Problems and solutions to teaching the African American student

Julie Brewer

The University of Southern Mississippi

Abstract

The goal of multicultural education is equity in the classroom and in testing yet an achievement gap persists between Black and White students as shown in standardized testing. Various methods beyond the integration of content with more racially diverse themes are suggested. Teachers can use knowledge construction to challenge definitions of terms used in content areas. Changing methodologies from traditional to more of a wide range of strategies is essential. African Americans are underrepresented in gifted programs but overrepresented in special education programs. Home life, culture and income level of the family are factors that need consideration before accurate placement can occur. Teachers who believe they can be successful in teaching African American students usually are successful. Programs to increase teachers' self-efficacy are helpful for novice teachers. Much work still needs to be done to achieve equity in education.

Multicultural education emerged from a need to address inequity in education during the civil rights movements of the mid twentieth century. In fact, "many trace the history of multicultural education back to the social action of African Americans and other people who challenged discriminatory practices in public institutions during the civil rights struggles of the 1960's (Banks, 1989: Davidman & Davidman, 1997)" (Gorski, 1999). Multicultural education is defined as "a complex approach to teaching and learning that includes the movement toward equity in the schools and classroom, the transformation of the curriculum, the process of becoming multiculturally competent , and the commitment to address societal injustices" (Bennett, 2011, p.3). The movement toward "educational equity" according to Banks (1981) included a necessary transformation in "policies, teacher's attitudes, instructional materials, assessment methods, counseling, and teaching styles (1981, 1989)" (Gorski, 1999). The infusion of transformative policies and research in the 1980's and beyond has not lead to total equality in education. In this paper I will explore the problems and potential solutions in the inequitable education of African American students.

The Achievement Gap "nearly always refers to disparities of achievement between or among student groups" (Hidden Curriculum, 2014). Black and White student groups have been measured to evaluate the Achievement Gap that exists in reading and mathematics by the National Assessment of Educational Progress or NAEP. Scores measured in 1978 for mathematics and 1980 in reading were shown in 2004 to have a narrowing of the Achievement Gap for both Black and White students for grades four and eight. In the same study in 26 states the math scores increased from 1990-2007 for both Black and White students in grade eight. For grades four in math from 1992-2007, there were 35 states showing an increase in scores for both Black and White students. It would appear to be an achievement for the increase in scores but

what is troubling is that in mathematics in 2007; only 15 states narrowed the achievement gap for grade 4 and four states for grade 8. In reading grade 4 three states closed the gap in 2007 from 1992 but in grade 8 there was no significant change (Rahman, 2009). In almost fifteen years math and reading in grades 4 and 8 were virtually unaffected as far as improving in thirty-five states. This shows that a significant achievement gap continues to exist for African American school children. In nearly fifty years since the inception of multicultural education there still remains an achievement gap.

To effectively teach the African-American student and teach multiculturally, Dr. James Banks developed five dimensions to true multicultural education. In the article for NEA, Banks shared his reason for his developing of the dimensions, saying that he discovered many teachers thought of content integration as the only way to achieve multicultural education. Content integration is thought of as the first step, where a teacher can introduce contributions of racially diverse groups as it applies to the curriculum. In Spanish class, the teacher may introduce a Black baseball player or that many countries like Panama and the Dominican Republic have Black Spanish speakers because of the former slave trade bringing Blacks to these areas. Content integration is only the first dimension.

Secondly, the "knowledge construction process moves to a different level because here teachers help students to understand, investigate, and determine the implicit cultural assumptions and frames of reference and perspectives of the discipline they are teaching" (Banks &Tucker,1998). Banks cites ideas like the "westward movement" can be questioned, for example by asking westward for whom, from what perspective. Perspectives have changed in educational content so that Columbus is no longer the discoverer of America. It is clear that teachers can evaluate their information to include various perspectives. Students may be given assignments to

investigate differing concepts in their curriculum. They could, for example, learn why Columbus is said to have discovered America or what other groups came also. They could write a report from the Native perspective when they discovered Columbus coming ashore.

Equity pedagogy or teachers changing their methods is the third dimension. Teachers need to change their methods to a range of strategies such as cooperative groups, role playing, simulations and discovery. Banks states that "what we found, for example, from the work by people like Triesman is that African-American students will learn calculus better if they learn it in cooperative groups" (Banks & Tucker, 1998). New methods are good for every culture as Banks confirms that what "we are suggesting is that cooperative learning will enhance the achievement of a wide range of students from a wide range of groups" (Banks & Tucker, 1998). Many other racial groups benefit from a diversity of teaching styles in lieu of the lecture.

