

**Teaching African American Students: A  
Look at Instructional Methods and Cultural  
Differences**

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## **Teaching African American Students: A Look at Instructional Methods and Cultural Differences**

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### **Project Abstract:**

The purpose of this literature review is to show how African American students differ in relation to their peers in the classroom. This study is needed because teachers can benefit from gaining knowledge about how to differentiate instruction for African American students. This literature review is particularly relevant for the social studies classroom because of the wide variety of instructional techniques and methods that can be employed in the classroom setting to benefit African American students.

This literature review focuses on three main areas. The first section deals with the social, psychological, and cultural differences that many African American students face. The second section deals with general classroom strategies that a teacher can utilize to make the classroom climate more inviting for African American students. The third section deals with specific classroom techniques that a teacher can use in planning lessons that will be more likely to engage African American students.

In conducting this literature review, the conclusion was reached that there was a great deal that the classroom teacher can do to make the classroom more inviting for African American students. By using a variety of instructional techniques and teaching methods, the instructor can better engage the African American student in the classroom.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **I. Introduction of Topic**

Pretend for a moment that you are a teacher who has two interviews coming up with prospective employers. In the first situation, you are interviewing at an elite suburban high school, which has a predominantly white student body. You have heard, through various conversations with people involved in the community, that the school is committed to diversity, multicultural education, and ensuring that all the students are given an equal opportunity to learn. You know that you will be asked a “multicultural education question” and you want to get it right. What should you say to ensure that you get the question right?

Your second interview the next day is at an inner city school, with a student population that is mostly Latino and African-American. The families of the students, for the most part, tend to be low-income. You also know that the principal at this school will be asking a “multicultural question” that will deal with how to effectively teach students with diverse backgrounds. The question asked will probably be very similar to the question that the suburban high school principal will ask you. How do you answer this potential question correctly?

Even though these two situations are entirely different, they both pose similar problems and lesson planning situations for teachers. In 1954, after the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, public schools across the nation gradually became desegregated and minority students, with particular emphasis placed on the African American student population, began to be educated alongside their white counterparts. By 2000, 35% of all public school students in the

United States have minority backgrounds (Hudson, 1994). While many teachers teach the same styles and strategies, with differentiation of instruction, research suggests that minority students have learning styles that are different because of a many factors (I.S.P. Nation, 1990). Therefore, teachers should be prepared to offer differentiated instruction to fit the learning styles and needs of these students. According to Hanson and Dyer (1974), two noted authors and educational administrators; the time is past due for educational institutions, “to begin recognizing that different cultural groups have unique educational, social, and psychological needs which must be taken into account if the school is, in fact, going to provide an equal opportunity to learn (Hanson & Dyer, 472).”

## **II. Focus of the Project**

While schools have begun to offer professional instruction to teachers to help them learn how to effectively teach minority students, there is still a great deal that needs to be done. Students and their parents are beginning to become increasingly vocal as they realize that the old formula, where teachers teach the same way to all students, is not working. According to Hanson and Dyer (1974), the truth is that this is the major source of, “change-orientated tension which has emerged in recent years and this highlights the rising expectations of minority group students who are demanding what American institutions have historically neglected to offer them- an equal opportunity to learn (Hanson & Dyer, 475).”

Minority students tend to learn material in the classroom more effectively when teachers use a variety of techniques. There are a variety of reasons why this is the case, with culture and social situations among the reasons. Classroom teachers, if they are to

reach minority students, need to be aware of the various classroom methods and techniques that will help students with varied backgrounds learn to the best of their ability. According to Momeni (1984), there are many different minority and ethnic groups represented in any given classroom environment, including Chinese, Japanese, Latino, African American, or Middle Eastern, to name a few.

To help limit the scope of the topic, this literature review will focus on some characteristics that differentiate African American students from their counterparts, general classroom strategies, and classroom specific teaching methods for these students. Particular attention will be given to cultural differences and student self perceptions that may hinder these students from performing well in the classroom. This topic is important because of the large percentage of African American students that attend public schools and the fact that, “black students today are more likely than any other group to be represented in lower academic tracks and special education classes, especially when they attend schools in majority white school districts (Bak, 13).” Students, of course, should get a quality education and have the chance to do well in an academic environment. Focusing on specific teaching methods for the African American student population will assist the teacher in making instructional choices to help students of this ethnicity succeed.

When looking at specific teaching methods and styles, it is important to highlight a specific content area to study. According to Rasool, when dealing with multicultural education and teaching minority students effectively, “a common response among middle and secondary educators is that history and the social studies are especially relevant to multicultural education and it is important to include the writings and contributions of

women and ethnic minorities (Rasool, 52).” This is the main reason why one of the focuses of this review will be on how African American students can effectively learn and be taught in a social studies classroom.

This review will be separated into three distinct sections. The first section will deal with cultural, psychological, and social differences that many African American students have to deal with before entering the classroom. The second sections of this literature review will deal with broad classroom suggestions that the teacher can do to help ensure the classroom is a positive learning environment for African American students. The third and final topic of this review will focus on specific classroom strategies and teaching methods that social studies teachers can use to motivate African American students to learn the content presented.

### **III. Brief Review of Relevant Literature**

To assist in finding answers to the proposed question and topic, there will be a broad range of sources that will be analyzed, evaluated, and interpreted. The first task is to gain some understanding of the characteristics that help to make African American students different from their counterparts. To assist in finding information about this, writings were found that examined what type of learners African American students are and how their culture separates them from their educational peers. The majority of sources will be in the forms of books, curriculum guides, journal articles, and various studies on multicultural and ethnic education. Some of the journals that will be consulted are: The Journal of Negro Education, The History Teacher, Urban Education, and The Journal of Educational Sociology. Many different educators and experts will be studied

and read to ensure that the best and most practical teaching methods are found and critiqued. The majority of the references were found in the libraries at The College of William and Mary and Christopher Newport University.

#### **IV. Procedures for Conducting the Study**

The topic will be explored by conducting a literature review of relevant sources that discuss this particular area of education. The literature review will fully reach some conclusions on how to effectively teach African American students so they will have a greater opportunity for success.

