Today's Dream Keepers: Exploring the Personal and Professional Beliefs of Teachers Who Successfully Provide Literacy Instruction to African American Males in Grades 3-5

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TODAY’S DREAM KEEPERS: EXPLORING THE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL BELIEFS OF TEACHERS WHO SUCCESSFULLY PROVIDE LITERACY INSTRUCTION TO AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES IN GRADES 3-5

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In her book, *The Dreamkeepers*, Ladson-Billings (1994) provides staggering statistics regarding African American children. She explains that poor education achievement for African American students relates to some of the social and economic realities they face. She explains that the infant mortality rate among African American children is quite high. African American children are five times more likely to be dependent on welfare, and to become pregnant as teens when compared to White children. In addition, they are four times as likely to live with neither parent, three times as likely to live in a female-headed household, and twice as likely to live in low income housing. There are more young African American men under the constraints of the criminal justice system than in college. However, as if these facts are not revealing enough, she also adds that African American boys who were born in California in 1988 are three times more likely to be murdered than to be admitted to the University of California (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

The drastic contrast between the academic performance of students of color—African American students in particular—and White students has been highlighted in many studies on literacy, and has been the center of discussion in reading and writing research and practice (Ladson-Billings, 2001). Much of the recent studies have centered on cultural and ethnic conditions of children and the relationship between these conditions, and the structure of appropriate contexts for literacy learning. However, there is less research on how teachers frame culturally relevant approaches to literacy teaching or how they, despite the dismal realities described in the previous paragraphs, dedicate their lives to teaching African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2001).

**Statement of the Problem**

According to Tatum (2009), literacy can define a person’s path through life. This statement is particularly true for African American adolescent males, for whom “under-exposure
to texts… contributes to a life in which they experience greater economic, judicial, and social strife and disappointment” (p. xii). For African American males, failure to become literate too often leads to a rapid downward path of poverty, incarceration, and drug abuse. According to the 2009 NAEP data, only 14% of African American 8th graders reached proficiency on national reading tests. Unfortunately, circumstances for these students do not improve in high school; studies show that fewer than half of African American males receive their high school diplomas (National Summary: Diplomas Count, 2008). Regardless of debates over the aims of literacy instruction, the greatest problem remains that far too many African American males struggle in the area of literacy. Although their struggles with reading are not unique, a higher percentage of African American males fail to perform at a proficient level when taking assessments, according to trend data. African American males as a group have scored low on the NAEP assessments, despite unprecedented research and experimentation to raise reading achievement throughout the nation (Beers, Probst, & Rief, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe the personal and professional beliefs of teachers who are successful with providing literacy instruction to elementary school African American males in a Title I elementary school. This study examined the literacy practices of teachers and their beliefs about African American males. It also investigated their use of culturally relevant teaching practices. It is hypothesized that by exploring the beliefs and practices of successful teachers with African American males this research can provide evidence of effective strategies, which can be used to impact the literacy achievement of African American males.
Research Questions

1. What are the personal and professional beliefs of teachers who have been successful with providing literacy instruction to African American males in grades 3-5?

2. What are the literacy instructional strategies of teachers who are consistently successful with African American males in grades 3-5?

Conceptual Framework

The following three components were relevant to the study of teachers in grades three through five who have been identified as being successful with having a positive impact on African American males in the area of literacy: (1) their literacy instructional practices, (2) their understanding and use of culturally relevant pedagogy, and (3) their understanding of the African American male population. *Figure 1* displays these components.

![Conceptual Framework Diagram](image)

*Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.*
Effective literacy instruction provides children with developmentally appropriate settings, materials, experiences, and social support that encourage early forms of reading and writing to flourish and develop into conventional literacy (Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003). Gay (2000) believes the knowledge that educators must have about cultural diversity goes beyond just respect for, and general recognition of the fact that ethnic groups have different values or express similar values in various ways. Therefore teachers must develop a knowledge base for culturally responsive teaching while gaining detailed factual information about the cultural particularities of specific ethnic groups. This is needed to make school more interesting and stimulating for, representative of, and responsive to ethnically diverse students. Culturally responsive teaching uses multicultural instructional strategies while adding multicultural content to the curriculum.

Although research on the schooling experiences of African Americans has a long history, recent discussions, in particular those shown by popular media about the unique plight of Black males and the racial achievement gap have captured the interest of many. These discussions surround the educational status of Black males, the nature of their perilous educational position, and are infused with compelling descriptors such as worlds apart, epidemic of failure, and left behind. From this dialogue has come an urgency to address the education achievement problems of Black males. Given this sense of urgency, it seems ironic that little attention has been given to the educational experiences and perspectives of Black males in early schooling (Davis, 2003).