The final two dimensions are prejudice reduction and empowering school and social structure. Teachers can work on prejudice reduction in their classrooms and help students work toward positive racial views. Many times the school and social structure needs to be addressed especially if the issues have not been addressed previously. Sports teams, cheerleading, homecoming queen, prom queen, and other school events can make the school climate racially diverse or not. Sometimes, as Banks suggests, choices for teams and queens are done inadvertently and need to be more consciously to develop more racially balanced programs.

African-Americans are significantly underrepresented in gifted education (Ford, 2011b). Federal programs historically have included academic, intellectual, and creative abilities and not the socio-emotional or psychological aspects in the giftedness. Revisions in the definitions of federal programs of giftedness now say "that outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata and in all areas of human endeavor"

(Scott, 2012, p. 24). Improvements have been made to be more inclusive of cultural and economic issues of gifted students but "there has been even less of a focus on the needs and issues of African-American students with culture in mind" (Scott, 2012, p.25). Scott (2012) cites the findings of Barton & Coley (2009) which identifies three reasons impeding success for the African American student: school, health, and home. School reasons include low preparation, rigor, experience, absence and high turnover of the teachers. Also in urban schools there are usually large class sizes. Health reasons are usually hunger and poor nutrition. Home reasons for lack of success include lack of parental participation and less reading but more television.

In the High Context culture, which the Black student comes from they have a need for affiliation with members of the group and "get their identity from group associations" (Bennett, 2011, p.46). Success separates them from their peers and "many very capable and motivated black students are living a life of deception. Although brilliant, they choose to perform at average or below average levels in an effort to be accepted among their peers"(Scott, 2012, p. 28). I have had a very brilliant African American student cut class repeatedly to play the "bad girl." She proved to be brilliant so to take the focus off her achievements she cut class. Bennett (2011) supports this statement in that Black "females tend to maintain a low school profile through strategies such as cutting classes selectively so as not to accumulate enough absences in any one class to fail it, "putting brakes" on their academic performance" (Bennett, 2011, p. 275). Perfectionism is another issue with the African American student. Black students needing to begin an essay would write a couple of lines, throw it away, and start over repeatedly. In fact, "due to perfectionism, fear of success and the need for affiliation, some gifted Black students may underachieve as a way to gain attention or to rebel against those who know they can do better" (Scott, 2012, p. 26).

Ford (2011a) combined works from Banks and Bloom to develop a rigorous set of recommendations to integrate into the curriculum; namely, contributions, additive, transformational and social action. The recommendation called contributions "focuses on holidays, heroes, and other discrete elements within a culture" (Scott, 2012, p.28), while additive adds ethnic elements. Transformation allows students to investigate content from other perspectives and social action allows the student to state actions to solve social problems. These recommendations address the needs and changes to the curriculum as well as teachers endeavoring to understand the needs of the African American gifted student.

Conversely, not only are African American students underrepresented in gifted education they are severely overrepresented in special education classes. Soft categories of special education are defined as learning disability, emotional, and behavioral disorders, such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Bennett (2011) explains "the overrepresentation of African American students in the soft categories, especially males, is a major concern because definitions of exceptionalities in these categories are difficult to pin down" (Bennett, 2011, p. 277). The referral process to these programs is questioned as being subjective and unreliable since teacher referrals, largely from white middle class teachers, account for placement in special education services. One hypothesis even states that "the groups that currently perform very poorly at school have historically been discriminated against and regarded as inherently inferior by the dominant group" (Obi & Obiakor, 2001, p.94).

Educators encounter students with backgrounds that may be "unable to read the material that the teacher is accustomed to using, or students may speak a language or dialect foreign to him/her instead of Standard English" (Obi & Obiakor, 2001, p. 93). This language barrier raises

the question of "whether they are disproportionately represented or identified as exceptional learners because traditional Eurocentric curriculum or strategies do not work in their favor" (Obi & Obiakor, 2001, p. 93). Whether the curriculum is oppositional or not, Bennett (2011) agrees that, "African American and male students are over represented in many special education programs, in some cases even when they are in high income families with well-educated parents" (Bennett, 2011, p. 272).

Low income of the student's household is a significant factor in poor academic achievement. The national report card shows students in high poverty areas scored lower in content areas, fewer of these students graduate and more are retained. Dropout rates are severely affected because for non-poor Whites the drop-out rate was 8.6 percent and non-poor Blacks the rate was 9.3 percent. For poor whites the drop-out rate was 27.1 percent and for poor Blacks 24.6 percent (Bennett, 2011). The drop-out rate shows a significant gap regarding income of the household for both White and Black students. However, according to Reardon (2011) "the association between income and achievement has increased substantially over time, indicating that family income matters more for academic now than it has in the past" (Miksic, 2011). Reardon (2011) also found that the parents' intellectual achievement is more of a factor in the child's educational success than income. Family incomes have increased since the beginnings of Multicultural education. It is possible that achievement for parents is a factor because many parents have college degrees and may not necessarily have higher incomes.