#### **V. How This Study Contributes to Curriculum and Instruction.**

This study is relevant to the scope of curriculum and instruction. In social studies education, with the high numbers of minority students in classrooms across the nation, it is becoming increasingly important for all teachers to have a clear idea of how to teach them effectively. This review has particular relevance to teachers in an urban setting, where there is often a majority of African American students present in the classroom. According to T. Earl Sullenger (1999), a former head of the Department of Sociology at Municipal University and a member of the Committee on Educational Sociology, teaching African American students requires instructors to bring, “a special teaching philosophy and pedagogy to the classroom which may build upon cultural preferences related to teaching and learning (Sullenger, 420).”

## **VI. Definitions of Terms**

Two major terms are defined below. They are multicultural education and multiethnic education. Culture consists of the behavior patterns, symbols, institutions, and other human made components of the society one lives in. Multicultural education, using a general definition, suggests a type of education that is related to a range of cultural groups. When speaking about its ramifications towards students, the goal is to help them acquire knowledge about a range of cultural groups and develop the attitudes, skills, and ability to function within many different cultural environments. Another worthy goal of multicultural education is to reform school environments so that students from diverse cultural groupings will be able to experience equal educational opportunities (Banks, 1979).

The second term, multiethnic education, can be defined by examining the characteristics of an ethnic group. An ethnic group generally has an ancestral tradition and members who share a sense of community and interdependence, though inclusion in the group is strictly voluntary. Multiethnic education should be used to help the students learn how to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and abilities to relate and function with a variety of ethnic groups, as well as function within their cultures with some degree of competency. There is a great deal of similarity between multicultural education and multiethnic education because multiethnic education is part of the larger global concept of multicultural education (Banks, 1979).

## **VII. Limitations of Study**

This study has one major limitation that is worth noting. When talking about the characteristics of African American students and the teaching/learning methods under which they best grasp material in a social studies classroom, it is important to remember that these methods will not work with every student of that ethnicity. Every individual student may require different methods of instruction or extra help to grasp any concept or idea. This study merely offers a guide that educators can follow in order to more effectively teach African American students and should not be viewed as a terminal source when dealing with students.

To summarize, the purpose of this review will be to look at what makes African American students, in general, unique in the classroom as learners and participants. The study will go over a variety of teaching methods, techniques, and strategies that educators can use in their lesson plans to ensure that this minority group gets the best educational instruction possible. After these two topics have been discussed, there will be a conversation about why these methods are important for the teacher to consider using with their students in the classroom.

## **Chapter 2: A Look at African American Students**

In an 1845 interview, former British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli said that, “The youth of a nation are the trustees of posterity (Evans, 63).” These sentiments, which were expressed over one hundred and fifty years ago, are just as timely today in regards to African American students in the classroom. Educators are acutely aware that all students must be provided with the opportunity to receive quality instruction if they are to remain competitive in the technological society of today. With the current emphasis being placed on identifying students who are considered at-risk in the educational environment, there is one segment of the population that should be given priority status for support. This segment is African American students, who have been classified by Ascher (1991) as being an, “endangered species because they seem to be vanishing and performing poorly in classroom across the nation (Ascher, 16).”

A recent study, performed by career educators Mitchell and Salsbury (1998), disclosed that three-fourths of the African American students enrolled in a public secondary school system of a large city in Illinois had earned grades which can be considered below average, while only two percent of the black males were able to secure a grade point average of 3.0 on a four point scale. This is just one of many examples where African American students performed below their peers. Many educators view this demonstration of low academic performance as signifying the African American students disinterest in identifying with the recognized school regimen for instruction. There is also evidence to support that this academic demise could be attributed to a

deficit of basic educational skills, which could be helped by differentiating instruction for this particular population of students (Wright, 1987).

The mission statement of many public high schools has cited three major goals for their students. These three goals are to stimulate the desire of the students, to provide instruction for sound scholarly achievement, and to provide an atmosphere conducive for the development of interpersonal expertise required for societal entrance. Sadly, these three goals are not being met for the African American student enrolled in public schools because many of them are being influenced by a sub-culture that minimizes intellect and castigates conformity. Ramsey (1998), Patel (1994), and others have written extensively on the fact that African American students, especially in urban environments, come from areas that do not focus on the intellectual growth at a young age. Thus, as they become adolescents and start to go into secondary schools, they are less likely than their white counterparts to try and do well academically because the drive to succeed in school is not instilled at a young age. While these young people are forced to attend school until they are either expelled or have attained the legal withdrawal age, they cannot be forced to incorporate the information being dispensed by the classroom teacher. For, as Plato wisely stated in the fourth century, “Knowledge which is acquired under compulsion obtains no hold on the mind (Evans, 1969).”

The information presented in this chapter seeks to provide educators with pertinent information regarding African American students enrolled in schools and classrooms. Additionally, suggestions for instructional strategies and techniques will be discussed.

## **Social, Psychological, and Cultural Circumstances of African American Students**

### **Social Circumstances**

When a student enters the school and the classroom, it is helpful for the classroom teacher to have some information regarding the family and community where they reside. While it is important to note that there are always exceptions to any situation, research has observed some commonalities among African American student backgrounds which could be helpful for the classroom teacher, especially in urban situations, to think about when planning instruction. .

A disproportionate number of African American students, compared to their white peers, are at the disadvantage of being children of single parents. Most frequently, the single parent responsible for the student is the mother. Lang and Ford (1992), two college professors who have written on reasons why African American students have difficulties matriculating into college, feel that this fact has a great impact on the success of these students. Teenage pregnancy rates are rising at an alarming rate and the percentages are even greater for African Americans when compared to other ethnic groups. After the birth of the child, the young mother is much more likely to withdraw from school and, unfortunately, rarely returns to finish her own education. Having little formal education, the mother has few skills to help the student with homework and does not, in many cases, serve as a positive role model to inspire the student to do well in a high school environment. Lang and Ford (1992) found that the lack of support at home for these students is one of the main reasons why African American students have trouble in the secondary school environment. Others, including Wood (2003), have been vocal

over the fact that, “African American students, as a whole, have many more barriers to overcome at home than other students in order to be successful (Wood, 37).”

