

INSTRUCTING AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

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Closing the educational achievement gap has been a schooling issue since *Brown v. Board of Topeka*, Kansas decision. Generally, the learning achievement of elementary and secondary African-American student has been an issue in majority school populations across the United States. And evidence of performance of these students appears to be more dismal than ever before. A becoming challenge to contemporary educators is manifested in the need for classroom instructional processes that can serve as solutions for decreasing the achievement gap which plagues segments of the African-American student population. The term "educators" used herein is inclusive of administrators and counselors, as well as instructional personnel.

The purpose of this paper is to identify and examine research-based findings on effective instructional practices in the context of their applicability for classroom teaching-learning situations. Such information can be valuable to the student learning-achievement work of teachers and instructional support personnel. Particularly, this knowledge can be valuable to teachers in the decisions they make about their students, content, and their teaching. This paper addresses the interrelationship of these decisions and teachers' instructional plan regarding teaching methods and strategies. Teacher decision-making is a critical component of the instructional planning process. Additional to the research on effective teaching, this paper presents teacher development outcomes from workshops settings and best practice instructional strategies for practitioners.

One essential key to economic, personal, and social success, for African American, is to pursue formal education. Concomitantly, the struggles of African-Americans to achieve educational excellence, equality, and equity are critically linked to the instruction experienced

in the classroom. African-American children, who are among the schools' "majority of minorities" in this 21st century, have experienced detrimental affects due to the lack of equity in the classroom. These children need advocates for excellence and equity in education to achieve their edu-

cational goals (Young, 1994). The dilemmatic issue regarding the lack of achievement by African-American children may conceivably be changed if equal and quality educational opportunities are provided through instruction in the classroom (Wright, 1999).

When presenting information regarding instructing African-American students to teachers, I always ask them to think about two things as we progress through this presentation. One is, "Change is Good." Even though we live in a society that continues to change, teachers often resist change. The reality is teachers enjoy doing what works for students in the classroom, but children have changed over the years in the classroom. The change in children and what they bring to the classroom requires a change in what should be done in the classroom for African American students to be successful. Another quote I share is, "Those who dare to teach must never cease to learn," penned by Anderson (1980). It is my belief that teachers should always be open to learn new things, ideas, and/or concepts to enhance their instruction in the classroom. As educators, we need to address the instructional process in the classroom to enhance learning for African-American children.

But, "Do teachers teach the way they were taught?" or "Do teachers teach the way they learn?" What about students who learn differently from the way teachers teach? Another question I pose to teachers in this presentation is, "How do you learn?" or "What is your learning style or modality?" To answer the above questions, the teachers are administered a learning style inventory to assess their learning prefer-

ence. Since teachers teach the way they learn; and when students learn differently from the way the teacher instructs, they are often times out of luck. Even though style of a teacher and student may differ, the differences should not be used as an excuse for poor instruction or low expectations (Hilliard, 1992).

The aforementioned questions will be addressed and information will be provided as workable suggestions can be utilized in the classroom to enhance learning for African-American children. The information will be based on the preferential learning style and dimensions of African American culture.

Learning Preferential Style

Students' success in school is dependent upon how much they learn academically. It is my belief that students come to school to learn but somehow that does not always happen. It is not as if students cannot learn. If a child walks through the door or if a child can talk and communicate with the teacher, then we know the child can learn. Everything a child can do after they enter school is learned. So, what can teachers do to help students learn while in school? First, teachers need to know how students learn.

Learning style and the way students learn has been addressed by many researchers to assist students in making the connection with learning in the classroom as well as helping teachers become successful teaching students with varying learning styles (Stevenson & Dunn, 2001; Gabe, 2002). What is a learning style? According to Dunn and Dunn (as cited in Stevenson & Dunn, 2001), a learning style

is the way an individual begins to concentrate on, process, internalize, and remember new and difficult academic information or develop skills. Students at the collegiate level tend to have a better understanding of how they learn by developing a prescription for learning. In fact, most college students do not learn of their learning style until after they enter college (Stevenson, & Dunn, 2001). How would knowing how one learns assist a student while in their formative years of their education?

If students were aware of their learning style, then students could take more responsibility for learning. Many students are not aware of how they learn because teachers do not know how they learn. As typical of most teachers, they teach "the way they were taught" not realizing that this prescription was not good for them even when they were students (Stevenson & Dunn, 2001). Questions that could be posed are: Are teachers exposed or trained regarding learning style? Does the teacher's learning style influence their teaching students with different learning styles? Can teachers identify learning styles in students?

If teachers were trained regarding learning, then these teachers could utilize this

information to develop instructional strategies that will accommodate students learning in the classroom (Haar, Hall, Schoepp, & Smith, 2002). Levine (2002) asserts that teachers can be trained to observe the brain function that a student has or does not have and can assist the student in learning how to utilize the function that is the strongest when learning. According to Haar & et. al. (2002) based on research conducted, they highly recommended that both pre-service and in-service education programs should place a stronger emphasis on learning style and teachers and students should learn to assess their learning style.

