

## **Executive Summary**

### Teaching Black Students: Best Practices

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This discussion of best practices for teaching African American students begins with a review of the research literature and some of the problems – theoretical, conceptual and substantive – inherent in the literature. Reports of research on human learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999) served as a starting point for the review of the literature. Research on the impact of culture on literacy and on mathematics and science achievement, that is, the role of culture in learning in school subjects, is also presented. In addition, the paper details teaching and learning episodes in elementary and secondary school classrooms and presents some of the findings from related interviews with practitioners expert in the area of teaching African American students. The paper, therefore, provides a critical examination of literature and praxis related to human learning and to the best practices for educating African American students.

The qualitative studies from which the teaching and learning episodes are drawn are part of on-going research projects. Participant observations and audio taped recordings took place in two elementary and one secondary classroom. Students in these classrooms are from diverse communities differing along many lines, including ethnicity, socioeconomic status and family educational backgrounds. A group of researchers also analyzed the transcribed audio taped recordings and their comments are presented.

The first/second grade combination class featured in the study was engaged in an extended inquiry of how and why things move. In her daily classroom practices and in her own professional development, the teacher of the students in the first class was also exploring forces, motion and Newton's Laws. Her decision to have her students study motion came about because of her participation in a project on which she worked with other teachers in the Cambridge Teacher Research Seminar.

Teaching and learning episodes related to students' study of how and why things move were audio taped and transcribed. Tapes and transcriptions captured a 13-minute discussion in which students interpreted their experiences with movement in light of objects' strength, weight and relation to various forces.

The various perspectives expressed by a group of researchers who analyzed the transcripts are notable. Some respondents employed a developmental psychological paradigm in their analysis, while others took a position grounded in a sociocultural perspective. Those operating from within a developmental psychological paradigm were inclined to justify their analyses with theories related to child and psychological development. Those representing the sociocultural perspective justified their analyses with explanations that were rooted in various theories on culture.

In the second class, the teacher made use of call and response, an African American discourse style and cultural practice in which one individual or group makes a verbal, musical or performance-based statement or gesture that solicits a response. Call and response is considered integral to communicative behavior and functions as an expression of identity and as a means of conveying cognitive information among African Americans (Cazden, 1988). Audio taped accounts of the classroom routines in which call and response was used were transcribed and analyzed. In some instances, the teacher used highly scripted, well-rehearsed material performed repeatedly; in other instances highly creative, inventive, and generative call and response sequences were used to facilitate pupil's semantic development by building upon, extending and connecting familiar linguistic patterns to newer patterns. Detailed analyses of call and response sequences are presented in the paper.

Last, using elite interviews (i.e., interviewing of individuals considered expert and well-informed on a specific area related to the research) the author questioned four professional educators who are expert practitioners of African American students: three K-12 practitioners and one university professor. The three practitioners are recognized as successful by African-American parents and community members; two of the three practitioners are National Board certified. The fourth respondent, who has written widely on the topic of best practices, is a former classroom teacher and, at the time of the interview, was a professor of teacher education and Associate Dean of Education at a comprehensive mid-western state university.

Although the interviews were only subjected to preliminary analysis, several recurring themes in the interviews reinforce the findings from the qualitative studies. Some of the themes that emerged follow. For optimal learning outcomes, teachers of African American students should:

- use culturally relevant schema to organize learning;
- create lessons that require personal involvement, are relevant, practical, and applicable to students' lives;
- make explicit to students what they are going to learn and how they are going to learn it;

- lead students toward more analytical and critical learning.

Despite the findings from the literature and from the interviews, these practices are not widely mirrored nor are they recognized, except in superficial ways, by most researchers who work in the field of learning in general or learning in particular subject areas. What is needed is more discussion and collaboration among those researchers examining the influence of culture on learning and those who are studying advances made in the disciplines. Without this cross-fertilization, issues of equity will continue to elude us.

### References

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