Continuing with the parental situations, it is worth noting that African American students also, more frequently than their white peers, have to deal with the absence of a father at home. Increases in divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing have dramatically altered the family life of American children. Whereas in the early 1960s, nearly 90 percent of all children lived with both of their biological parents until they reached adulthood, today less than half of children grow up with both natural parents. Nearly a third are born to unmarried parents, the majority of whom never live together, and another third are born to married parents who divorce before their child reaches adulthood. To further complicate matters, a substantial number of children are exposed to multiple marital disruptions and multiple father figures. In the African American population, these numbers are even less (Popenoe, 1998).

Popenoe (1998), Whitehead (1993), and Blankenhorn (1995) find that children who grow up apart from their biological fathers do less well, on average, than children who grow up with both natural parents. They are less likely to finish high school and attend college, less likely to find and keep a steady job, and more likely to become teen parents. The differences between children in one- and two-parent families are significant, and there is fairly good evidence that father absence per se is responsible for at least some of them. Popenoe (1998), Whitehead (1993), and Blankenhorn (1995) also all believed that if parents who decided to live apart were able to cushion their child from the economic instability and disruptions in neighborhood ties that often accompany the breakup of a family, and if single mothers were able to establish and maintain regular

routines and effective systems of supervision, their children would likely do just as well as children raised in two-parent families. The problem is, these objectives are very difficult to achieve, especially in the urban setting where many African American students reside. These authors argued that when fathers live apart from their child, they are less likely to share their incomes with the child, and, consequently, mothers and children usually experience a substantial decline in their standard of living when the father moves out.

Economic adversity, which is mentioned above when talking about single parent families in the African American community, is another problem that many African American students are forced to deal with. The parents of African American students are often not educated to the degree necessary to remain competitive in today's job market. As a result, they have to take low paying jobs. The economic hardships that come with this situation leaves the high school student with the task of working jobs in addition to going to school, which can have a negative impact on schoolwork. Kunjufu (2002) has written that African American students attending high school, especially in an urban setting, have to work more hours than their peers because of the family situations they come from. In addition, Pallas (1989) did research and found that African American students, because of these extra responsibilities, get less sleep than is recommended. All of these factors help to explain why African American students, on average, perform below their white peers.

Continuing with the economic problems many African American students face, it is also important to point out that urban African American students are more likely to live in substandard housing and/or have a high mobility rate. Since a higher percentage of

African American students live in substandard housing or government assisted areas, the neighborhoods around these houses are not as safe and are favorable to criminal activity. Jackson (2000) and Blankenhorn (1995) note that this negative societal atmosphere can hinder the ability of the student to perform well in school because of the peer influence and the daily fear associated with such conditions.

Research has also demonstrated that students who attend the same school for their high school education have a higher probability for graduation and performing above expectations. Hall (1997), an author who has done research on this very topic, has statistics that show that children who come from one parent homes, which occurs more frequently for African American students, have a tendency to move much more frequently than children in two parent households. Each move is stressful because the student must begin the socialization process again. Hall (1997) concluded that such situations can negatively affect intellectual accomplishments because students learn better in cooperative learning groups and, if a child has trouble making friends, than the student is more likely to have fewer peers to go to for assistance with any content related problems.

Writings on African American students have shown that they are more likely to face problems and issues away from the school that could hinder their learning. Whether they come from single parent homes, face economic adversity, or change addresses more than their white peers, African American students are at a greater risk of having problems at school because of these circumstances. It should be noted that having one or more of the above circumstances does not necessarily assign the African American student to at-risk status. Obviously, not every student that a teacher comes across will be faced with

these situations. Despite this, these circumstances are examples of the type of things that schools must be responsive to. The unique family background and environmental experiences that influence African American students must be taken into consideration by the classroom teacher.

### **Psychological Circumstances Regarding African American Students**

When a young student, regardless of ethnicity, enters elementary school, he or she approaches the new experience with eagerness and enthusiasm, with little variance. Fast forward to this same child as high school is beginning. The perceptions that accompany this child's entrance into secondary education are usually much different. Many things cause students to go from being eager six year olds to jaded high school students with negative opinions about education. Trevor Corner (1984), a specialist in minority education, believes that African American students are much more likely to become less interested in school as they become older. Corner (1984), Harris (1999), Hopkins (1997), and other authors have written that high school educators must be must be mindful of some of the common perceptions held by African American students in order to design programs and classroom strategies that will help to dismiss their psychological mindset and predetermined ideologies. Of the many perceptions that African American students have at the high school level, four will be discussed in this review. These four are that it is not good to make high grades, the feeling that they have no control of their academic destiny, feelings of acceptance, and discrimination issues.

According to Harris (1999) and Corner (1984), African American students, in many cases, do not feel that making good grades in school is worth the effort. Should an

African American student achieve honor roll status or gain compliments from the instructor, it is highly possible that their friends will ridicule them, tease them, and assign other labels on them. To avoid this affront to their integrity, “many students will purposely fail to do required assignments or take other avenues to ensure they do not receive high grades (Corner, 184).” Likewise, many African American students are, “accused by their peers of acting white when they make good grades (Harris, 54).” They are accused of embracing the white system of beliefs that affirms that hard work will reap justified rewards. Rather than be subjected to this negative peer pressure, many African American students will seek to divert attention from their academic ability by misbehaving in class, accenting athletic achievement, or associating with socially unacceptable students.