New research on the role teachers’ play in increasing the achievement levels of Black males is being called for. Teacher accountability is a dominant theme in school reform efforts across the United States. Most of this concern for accountability centers on student learning and achievement outcomes (Boykin, 1994). Teachers play a very important role in the school lives of students, because most of the school day is spent in classrooms under the supervision and
guidance of teachers. The influence that teachers have on Black males should never be taken for
granted. Although teachers are blamed for many problems Black males face, ironically, most of
the proposed solutions aimed at fixing the educational plight of Black boys have excluded
teachers. The rationale for this position is that teachers are blamed for students’ poor levels of
academic performance and engagement (Holland, 1992). The teachers’ influence on Black males
is too important to silence them, and lower their contribution to this national conversation. Black
males, in general, share this desire for a more personal connection with teachers. They often feel
misunderstood and wrongly judged because of how they look and act. Teachers carry a
disproportionate role in monitoring social relationships not only in their classrooms but also in
other social settings at the school. Traditionally, teachers have felt that their student social
networks and relationships were off-limits to them. As teachers are being held accountable for
structuring their students’ learning opportunities, so must teachers take a more active role in
understanding Black males and intervening when necessary with social lessons that cultivate an
appreciation for the importance of school and achievement (Davis, 2003).

Overview of Methodology

The research design selected for this study was a series of four individual case studies,
followed by a within-case analysis. A qualitative case study design involves the researcher in an
in-depth exploration of a single or multiple cases (Mertens, 2010). In this study, the researcher
observed four teachers active in their classrooms. The case study design was selected because it
allows one to describe, analyze and interpret the beliefs, practices and instructional strategies of
teachers who have been identified as successfully impacting the literacy performance of African
American males in the intermediate grades (3-5) (Merriam, 1998). Case study research, as stated
by Yin (2003), enables the researcher to obtain in-depth and firsthand data from authentic
settings to conduct observations, and to gather data sources. The classrooms in this study will serve as the real life authentic setting.

In order to obtain information to answer my research questions and learn from the teachers participating in the study about their literacy practices, possible implementation of culturally relevant teaching methods and their knowledge of the African American males in their classroom, this study used the following data sources: (a) an initial teacher interview and post-observation interview, (b) classroom observations during literacy instruction, (c) questionnaire, and (d) follow-up interviews. In order to minimize validity threats, this study used triangulation of the data sources and member checking.

**Results**

**Teacher Beliefs**

In response to the first research question regarding the personal and professional beliefs of the four teachers identified as successful in providing African American males literacy instruction, all participants shared the common belief that all children can learn. Due to this belief, each teacher felt it was their responsibility to plan and implement lessons that would help their students experience academic success. They each expressed a strong sense of self-efficacy when it came to their profession. In a similar way, all four teachers demonstrated these beliefs through their demeanor, which created a positive atmosphere for students to succeed. Corket, Hatt, and Benevides (2011) suggest that self-efficacy, or the belief in one’s ability, in regards to both teachers and students, is thought to be directly related to teacher and student success. The teachers in this study were observed portraying a strong sense of self-efficacy. This strong sense of self-efficacy has been recognized as an important trait of effective teaching, and has been
positively interconnected to teacher and student outcomes (Swackhamer, Koellner, Basile & Kimbrough, 2009).

Throughout this study, all four teachers made it a priority to address the needs and learning styles of their African American male students during their literacy instruction. They also shared the belief that creating student interest in reading among their African American males was an important component in providing literacy instruction. They believed that student motivation had an impact on African American male learning. In order to build interest, and motivation, each teacher employed some system of learning more about their African American males.

These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Tatum (2006), who explains that many adolescent African American males do not read texts available to them because many are socially and culturally irrelevant and inauthentic. This reading disengagement can be connected to reading underachievement, due to a direct relationship between how often students engage in reading, and how well they achieve in reading (Husband, 2012). In this current study, each participating teacher made it a priority to find ways to gain knowledge about their students’ interest, and then take this information and incorporate it in their daily literacy instruction. They also shared the belief that instruction must be relevant to the student at all times. In addition to interest, each teacher believed it was their duty to create a positive classroom environment which enables students to learn and become academically successful. This belief of building positive relationships assisted in helping their African American male students become problem solvers, an important skill mentioned by all four teachers.

Fuller, Wood, Rapaport, and Daornbush, (1982) write that effective teachers hold high, realistic expectations, maintain a strong sense of efficacy, or the expectation that their efforts will
result in valued outcomes. All four teachers in this study believed in themselves, their students, and believe that investing efforts in their work will result in high student achievement. Their classrooms allowed for African American males to problem solve, communicate, and collaborate with their peers and teacher as a part of their learning process.

