African American students have found creative ways of utilizing these types of community resources to maintain high levels of achievement in their students (Asher, 1991). Exemplary programs have demonstrated that linking with a university child study center, provides powerful resources for helping African American students succeed (Comer & Haynes, 1991). Schools which form partnerships with historically Black colleges and universities establish additional people resources and mentors as well as current research driven educational techniques for helping African American students achieve.

School Supports. Exemplary programs have demonstrated that schools are in a better position to serve African American students through the collaborative efforts of school teachers, administrators, psychologist, social workers, guidance counselors, parents and health specialists (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

Peers. Peers have a powerful influence on the achievement motivation of African American students. An emerging body of literature reveals that peers who support the development of both ethnic and academic identities help promote academic excellence among African American students. African American students who receive positive academic support from their peers are less likely to adopt an "oppositional frame of reference" which requires them to choose between being smart and alone or being African American and accepted (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fordham, 1988). Other studies have found that peer groups which promote both social and academic identities foster higher levels of achievement (Fuffilove & Treisman, 1990).

Instruction

Two assumptions underlying research that examines culture and learning are: (1) children do not enter school as "empty vessels" ; and (2) culture does not determine ability but it shapes how it is processed and expressed (Protheroe & Barsdale, 1991; Bowers & Flinders, 1991) Although there is diversity in learning styles among African Americans there is a strong relationship between African American cultural patterns of perceiving and the field-sensitive learning style.

Designing instruction to meet the needs of African American field-sensitive learners can be approached systematically by first setting the stage for learning prior to performing the

task of teaching. There are two phases of stage setting -- a student-initiated phase and a teacher initiated phase. The student initiated phase involves creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere that will help prepare students psychologically for total involvement in the learning process (Howard 1987). The preparation period might include behaviors aimed at establishing social relations with peers and with the teacher. The teacher-initiated phase has three activities (Brown, 1986). Activity one includes helping the students to perceive relevance of the learning tasks to their lifestyles. In the second activity of stage setting, students explore their familiarity with the topic. In other words, showing them what they already know by citing how they actually have used it in their daily lives. The cognitive scheme developed in activity two becomes the mental hook onto which new information can connect. The result is the beginning of activity three which is transition by acquisition. During this phase of stage setting students begin the process of expanding the pre-existing scheme to accept more knowledge of the subject and thus grow cognitively.

MASSI Pilot Program

The Howard County Public School System in Columbia, MD has begun a pilot of the MASSI framework involving a six-school kindergarten through twelfth grade feeder system. Teachers in the feeder system have received seven sessions of targeted staff development training in the use of the framework. Participants were provided an opportunity to experience the individual elements first hand and to learn more about incorporating the strategies into lessons. A second aspect of the staff development training involved a peer coaching component designed to provide support and encouragement as teachers take MASSI back to their classrooms.

Preliminary evaluation indicates that the MASSI framework is proving to be more than a mechanism for closing the performance gap between African American students and their counterparts. Rather, MASSI is demonstrating efficacy in improving instruction and student performance across various cultural domains.

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