The second perception that African American students have is that they don't control their academic destiny. According to Hopkins (1997), a former classroom teacher turned college professor; the student perceives that the teacher's attitude towards him determines the ultimate grade in the course. Countless times, according to the author, African American students tell parents and administrators that the teacher gave them an “F” for the test or say that the teacher does not like them and that is why they failed. Unfortunately, many urban African American students do not want to accept responsibility for any shortcomings in the course or subject matter studied. Polite and Davis (1999), who have views similar to Hopkins (1997), write that the African American student who believes that he received a grade on an assignment because of effort or ability is not reserved about attempting future assignments because of a belief that successful completion is a distinct possibility. Conversely, Polite and Davis (1999)

go on to state that the student who perceives that the grade on an assignment was the result of consequences other than effort and ability will probably refuse attempts on future assigned work. This pessimistic attitude is often because the, “low achieving student perceives that failure is inevitable and no amount of effort upon his or her part will result in a successful performance of the task required based upon past experiences in the classroom (Polite & Davis, 213).”

Often, the African American student believes that, regardless of effort, it will be difficult to become accepted by his instructor, his peers, or the community where he belongs. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, in a conversation with an eighteen-year-old black youth about to leave the projects of Washington for an Ivy League college, told him, “You just have to outwork them. That is the way you will beat them. It was that way with me also. You are going to be up there with lots of very smart white kids, and if you’re not sure about who you are, you could get eaten alive” (Polite & Davis, 143). While this is great advice, it is the rare African American student who is able to gain such counsel from a respected and successful member of the community who came from a similar background as them.

Many African American students also are under the perception that discrimination will inhibit their progress in school. While many authors have tackled this controversial and valuable topic, Terry Ford (1999) is the writer this review will focus on for this topic. Ford (1999), who has planned and spoke at many workshops about minority students and their education in secondary schools and college, says that African American students will make statements that the teacher did not support them or give them a passing grade because of the color of their skin or the fact that the instructor was white. Furthermore,

they believe that they should not vie for any honor against a white student of equal qualifications, because, “the white applicant will automatically be given the honor (Ford, 76).” This feeling of discrimination, while possible, is becoming less rampant with each passing generation and year.

African American students, more than their peers, feel that they are not able to learn classroom content at an acceptable level. The above perceptions, whether real or perceived, can be detrimental influences on African American students and all of the authors mentioned believe they must be aggressively addressed by contradictory, positive practices modeled by influential instructors. When these perceptions, as a whole, are shown to be incorrect, the African American student will become more receptive to the academic achievement ideology that is put forth in their educational establishment.

### **Cultural Circumstances Regarding African American Students**

African American students continue to demonstrate a lack of proficiency in classroom exercises. One of the main reasons why this is the case is that their cultures are different than their peers. There are many possible cultural rationales that could be used to explain this problem. Examples include insufficient foundation skills, low self esteem, teacher affinity, and educational affinity.

Some African American students have not been exposed to educational opportunities before entering school. According to Harris and Duhon (1999), their households are not filled with magazines, books, computers, and other educational tools at the same rate as their white peers. Often, the parents, “do not realize the impact of such activities and tools on their children’s academic future and they did not demonstrate

the assertive involvement seen in the homes of their white peers (Harris & Duhon, 147).” Richard-Amato and Snow (1996) also wrote that many black families only have the funds to support the basic family necessities and they lack the money to buy supplemental educational experiences. Such things as art museums, science museums, plays, and other worthwhile activities are not at the top of the list in many African American homes. These young children arrive at school less prepared than their peers and this begins the cycle of defeat. Ford (1999) believes that the above reason is why many African American students arrive at each grade preordained for failure. Since they lack the basic prerequisites to perform competently, they have to work harder than their white peers to gain similar marks.

In the African American culture, it is also very important for the student to save face, which means that they tend to stay away from situations where they may get embarrassed. According to Richard-Amato and Snow (1996), the effect of this behavior is that students approach learning and school with a fairly low feeling of self worth. To help mask this personal belief, Stone and Denevi (1971) feel that the “the student may resort to aggressive behavior, rebel against authority figures, display poor study habits, or isolate themselves within the classroom (Stone and Denevi, 227).” Many times, the African American students become a discipline problem to permit their removal from the classroom environment that is perceived as threatening.

Another possible barrier to classroom achievement for African American students is the fact that the teacher and the student may not be connecting because of the cultural background of the student. According to Davis and Jordan, two African American educators and authors, for the African American student to be successful in the

classroom, it is important for there to be a positive rapport between the African American student and the teacher. These students are very sensitive because of their cultural and experiential backgrounds to adult authority figures. Since these young students reside, in many cases, to matriarchal homes and the majority of teachers are female, they often transfer their hostile attitudes towards the instructor. If the student genuinely believes that the teacher is disinterested in them, “they will react by being inattentive and refusing to cooperate (Davis and Jordan, 581).

Moreover, teachers, particularly those with little experience, need to be careful about patronizing the African American student, since they will most likely treat the instructor with indifference. Kunjufu (2002) writes that this attitude is most often prevalent in the inner city classroom, “inhabited by beginning young white teachers who, “like a missionary, views the student as a personal mission field (Kunjufu, 113).” Similarly, non-verbal communication is very important to the African American student. Teachers whose mannerisms and tone of voice do not express acceptance will be given reactive, defensive, and hostile responses by the students that result in a visit to the principal’s office. Ascher (1994), who has similar views as Kunufu, goes on to say that many secondary students, regrettably, will chose absence rather than sit through a class period with a disliked teacher

Low achieving African American students tend to have educational avoidance, in many cases. These students who have been unsuccessful in the past have a tendency to focus on past failures when concentrating on an assignment. Failure, to the unsuccessful student, is a threat to him personally and is not comprehended to be a learning experience for growth. The student confuses the concepts of ability and effort thinking, wrongly,

that effort is synonymous with ability. This results in the student demonstrating little effort towards a given assignment in the belief that he will be perceived as having no ability. In other words, “if the student does nothing, the teacher will not know he is not capable” (Ford & Harris, 1994).

The above hypotheses have frequently been the catalyst for African American students underachieving in the classroom. Culturally, African American students are much different than their white peers and it is important for teachers to realize this. Educators, seeking to maximize the intellectual opportunities for black students, would be wise to consider the above possibilities when designing instructional and curricular strategies for classroom use.

