Michigan Department of Education Achievement Gap
Experiential Learning Intervention: Evidence-Based Implementation Brief

Studies demonstrate that high-quality experiential learning opportunities, particularly service-learning and project-based learning, have positive effects on the engagement and academic performance of African American males. Students who participate in these meaningful learning experiences skip significantly fewer days of school and are more apt to attain high grades and stay engaged in school than others who do not participate in experiential learning (Scales, et. al., 2006; Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Meyer, Billig, & Hofschire, 2004; Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000).

A Discussion of the Problem or Need

Research shows that African American males are more likely to attend schools with limited resources, participate in low level and irrelevant curricula, and be taught using memorization and drill based instructional methods. These factors, along with others, contribute to the disengagement of and high drop-out rates for African American males.

Although there is no single reason why students disengage or drop out of school, Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) identified the following key contributing factors: lack of connection to the school environment; a perception that school is boring; feeling unmotivated; and the weight of real world events. Bridgeland and his colleagues found that most students who dropped out of high school said they could have succeeded with more challenging coursework, engaging classroom experiences, and instructional support. In fact, 80 percent of the students surveyed stated that there should be more opportunities for real-world and experiential learning in order to make school more relevant and engaging. As early as 1989, Conrad and Hedin found that one of the biggest problems students had to overcome in school was a lack of connection to schoolwork, most likely due to what is perceived as an immense gap between curriculum and their daily lives, often leading to boredom.

A Description of the Intervention

Experiential learning provides a pathway to engage African American males in authentic and relevant learning experiences that connect with their lives and the larger world around them. Experiential learning requires students to work with peers and adults to actively and critically examine real-life issues. Through these learning experiences, students develop critical thinking and communication skills, and gain motivation for learning by working on realistic and relevant projects (Guilford College, 2012).

The Association of Experiential Education describes twelve important facets of experiential learning at http://www.aee.org/about/whatIsEE. Three of those facets, affirmed by proponents of experiential learning (Dixon, 2012; Joplin, 1995; Kolb, 1984; Haberman, 1991), follow.

- Experiences are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results.
- Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.
- Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic.

Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning (1984) captures the method described. Teachers can begin the learning cycle with either experiences or concepts and then lead students to reflect, observe or even experiment as a way of taking action. Experiential learning supports the teaching of higher-level thinking skills by using complex question/answer techniques, inquiry, and active dialogue with students. As teachers and schools continuously implement experiential learning, students move from one challenging

activity to the next with the teacher providing both initial focus and later feedback about an activity before going to the next activity (Learning Theories, 2012; Lloyd-Strovas, 2010; Joplin, 1995).

For African American males, it is effective to build in the use of drama, role-play, and active participation. It also helps to build on things students already know such as hip-hop or a particular rap song (Landsman & Lewis, 2006). For another example, in an alternative high school program that addresses the needs and interests of African American males, a 9-12 science teacher may require the investigation of the sugar content, acidic/basic content, and nutritional values of soda pop as an experiential exercise.
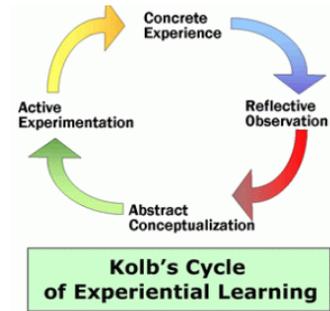
Actions for Implementation of the Intervention

- Partner with community members to identify real world problems or needs that could be explored through experiential learning.
- Design learning experiences around case studies, real world problems, community issues, and/or service projects. These experiences should be aligned to rigorous standards and learning objectives.
- Not all experiences generate knowledge. A learner must be actively involved in and reflect on the experience in order for learning to take place. Therefore, structure opportunities for students to describe, reflect on, discuss, and construct meaning from the experience.
- An important part of experiential learning is the element of "surprise." If the experience does not easily and immediately confirm an individual's prior expectations, the learner is more likely to think critically about and internalize the concepts. Therefore, design learning experiences that challenge the learner's assumptions and prior conceptions.
- Students need to demonstrate their learning so give credit for learning, not just for service.

Citations

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