Even though several learning style inventories have been developed and utilized (Canfield & Canfield, 1976; Dunn, Dunn & Price, 1978; Perrin, 1981) an inventory developed by Torrance, Reynolds, Riegel and Ball (1977), was utilized during this presentation. There are two preferential styles of learning global (right brain) and analytical (left brain) (Torrance et al., 1977). "What does it mean to be a global or analytical learner?" "Which learning style is most indicative of the classroom?" Listed below are the characteristics of the learning style preference.

If teachers are going to learn to instruct to address learning styles, then teachers must assess how they learn as well as how students learn. Knowledge of this information will assist them in developing strategies that will help student take more responsibility for learning, especially if a student knows how they learn.

The Global Learner

The global learner visual, tactile, and kinesthetic meaning this learner has to visualize what is about to be learned, the learner must touch what is about to be learned, and the learner must move to learn. When teachers are giving directions, the global learner is trying to visualize what needs to be accomplished. However, most often the global learner is still visualizing and the teacher has moved on. When the global learner raises his or her hand and ask, "What are we supposed to do?" the teacher will often respond with, "You were not listening!" Well, that is not true of the global learner and most often the teacher will not repeat the directions leaving the global learner lost and fearful of asking questions. This fear of asking questions seems to live with the global learner throughout their educational career or they will have to find someone to help them progress through analytical subjects.

Not only does this learner need to see, touch, and move when processing information, the global learner also responds to word pitch and feeling. A case in point is the scenario below.

Case 1: One day a student (global learner) walked into the classroom and approached the teacher prepared to pose a question. After calling the

teacher's name, the teacher's response was, "What do you want?" (using a stern voice) What do you think happened to the global learner? The initial response was the student backed down, did not pose the question, and begin to wonder what she may have done to get such a response. The teacher had a confrontation prior to entering the classroom. As such, this incident was not the fault of the student, however, the student received a response that caused her to believe she may have done something, unknowingly that elicited such a response. The student returned to her seat and wondered, "What did I do?" The child wondered most of the day and several days after the incident, "what did I do?" So, how does that effect learning?

Most often the student will spend more time wondering than learning and would not dare ask the teacher another question for fear of receiving the same response. Not getting the question answered may lead the student to believe that the teacher does not like him or her and chosen behavior may be indicative of this thought. Even if the thought is not true, it is the perception of the student and consequently, the perception impacts learning.

Another aspect of the global learner is that this learner process information in chunks.

Case 2: Imagine if you will the 4th or 5th grade. As a global learner, you enter the classroom on Monday morning and you see 20 spelling words on the board. What is your

reaction? How does seeing those words make you feel?

Whenever I pose this question to my global learners who are teachers, the responses given are, "that is too many words" or "all of those words!" This response is given because the student is overwhelmed as such the global learner believes he or she cannot learn all of those words. As a result of this belief, the student inevitably does not try or as one teacher responded, wait until Thursday night. Students believe if 20 words are on the board, then all 20 words must be learned at the same time. Not true and not achievable for a global learner. My question to the global learner is, "Can you learn 4 words?" Most often the response is yes. Then the student is given 4 words to learn for that day or evening. The idea of being overwhelmed has been removed and the willingness to learn has increased. Not only would the teacher give the student 4 words to learn, the words should be written on rectangle or square pieces of colored paper with a word on each piece. This way the student can manipulate the pieces of paper, play a game with them, put them in their pocket, or look at them on the way home. The main idea is that the student is no longer overwhelmed. This same concept can also be used to learn multiplication facts.

Learning multiplication facts is extremely overwhelming for the global learner when all of the facts are on one sheet. This is a concept that can be shared with student, especially beginning at 3rd grade. The student can learn to devise information in chunks and learn accordingly. Using color enhances the creative

side of the global learner, is warm, and causes the learner to want to interact with the information. Think about yourself as a global learner and how having learned this aspect of your learning style could have helped you so much during your formative years of school.

Processing information in chunks causes math to be somewhat difficult, since math is a sequential subject and sequential is indicative of an analytical learner. What I recommend to math teachers is to give the global learners the answers and have the students to copy the steps in different colors. Giving the answer could cause the global learner to work backward to determine how or why that is the correct answer. Again, the goal is to not have the global learner feel so overwhelmed, to increase the willingness to learn, and decrease the belief of, "I can't learn that." Teaching to enhance the global learner does not impact the analytical learner negatively, because the analytical learner is in a comfortable environment to learn.