### **General Classroom Strategies Regarding African American Students**

The classroom teacher is one of the most influential adults in the life of an African American student. A school may be equipped with the most modern technology, have all the current educational programs in place, and have unlimited resources available for experiential activities, but without the intensive efforts of the classroom teacher little will be accomplished. Within each individual classroom, the classroom teacher will exert either a positive or a negative influence on the African American student. Factors that will influence this reaction include classroom climate, teaching strategies selected, and motivational techniques employed. Also, how a teacher introduces a new skill to the African American student is vital. Using the Socratic

Method and visual cues are some of the ways that teachers can ensure that the African American students in the classroom have an easier time comprehending the material. I

Urban African American students, because of cultural and societal reasons, tend to personalize relationships, which makes the attitude of the teacher instrumental in ensuring affirmative participation. According to Frankel (1999), the teacher must approach the students with an attitude of tolerance. The instructor “must refrain from accepting unconditionally the negative stereotypical portrait of black students presented by the media and assuming that all the students possess these characteristics (Frankel, 406).” Hall (1997) has done research that has demonstrated that when a person has not had individual association with a member of a different group, there is a tendency to consciously or unconsciously assign stereotypical representations to the group based on the prevailing cultural bias of the day. These misconceptions, as a result, will then dictate the behaviors toward individual members of the group. If one were to believe the propaganda espoused by the media regarding black students, one would, sadly, think they were all, “lazy, gun toting, drug dealing criminals who have little regard for societal mores (Hall, 23).”

According to Pallas (1989), the teacher who accepts the media definition of black students will possess the attitude that the students in the class are incapable of learning. The instructor will not hold these students to the same levels of accountability as others and will provide them with a watered down version of the curriculum and their evaluation instruments will have a much lower standard of expectation. According to Nash (1989), since the teacher has unfairly put lower expectations on these students, “they will not be

motivated to perform any better and will reinforce both the attitude of the teacher and their own belief that black students can't learn as effectively as their peers (Nash, 96).”.

The personal belief of the teacher has a profound effect upon the performance of the African American student. The teacher who believes that he or she can effectively influence student achievement, regardless of current or previous student performance will inspire the black student to achieve. According to Rosenzweig (1999), a faculty member at the University of Idaho, the classroom teacher who, “refuses to succumb to the media litany of ignorance and apathy regarding black students and believes that the student is capable of learning will demand the completion of educational tasks which foster higher order thinking skills” (Rosenzweig, 434). These teachers experience greater positive communication with the African American students and the student receives much higher positive reinforcement for their efforts, such as verbal praise, approving smiles, and encouraging pats on the shoulder. According to Hunter (1982), a social studies teacher and former lecturer on effective teaching, writes that, “once the student comes to the realization that they are capable of learning, they will be motivated to duplicate the experience and break the cycle of ignorance that has labeled them as underachievers in the past (Hunter 57).” .

Conversely, the teacher who believes that black students are not capable of being roused from their lethargy of low achievement, and that no effort on the teacher's part will be a catalyst for change, will engage in negative behaviors and utilize non-motivational strategies. According to Stone (1971), if the at-risk student perceives the instructor has no belief in his educational potential, “it is much more likely that the African American student will retreat into a shell of isolation and alienation (Stone, 79).”

Continued reinforcement of this belief could result in the student being more likely to leave the school before graduation.

The process of getting to know these students begins with a change of attitude by the teacher. Kenneth Ghee (1990), who has published articles in a variety of educational journals, writes that there is a hierarchy involved when getting to know African American students. The first step is that educators must be certain that they examine their own image of African American students. The next step in this process is reeducation. The teacher must make an honest effort to get to know the African American student and their culture. A, “significant moment in this process involves the educator getting in touch with their perception of African American students (Ghee, 45).” The teacher should be given ample opportunities for direct encounters with African American students.

According to Holland (1989), this process should begin in the pre-service teacher education programs. Unfortunately, many education majors choose to complete their field experiences in schools that do not have many African American students. In service programs, including teacher education programs, “should be used to educate teachers about African American students and practicing teachers could then use the knowledge gained from that experience in their own classrooms (Holland, 53).”

In addition, Kraft (1991) has written that it would be helpful for practicing teachers to participate in community service programs to help increase their knowledge of their African American student body. Examples of these types of programs include Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Boy Scouts, and athletic programs. There are also a growing number of Afro-centric based programs for African American students. These include such programs as Black Hawks, Black Male and Female Image Development, Saturday

School Project 2000, and Project Role Model. Kraft (1991) and Holland (1989) both believe that teachers who participate in program similar to these will be able to gain a better understanding of the interests and communities that their African American students reside in. .

To help aid in the learning experience of African American students, teachers must make it clear that they value them personally and collectively. According to Majors (1992), the young African American in the classroom must feel accepted by the teacher and the educator must have ways to motivate the student in the classroom. The motivation of African American students is crucial to success. The successful educator is one who has learned to connect the educational process with the interests of African Americans. Teachers must work to, “recognize and teach in harmony with the feeling tone of African American students (Majors, 102).” This suggests that the teacher and the student have a connection that will make learning more likely for the African American student.

Like all students, African American students must be able to connect the real world to the classroom content. According to many educators, including Majors (1992) and Ross (1991), teachers will want to keep in mind that the real world of these students may be vastly different from their own. The typical public school teacher is usually not in tune with the real world of these students. Ross (1991) makes it clear that, “educators should not assume that their real world is the same as many of their African American students. The opposite is probably closer to the truth (Ross, 29).”

Garibaldi (1992), who has written many books and articles educating and motivating minorities in the classroom, feels that it is, “important that the educator’s

fundamental perception and interaction with African American students have the greatest impact for their motivation (Garibaldi, 16).” Garibaldi (1988) continued in another article by pointing out that, “While some activities or teaching strategies may be helpful, the prerequisite for their effectiveness is an educator who values the differences and potential of African American students (Garibaldi, 53).” As the African American student comes to awareness that he is accepted and cared for by the teachers, the level of motivation can be expected to increase.

According to Richard-Amato and Snow (1996), the complaint of many African American students has been that teachers do not give them adequate instruction when new information is being introduced in the classroom. Educators have discussed certain procedural steps that could be used when demonstrating or introducing a new skill to these potentially at-risk African American learners. These steps are to give the skills for learning, let them demonstrate the skill, allow time for practice, and have the students review the skill.

According to Sullenger (1999) and Starr (1983), students should be given the reason for why performing the skill is important. If they understand the logical reasoning behind a given skill to be learned, they are more likely to participate willingly in its mastery. Next, they should be aware of what they will be doing and how it will be done. For example, the teacher could let the students know that they will be learning about the Treaty of Versailles through document analysis. In addition, the teacher should let the students know that this event is important because the treaty ended World War I and many of the terms that were put in the treaty had a direct impact on the start of World War II.

Harris and Duhon (1999), who are both professors at different universities, wrote that after the activity or classroom discussion is introduced, “the classroom teacher should show the students how to perform the skill by either demonstrating it on the chalkboard, using an overhead projector, or a computer attached to an overhead projector (Harris & Duhon, 63).”. Should the activity or skill be in a laboratory or a computer lab, the students could gather around or look at the front of the room while the skill is being demonstrated. Using the same example on the Treaty of Versailles, the teacher should make sure that the students know what documents they are supposed to use and what questions are to be answered while reading the documents. This is important for African American students because they need the scaffolding that this extra step brings. The teacher can ensure that the African American student understands the activity and any questions can be answered at this stage.

The teacher should also make sure to allow time for frequent practice of the skill so that the African American students are able to properly complete it, according to Hooks (1989). To help scaffold the African American student in the classroom, “the teacher should circulate and provide feedback while the students are practicing the skill. Depending on the skill being introduced, the students could be in cooperative learning groups or peer partners while learning the skill (Hooks, 123).” Using the above example again, the students could be put in groups to discuss the ramifications of the Treaty of Versailles after they have read the documents. As they receive constructive feedback from the instructor regarding their proficiency, students can correct any errors made while performing the skill.

Ford (1994), Harris and Duhon (1999), and Hooks (1989) are all in agreement that it is also imperative to review the procedural steps of the skill. A verbal review of the steps taken to perform the skill reinforces the procedure for the student. In high school, the steps might be presented on a flip chart for visual reference. Depending upon the type of skill being studied, work sheets could be given for home study to help reinforce the skill. For the same Treaty of Versailles assignment, the students could be given a worksheet which requires them to answer questions about the event. The following day of class, a student could be asked to recall the steps for a peer partner or the entire class. There should also be other opportunities to use the skill in other contexts. The students, “should be given multiple opportunities over the course of the school year, and their secondary school career, to use documents as a supplement to classroom learning (Harris & Duhon, 74).”

When students are provided adequate time for the introduction of a new skill and provided additional opportunities to use the information in the context of a lesson, the skill will remain with them. Because African American students enjoy concrete activities, learning skills which require sharing ideas with other students and discussion is pleasurable. When the skill uses mental and tactile ability, extra time should be given for the student to assimilate the product.

The teacher, in order to make African American students feel comfortable, need to ensure that the classroom climate is conducive to learning and is respectful. The teacher should make sure to respect and learn about the African American culture so that he students will be receptive to the lessons. Also, when teaching a new skill, the

classroom teacher must make sure that ample time is given so that the student is able to learn and comprehend the new skill.

### **Teaching Strategies for Stimulating Success for African American Students**

The responsive teacher must design curriculum strategies which will motivate the potentially at-risk African American student to resist the natural desire to resist learning. This is first done by recognizing and profiting from the behaviors commonly observed belonging to African American students. According to Hudson and Holmes (1994), many of these students seek the approval of their peers by asking questions of the instructor which are designed to challenge authority or ask a question which requests extraneous information. Should the student have the solution, or know the answer, to the given question being posed, African American students are more likely to seek additional attention from the class by providing a detailed, extended explanation to the inquiry. This, “will usually result in laughter from the class and the astute instructor would be wise to ignore their amusement (Hudson & Holmes, 389).”

To help combat situations like the above, classroom teachers must develop instructional strategies which not only incorporate the course mandates, but give consideration to the cultural, psychological, and emotional mechanics within the classroom setting. Many authors offer recommendations to be considered when developing strategies for classrooms having a disproportionate amount of African Americans. The following will be discussed in this literature review: student/teacher

collaboration, language proficiency, experientially relevant lessons, challenging curriculum, and the use of the Socratic Method.

According to Ford and Harris (1994), teachers must recall that, for African American students, learning is equated with activity and the role of being a passive participant is detrimental. Any strategy, “which incorporates a joint collaborative activity between the student and the teacher will result in successful instruction because this allows them to establish an educational rapport for problem solving (Ford & Harris, 206).” As they are seeking a solution or a common problem, such as trying to determine why a historical event is important, the student and the teacher are required to communicate effectively. This will form a common observable bond between the two which will extend to future collaborations.

An example of student teacher collaboration in a secondary social studies classroom can be displaying the work of the students throughout the classroom. An example project that a social teacher may assign to the students could be to make a poster board of a political cartoon or piece of propaganda that would have been used during World War II. Another example would be to create a small display showing how the soldiers that died during World War I were considered the, “lost generation. According to Marilyn Clayton (1998), a teacher who has taught classrooms ranging from the elementary level to the secondary level, a classroom filled with the work of the students is a delight to be in and sends a message to students that their work and their learning are important. Although early in the school year, the teacher might do much of the display planning and caretaking, as the year progresses, students can take an increasingly active role in displaying their work.

For the African American students in the classroom, there are several ways in which the student can be involved. Clayton (1998) goes on to point out that they can simply choose pieces of their own work that they give to the teacher to assemble into a display. They can create the actual display by, for example, designing and putting together a bulletin board. And they can manage the entire process from choosing the work, to building the display, to providing ongoing maintenance.

