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PERSPECTIVES

The Troubling Context of Urban Schools: Instructional Design as a Source of Transformation for Students of Color

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Various research and writings have framed the issue of teaching and learning in urban K–12 schools. A significant body of literature exists on the achievement gap between African American and White students in a variety of educational settings (Landsman & Lewis, 2006; Moore, 2003; Obiakor & Beachum, 2006). There is also a plethora of research dealing with the over representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; Hilliard, 1990). It is unfortunate that these concerns are only a small part of the portrait of struggles facing African American learners in urban school settings.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT

Exploring the data that illustrate the ongoing challenges faced by urban students brings attention to the reality that these grave circumstances are not new phenomena. Almost 45 years ago Dunn (1968) highlighted the issue of over representation of African American students in special education programs. Today, concerned parents, teachers, and other stakeholders still complain bitterly about this and other crises affecting urban students and minority urban students in particular. The purpose of this essay is to offer critical consideration to the challenging context of urban K–12 schools and to highlight the role of instructional design as a source of transformation for students of color.

As African American students—and especially those in urban schools—continue to be labeled "at risk," the disparities between them and their White counterparts are persistently alarming. The current outlook for urban

public schools is worrisome; with high dropout rates, dilapidated facilities, low graduation rates, and overall poor achievement when compared with rural and suburban schools (Kozol, 2005; Louis & Miles, 1990), there are significant setbacks for urban schools and their students.

ROLE OF INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

One possible source of transformation for urban students of color is the implementation of a process that insists on instructional design that results in culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. This process takes a practical step toward conceptualizing the discourse on the achievement gap in a different way: to move away from the perception of it being a challenge towards viewing it as an opportunity for radical improvement. Although a change in the approach to instructional design is only one aspect of required change, it can act as a sound framework from which effective change can occur.

When conceived broadly, instructional design (a) encompasses the experiences of learners and facilitators of learning and (b) takes each as a valuable and legitimate component of the learning process. Along with the overarching need to adequately prepare teachers with the technical knowledge, skills, and attitudes to meet the needs of diverse students, it is important that they are also culturally aware and sensitive. In terms of cultural sensitivity, teachers undergo several stages (Bennett, 1995; Irvine, 2002) in which they progress from awareness, to acceptance and respect for others' cultural differences, to empathy for other cultures (Bennett, 1995), and eventually to developing enriching classroom experiences while considering these differences in instructional design and evaluation (Irvine, 2002).

To design culturally sensitive, relevant, and responsive instruction, particularly for African American students, teachers should develop expertise in nine dimensions of African American culture (Boykin, 1983). By offering these nine dimensions, Boykin (1983) created opportunities for teachers to create learning environments that represent culturally responsive pedagogy. This set of skills will promote student engagement and will help teachers design instruction that meets the needs of multiple learning styles within the specific context of the learning environment. This approach can serve as a platform for development of urban African American learners and a source of transformation.

SUMMARY

The complex challenges that urban students face—obviously not discussed in their entirety herein—require an integrated systematic approach to change.

This change is demanded in areas of policy and practice. In discussing an approach for change to address the achievement gap between African Americans and White learners, Lewis, James, Hancock, and Hill-Jackson (2008) pointed out the need for a multiple-perspective approach. With no magic formula to eradicate these problems overnight, this essay proposes the need for culturally sensitive teaching (Gay, 2000) from teachers who will, in turn, be able to design culturally relevant pedagogical experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2000) for African American learners. To this end, developing expertise in the dimensions of African American culture (Boykin, 1983) will assist in the appreciation of multiple learning styles and an even deeper appreciation for the African American culture and learner.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Curriculum Construction: Conflicts and Constraints That Promote the Underachievement of African American Students in Urban Schools

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The current deficits that exist in the academic achievement of African American students are evidence that the traditional curriculum model in the United States has failed over the years (Ogbu, 1987). The underachievement, increased dropout rates, and lack of progression for African American students