Collaboration and Learning in Diverse Communities

The national news is full of reports about the educational plight of African-American youth. They specifically address the male members of that ethnic group. As you discuss the educational and social characteristics of that segment of the United States population and some of the educational practices that have been shown to improve their educational prospects, cite research that supports successful practices that have improved the educational outcomes of the identified population .

 The latest reports, on educational achievement in the United States, show a great disparity between persons of color and Caucasians. Compared to the international community, all students in the United States score significantly below Shanghai-China and Finland in the core subjects of reading, mathematics, and science. It is not surprising that this country, which brings innovative and creative solutions to the rest of the world, has not been able to close the achievement gaps between the different ethnic and gender groups. At the eighth grade level, males lag behind females in reading, while females lag behind in mathematics (Strauss, 2010). Students of color, with the exception of Asian ethnicity, still lag behind Caucasian students in achievement in the core courses of mathematics, science, and reading. African-American students represent the majority of lower achieving students (Plank, McRobbie, Klasik, Mullen, & Williams, 2008). The disparity may be due to the strategies that are being used to force accountability on the United States educational system (Strauss, 2010).

 Bob Wise, former Governor of West Virginia (2008), states that the problem with fluctuating achievement gaps lies in the methods used to educate the various ethnic groups. Further, he believes that the worst problem is in how we educate inner-city African-American males. Many of these students, inappropriately labeled as students with learning disabilities, are placed in special education classes. Former President George W. Bush termed this action as “bigotry of low expectations” ( as cited in Wise, 2008, p. 62). Wise (2008) contends that until all educators hold high expectations for all students, the achievement gap for both gender and color, will never close (Wise, 2008).

 African-American males also account for the majority of high school dropouts. The trend is for this group to have adult responsibilities, demonstrate academic disengagement, have poor academic records, exhibit high absenteeism, and develop poor relationships with authority figures. Educators must develop a deep understanding of the various ethnic cultures that comprise the student body within their schools. Through diligent study, educators can develop the cultural competency needed to guide their instructional strategies.

   Cultural competency is the lens through which each individual colors their view of a diverse world, values, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors; this trait is also the realization that each culture we encounter has value and is deserving of our respect. As educators, we approach cultural competency in our educational institutions through seeking to assure equal access, educational justice, and restraint of practices that might be discriminatory. As a person, one must learn to, as Ellen Reeves stated, “navigate cultural differences in the classroom – racial, religious, socioeconomic” ( as cited in Delpit, 2006). Because we are educational leaders, we strive to learn from others and temper our cultural awareness, squaring that recognition with other cultures (National Center for Cultural Competence, 2010; Olsen, Bhattacharya, & Scharf, 2006).

       With respect to Delpit and Comer, we marginalize and disenfranchise many students because we are too busy teaching to the test and fail to recognize the special talents and challenges our students bring to the classroom (Comer, Ben-Avie, Hayes, & Joyner, 1999; Delpit, 2006). Haberman (1991) proffers the belief that any student can learn, if they are taught utilizing a variety strategies. In particular, he states,

Education will be seriously reformed only after we move it from a matter of "importance" to a matter of "life and death," both for society and for the individuals themselves. Graduates who lack basic skills may be unemployable and represent a personal and societal tragedy. However, graduates who possess basic skills but are partially informed, unable to think, and incapable of making moral choices are downright dangerous. Before we can *make* workers, we must first *make* people. But people are not *made*-- they are conserved and grown. (p. 126)

Several instructional strategies allow educators to reach many students. While there is a need to teach basic skills and processes, it is imperative for educators to approach instruction through strategies that are appropriate for each student. Such approaches, addressing each student’s learning style, do not marginalize any one student (Gardner & Moran, 2006). Every individual has unique characteristics, abilities, and needs that every educator should respect (Comer, et al., 1999). One of the greatest contributors to the achievement gap for African-American males is their poorly developed literacy and numeracy. Wise (2008) believes that this is due, in part, to an educational dichotomy that exists in teaching reading at the elementary and secondary levels. “In the early grades, children ‘learn to read.’ In high school, they ‘read to learn,’ and it is a different skill set”(p. 81). He continues by pointing out the more than six million seventh through twelfth graders who read two or more years below grade level. Many literacy programs can be employed to raise reading levels and redirect student focus to a ‘reading to learn’ format. Programs such as Reading in the Content Areas, Achieve 3000, the Wilson Method, Creating Independence Through Student-owned Strategies, and SQ3r are just a few programs that show promise in closing the reading gap (Rosenthal & Dodelson, 2010; Shanahan, 2005; Snow, et al., 2002; Wise, 2008).

 A strong literacy program, at the secondary level, is essential to the recovery of struggling readers. However, it will take more than strong literacy to close the achievement gap. A rigorous and engaging curriculum that spirals from kindergarten through the twelfth grade is also essential to educational success. Requiring students to participate, rather than act as bystanders, in their education will better prepare them for either college or the workplace. Closely related to rigor is relevance. Curricula must be written so that the material is both engaging and meaningful to the students’ lives. Educators need to assist students in seeing the connection between course work and real world applications (Wise, 2008).

Since many African –American males have trouble developing good relationships with people in authority, educators need to hone their people skills, along with, their cultural competencies. Roosevelt once said “No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care”(Roosevelt, 2010). Districts need to develop networks of mentors and role models for all students. The mentors need to be able to listen to problems, assist with course assignments, and troubleshoot issues. Since the majority of struggling students decide to drop out during the first half of their ninth grade year, mentoring programs should be especially strong at that grade level and tied to a transition or school within a school program. Additionally, schools must make it easier for students to receive extra assistance during and after school.

Educators must figure out which teaching strategies are going to work for each student and then try to use those varied strategies to reach students on the edge. Use of confidence-raising strategies, prescriptive plans for individual students, frequent home contacts, celebrating every success (no matter how small), and filling instruction with materials designed for multiple learning styles is the only way to teach. Delpit (1992) said “If teachers are to teach effectively, recognition of the importance of student perception of teacher intent is critical” (p. 239). Teachers should leave no doubt that they are in the classroom to touch each student at their level and lift them up when they feel that they just cannot do the work. Teachers must all be part “Pied Piper”, Sherlock Holmes, Nelson Mandela, and Gandhi, if they are going to spread the cultural curtains and deliver fair and just instruction to all children. When the educational goals of each student are considered as a function of their personal learning styles and there is consensus among the collective, composed of the parent, student, and teacher, an individual educational plan is born. This plan is unique to that student, addresses just that student’s needs, and provides a roadmap for just that student. If all parties are on the same page, then student success, while not assured, is a more likely result. Identifying struggling students, through data derived from benchmarking, is essential to the success of the learner. Using testing programs like Scranton’s Achievement Series ™ provides the classroom teacher with the ability to rapidly identify weak students and develop remediation plans that are tailored to each student.

Successful African-American male students have developed coping mechanisms that do not involve study groups and teamwork. In a small study by Uri Tresman, University of California at Berkley, it was found that African-American students socialized with each other but they did not study together. This finding is related to the need to be closet academics to thwart peer ridicule for being successful. Tresman worked with these students and assisted them in learning how to study together, analyze lectures, and share tips and strategies. His method of forming ethnically diverse study groups avoided the appearance of remediation and chance stereotyping. This strategy, while used at the post-secondary level, holds promise for both middle and high school students (Singham, 1998).

If we are to close any achievement gaps in American Education, we must look at countries that are excelling in educating their youth. Should America adopt the Shanghai-China method of “Drill and Kill” or move toward the approach taken by Finland? Teachers need to come from the top of their classes, be skilled in their content area, and begin teaching only after they have obtained a master’s degree. Educators need to be well trained in cultural competency and have a strong foundation in how students learn. Further, educators should be well compensated for their education and expertise. Parents and the community must be actively involved with their child’s education. Finally, every school should be afforded equal access to every available resource and technology. The refocusing of American education is necessary. If we continue to do what we have always done, we will continue to see a widening of the achievement gap between all reporting categories on both national and international tests (Robbins, 2006-2010; Wise, 2008). There are no obstacles to learning other than the roadblocks we make for ourselves!

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