In taking on responsibility for displays, African American students have an opportunity to learn and practice important social and academic skills they may not have gotten at an earlier age. Korteze (1990) has written that, “when children choose work for displays, they learn to reflect on their work. By creating displays that recognize effort rather than perfection, children better understand that learning is a process of growth, not just a process of mastery (Korteze, 92).” Payne (1994) also puts a great deal of belief in creating displays and feels that they can affirm children’s growing sense of competency and give them practice in individual and group decision-making. He writes that, “It provides an opportunity to learn from each other and to appreciate the work of others, nurturing empathy, respect, and a strong sense of classroom community (Payne, 187).” This sense of community, according to both Payne (1994) and Clayton (1998), can help the African American students in the classroom become more involved in the classroom as the year goes on. Maintaining displays also gives an opportunity for all students, not just African American students, to develop organizational and decision making skills. All aspects of creating and maintaining displays allow the students to take responsibility for an important part of the classroom life.

To be considered educated in today's society, it is customary for a person to be able to effectively express oneself both verbally and in writing. According to Banks (1981), teachers must incorporate lessons across the curriculum which includes activities to reinforce language proficiency so that African American students can become better equipped at writing. Classroom teachers must conduct purposeful dialogues with African American students to enhance communication skills rather than being dependent upon drill activities and an overabundance of rules and regulations. Frankel (1999), using the history classroom as an example when discussing standards in education, says that while, "many students in a social studies classroom can recite the Gettysburg Address or give examples of amendments to the Constitution of the United States, but it can be an entirely different matter when they are required to identify them in the context of a historical discussion (Frankel, 409). Students should realize that the ability to construct and support an argument is not just a skill that is stressed in English class, but that language proficiency should be stressed in history research papers and similar assignments.

According to Hooks (1992), African American students, as a group, do not incorporate abstract ideas easily. Therefore, she stresses that strategies should be devised which illustrate the abstractions, regulations, and verbal discussions being presented. When the student, "is provided with some concrete illustration of an abstract concept, the concept will be retained much more easily (Hooks, 87)." Incorporating the cultural experiences of the students into the lessons will help make it relevant as well. There are many examples of this in high school classrooms across the country. Dougan (1996), an educator who is a frequent contributor to educational journals, writes of one high school

history teacher who has devised a group activity where the students are asked to devise a rap song about the causes for World War I.

Dougan (1996) and Hooks (1992) both agree that students will remember interesting illustrations to reinforce some abstraction or regulation and recalling the information easily will strengthen student self-esteem and confidence for future learning. This can be done by giving the students class notes that could possibly be done using illustrations. Staying with the World War I example, the teacher could lecture about the causes of World War I and how the Balkans was the instrumental force, or powder keg, that helped start the conflict. After the discussion, the teacher could give the students notes where the facts were written inside a powder keg. This would help give the students a visual representation of the just discussed topic.

As has been stated in many different sources, many times the potentially at-risk African American student is presented lessons which do not demand any cognitive ability upon their part. The teacher assumes that the student is not capable of complex thought and provides instruction consisting of boring drill routines and rote memorization assignments. The lessons in classroom with majority African American representation should be designed, “to achieve an academic balance between the ability of the students and provide a challenge for intellectual growth (Longstreet, 43).” Longstreet (1978) and Kronowitz (1987) both agree that students will achieve at the level of teacher expectations, therefore, the intellectual bar should not be lowered because of a student’s minority status. Thus, the authors come to the conclusion that classroom teachers should make sure to challenge their students on a daily basis and to keep the busy work to a minimum.

Many authors have pointed out that teachers routinely complain that African American students prefer to respond with one word answers when posed with a question. Such replies do nothing for the thinking process of the individual. According to Murell (2002) and Starr (1983) specifically, it is incumbent upon the teachers to design questions which require the students to analyze and synthesize. The method of inquiry developed by Socrates, which both authors mention specifically, forces the student to go beyond the recall stage of development and start to use higher order thinking skills. Murell (2002) noted that, "Posing a question which requires the student to restate information in other words will help to increase comprehension (Murell, 134)." An example of the type of question that could be asked in a social studies classroom might be, "How does the electoral college work?" Starr (1983) writes at length about the importance of asking questions which ask the student to use given information to solve a problem and also ask them to apply what they have learned in a new way. While this is obviously important for all students, African American students especially benefit from this type of questioning because it is asking them to think and respond in ways that they have not been asked to in the past, in many cases.

There are many reasons why the Socratic Method is an effective technique for African American students. Starr (1983) states that, "questions might be asked which require the student to synthesize or assemble information by combining two or more different sources to arrive at the conclusion (Starr, 497)." Using the history class as an example, if an instructor asked the student what two different authors felt about how much Germany should be punished following World War I and what they thought about their conclusions, it would be necessary for the student to know what the authors

opinions were and whether they agreed with them or not. In addition, Woods (1980) makes the point that, “questions of the highest order require African American students to make an evaluation judgment by expressing their opinion on a given subject (Woods, 79).” “Do you believe in the death penalty should be abolished and explain your position” is a statement which has no right or wrong answer but the opinion must be supported with information. Questions of this nature can be designed to address the abilities of African American students throughout all grades. The complexity of the question will be determined by the level of instruction the student has attained. The goal, according to Woods (1980), Murell (2002), and Starr (1983) is to exercise the student’s thinking processes and not reduce the learning activity to a mere regurgitation of acquired information.

Hopkins (1997) and many other authors are adamant that, in a history classroom with African American students present, the teacher can construct lessons that highlight the African American cultural influences on history. According to Hall (1997), especially in American history, the black experience is a vital part of the American cultural tradition. Whether the lesson highlights slavery, the civil rights movement, Reconstruction, or the valuable contributions in science, medicine, and education, the teacher can help African American students stay engaged by highlighting African American achievements across history.

This multicultural learning method is gaining popularity across the United States. Multicultural education helps students to understand and appreciate cultural differences and similarities and to recognize the accomplishments of diverse ethnic, racial, and

socioeconomic groups. Classroom materials portray these diverse groups realistically and from a variety of perspectives.