Unfortunately, historically elementary schools are filled with predominantly White, middle-class, female teachers, which rarely mirrors the great diversity seen in today’s public schools. Regardless of one’s color or ethnic background, teachers must be knowledgeable about the social and cultural contexts of teaching and learning. They need to be able to identify with their diverse students, especially at the elementary level. Teachers must also gain the skills required to translate the knowledge of a child’s cultural background into pertinent instruction. All four teachers made it a priority to gain knowledge about their students and use the students’ cultural knowledge to build relationships and provide instruction. This was evident by their willingness to express care, respect and high expectations for all students. This is important because culturally aware teachers make an effort to get to know their students. They understand that by learning the culture and value of their students they will be better prepared to present instruction in a meaningful ways. Students learn best when they believe that the teacher cares about them (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

**Literacy Practices**

In response to the second research question concerning the practices of teachers who are successful in their literacy efforts with African American males, all four teachers provided instruction that was differentiated, data driven, used small group sessions, and promoted academic success among their students. During their literacy instruction observations, it was noted that all four teachers incorporated cooperative learning groups. This allowed for the
teacher to serve as a facilitator while their students worked in small groups. Small group instruction allowed for two of the four teachers to implement guided reading as a component for the majority of their literacy instruction. These teachers found guided reading to be beneficial because they were able to target individual student needs. Guided reading provided students a chance to apply strategies they learned from the mini-lesson to a variety of texts, with the support of the teacher as a facilitator.

Conclusions

In regards to personal and professional beliefs, all four teachers made it a priority to create a nurturing classroom environment and a positive learning atmosphere that enabled students to become academically successful. To foster success among their students, each participant created a student-centered environment while also building positive relationships with their African American male students. They made it a priority to plan, prepare, and implement lessons that cultivated their success.

All four teachers maintained a strong sense of self-efficacy, and set high standards for their students. They were committed to learning about their African American students, and utilizing their students’ interest to provide meaningful literacy instruction. Each teacher stood by the belief that African American male students benefit when teachers work diligently to develop a caring relationship. These teachers also implemented instructional strategies that connect to their student’s learning styles and background knowledge.

Each teacher in the study implemented an approach to literacy instruction that included guided reading, teacher-directed instruction and mini-lessons. Even though various literacy approaches were used, each teacher felt that working with their African American males in small groups provided them the opportunity to have a positive impact on individual student
achievement. Each teacher was able to work with their students in small groups on their instructional level to coach and model reading strategies, differentiate instruction, to expose students to text that was interesting, and to help them grow as readers. In regards to culturally relevant pedagogy, teachers in this study used these practices to improve student success by gaining knowledge of their students’ cultural backgrounds, and translating this knowledge into instruction practices. The teachers were able to use a student’s personal cultural knowledge to bridge the gap between what was known and unknown.

**Educational Significance of the Work**

The following recommendations for pre-service teachers, school administrators, and in-service teachers are suggested based on the needs and findings of the participants in this study.

**Pre-service Teachers.** Zimpher and Ashburn (1992) describe the average pre-service teacher as a female from a small town or suburban community who enrolls in a college less than one hundred miles away from home. These teachers intend on returning to a small town in order to teach middle-income children of average intelligence in traditionally organized schools. More specifically, 76 percent of these students are female and 91 percent are White; nearly half speak no language other than English. Less than 7 percent of the teachers are people of color or of international descent, and over 75 percent want to return back to their suburban or rural towns to teach.

Due to these demographics, pre-service teachers must observe experienced teachers engaging students in a culturally relevant manner. The classroom observed should reflect a varied student population so they could experience the reality of today’s diversified classroom. Colleges and preservice teachers can form a partnership with local elementary, middle, and high
schools with diverse student populations in order for preservice teachers to work in these environments. In addition, partnership schools can be used for pre-service teachers to complete some or all of their field experiences. Additionally, pre-service teachers should be required to keep a journal to record their observations that can be used in class discussions, writings or other assignments. The course work that pre-service teachers are taking should embed culturally relevant teaching practices so that they can experience how these practices can be implemented in the subject area, classroom, and personal philosophy. Universities and colleges could also offer a culturally relevant pedagogy program that pre-service teachers can pursue as a minor or for an add-on licensure. This add-on would also be available for those teachers currently in the field.