The Analytical Learner

The analytical learners can process information that is written (textbooks) or orally (lecture). These learners tend to progress in subjects such as math, science, or history because information is often sequenced in these courses. The analytical learner, given the same scenario of entering the classroom to pose a question to the teacher, would not be affected by the tone of voice. The analytical learner responds to word meaning and if the teacher were to ask, "What do you want?" (using a stern voice), the analytical learner would pose the question. Analytical

learners recall facts and dates with relative ease as well as process information linearly. This learner responds to logical appeal helping them to pose more questions to understand what is reasonable or logical (Hilliard, 1992). Based on the aforementioned information, this style of learner tends to be most comfortable in an academic setting because their learning style is most often addressed.

The Impact on African-American Students

Which style is most indicative of the classroom? The analytical style of learning is most indicative of the classroom because the traditional American school is quite rigid and encapsulated in a style that mimics the particular cultural style of most European American children (Hilliard, 1992). According to Anderson (1988), of the two preferential styles, global learners are highly concentrated in the African-American community. As such, how can African-American students be successful in an environment where they are not being instructed the way they learn?

How teachers interact and instruct students in the classroom is important to children learning. The results of research conducted by Goodlad (1984) indicated that a lack of instructional variability was found in most classrooms regardless to ethnicity causing teachers to use a limited repertoire of pedagogical methods. Boykins (1986) found, based on data collected in experiments conducted, that performance of African-American children was enhanced when teachers employed activities with, "verve inducement and high sensate stimulation" (p. 6). Verve, a

dimension of African-American culture, is the propensity for high stimulation. African American children often experience this concept of verve in the community, home, and church. When these children enter school, they are often instructed to sit in their seats and are provided information that is not stimulating as they have been accustomed. Irvine (1991) summarized the importance of the use of movement in the classroom for African-American children best in the following statements:

If the lack of instructional variability is descriptive of the majority of our schools, then it seems fair to speculate that this dismal situation is intensified in schools that serve students who are African-American. In these schools, the overwhelming preoccupation seems to be with control- particularly controlling physical movement and anticipated and perceived aggression of African-American children. Given these conditions, all children, particularly African-American children, would welcome "verve inducement" in these classrooms (p. 91).

According to Hale-Benson (1994), learning activities that involve physical movement contribute to the achievement of African-American children. To assist African-American children in their achievement, teachers should create movement, provide opportunities for personal oral expression, create learning activities that are energetic and lively, even if they have to move outside the walls of the classroom.

The Impact on Instruction

So, what should teachers do before beginning the instructional process for African American students? Teachers should assess how students learn by administering an inventory comparable to the reading level of students in the classroom. After assessing how students learn, get to know the students, then the teacher must prepare to instruct using both styles and instruct the way the student learns. Becoming acquainted with students will assist the teacher in devising instructional episodes that are relevant to these students. Irvine (1999) suggested that teachers who are preparing to instruct African-American students should adopt the same spirit of learning as if they are going to another country. They learn about the culture of the children in that country before venturing into that country to be able to appreciate the people. As such, there is a culture that children learn as African-American that teachers should learn about before preparing to instruct African-American children.

To assist the global learner in the classroom, the teacher could employ more group work, give students options of completing an assignment, and make correct grammar a practice in the classroom. Most often, teachers want students to work individually, however, it would assist the global learner tremendously if that student can work with someone. It is important for the global learner to have someone who will understand his or her need in learning, is patient with the learner, and is willing to assist the learner. As teachers, we know that sometimes students are able to explain information to another student in a way whereas the student can understand better.

In terms of global learners, this concept should be encouraged often in the classroom.

The teacher of global learners can foster independence by incorporating cooperative learning groups, classroom discussion, experimental learning, student's evaluating each other's work. If cooperative learning groups are employed, then by all means have both analytical and global learners in a group and provide written instruction. The global and analytical learner can learn from each other because the analytical learner will read the instructions to the global learner who will visualize what should be done. Once the global learner has the picture in his or her mind, then the student can proceed. If all the learners in a cooperative group are analytical learners, then more than likely the teacher will get four projects. Analytical learners have their way of completing assignment, tend to believe their way is the best way, and tend not to compromise. This is not necessarily negative, however, this idea is not comparable for cooperative group work. On the other hand, if all the learners in a group are global, then more than likely they will spend more time asking each other what they are supposed to do. The global learner needs more time to process the instructions before proceeding. If the teacher gives the instructions one time, then the global learner has not had adequate time to process the information given. Oftentimes, in this situation, if the global learner were to ask the teacher to repeat the instructions, the teacher often accuses the student of not listening. Therefore, the global learner tends not to pose this question to the

teacher, "what are we supposed to do?" The outcome of completed work by the global learners limited if at all.

Conclusions

After having read this information, hopefully teachers will realize some of the errors made while instructing African American students, will get excited about teaching, so these students can get excited about learning. The aforementioned adjustments can only enhance learning regardless if the student is a global or analytical learner. If a teacher is going to become culturally sensitive, it will require a change of *attitude* and a change of heart. A change of attitude and a change of *heart* requires learning something about self. If you have learned something about yourself, then the question is, "are you ready to make a change?" It is not as if African-American students do not want to learn, but learning requires teaching a student the way he or she learns.

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