In a study by Gloria Ladson-Billings "culturally relevant teaching" was explored in a study of a "California school district that serves primarily African American families" Bennett, 2011, p. 236). Parents' ideas of excellence included their child's enthusiasm, the teacher's respect for the parent, and that teachers understood the bi-cultural world of their student.

Principals viewed teacher success with African American students as low referrals, high attendance, and high test scores. The conclusion of this research showed that teachers who viewed themselves, the community, and in how they viewed knowledge were the most successful. They chose the low income, African American community and were aware of the surrounding societal conditions. Namely, they wanted to be there and they chose to help these students succeed.

For teachers to be successful with African American schoolchildren they must believe they can be successful. It is alarming that attrition is high in schools with a high percentage of low income, high poverty and minority students. Teacher attrition has been attributed to the fact that the new teacher is unprepared for dealing with diverse classrooms. "Focus on teacher preparation includes transforming teacher's multicultural attitudes (e.g. Gay, 2000), increasing their culturally diverse knowledge base (e.g. Gay, 2002) and helping them develop the skills to effectively teach African American students (e.g. Miller, 2009)"(Siwatu, Frazier, Osaghae, & Starker, 2011, p.209). One of the coauthors of the paper…"has questioned whether the novice teachers he has worked with have been adequately prepared to teach African American students and whether they are confident in their ability to engage in the practice of culturally responsive teaching" (Siwatu, Frazier, Osaghae, & Starker, 2011, p. 211).

According to Siwatu (2011) teacher's beliefs about their abilities affects the effort they put into teaching, and their willingness to try new culturally responsive methods. The self-efficacious or confident teacher also puts forth more effort, is willing to accept their student achievement, and accepts challenges presented by the culture (e.g.Tshannen-Moran &Woolfolk, Hoy, 2001). In order to develop the goal of more self-efficacious teachers Bandera (1997) proposed that self-efficacy beliefs are influenced by four sources of information: mastery

experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and information conveyed by emotional reactions. Bandura (1997) claims that opportunities must be provided for pre-service teachers to perform the tasks covered during training. Vicarious experience refers to the teacher being able to observe culturally successful teachers in their classrooms. Verbal persuasion could be given to explain to the novice teacher that they are successful. Information from the new teacher's psychological state, such as, remaining calm is the last factor.

In conclusion there are many problems involved in the question of culturally relevant teaching of the African-American student. In the twenty first century, achievement gaps still exist after the introduction of multicultural education over fifty years ago. Research has adequately formulated a plan to bring success to the classroom for the African-American and other minorities. Implementation of equity pedagogy and culturally sensitive schools has been lagging on spite of the emphasis on multicultural education as a need.

First, an effort to realize the possible low income status and other home factors is a must. Teachers need to deal with a cultural viewpoint, and attitudes they might have that are not like theirs. The teacher proves to be a major factor in the success of the African-American student. The teacher who wants to teach African-American students and knows what challenges they are facing will be successful. Also, the teacher of culturally diverse students' needs to try nontraditional methods to teach and needs to understand the cultural nuances of the student.

Suggestions have been researched to develop the cultural competence of the teachers. African American students have been misrepresented in programs seemingly for their benefit and stricter more careful evaluations should be implemented before placing them in programs which could be to their detriment. Schools, administrators, and teachers alike have a challenging task to eventually close the Achievement Gap between Black and White students.

References

Bennett, C. (2011). *Comprehensive multicultural education.* New York: Pearson.

Hidden curriculum (2014, August 26). In S. Abbott (Ed.), The glossary of education reform.

Retrieved from http://edglossary.org/hidden-curriculum

Gorski, P. (1999, November 1). A brief history of multicultural education. Retrieved from

edchange.

Miksic, M. (2014, March 20). The persistent achievement gaps in American education. Retrieved

from ciep.hunter.cuny.edu/the-persistent-achievement-gaps-in-American-education

Obi, S. O., & Obiakor, F. (2001). Empowering African American exceptional learners: Vision

for the New Millennium. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, *25*(2), 93.

Rahman, T. (2009, July 1). Achievement gaps: How black and white students in public schools

perform on the national assessment of educational progress. Retrieved from nces.ed.gov

Scott, M. F. (2012). Socio-emotional and psychological issues and needs of gifted African-

American students: Culture matters. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching & Learning*,

2(1), 23-33.

Siwatu, K. O., Frazier, P., Osaghae, O. J., & Starker, T. V. (2011). From maybe I can to yes I

can: Developing pre-service and in-service teachers' self-efficacy to teach African

American students. *Journal of Negro Education*, *80*(3), 209-222.