Educators tend to take one of two approaches to multicultural education, writes Gloria Ladson-Billings (1997), professor in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a Senior Fellow in Urban Education of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. These two methods are the multicultural festival approach and the transformative approach. Teachers using the multicultural festival approach, “have students celebrate ethnic diversity through, "foods, fun, and festivals (Billings, 87).” For African American students in a history classroom, this is shown during Black History Month, where more of the class time is spent focusing on instrumental African American figures throughout history.

Teachers applying the transformative approach weave a range of cultural perspectives throughout the curriculum. For example, a secondary social studies teacher may read Uncle Tom’s Cabin -- as well as other novels or stories about slavery in other countries. Students would, “compare the moral and ethical dilemmas, story structure, standards of beauty, and specific characters in all the versions (Billings, 113).” The African American student would gain a better understanding of his own culture, which would help put the classroom and the learning process higher on the priority list.

The above mentioned recommendations for classroom teachers can help to assure that the African American student has lessons which encourage collaboration, improve literacy, challenge them intellectually, and encourage thinking. Also, it is important for the classroom teacher to incorporate African American culture into the lessons. These

things can help African American students use and develop higher order thinking skills in the classroom and help success become more likely.

## **Chapter 3: Results of Literature Review**

### **I. Summary of Findings**

This purpose of this literature review was to discuss the African American students in the classroom environment and what makes them a unique challenge for classroom educators. The review discussed the social, cultural, and psychological circumstances that lead these students, in greater numbers than their cohorts, to have difficulties in the classroom. There was also a discussion of classroom strategies and methods that could help African American students feel more comfortable, and in turn perform better, in the classroom. The third topic covered was specific classroom strategies that a social studies teacher could use to help structure the lessons to benefit African American students.

Socially, African American students have to deal with hardships at a greater rate than their white peers. Examples of the types of things that occur more frequently in the African American community are single parent homes, the absence of a father, economic adversity, substandard housing situations, and a higher chance of moving away from the student's home school. These situations put the African American students that must deal with these circumstances at a disadvantage in the classroom because the students must deal with more issues at home than their peers.

Psychologically, the African American student is more likely to feel at a disadvantage in the school environment. Mentally, the African American student has a barrier that may inhibit the learning of the content. Four perceptions that the African American student has are that it is not good to make high grades, the feeling that they

have no control of their academic destiny, feelings of acceptance, and discrimination issues. The classroom teacher, in order to successfully deal with African American students, must take these preset thoughts into consideration before the African American student enters the classroom. The teacher must take these things into account and try to change the mindset of the student in order to ensure a successful transition to the secondary social studies classroom.

The African American student, in a cultural sense, is less likely to feel that the classroom is an area where the student can feel comfortable. In this literature review, four different reasons were discussed that showed why this may be the case. These four reasons were insufficient foundation skills, low self esteem, teacher affinity, and educational affinity. The fact that the student, in many cases, does not have the feeling that learning the content on a regular basis is something that be attained is an issue that classroom educators must deal with. Making sure that the student feels a positive rapport with the teacher and keeping track of the work a student does are two things that the classroom teacher can do to help change the cultural stereotypes.

This literature review also covered some general classroom strategies that the teacher could attempt that could aim to make the classroom a more positive place for the African American student. Some of the strategies discussed included classroom climate, teaching strategies selected, and motivational techniques employed. Also, how a teacher introduces a new skill to the African American student could have an effect on how these students view the classroom. In this area, the instructor has a great deal of control over how African American students view the classroom. By using some of these techniques,

it is more likely that the African American students in any given classroom will feel more at ease in the classroom environment.

Also, some more specific instructional techniques were covered that classroom teachers could use while constructing their lessons. The teacher must construct lessons that deal with the course mandates, but must also be sure to give consideration to the cultural, psychological, and emotional circumstances that many African American students face. Many authors offer recommendations to be considered when developing strategies for classrooms having a disproportionate amount of African Americans and this literature review covered some of these recommendations. The following were discussed in this literature review: student/teacher collaboration, language proficiency, experientially relevant lessons, challenging curriculum, and the use of the Socratic Method. Incorporating these ideas into their lessons will help the teacher engage African American students in the classroom and make the classroom environment a more enjoyable experience for African American students.

### **Conclusions:**

African American students, and the interactions that educators have with these students in the classroom, are unique. Teachers and other educators must come to the full realization that instruction must be differentiated in order to ensure that these students get the instruction that is necessary. The cultural, psychological, and social circumstances that plague this portion of the population, at a higher rate than other ethnic groups, must be taken into account in schools to help make the learning experience for African American students more productive and enjoyable.

The classroom teacher's role is to ensure that they understand the cultural, psychological, and social circumstances that can hinder these students. Also, they must work to make the classroom climate positive for African American students and construct lessons and activities that stimulate and engage these students on a regular basis. If the classroom teacher realizes the potential that African American students have, then it is more likely that a relationship between the student and teacher can grow that will help the student become a more active participant in the classroom.

### **Recommendations and Implications for the Practitioner**

The teacher, who deals with African American students on a regular basis, must make sure to become, and remain, educated about the differences between African American students and their cohorts. This literature review can be used as a starting point, but there are many varied resources that should be used so educators can have a greater understanding of how to help these students in the classroom.

While this literature review may be more helpful for the teacher in an urban setting, other educators could learn a great deal from reading this review and consulting other sources on African American students. The strategies, techniques, and varied circumstances discussed in this review can be used for many different students. The recommendations for classroom strategies and techniques could be used regardless of the ethnicity of the child and have positive results.

The implication for the practitioner that stems from this literature review is that teachers should make sure to consider the different learning styles and backgrounds of their students as they are preparing their lessons and setting up their classroom rules and

procedures. African American students should be considered when doing this, but the hope is that teachers and other educators take this literature review and begin to look at how instruction can be differentiated for other groups as well. African American students are just one segment of the population that is looked at in great detail.

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