**School Administrators.** Husband (2012), states that in order to improve reading achievement of African American males, administrators must be willing to work with teachers and school officials to create new strategies, and build new foundations for reversing and eventually eliminating trends in reading underachievement. Teachers who are knowledgeable about their students’ cultures and backgrounds are better able to create instruction that best meet their needs (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Therefore, school administrators have to ensure that their staff is properly trained and knowledgeable about how best to instruct African American males. However, meeting the educational needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is a major challenge for most teachers. Administrators can begin with providing professional development opportunities for their staff to explore, and put into practice the components of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy as outlined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994). The professional development should include opportunities that are specifically related to engaging African American males in the literacy process. Teachers can receive training
on choosing appropriate classroom resources for African American males. Providing a rich variety of materials and being aware of these students’ reading preferences can go a long way towards building a meaningful and nurturing reading environment for African American males. Teachers will also look at how to structure their reading and writing instruction so that it is beneficial to African American males. This study showed that in regards to reading and writing instruction, African American males were more motivated to perform in a highly structured environment where the teacher modeled and provided explicit instructional strategies. Through this professional development teachers can also learn how to create social interaction among their students. All four teachers in this study discussed the importance of communication with their African American students, this helped them build relationships but it also allowed for these students to express their thoughts on what they were learning. Ultimately this professional development will help teachers improve literacy instructional practices for an underrepresented group and help reduce the achievement gap because instruction is connected to home, school experiences and culturally relevant for all students.

School administrators can work to collaborate and develop partnerships with the local colleges to work with members of the College of Education to implement culturally relevant teaching practices in both settings. Administrators need to also ensure that their staff is comfortable expressing their thoughts in regards to the culture of the school, and their fears or misunderstandings when it comes to providing instruction. There can be a suggestion box for teachers so that they can speak anonymously about culturally relevant teaching practices. Administrators must also be very supportive of those teachers in their building who do an excellent job providing instruction to African American males. These teachers can become
teacher leaders in the building, by providing professional development to their peers, agreeing to be observed, or sharing the general knowledge of what works for the students in their classroom.

Tatum (2006) explains that many African American males do not read texts available to them because many are socially and culturally irrelevant and inauthentic. These texts fail to reflect African American males’ social and cultural backgrounds. In order for schools to address this issue, it is recommended that schools ensure they have texts that appeal to their African American male student population. This material needs to be exciting for both students and teachers, must challenge students cognitively, and aide students with applying literacy skills and strategies independently. These texts should allow teachers to engage students in authentic discussion where they can analyze their real world knowledge in the context of the curriculum, and discuss strategies for overcoming academic and societal barriers.

**In-service Teachers.** In-service teachers must be knowledgeable of culturally relevant teaching practices because students of diverse backgrounds often experience literacy in social contexts that is quite different from those normally found in today’s school. Therefore, teachers must make it a priority to enable students from diverse backgrounds to use literacy successfully in today’s social contexts, along with the contexts of their home and community by adjusting their instruction so that lessons can be more effective. Teachers can begin by engaging in book study as a grade level team, or as an entire faculty to read literature related to culturally relevant pedagogy, instructional practices for African American males, and best practices in the area of literacy. It is not enough to just read about these practices, teachers should then observe other teachers who are effective in using culturally relevant teaching practices and providing literacy instruction to African American males. Teachers must engage in ongoing and meaningful professional development, which would allow them to take what they have learned and apply it
in the classroom. While teachers are practicing, they need to have a mentor with another teacher or a member of the local college who is knowledgeable of culturally relevant practices, so that they can support and guide in-service teachers with improvement of their instructional practices. One recommendation for administrators mentioned above was for the school to provide more text that would appeal to African American males; however, identifying reading material is not sufficient enough if teachers do not know how to properly use the text. Therefore, along with the culturally relevant teaching professional development, teachers need professional support to help them mediate these texts with students, and use them to provide effective literacy instruction.

This research suggests that parents have an impact on their child’s achievement, thus it is important that teachers find ways to create a connection between home and school. This can be done by utilizing parents as a resource, providing opportunities for them to become involved in the school or classroom, and communicating with parents on a regular basis. In regards to the students, teachers must ensure that they work to build positive relationships with their students. Teachers should find ways to build the bridge from a student’s existing background knowledge to the knowledge they will need so that students can find success in their future endeavors. Participating teachers in this study suggested that African American male students benefit when teachers work hard to develop positive relationships with them. Therefore, teachers must be patient and tolerant with African American males, and find other ways to help them deal with any anger or behavioral problems. Teachers must make every effort to use appropriate classroom management strategies, and establish consistent rules and routines.

The goal of these recommendations would be to encourage beliefs and practices related to culturally relevant pedagogy that would enhance teacher’s literacy practices, and positively impact student achievement. Teachers should use these practices in their classroom and it would
become part of their pedagogical style, impacting the way in which they planned lessons and provided instruction to their students. This study revealed that teachers recognized that they were responsible for their students’ learning. Therefore, the implication is that changing teacher beliefs should serve as a starting point. Culturally relevant practices need to become more prominent as today’s classrooms become more diverse.
References:


